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BOOK REVIEW

Michael Williams. *How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens: A Guide to Christ-Focused Reading of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. 288 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-310-33165-0.

Michael Williams is Professor of Old Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary and a member of the NIV Committee on Bible Translation. He has written two previous books on Old Testament topics as well as edited and contributed to a collection of essays on Deuteronomy.

Williams's latest work, *How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens*, is a beginner's guide to finding Christ in every book of the Bible. It employs text boxes, bold section headings and simple graphics reminiscent of the popular *Dummies* book series. In every chapter Williams focuses on how each Bible book connects to the life and redeeming work of Jesus, like a "Jesus Hermeneutic for Dummies." With its brief chapters (four to five pages long) and simple, non-theological language, Williams's book is best suited for new Christians or seekers who are trying to make sense of the Bible.

"Reading the Bible through the Jesus lens is reading it the way it was intended," Williams writes in his introduction (p. 9), and the rest of his book follows upon this premise. He makes it clear that he is not interested in "dusty details" or "confusing theological issues" (p. 9), but in how the entire Bible illustrates the greater picture of Christ's role in God's redemptive plan, and how this picture of Jesus can transform and shape lives today.

Williams uses this theme to structure the short chapter on each book of the Bible: he begins with an overview of the book, then gives a section on how "The Jesus Lens" interprets the book, a brief exploration of the book's "Contemporary

Implications,” and ends with a series of “Hook Questions” to promote discussion or self-reflection. A one-sentence description of the book’s theme and a memory verse are highlighted in text boxes. A chart at the end of the book summarizes the main points of each chapter for quick reference.

How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens is best used as a Bible study guide; while reading the book through on its own, one notices the frequent repetitions of the same ideas and similar questions from chapter to chapter. It places its sharpened gaze on Christ’s atonement and conforming one’s character to Christ, and little else. This focus makes the book an appropriate evangelizing and discipling tool for new believers, but it lacks enough depth to go beyond the basics. Yet this may be the author’s intent. Williams uses his survey of the Bible to hammer home the salvation message from several different angles, and he keeps his readers’ gaze fixed on how the life and death of Jesus should transform and shape their own lives.

Unsurprisingly, Williams excels the most when he employs his hermeneutical skill on the books of the Old Testament. He demonstrates how the genealogies, Torah laws, and God’s promise of deliverance to Israel are ultimately fulfilled through Jesus. To new (and even seasoned) readers of the Bible, Israel’s cycle of blessing–rebellion–punishment–repentance seems barbaric, cruel and confusing when compared to the stories of Jesus. How does the wrathful God of the Old Testament become the God of love and forgiveness in the New Testament? Williams effectively reveals the presence of Jesus in the Old Testament books, using these glimpses to show how the suffering of Christ on humanity’s behalf was the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel.

For example, in his chapter on Ruth, Williams shows the resonance between Boaz, the “guardian-redeemer” of Naomi and Ruth, and Christ, the “guardian-redeemer” of humanity (pp. 42–43). Both Israelite Naomi and Gentile Ruth benefit from the protection and providence of Boaz, just as Jews and Gentiles alike benefit from the atonement of Christ. In addition, as Williams points out, the offspring of Ruth and Boaz’s marriage is a forefather to Christ (p. 42). With such illustrations Williams

encourages readers to see themselves in Israel's story.

If its chapters on the New Testament are less compelling, it is only because the book's Jesus lens is much easier to identify in the stories of Jesus and the church that sprang from his resurrection. However, it is pleasing to see that Williams goes beyond simple evangelistic soteriology and spends significant space focusing on how the life of Jesus should shape behavior and action. The "Hook Questions" at the end of each chapter emphasize self-reflection on how we live our lives in God's Kingdom, and what kind of witness to Christ our lives proclaim. These questions are not general, but prompt readers to think about behaviors, attitudes, and actions in their daily lives.

Despite the breadth of his survey, Williams misses the opportunity to apply the Jesus lens to certain important questions for modern readers of the Bible. For example, how does the Jesus lens put into perspective the wars waged by the Israelites to conquer the Promised Land? How does Jesus' life and message relate to the ban against women teaching and exercising authority over men in 1 Timothy? These are difficult questions to answer, but vital to a twenty-first-century audience. Had the book addressed them in some fashion, it would have been the richer for it.

While its Jesus lens sometimes ignores difficult issues in favor of reinforcing the gospel message, *How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens* provides an effective Christ-focused guide to the Bible for seekers and believers new to the Bible. Its simple, direct prose and thoughtful questions make it a useful book for evangelism, group Bible study, and mentoring young Christians.

Laura Thompson
McMaster Divinity College