

“In *The Jesus Lens*, Leroy Spinks devotes much of his work to analyzing one possibility for how the Old Testament came to be written, edited, and shaped into the document we know. Leaning heavily on the work of Richard Elliott Friedman, he traces the work of various writers who contributed to the development of the Hebrew Bible over hundreds of years and in different life situations.

“Spinks explains the varying images of God and depictions of acceptable morality in the Old Testament as progressive steps in divine revelation that culminate in the good news of Jesus, who should be understood as the key to interpreting the scriptures that come before. This book will be especially enlightening to readers who haven’t previously been exposed to the contributions of critical scholarship to our understanding of the Hebrew Bible.”

—*Dr. Tony W. Cartledge, Nurturing Faith Bible Studies writer and Professor of Old Testament at Campbell University Divinity School*

“Leroy Spinks draws on a lifetime of engagement with Scripture to show that the story in the Bible can’t be separated from the story of the Bible. To those who are disillusioned by simplistic and insular biblical interpretation he offers an understanding of scripture that respects modern historical sensibilities while still treasuring the Bible’s authority as God’s message to us.

“Instead of forcing a dogmatic unity onto the biblical text, he listens to the different voices that emerge, valuing them all for their revelation of the nature and will of God. *The Jesus Lens* is full of insights that give meaning to the texts, introducing lay readers to the work of biblical scholars.

“Spinks’ attention to the purposes and artistry of the human writers of scripture complement his confidence that God spoke through those human writers and continues to speak through the texts to readers today.”

—*Dr. Dalen C. Jackson, Academic Dean and Professor of Biblical Studies, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, Georgetown, Ky.*

“As a scientist trained to be skeptical even of events I observe, I am unable to read the Bible as a literal scientific or historical document, although I respect and sometimes envy those who do. I cannot reconcile what I understand of the natural world and evolutionary processes with a belief that the universe was created in seven 24-hour days or that Eve arose from Adam’s rib.

“My skeptical nature is also triggered by inconsistencies. Why do there seem to be two versions of creation in Genesis? How can I reconcile the often-violent passages of the Bible with a loving God? In *The Jesus Lens*, Leroy Spinks explains how the Bible’s message can be interpreted without abandoning an understanding of the natural world as we experience it daily.

“Spinks synthesizes the work of biblical scholars, historians, archaeologists, and others to tell the story of how the Bible was written. With this historical context, the reader is better equipped to interpret the message of the Bible. For example, by presenting evidence that the creation accounts in Genesis were written by two different authors, both motivated by a desire to explain humanity’s relationship with God and with dismissing the Babylonian creation myths, Spinks explains how we can find a more fundamental message in Genesis, not science or literal history.

“Mysteries are part of both science and religion. Some mysteries can be understood through observation and experimentation, but the Christian faith ultimately relies on belief in an event that falls outside of the realm of science: the resurrection. No book can resolve all conflicts between faith and science, but *The Jesus Lens* is a valuable tool for those who, as Spinks explains, ‘are conflicted about the Bible but are willing to keep reading and thinking.’ As a scientist and practicing Christian with more questions than answers, *The Jesus Lens* helps me do just that.”

—Dr. Rick Kopp, Professor of Biology, Georgetown College, Georgetown, Ky.

“Leroy Spinks’ *Jesus Lens* is a wonderfully approachable, honest study of our sacred texts. Our biblical studies too often deal with discrete—even isolated—passages. Spinks’ primary goal in this work is to reveal the continuity and connectivity that exist within our sacred ancient stories. In doing so, he reveals the power and beauty of the epic journey of God’s faithful: a journey of space, time, and understanding. While reframing and reintroducing the famous stories, Spinks addresses his understanding of God’s intentions and tackles questions left unanswered by the original authors.

“Spinks has provided historical commentaries about many of our commonly accepted understandings of religious themes and movements. However, the real excitement in reading the book is with his own interpretation from a lifetime of faith and service. With skill and ease he takes the pieces of our faith and molds them into an epic story that highlights God’s great works and humans’ evolution in knowing and understanding their God. Throughout the story the author never lets us forget that the Spirit has inspired and walked beside us from the beginning. There is a depth in each chapter that helps the modern reader and Bible student explore their faith and challenge their understandings in the quest for faithful discipleship with the true lens, Jesus.

“Rev. Spinks has given us a valuable retelling of an old and continuous story. The book will be a valuable addition to the library of novice biblical students, veteran Sunday School teachers, and those of us who preach on Sunday morning.”

—Dr. Thomas Quisenberry, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Chattanooga, Tenn.

# THE JESUS LENS

*Bringing the Bible's Story into Focus*

*By Leroy Spinks*

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# Foreword

**H**umility is an important mark of Christian discipleship. One sign of such humility is admitting that we are imperfect and, therefore, interpret truth—even biblical truth—imperfectly through various lenses. The apostle Paul, in his famous “love chapter,” confessed to this reality when stating that he “sees through glass, darkly” and therefore “knows in part” (1 Cor. 13:12). We too should confess our limited vision and cultural biases that impact even our best efforts in exploring biblical truth.

What we take out of the Bible is shaped to a great measure by what we bring in. Whether intentional or unintentional, recognized or unrecognized, we all have presuppositions and perceptions that shape our biblical interpretations. Christian humility calls for setting aside any arrogance that allows for thinking we can extract truth purely.

However, we are not left helpless and hopeless when it comes to the important task of seeking and finding the truth as revealed in these ancient and holy texts. Jesus himself affirmed that God’s Spirit (“the Spirit of truth”) will “guide you into all truth” (John 16:13).

Yet, it is Jesus who serves as the best lens through which we interpret biblical truth. Think of it in this way: You may choose between a candle and a searchlight to find your way out of a dark forest. It is a simple choice, isn’t it?

Likewise, Jesus is by far the best filter—the most illuminating light—for interpreting the Bible. While God is revealed in various ways, Jesus is clearly—with no close second—the fullest revelation of God. Therefore, his life and teachings, death and resurrection, provide the best way to read, understand, and apply biblical truth.

The harsh reality is that many Christians talk about the Bible more than they read and study it. And it is simply stunning to observe throughout the history of Christianity and today propositions of biblical truth that do not align with Jesus.

Therefore, this book written by an experienced pastor and thoughtful student of the Bible is so very important. It reminds us of or redirects us to the best approach to bringing the entire biblical revelation to life: Jesus!

As the author writes, “*The Jesus Lens* shows that the validity and truth of the biblical revelation lie in the entire story as read through its climactic conclusion in Jesus of Nazareth.”

May this timely book about the timeless biblical story that culminates in the good news of Jesus Christ be read carefully and gleaned for all the available insights. Most importantly, may it help us to read the Bible, again and again, with Jesus as the lens through which we understand and apply the divine truth found in each unfolding story.

John D. Pierce  
Executive Editor, *Nurturing Faith Journal*  
Publisher, Nurturing Faith Books

*I dedicate this book to my wife,  
Annette Scoggins Spinks,  
the love of my life,  
the most truly spiritual person I know,  
without whose encouragement and informed guidance  
I would not have completed and published this work.*

## INTRODUCTION

# The Misunderstood Book

America exhibits societal traits that mystify and amuse the English and Europeans. Our national political narrative constantly echoes with debates over abortion, homosexual marriage, and capital punishment, each side quoting the Bible to sustain its views. Congressmen claiming the Bible as their authority have pronounced global climate change a fraud, the theory of evolution a “lie straight out of the pits of hell,” and all abortions murder. At the same time, equally devout ministers and theologians have found no conflict between Scripture and climate change, evolution, or abortion.

Whether the subject is sex, evolution, alcohol, marijuana, political conservatism vs. liberalism, war and peace, the Democratic and Republican parties, Islam and “Christian America,” Americans often use biblical arguments. Even the national budget, economic theory, and gun rights too often entice various contestants either to trot out a favorite biblical proof text or to lampoon the other’s use of the Bible to prop up a sagging argument. Frequently several sides of any given issue are equally convinced their position is “biblical,” supported by divine revelation, endorsed by none other than God.

Millions of believers have found in the pages of the Bible the keys to living in personal peace with God and inner security, guiding their lives by its moral and spiritual precepts. Accepting the entirety of the Bible by faith, they do not question anything about this historic book—its history, science, moral injunctions, or views of God. For these believers, the Bible is inspired by God and therefore inerrant<sup>1</sup> in every detail.

Millions of others, however, see in the Bible a pre-scientific mindset more compatible with primitive mythology than with modern cosmology and critical historiography. They view adherence to the Bible as demanding blind faith instead of rational thought.

Furthermore, they find many of the Bible’s teachings—on slavery, the place of women, holy war and genocide, stoning and mutilation as judicial penalties, and sometimes even the character of God—ethically, morally, and spiritually objectionable. They cannot imagine how to square those teachings of Scripture with the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Finally, many of them have concluded that history has shown the Christ of faith to be largely mythology

created several generations after Jesus and having little to do with Jesus of Nazareth as he actually was.

These competing mindsets have contributed to a nation in which radical contradictions and ideological conflict rage. Conservative evangelical churches have exploded into America's fastest growing and largest churches, with immense political clout that can even elect a president. At the same time, a host of believers reared in the church leave in young adulthood never to return. Simultaneously, our contemporaries exhibit a bewildering variety of competing types of "spirituality" and secularism—and the church constantly loses population share.

Possibly the fastest growing group in America are those I call "skeptical believers." They are still believers, although they do not necessarily refer to themselves that way. They believe in God, and they admire Jesus Christ; they just do not like Christians or the church. Most of all, they cannot swallow some of the ideas we have convinced them come from the Bible.

Although believers of a sort (they frequently call themselves "spiritual but not religious"), they are also skeptics. The latter descriptor means they insist on relevant evidence for any proposition they accept as true. They see the Bible as a book of myths, legends, parables, and metaphors, but not facts of history. Some of them even say the Bible is inspired; they just can't take it literally. They want to believe, but the conflict between their intellect and their desire for faith and spirituality leaves them paralyzed.

In *The Jesus Lens* I address all these people—believers struggling to correlate science and history with the Bible, those who have totally given up on the Bible, and those who are about to give up. I address those who are conflicted about the Bible but are willing to keep reading and thinking.

It may come as a surprise to some to learn that many of us who believe and love the Bible, follow Jesus Christ, and preach the Bible's message have wrestled with these same issues. We have struggled personally, devotionally, and professionally with these same intellectual, ethical, and spiritual difficulties. For many of us, faith has not been easy, certainly not automatic.

We refuse either to reject the biblical message or to harmonize and rationalize its difficulties. We also refuse to reject the well-grounded findings of a century and a half of scientific and historical research. Believing "all truth is God's truth," we value both the biblical message and the findings of scientists and historians. We have committed ourselves both to faith in God and a rational, scientific approach—even to the Bible. *The Jesus Lens* sets forth one such approach.

## Interpreting the Bible

Many of us grew up hearing the Bible stories and fell in love with the narratives of encounters with God by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. We loved the stories of Jesus of Nazareth as he revealed the God of love and grace. Along the way, however, we ran into disturbing facts about that simple Bible and the simple Christ—facts we could not ignore, facts that confused our childlike faith.

The Bible describes the God of love destroying with a flood the entirety of humanity except for eight fortunate souls. Those same scriptures describe Jacob's sons—Israel's patriarchs—massacring an entire city to avenge the seduction of their sister. A couple of biblical authors say the God of love commanded Israel to slaughter the Canaanites down to the last suckling infant, pregnant woman, and helpless old man. How could we square such narratives with the Spirit of Jesus Christ?

To understand such stories, we have to understand that the Bible must not only be read; it must be interpreted. So, how do we do that?

I am convinced that a significant portion of the difficulties many people have with the Bible is due to a lack of understanding of the historical process by which we received these inspired scriptures—and I do believe they are divinely inspired. We have not paid sufficient attention to the story of how the Bible came to be written.

I propose to tell that story in this book—at least, that story as I understand it. Of course, the story of how the Bible was written overlaps considerably with the Bible stories themselves and with the historical context of Scripture. Still, we need to keep straight in our minds which story we are telling here. Our concern in this book is with the story of the writing of the Bible.

## A Different Viewpoint

The approaches to the Bible taken in this work do not constitute some wonderful new discoveries of this author. Most of them have been around for more than a century. Neither do I claim that the conclusions I draw in this work are universally accepted by all biblical scholars. As in all intellectual pursuits, the experts debate, argue, and even quarrel acrimoniously over many of these issues. This general approach, though, is widely accepted among biblical researchers who are also Christian believers.

*The Jesus Lens* does, however, represent a new approach to this subject in four respects:

1. It presents this understanding of the Bible as a story—an epic.
2. It tells the story of the writing of the Bible as a whole.
3. It tells this story in a popular style understandable by non-specialists.
4. It presents the findings of historical biblical scholars from a faith-filled, Jesus-centered perspective.

I know of no other work that combines these four characteristics.

By the nature of the case, no one can fully explicate all these themes in a single volume. For this reason, the reader should approach this book as a schematic rather than as an encyclopedia, a suggested approach rather than the final answer.

Furthermore, I do not claim that all biblical scholars adhere to all the opinions expressed in this book. All the views expressed here, though, do reflect sound scholarship held by numerous qualified, trained biblical scholars and historians. The suggested readings at the end of this work will help those desiring more detailed scholarly discussions of these matters.

## The Grand Epic

In *The Jesus Lens* I present the story of the writing of the Bible as an epic as exciting as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. The story of how the Bible arose is a saga as thrilling as those of any Viking skald. This epic began with a set of political and religious controversies. Those controversies led to an even greater problem: Who is God, and how can we come into relationship with him? The story moves through a complicated plot exploring that problem. This plot features traditionalists, historians, prophets, and wise men and women approaching the problem in a wide variety of ways and coming to sometimes contradictory conclusions.

Our epic eventually moves like a gigantic multi-episode televised drama to a crisis and a climax that solves the original problem in a single man—Jesus of Nazareth. This great epic concludes with a denouement that wraps up the loose ends. This denouement explains the meaning of the epic and its climactic resolution, states the moral and ethical implications of that meaning for our lives, and provides tantalizing glimpses of what is yet to come.

The Bible itself is not always laid out in exactly the sequence of events I present here. You see, the Bible was not written by one person but by dozens of authors writing sixty-six different books over a period of a thousand years. For this reason, the order of events as I present them will require the reader constantly to remember what story we are examining. I am not telling the

Bible stories we learned as children but rather the story of how the Bible came to be written—how we got our Bible. For this reason, the order of events in this book does not always follow the order of the events in the biblical narrative itself or the order of the books in the Bible. After all, we are recounting not the stories the Bible tells but the story of how the Bible we use came to be our Bible.

## **The Purpose of *The Jesus Lens***

In *The Jesus Lens* I show that the validity and truth of the biblical revelation lie in the entire story as read through its climactic conclusion in Jesus of Nazareth. In that story taken as a whole we see God revealing the divine nature, will, and redemption in spite of human intransigence and inability to understand the divine self-disclosure. That divine revelation, moreover, is a progressive revelation—progressively unveiling God and correcting our human misunderstandings about God and even correcting earlier misunderstandings in the earlier scriptures.

The Bible's inspiration flows from its authors' unique intimate communion with the Spirit of God as they wrote their various visions of the self-unveiling God. The Bible is the word of God in the words of men. Here we tell the story of those humans who put the revelation into words.

Its authority proceeds from its nature as the primary record of and witness to those human encounters with God and their understandings of it. The solution to the scientific, historical, ethical, and spiritual difficulties many find in the Bible lies in the story of its human words—how it came to be the book we possess today. While the Bible is a revelation of God, here we give attention to the humans who wrote it. Join me in exploring this monumental record of divine revelation.<sup>2</sup>

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>The doctrine of biblical inerrancy holds that the original documents in the handwriting of the original authors (the autographs or *autographa*) are wholly without error (inerrant) in any respect—factually, historically, scientifically, ethically, or spiritually. *The Jesus Lens* does not subscribe to that theory, considering it contrary to the teachings, implications, and phenomena of the Bible.

<sup>2</sup>For readers desiring additional study of various topics included in *The Jesus Lens*, see “Suggested Reading” on pp. 183-184.