

## Overview of the Main Points of the Book

This document is meant to give particular readers (or even potential reviewers) a good general overview of the main points of this book. The title and subtitle are:

**Reading the Bible in a Secular Age**  
**The New Testament as Spiritual Ancestry**  
by Julius-Kei Kato (Cascade Books, 2023)

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Those titles describe what the work is about: It's a pedagogical resource meant for undergraduate students (such as those I teach) and their instructors, many of whom live in a very secularized context and are likewise quite secularized themselves (even though some may be nominally religious). It can also be used in contexts (even in pastoral-church ministry settings) where people are increasingly questioning why they still need to be familiar with the Bible and the Christian tradition. The book deals with "the why and how" of reading the Bible even though we live in a secular age.

The main reason I propose in this work is that, for us who are located in the West, the Bible is an important part of our "spiritual ancestry," a dominant idea of the book. Hence, learning how to read and interpret the Bible properly (particularly, the New Testament) is like getting to know our spiritual ancestry better.

The main strategy that I suggest in the book (something which, I think, has some originality in it) is to treat the New Testament as *a metaphorical (textual) village* in which some of our most important spiritual ancestors continue to live. If we learn some good strategies to read and interpret the text (hermeneutics, my field of specialization, plays a pivotal role), we will be able to, as it were, visit this textual village, have meaningful conversations ("hermeneutics as conversation") with these spiritual ancestors and, thus, become better grounded in our spiritual ancestry here in the West. With that, we can return to our secular context, better equipped to both embrace and wrestle with our spiritual ancestry. Hopefully, that also enables us to forge for ourselves a spirituality or a meaning-system that would be appropriate for our present world while being well grounded in our traditions.

The book and its approach are grounded in my identity as a BIPOC scholar (Asian-North American). The "spiritual ancestry" aspect makes its Asian influence pretty clear.

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### **Summary of the Main Points of the Work as Extracted from Key Parts**

#### ***[From the Preface]***

#### **A Pedagogical Resource. Not a “Theological” Work. Using Mainly Literary & Historical Approaches**

I’ve been teaching biblical studies at the college/university level for twenty-some years now. I decided to write this book because I feel that it is high time to create a pedagogical resource meant for my students (and other similar learners), as well as those who are in a position of teaching (the Bible or other related fields). So here is my humble offering for students and teachers alike. It is based of course on how I’ve tried to teach the New Testament, my “bread and butter” course, and the many experiences I’ve had as a scholar-educator.

One characteristic that has constantly defined the places where I’ve taught through the years (and which has therefore greatly influenced my teaching) is that I usually could not assume that “religious faith” is a significant factor for a great number of my students. In short, this situation is what we teachers (in religion-related fields) know so well as the secular environment that is increasingly becoming the norm across the Western world, particularly in post-secondary institutions. That is even the case in many institutions that are still affiliated to religious

institutions such as my own. Of course, there are notable exceptions, such as places in the Bible-belt in the US.

Since that secular environment has constantly been my context, I have had to exert much effort to make biblical studies relevant through non-theological ways. This factor plays a central role in this book. I repeat: I intentionally *do not use* a theological approach to the Bible here. Rather, I prioritize approaching this collection of writings using primarily literary and historical methods for a very important reason. In this secular age in which we live, I'm becoming more convinced that "theology" (if such an enterprise might even be possible in a context radically marked by diversity in religious belief or lack thereof) can only come *after* we deal first with *the things that commonly bind us all as humans*, hence, the priority of literary and historical approaches. Simply put, one does not need religious faith to study literature and history. Moreover, as a BIPOC scholar, I also employ cross-cultural perspectives as a way of somehow decentering biblical studies from the almost exclusive grip that Western points of view have had on this field until now.

### ***[Parts from the Introduction of the Book]***

#### **A Broad Description of This Book**

This work is a "first step" in a long-term project I have to attempt to propose to people nowadays (I'm thinking particularly of the young people who can potentially be my undergraduate students) how to develop a relevant spirituality (a "quest for meaning," if you will) for themselves, whether they are religious in the traditional sense or not. And that first step can be solemnly expressed thus: *Thou shalt know thy spiritual roots!* For, as various philosophers remind us, to be rooted, to be connected with one's ancestry, especially in the

spiritual realm, is one of our deepest and fundamental needs as humans. To paraphrase Thich Nhat Hanh, without roots, happiness will always elude us.

For us in the West, it is clear from an unchangeable and inescapable history that Christianity and its heart, the Bible, are, for good or ill, the essential components of our spiritual roots for the simple reason that the quest for “the meaning of it all” has been done for most of Western history in serious conversation with, even often controlled by, Christianity and the biblical tradition.

Because of that, I propose here that we get to know our spiritual ancestry by metaphorically standing in front of a concrete and material symbol of the Christian tradition—the book known as the Bible, particularly the part called the New Testament. And then, it’s a matter of doing the same thing that was whispered by a divine voice to St. Augustine of Hippo when he was on the verge of a great spiritual breakthrough, “*tolle et lege!*” (“Take up and read!).

This book first and foremost will make a case for why it would do us good to take up and read the Bible although we are living in a secular age, which frowns down upon such activities related to “old-time” religion. We should read the Bible even in a secular age because it is one of the best ways to be connected with our spiritual roots and ancestry. I will flesh out my case by suggesting that the New Testament is a kind of a textual village where some of the most important spiritual ancestors that began the Christian tradition continue to live through the texts that either they wrote, were written about them, or were first received by them. The good news is that by learning some strategies to read and interpret the Bible, we can get to know these spiritual ancestors, have relevant conversations with them and thus reconnect with the earliest roots of our spiritual tradition in the West. In this way, we will know where our roots and ancestry lie and

with this, we will be better equipped to proceed in our continuous quest for a deeper and bigger meaning in life, whether that involves “God” and established religion or not.

There is an (unfortunately fake yet perceptive) Dalai Lama quote that goes like this: “Learn the rules well in order to know how to break them properly.”<sup>1</sup> Applied to our spiritual ancestry and roots, this work will insist that, as a first step, we have to encounter our spiritual ancestors in the New Testament and converse with them meaningfully. When we are finally in touch with our roots, we can then more properly discern how to seek for meaning in our world and decide what to embrace from our spiritual ancestry, as well as what to revise, resist, or even reject.

### **Overview of the Structure of This Work**

To go into details, this book will take the following concrete form: It will have two main parts. In Part 1 (chapters 1–5), we will begin by getting an overview of our broad topic and discuss some themes that will prepare us to make a metaphorical journey to the New Testament village to encounter some major “village elders” (spiritual ancestors). That will happen in Part II (chapters 6–11). Chapter 12, the conclusion, will bring us from our journey to the New Testament village back home to our Western secularized world and suggest how we can both embrace and struggle with the spiritual ancestry that we have come to know better after our journey.

### *Description of the Book’s Chapters*

Let me give a more detailed description of the individual chapters. Chapter 1 will offer broad but key reflections on why we need to read the Bible even in a secular age. Chapter 2 will

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<sup>1</sup> Dalai Lama, “18 Rules for Living,” accessed July 23, 2022. <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/dalai-lama-18-rules-of-life-2572518> . See this website that claims that the 18 rules are not from the Dalai Lama. <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2014/03/01/dalai-lama-fake-quotes/> . Accessed July 23, 2022.

explain in more detail the nature of the secular age in which we find ourselves in the West today. Chapter 3 will offer a foundational paradigm for viewing the Bible, **shifting the focus from a too facile idea of “the Bible as God’s word” to the most plain and demonstrable fact—that the Bible contains the words of our spiritual ancestors.** It will also discuss some foundational ideas that are linked with the Bible, such as God, faith-as-trust, revelation, belief or unbelief, etc. Chapter 4 will present the main metaphorical image of the Bible, particularly the New Testament as a village where our spiritual ancestors continue to live. It will also suggest some concrete strategies on how to relate with these spiritual ancestors and how to interpret their writings. Chapter 5 will give a general orientation to the New Testament village by giving a “big picture” so that readers could grasp the whole before they enter into details about specific spiritual ancestors in Part II. It will also give an important background review of the Old Testament for those who need it.

With that, we will enter Part II of the work. Here, we will discuss in detail six important spiritual ancestors who were present at the very beginning of what would eventually become the Christian tradition. They are Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, Paul, and, of course, Jesus, the great founding ancestor. The intent is to pay a visit to a particularly important spiritual ancestor, encounter them and grasp some, what I will call, “*sine qua non*’s” (Latin for “without which”). By this, I mean some essential characteristics without which we would not understand what “made this particular spiritual ancestor tick” and what is going on in the work attributed to this particular village elder.

After those encounters and conversations with the six spiritual ancestors, we will come back to our present, secular world in chapter twelve. The journey will have hopefully given us enough knowledge and insight that would equip us both to embrace and wrestle with our

spiritual ancestry. All this is for the purpose of eventually directing us toward constructing a more relevant spirituality here and now that would be effective in aiding us to pursue the depth and transcendence that all of us long for as humans.

***[Parts from the Concluding Chapter of the Book]***

**The Legacies of Our Spiritual Ancestors**

I mentioned earlier that the purpose of our visiting the New Testament textual village and encountering important spiritual ancestors there was to make, as it were, a first acquaintance and grasp some key characteristics without which (*sine qua non*) we would not begin to understand them, their world, and what they left as a lasting legacy to the spiritual tradition that came to be known in time as Christianity. Here are the most important points of the legacy each spiritual ancestor has given us.

In this work, I suggest that we address our spiritual ancestors with a title (“Asian-style”) to establish our family affinity. Hence, I call them “granduncles.” Granduncle (GU) Mark and his clan were probably located in a context of great suffering, a circumstance often identified as persecution by biblical scholars. From that painful context was born his dominant portrayal of Yeshua as a suffering Messiah: the chosen one of God who was nonetheless misunderstood, opposed, plotted against, betrayed, abandoned, sorrowful and even in despair at the very end of his life on the cross. In this way, GU-Mark, it seems, wanted to impart the lesson to his community that to “follow Yeshua on the way” of life and discipleship (see Mark 10:52) boils down to facing life’s inevitable suffering with courage while not losing hope and compassion, as the way still leads to a tomb that is empty and a promise of encountering the Risen One (Mark 16:6–7). Indeed, the dominant image of Yeshua in Mark as a suffering Messiah invites the



Yeshua-follower to contemplate this figure full of pathos with compassion. Hopefully, that same compassion becomes for each one the dominant way to view all human suffering and even the whole of existence.

Granduncle Matthew, on the one hand, was struggling to find a balance between his attachment and devotion to the sacred tradition inherited by his people Israel, and, on the other hand, his faith and trust that Yeshua was indeed the promised Messiah sent to Israel to fulfill God's covenant with them. This was a claim though that was ultimately rejected by the majority of his Jewish contemporaries. Nevertheless, Yeshua is considered to be so important that GU-Matthew dares to identify him as an embodiment of God, applying to him the epitaph mentioned in Isaiah 7:14, "Emmanuel," "God-with-us." Thus, GU-Matthew bequeathed forever to Christianity the foundational principle that Yeshua's nation and people, both referred to as "Israel," was always going to be a fundamentally important part and parcel of the developing spiritual tradition among Yeshua's followers. This is clearly shown in how the Christian Church later on embraced and affirmed the Jewish Scriptures (often referred to as "the Old Testament") with its stories and teachings, as an integral part of its own spiritual legacy. We shall see below how one key concept from Israel's heritage, the idea that humans are made in the image of God (in Latin, *Imago Dei*) played a crucial role in the development of the secular West.

Moreover, GU-Matthew's message is particularly important and insightful for us who ourselves struggle to figure out how, on the one hand, we can continue to valorize our spiritual traditions from the past while, on the other hand, find ways to make them relevant to a very different and difficult contemporary situation in which we find ourselves.

Granduncle Luke went out of his way to write not only an account of Yeshua's life but also a second work that dealt with what happened to Yeshua's followers and their communities

in the aftermath of Yeshua having gone back to the One who had sent him. In this, GU-Luke was trying to tell us that the covenant that God made with Israel was now, through God's anointed One—Yeshua, being offered beyond Israel to the wide-world of the Gentiles, the ones who were hitherto perhaps considered as marginal and second-class citizens of the covenant. We can feel the passion of GU-Luke for the inclusion of the Gentiles as full-fledged members of God's people.

It is fair to say that GU-Luke's lasting legacy to us then is his message about (God and Yeshua's) inclusivity. He brings this to the fore in the gospel where he spotlights the predilection of Yeshua for those who were outside the mainstream, the marginalized, the oppressed, and the downtrodden. He arguably brings his narrative to its high point in the Acts of the Apostles where he focuses on how the message of Yeshua is, in stages, brought to, realized, and accepted joyfully by the Gentiles, mainly through the work of Yeshua's intrepid apostle Paul and his collaborators.

Granduncle John, writing toward the end the first century, was the one who profoundly grasped, perhaps more than others through his deep spirituality and mysticism that Yeshua was a unique embodiment of the One God and thus was to be identified as closely as possible with the divine being Israel knew as YHWH. Of course, Yeshua, the Christ, being an embodiment of Israel's God is a strand of thought found elsewhere in the New Testament. We have mentioned GU-Matthew calling him "Emmanuel" ("God-with-us"). GU-Paul also describes Yeshua as the "image of God" in several places in letters he wrote or in those attributed to him. However, we can say that it was GU-John who arguably identified Yeshua most closely with Yahweh to the point that he could be acknowledged in his gospel by lofty statements such as: "the Word was God" (John 1:1), "one with the Father" (10:30), and even "My Lord and my God!" (20:28).

Thus, in his story, GU-John sought to present the Yeshua walking the dusty roads of Palestine and living on this earth as, although human, also something like an exalted divine being-come to “dwell among us” (1:14); an exalted Messiah who knew everything that was going to happen to him (18:4) and as one who freely lay down his life (10:17) to “draw all things” to himself (12:32).

It is GU-John’s narrative that can act as the most direct springboard for us to see how Christianity later on came to consider Yeshua or (to revert to his more familiar Western name) Jesus as God-incarnate (the noun is “incarnation”) and make this teaching the very centerpiece of its institutional creed. This in turn accounts for the fact that Jesus becomes the hero-archetype, the savior-archetype par excellence in Western culture and even in contemporary popular culture as can be seen in Harry Potter, Frodo Baggins, even Superman (among many others) who are all arguably Christ-figures.

Granduncle Paul is known most for his being the apostle to the Gentiles. He tirelessly labored so that more people outside (the nation and people of) Israel might come to the knowledge of Yeshua, the Christ, because in his life-changing encounter with Christ “on the road to Damascus,” he glimpsed that everyone and everything was “one in Christ” (Gal 3:28). This was his version of what—in the Perennial Philosophy—is often called the unitive/non-dual spiritual experience of reality. GU-Paul might be considered the most important figure in Christianity next to Yeshua himself because, in his lifelong effort to make the way of Christ more Gentile-friendly, he in effect laid the foundations that would eventually lead to Christianity becoming a world religion. Without the vision and labors of this spiritual ancestor, Christianity might have remained an obscure Jewish sect and might never have become the largest religious tradition with the most number of believers that we know it to be today.

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Finally, we also got a glimpse of how Yeshua himself probably was as a historical figure, particularly, how he sought to proclaim and realize the new order he called “the reign of God” (*basileia tou theou*). This was a reality (even a social order) that—he was convinced—God was already establishing in *the here and now* through his own ministry. In God’s new order of things, the abundant blessings of wholeness (peace, justice, compassion, inclusivity, prosperity, abundance, etc.), of God’s *shalom* would be present especially for those who in this world were underprivileged, excluded, poor, oppressed and marginalized.

### **Why We Still Need to Read the Bible in a Secular Age**

Thus, the ultimate reason I can offer for why we still need to read the Bible, particularly, the New Testament, in this our secular age can be expressed thus: *It is only by visiting the New Testament village that we can be put in touch once again with the original impetus that gave rise to the Christian tradition*, a legacy that still impacts us as Westerners (or hybrids with some Western component in us) in so many profound ways today. *It is only by meeting those ancestors in the New Testament village, conversing with them, learning, agreeing, disagreeing, adding some critical perspectives to their views<sup>2</sup> can we root ourselves in the tradition and pass on what needs to be passed on to the next generation.* It is this creative embracing of and wrestling with the tradition I have advocated here that will fulfill our deep need for roots.

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<sup>2</sup> One particularly urgent task today in interpreting our traditions (such as the Bible) is the effort to think intersectionally about them. That means to reflect on how these traditions are impacted by various interacting systems of oppression and privilege. For more on this, confer Yee, “Thinking Intersectionally: Gender, Class, Race and the Etceteras of our Discipline.”