

Reading list

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

Reading the Bible with the Damned. By Bob Eckblad. Westminster John Knox, 2005.

A stunning book about how studying scripture with the poor, with illegal immigrants, and especially with the imprisoned can produce extraordinarily beautiful readings—and hopefully, more redemptive politics.

Discipline and Punish. By Michel Foucault. Vintage, 1995.

The classic postmodern text about the rise of the prison. Foucault locates the origins of prisons in capitalist economies which prize time for labor and so punish people by taking away their time. He suggests that modernity is premised on citizens' "self-policing": those behind bars are not the only ones being harshly disciplined.

Crime. By Timothy Gorringer. SPCK, 2004.

Gorringer lays the blame for an unjust, punitive prison system at the feet of Anselm and his substitutionary view of the atonement (lest we think theology doesn't matter) and leans on René Girard to suggest a more conciliatory Christology and a system of justice that emphasizes reconciliation.

"God's Prisoners." By Andrew Skotnicki. *Modern Theology*, January 2006.

Skotnicki sees Anselm's theory of the atonement not as the problem but as a potential solution to unjust prison practices. He differs from Foucault in tracing the rise of the prison to the rise of monastic practices of penitence. He parallels the birth of the prison in the 11th century with the then-new theology of purgatory: both involve spending time in purgation of one's sins.

Beyond Prisons. By Laura Magnani and Harmon Wray. Fortress, 2006.

Offers a way past punitive justice and a way to reform the political and social order to aid the "least of these."

When Prisoners Return. By Pat Nolan. Xulon, 2004.

The head of Prison Fellowship calls for prison reform, especially to reduce recidivism, in a book that introduced many of the prison reforms now being contemplated at the federal level.

The Ways of Judgment. By Oliver O'Donovan. Eerdmans, 2005.

O'Donovan analyzes prison policy in a rigorous fashion that never fails to enlighten. He criticizes early Quaker builders of penitentiaries for "believing that the world could be made better, but not believing sufficiently in miracles to know that penal techniques were insufficient to that end."

Jesus the Savior. By William Placher. Westminster John Knox, 2001.

A landmark work in Christology with a chapter on visiting prisoners as a crucial and neglected part of participation in the body of Christ.

Are Prisons Obsolete? By Angela Y. Davis. Open Media, 2003.

Davis's answer is yes. She sees incarceration as akin to slavery: a racist system on which an entire economy is unjustly built.