

## The "Metaphorical Gospel Theory" - Abstract

By: Erick Nelson

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There is an important and influential theory held by some contemporary Historical Jesus scholars such as Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Bishop John Shelby Spong, which I call the Metaphorical Gospel theory. This book argues that this theory is false.

The Metaphorical Gospel view is typically found as an *underlying assumption* in writings that are concerned with proving *other* things. For instance, Borg and Spong are eager to "re-vision" and redefine Christianity in terms that would be more acceptable to the modern mind, based in part on the premise that the MG theory is true.

At times they give reasons for this premise, but nowhere do they mount a sustained *argument* for it. Thus, the burden is on the researcher (that's me) to make the argument plain. That's one of the things I attempt to do in this work.

The Metaphorical Gospel theory states, in a nutshell:

1. The New Testament writers did not intend to portray many of the stories, and the claims about Jesus' deity and resurrection, as "factually" true. Instead, they intended to portray them as (*only*) *metaphorically* true.
2. This way of telling stories was common practice at the time, and the original readers and hearers of the New Testament typically *understood* the stories and claims to be metaphorically, but not factually, true.
3. It was only a later generation that "literalized" the gospel.

Since Christianity, as commonly understood throughout the ages, has always taught *both* the factual basis and the metaphorical value of these things, it is clear that the MG theory is defined not so much by what it *asserts* (the metaphorical truth) but by what it *denies* (the grounding in fact).

### Evaluating the Theory

First: to forestall possible misunderstanding (and to proactively avoid being labeled "Nelson, the Literalist"), (a) I set aside space to reassure the reader that I do indeed understand metaphor, can spot one when I run into it, and think that metaphor is good. (b) I simply follow the scholars' established usage of the terms "factual", "literal", "historical" to mean, more or less interchangeably, "events which occurred" - and do not intend to imply that metaphorical statements aren't true.

To be clear on intent: I do *not* consider this to be, fundamentally, an issue of "faith", but of historical exegesis: what did the New Testament authors intend to convey? I try not to approach this from a partisan viewpoint. I do make a sincere attempt to be fair to the theory. This should not be an issue of good guys vs. bad guys, but simply: "What is the truth in this matter?"

Even though I effectively take on the burden of proof here in this work, I believe that the burden of proof really should lie with those who wish to affirm the MG theory. I identify five requirements of any sound theory:

- Definiteness of Articulation

- Definiteness of Warrant
- Internal Evidence
- External Evidence
- Answers to Objections

The following is a summary of what I found concerning these five requirements:

### **Definiteness of Articulation and Warrant**

This principle says that, to be a good theory, the position must be clearly stated and some definite rational support must be offered.

In researching these authors, I was surprised by the fact that I failed to find clear, straightforward explanations of what the position really was and why they think it is true. Instead, I found three things: (a) general claims, bolstered by appeal to authority, (b) passages that seemed to simply muddy the issue, and (c) even some statements that seemed to support some *other*, competing view.

Thus, I conclude that - at least for the scholars I studied - this requirement has not been satisfied.

### **Internal Evidence**

If the Metaphorical Gospel theory is true, we would expect statements in the New Testament which address this issue to confirm it. We simply do not find direct statements *supporting* the view.

The justifications I did encounter typically appeal to *indirect* evidence. I contend in this work that these appeals are fundamentally flawed, not so much because they appeal to indirect evidence, but because they are invalid arguments.

All of the direct internal evidence that can be brought to bear on the theory actually *refutes* the theory. A summary list of this evidence has to do with:

- The deity of Jesus is a true, not metaphorical deity (Paul)
- The resurrection of Jesus is a body/transformation one, not a metaphorical one - (Paul and Acts)
- The New Testament writers claim in direct and indirect ways to present eyewitness accounts of actual events (Luke's prologue, John, "Deutero-" epistles)
- The kerygma in Acts contains an appeal to fulfillment of prophecy
- A close continuity, rather than separateness, of Jesus and "Christ" is claimed (1 John)

### **External Evidence**

If the Metaphorical Gospel theory is true, we would expect the major church leaders who lived during the time period in question (70 -110 AD) to affirm this view, since they were among the very people who supposedly interpreted the gospel metaphorically. Instead they *contradict* it.

Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna (the "Apostolic Fathers"), bishops of their respective churches, not only lived during the era under question, but were in an excellent position to have first-hand knowledge regarding the meaning and intent of the gospel writers. (They also were martyred for their views, which shows they were serious about what they said.)

[For argument's sake, throughout this work I have used the gospel composition dates, 70-100 AD, accepted by the MG proponents.]

- Each lived during the 70-110 AD period, which is the time period in question, and therefore are specific, real-life examples of the very people whose views we are trying to determine.
- Clement was a leader (co-presbyter) of the church in Rome (Mark's gospel) around the time that Mark's gospel was written (using 70 AD), and later a bishop of that church.
- Ignatius was an adult member of the church in Antioch (Matthew's gospel) around the time that Matthew's gospel was written (using 80 AD), and later a bishop of that church.
- Polycarp was an adult member of the church of Smyrna (next-door neighbor to Ephesus, John's gospel), and possibly bishop of that church, around the time that John's gospel was written (using 100 AD)
- There is, in addition, further evidence that connects these three with apostles themselves.

Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp say that:

- Jesus' deity was "factual"
- Jesus' resurrection was of his body
- We should reject stories that are made up, and instead believe the eyewitness accounts of what happened
- We should reject the idea that Jesus and the Christ are to be separated

## Answers to Common Objections

I was able to correspond with Dr. Borg and Bishop Spong, which gave me the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. I understood that it was unreasonable to expect full replies from these busy men, and was gratified that they responded at all.

Dr. Borg confirmed in 1997 that my basic understanding of his view is correct. He later responded briefly to emails in 2002 which attempted to confirm his position, and especially clarify his views about literalization. I was surprised that he was not able to easily deal with Internal Evidence I presented, nor did he have a sufficient understanding of the Apostolic Fathers or the Apologists.

Bishop Spong also confirmed that my basic understanding of his view is correct. He was silent about the Internal Evidence, although we exchanged several emails and he commented on several topics. Even though he has vehemently argued in his books that the (Jewish) gospel had been literalized by a later Gentiles, when pressed about details he confessed that he *did not know* much about Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp, *did not know* whether the first-century Gentiles understood the gospel literally or metaphorical - *nor does he care*. He therefore had no reply to the evidence.

John Dominic Crossan did not respond to my emails, and so I simply don't know how he would have answered my points.

## Conclusion

I have tried to understand exactly what this theory claims and to set this out fairly. I have tried to reveal the underlying arguments, which wasn't always easy, and to consider them closely.

I looked for "meta-gospel" (statements in the gospel writings *about* the gospel) that would either support or contradict the theory. All of them *contradict* it; none of them support it.

I looked for statements by people who were part of the original audience and were in such positions of leadership (including even *geographical* commonality with the gospels) that they couldn't help but know what the New Testament writers meant. I found that all of the statements that can be marshaled on the subject *contradict* the MG theory, and none support it.

Finally, I found no *answers* to this evidence either in the MG scholars' books, or by asking them directly. It appears (and I can't bring myself to believe that this is actually the case) that they have not considered the most obvious objections to their theory.

The very evidence which ought to support the Metaphorical Gospel theory actually refutes it. Therefore, I find that the Metaphorical Gospel Theory is not only false, but provably so.

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## My Purpose

By: Erick Nelson

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"A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it." – G.K. Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, 1925

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## Introduction

It is surprisingly easy to misunderstand what the point of this article is. My scope is actually pretty narrowly defined.

**I want to take a prominent New Testament theory and make it very explicit, lay out the evidence which is relevant to its confirmation or refutation, and show that the evidence refutes the theory - in the clearest possible step-by-step argument. That's it.**

Some people have assumed that I'm trying to prove in this article that "Historic Christianity" is true. I'm not. Actually, the contention of this article is perfectly compatible with people who say (a) the gospel writers made everything up in an attempt to fool people, or (b) the gospel writers innocently passed along legends, thinking they were factual accounts, or (c) other scenarios.

Some people have gotten the impression that I'm trying to discredit the scholars I discuss. That's not my purpose, and if I've been less than charitable towards them I apologize. Let me know what you think I ought to change and I will try to do so.

Some people have objected that I'm engaging in a religious debate which cannot be settled because it is in the realm of "faith." That is not the case. The issue of the *meaning* of the New Testament writers, although theological aspects are involved, is primarily an exegetical issue. The issue of the beliefs or common world-view of the early Christians between 70 and 110 AD is both an exegetical and historical issue. As such, there is plenty of reason to think that these issues are decidable.

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## Statement of Intention

### What I am trying to do

- I am trying to clarify an issue in New Testament studies that very much needs clarification. This analysis uncovers the theory or view which claims that the New Testament writers *intended to portray* their material as metaphorically, not factually true.

I call this the Metaphorical Gospel theory.

- I am trying to describe a theory which is often only *implicitly* held. In doing so, I gather the statements from three prominent scholars (Borg, Spong, and Crossan) who affirm the theory.
- I am trying to evaluate this theory solely on the basis of the appropriate *evidence*. And, therefore, I (a) specify what kinds of evidence ought to be examined, (b) present the evidence and explain its credentials, and (c) directly compare what the evidence says with what the theory says.
- I am trying to show exactly why I think the Metaphorical Gospel theory is false. I am trying to present a step-by-step, detailed argument, so that you can decide for yourself whether my conclusion is correct. The intent of my approach is, therefore, purely as a straightforward, rational analysis of publicly available evidence.

### **What I am Not trying to do**

- I am not trying to say that there is no metaphor in the New Testament, or that metaphor is bad or that metaphorical statements can't be true in and of themselves.
- I am not trying to conduct a detailed critique of any particular scholar's writings. I only include these three particular authors so that they can act as real-life examples of influential scholars who hold the theory. I could easily have concentrated on other writers and professors.
- I am not trying to misrepresent, distort, or exaggerate the views of the scholars I do discuss. I have gone to great lengths to try to really understand their positions. I corresponded with Bishop Spong and Dr. Borg, who have confirmed with me that they do indeed hold this position. Since Dr. Crossan did not return my emails, I judge his position solely by his published comments.
- I am not trying to argue from an evangelical Christian's "perspective", or assumptions, as has sometimes been the case when Christians have critiqued these scholars. Instead, I am consciously trying to take a purely *evidential* approach to the subject matter. And therefore, in a very real sense, I am *not* taking part in a religious debate. I am taking part in an examination of evidence.
- I am not trying to prove that "Historic Christianity" is true (although I think it is). Since I outline six Options, or alternative ways of understanding the meaning of the gospels, it is clear that refuting *one* of the six only reduces the number of Options by one. Simple math tells us that there are five left.
- I am not trying to address the issue, held by modern theologians, as to whether the *real* meaning of the gospel stories ought to be understood metaphorically or factually. I only address the issue of the *intent* of the gospels writers, not the *ultimate value* of the material. That would be another, probably longer, paper.
- I am not trying to rely on fancy phrasing or clever rhetoric to establish my points. I want the argument to convince the reader. I think that the evidence is so strong, and the reasoning so direct, that I want nothing to get in the way and obscure the force of the case.

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## **Background**

Since the beginning of the century a certain peculiar, even somewhat counter-intuitive, view has been put forth by certain (but not all) New Testament scholars. This view says that the gospel writers adapted or created many of the sayings and activities attributed to Jesus without being guilty of actually *lying* about these matters. The view is usually stated in terms of the gospel writers' desire to address the "needs" of the church within it's "life situation" (although they used German words, which seemed much more sophisticated).

I have long been puzzled by this view, because I wasn't sure exactly what was *meant* by this assertion. It seemed as if the writers were saying that

- many of the stories were factually false
- they were written in good faith, so
- the writers must have *intended to portray* their material as being true spiritually, theologically, metaphorically, and not factually.

However, this was usually implied rather than explicitly spelled out. This didn't worry me a great deal, because I thought that I had read enough about the authorship and dating of the gospels to form my own opinion. In brief, I was convinced by arguments presented by such scholars John Warwick Montgomery (*History and Christianity*), F.F. Bruce (*The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?*), Donald Guthrie (*New Testament Introduction*), and Bishop John Robinson (*Redating the New Testament*), which seemed to me to be superior in clarity and logical precision to those of the "old guard" liberal scholars (e.g. Bultmann, Dibelius, V. Taylor, etc.), or to their more modern counterparts (e.g. Morton Smith, Norman Perrin, etc.) I was fortunate enough to have personally met with Montgomery, Bruce, and Guthrie to discuss these issues. I also had the chance to write a paper for John Hick which described my view at the time, and he thought that it represented sound scholarship (even though it was diametrically opposed to his own views).

However, many years have passed since I last looked into this subject. I attended small group meetings with people who were interested in theology and discovered that there were new scholars who were all the rage. Among these were Marcus Borg, Bishop John Shelby Spong, and John Dominic Crossan. As the group discussed these writers, it became clear that the issue I had previously wondered about (the "metaphorical" intent of the gospels) had been somewhat clarified, especially by Spong. The "Metaphorical Gospel Theory", as I call it, was presented to me as the definitive scholarly truth of 1995. Anyone who was doubted this theory surely did so out of blind ignorance and theological prejudice.

This got my attention. I thought to myself, "Ok, let's see what these guys have to say. I'll take time out from my career pursuits and let them give me their best shot. I will be willing to re-think everything that I've lived for, be willing to modify my own Christian beliefs, if they can really prove their case." And I bought some of their books and tried to understand their positions and arguments.

Not being content to merely read their books, I endeavored to correspond with them. Dr. Borg and Bishop Spong were kind enough to (all too) briefly discuss my questions via email (Borg) and regular mail (Spong). So I had a pretty good chance both to understand their positions and to probe these positions a little bit. (See Borg emails and Spong letters.)

When doing background research on this topic, I attempted to ask questions of some seminary professors. One of them questioned my motivation. So, I'll try to give an honest answer here. I think my motivation changed over time. At first, it was the direct challenge of letting those who advocate this view "give it their best shot." Later, I was asked to do an article and post it on the web site of some friends - so my motivation was to write a good article. They were so enthusiastic that I started thinking that this analysis might help somebody else to think through the topic. Still later, when few or no people were interested in the topic, I realized that this is still a good exercise for me - even if nobody else ever reads it. That's because I'm interested in "modeling arguments", and this gave me an interesting, complex, and definite argument with

which to practice.

The result is also that my belief that truth will stand up under scrutiny was rewarded. Having examined the arguments pro and con, and after considering the evidence myself, including these scholars' replies to my questions, I will not be easily intimidated into assenting to a view which is simply a mistaken view. It doesn't matter *who* teaches it, or how many people believe it, or how popular the theory becomes. As long as the evidence refutes the theory, I will reject it.

I believe that the Metaphorical Gospel Theory should be spelled out and examined. This theory is an important and influential one, even though often held only implicitly and confusedly. It is a bedrock assumption for much of university and seminary New Testament studies. It is accepted uncritically by thousands of students, pastors, and lay church members.

In this article I consider the relevant evidence and - on the basis of this investigation - conclude that the Metaphorical Gospel theory is false. I also conclude that it is not only false, but provably so.

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## Requirements of a Sound Theory

By: Erick Nelson

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### General Principles

#### Interpreting Texts

It is sometimes mistakenly thought that Metaphorical Gospel issues are matters of faith, or religion. They certainly do have implications for religion, but they are first and foremost questions of historical fact. Namely, "What did certain people (the New Testament authors/redactors) intend to convey when they wrote?" More specifically, "Did the New Testament writers INTEND TO PORTRAY their material as metaphorically, not factually, true?" The MG Theory says "YES" to this question.

And so we enter the world of "hermeneutics", the interpretation of texts. So, we ought to be clear about our principles of interpretation.

#### Representing the Theory

John Dominic Crossan rightly complains of a tendency to set up straw man arguments to knock down. It's too often the case that the critic of some view simply does not take the time to understand it. Or, having understood it, to caricature the view so as to make it ridiculous.

It is, however, only a small part of the recent shift from academic argumentation (I will make your case as accurate and strong as I can before I demolish it) to political argumentation (I will make your case as dumb and silly as I can before I demolish you). I am not too happy with that aspect of the recent Jesus Wars. (John Dominic Crossan, Mar 2000, HJMaterials/Methodology discussion group)

The two principles of charity and fidelity should prevail here. We should try to be faithful to the writer's view (fidelity), while putting the best construction on it that we can (charity). I would add that, if possible, it is a good idea to ask follow-up questions of the writer in question, in

order to clear up misunderstandings and achieve the greatest clarity.

## Subjectivity

It is clear that the Metaphorical Gospel theory does not embrace an entirely subjective theory of interpretation. Some theories maintain that texts mean whatever we *think* they mean, or whatever we *want* them to mean, in our own existential situation. For such theories, it is impossible to be wrong when interpreting written material, because the texts themselves do not have an objective meaning outside of our interaction with them!

No, the MG theory doesn't say this. On the contrary: its proponents specifically claim that the standard interpretation of the New Testament is *wrong*, and that this new interpretation is *correct* - that is, faithful to the original intent of the authors.

Therefore, we will agree that the New Testament writers were trying to convey something, that there is a true interpretation of their texts, and that this interpretation is discoverable.

## Principles

What principles shall we use to do our exegesis? We immediately find ourselves in a peculiar position. We can't exactly appeal to "standard principles of New Testament interpretation", for these are the very things in question!

I propose that we start instead with the interpretive rules used in the "real world" of the legal profession. The following four principles are at the heart of these rules:

1. The meaning of the text should be found in the document itself. Insofar as possible, the document should be allowed to be self-interpreting.
2. When ambiguities arise, the clear intention of the writing should prevail over particular words.
3. The "plain" meaning should be accepted whenever possible. Any novel interpretation must be supported by proof.
4. The document must be construed as a whole. Exegesis must be in context.

## Burden of Proof

There are several common-sense legal rules for assigning the burden of proof. (McCormick, *McCormick on Evidence*: 785-6; McGuire, *Evidence: Common Sense and Common Law*, 179) The party having the burden of proof must overturn some initial presumption (in this case the results of interpretation according to the rules stated above) by establishing the *greater* likelihood of its thesis. The burden of proof is on:

- The party seeking the affirmation of an unusual event
- The party possessing peculiar knowledge of the situation
- The party which accuses another of fraud

On each of these points, the burden of proof is squarely on those who affirm the Metaphorical Gospel theory. Because of the rules of interpretation, the presumption is that the text says what it seems to say. The "unusual event" is the introduction of a novel interpretation; the MG theory proposes to overturn the norm. And if the theory is implausible in the ways I've describe later, it incurs an additional burden of proof.

The scholars who affirm the MG theory claim to possess peculiar knowledge, hence the burden is made greater. And - while they do not accuse the "literalizers" of fraud - they do claim that a mistake of gigantic proportions has been made, and therefore must be made to prove their claim.



## Falsifiability

Analytic Philosophers, especially those such as Karl Popper who are concerned with the Philosophy of Science, have pointed out that one requirement for a meaningful theory is that it is theoretically "falsifiable." Expressed in common-sense terms, this requirement says that I must be able to say not only what kind of evidence would support my theory, but what kind of evidence would *count against it*.

[When you realize that most scientific theories are of the "universal" form (e.g. "all x is y") rather than the "existential" form (e.g. "there exists an x which is y"), it becomes obvious that mountains of evidence confirming the theory cannot establish its truth with certainty, while only one counter-example is sufficient to disprove it. It follows that much scientific experimentation is designed to find such counter-examples.]

Let's say we have a theory which is so flexible that no possible state of affairs could count against it. Let's say my theory says, for instance, "Everyone is plotting against me." You can point out that many people actually like me, and are helpful to me, and that most people completely *ignore* me. I respond by saying "Yes, that's all part of the plot. They're trying to win my confidence, lull me into trusting them." Any possible evidence that you present can be assimilated into my theory. It is bullet-proof - but at a cost. The cost is that the theory is technically meaningless.

And so, a sound theory must be falsifiable.

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## Requirements of a Sound Theory

There are various kinds of theories, and each kind may require a different degree of proof. The hierarchy of proof could plausibly go something like this, from weakest to strongest claim:

- working hypothesis
- tentatively-held theory
- established theory
- mature theory

A mature theory is simply an established theory that has stood the test of time. It has perhaps changed a bit in order to accommodate objections. Its definition has been refined and perfected: we know not only what the theory says and doesn't say, but we also know precisely what counts for and against the theory. And what specifically makes it a mature theory is that all remaining objections to the final theory have been considered and shown to be faulty - in fact, there are standard rebuttals to most objections.

Which type of theory is the Metaphorical Gospel theory? I would assume from the way that it is affirmed that its proponents consider it to be *at the very least* an "established theory." In fact, their zeal in recommending it and confidence in its truth actually indicates that they consider it to be a "mature theory." So, let's expect the degree and type of proof suitable to a mature theory concerning the interpretation of the New Testament texts. What would that be?

Any sound theory should provide the following. A mature theory should go beyond this and provide it in a rigorous manner.

### Definiteness of Articulation

We should be clear as to what the theory is.

1. The theory, first, should be clearly and explicitly spelled out. The reader should

easily be able to know which *propositions* are asserted by the theory, which are denied, and which are outside the scope of the theory. If we are not clear about what the theory says, how can we know if it is true?

2. Quite obviously, the theory must be internally consistent.

### **Definiteness of Warrant**

We should be clear as to why the theory is held to be true.

1. The theory should tell us exactly which kinds of events or facts count *for* the theory, which count *against* it (it must be falsifiable), and which are outside the scope of the theory.

2. The reasoning from evidence to conclusion must be clear, valid, and be explicitly spelled out, so we can all see *why* the theory is true.

### **Internal Evidence**

What direct or indirect statements within the text confirm the theory?

1. Direct. Internal evidence, that is, statements within the body of the text, will often be difficult to evaluate, simply because they are the very statements at issue. However, the careful reader may find "meta-textual" statements in the text: statements that directly confirm or disconfirm the theory. Any such statements should be brought forth and analyzed.

2. Indirect. Some statements within the text, while they do not directly address the issue at hand, support or undercut the theory in an indirect way. For instance, a passage may *assume* or *depend* on something that constitutes evidence for or against the theory; or the passage may make *better sense* within one framework than another.

### **External Evidence**

What direct or indirect statements outside the text confirm the theory?

1. Direct. Are there writings that show how the text was commonly understood by those in the best position to make that assessment?

2. Indirect. Are there writings that assume or depend on, or make better sense of, one interpretation?

### **Answers to Objections**

Has the theory taken all the relevant facts and inferences into account?

1. Coverage of the Intellectual Terrain. One of the most important attributes of a sound theory is that it has considered the question from as many angles as possible. The one presenting the theory, for instance, has not just considered one side of the question, but is conversant with all the issues involved.

2. Answers to Common Objections. Any significant theory will be tested by others. Unless the theory is trivially true, somebody will come up with questions and objections, counter-examples, new inferences, etc. A sound theory will have considered all such questions, and will in fact have anticipated new

questions. A *mature* theory will go beyond even this. It will have become so adept at responding to such questions that it will have "stock" answers for the most common of them.

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## Defining Characteristics of the MG Theory

By: Erick Nelson

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### Introduction

Bishop John Shelby Spong has given us a little scene from his life that serves as an excellent introduction to the theory.

"As I sought to explain this biblical background, my friends around the room looked increasingly incredulous. 'You mean', one of them said, 'that maybe these things did not actually happen?'

'No', I suggested. 'What we have in the Gospels is an interpretive narrative based on an earlier part of the tradition and designed to enable the reader to see the reality of God in Jesus and to be drawn to this reality in faith.'

'This means', my questioner continued, 'that you are saying that Luke was lying. He told these things as if they were true when he knew they were not!'

The luncheon would not be long enough to address these issues, I thought to myself in despair. This woman believed that the Gospels were something like a television documentary or a researched biography. She knew nothing about the style of writing that was in vogue in the Jewish world when the Gospels were written."  
(Born of a Woman p 17-18)

According to Spong, the writer of Luke knew that many of the stories he wrote weren't factually true, but wasn't lying, because he was practicing a style of writing "in vogue" at the time. Spong says,

- the stories were not factually true,
- Luke *knew* that the stories were not factually true,
- (therefore, Luke could tell the difference), and
- Luke *did not portray* them as factually true.

This is the beginning of a theory of interpretation that I call the Metaphorical Gospel theory.

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### Defining Characteristics

I want to start out by offering a definition of this theory. Then we can fill in the background. The first important thing to note is that the MG Theory is not defined so much by what it affirms, but by what it denies. These are the essential elements:

**Stories intended metaphorically, not factually**

According to the Metaphorical Gospel Theory, the New Testament writers did not intend to portray many of the stories, sayings, and claims about Jesus as factually true (that is, as events which happened, things he said, etc.), but as metaphorically true (spiritually, theologically, even archetypally true).

For instance, the Metaphorical Gospel theory might say that the author/redactor of the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead didn't at all mean to imply that there was really a dead man named Lazarus who came back to life, but that the author was trying to express how our lives can be transformed ("brought back to life") by faith.

In another example, the gospel author would be the first to point out that Jesus didn't literally walk on water, or do anything that looked like he did, but that he, the author, wrote this story to illustrate that we can rise above our troubles and circumstances as we trust God.

Since MG scholars agree with each other that layers or strata of actual history are embedded in the gospel accounts, they do not suggest that *none* of the stories are historical. They sometimes differ with each other, though, about details concerning which are historical and which are metaphorical.

### **The deity and resurrection of Jesus not intended "literally"**

According to the Metaphorical Gospel Theory, the gospel writers did not believe, or mean to imply, that Jesus was the physical incarnation of God on earth, nor that his body came back to life. They meant to convey Jesus' close connection with God, and continued presence, through powerful imagery.

For instance, one scholar (Borg) tells us that the "I am the Way"-type claims put in Jesus' mouth in the gospel of John were not intended to make Christianity into an exclusivist religion. Rather, the "way" of Christ refers to his *teaching* - specifically, his teaching about the path of death and resurrection.

The "resurrection of Christ" does not, according to the MG Theory, imply that Jesus' body came back to life out of the grave. What it does mean is that Jesus' disciples experienced *something* after his death that radically changed their lives. That "something" is variously thought to be a real spiritual experience, or a more general insight or awakening.

### **The Historical Jesus distinguished from the Christ of Faith**

According to at least some flavors of the MG Theory, the New Testament writers were often actually writing about the "Christ of Faith" rather than the historical man Jesus, writing *as if* the man Jesus had said and done these things. Jesus and the Christ are separate.

The actual "object of discourse" or "object of reference" in many gospel passages thus was the "present" Christ of the community's experience, not the "fleshly" man Jesus. For instance, the author of the Lazarus story was trying to express how "Christ's" continued presence changed lives, and so he wrote a story *as if* the man Jesus had done these things.

### **Original audience understood metaphorically, not factually.**

According to the Metaphorical Gospel theory, the congregations of those churches at the time the gospels were written (and especially the leaders) were "in tune" to the spiritual or metaphorical nature of the gospel accounts and the claims about Jesus.

This kind metaphorical writing was common practice at the time - so common and pervasive, in fact, that the original readers and hearers of the gospels easily and naturally understood that the material was presented metaphorically rather than factually.

## Later, the gospel was literalized.

It is clear, and even universally acknowledged, that by the mid-second-century Christian leaders such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus did *not* hold the MG view. They interpreted the gospel stories as accounts of things which really happened; they believed in the deity and resurrection of Jesus in their plain sense; and they saw a complete continuity between the man Jesus and the Christ they experienced as a present reality.

Therefore, it is clear that, if the MG Theory is true, there must have been some process of literalization. Some scholars address this more directly than others. Those who do take this on (such as Spong) stress that it was only a later generation, removed by time, culture, and location, which started to misinterpret the New Testament, literalizing it. Mid-second-century Christians, such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, did not *know* how the material was intended, and so naively interpreted the stories and claims literally, factually. This mistaken interpretation became the foundation of Historic Christianity throughout the centuries.

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## Six Options

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: December 29, 2001

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## The Question

Proponents of the MG Theory often tell us that we need to read the Bible stories as true metaphors rather than as historical events. Marcus Borg, for instance, tells us in his newest book:

"As we enter the twenty-first century, we need a new set of lenses through which to read the Bible. The older set, ground and polished by modernity, no longer works for millions of people. These lenses need to be replaced. The older way of seeing and reading the Bible, which I will soon describe, has made the Bible incredible and irrelevant for vast numbers of people." (Reading the Bible Again, p 3-4)

The assertion that we *may regard* the gospels as "metaphorically" true while doubting their value as factual truth is surely an unexceptional statement. In fact, it is almost trivially true. A statement of this kind can be cheerfully made about almost any document or story.

I may, for instance, think that Mormonism or Islam have many true and insightful things to say about our spiritual life without believing that Joseph Smith or Mohammed were actually prophets or that the events relayed in the Book of Mormon really occurred.

I may admire Bertrand Russell's personal moral stands and his clarity of thought as spiritual examples worthy of emulation, without accepting the atheism he taught.

And anyone who wishes may, in the same way, think that the gospels include profound and insightful spiritual or moral truths - even if they doubt Jesus' very existence.

But is there more to this contention than that? Do the authors sometimes slide, almost unconsciously, from the statement "I think that there are metaphorical truths in the material" to

the very different proposition, "The original authors and their audiences believed the material to be only metaphorically true"?

The Question we want to answer here is *not*:

- Is there valuable metaphorical content to be found in the NT (it is universally acknowledged that there is)?
- *Should we*, in today's world, regard the NT to be (only) metaphorically, rather than factually, true?

Our question is:

**Did the New Testament writers INTEND TO PORTRAY their material as metaphorically, not factually, true?**

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As the reader scans the theological works for a confirmation of this conclusion, it is not always clear what the scholars think, because sometimes they seem to say one thing, sometimes quite another. The more we read, in fact, the more likely we are to become confused.

We will spell out the basic possible interpretations. We will take this step by step in our attempt to clarify the issue.

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## **Six Basic Options**

**Option 1.** The NT writers truly believed that these stories and claims were factually (as well as metaphorically and spiritually) true, and they were correct. This is, of course, the position of Historic Christianity.

This option says that the stories and claims were indeed factually true and understood as such by the first audience. Since this view is explicitly rejected by these New Testament scholars, it is quite obvious that this is *not* what they mean. No confusion on *this* point. We won't consider it further.

**Option 2.** The NT writers truly believed that these stories and claims were factually true (the "creative" changes having occurred earlier in the process), portrayed them as such, but were mistaken.

This says that the gospel writers or "redactors" (compilers and editors) believed the factuality of the stories, but were simply mistaken. This view would presume of course that they didn't themselves *make up* those stories, but that these "creative" activities had been accomplished earlier, by others. The gospel writers would be seen merely as the innocent compilers of the (invented) traditions handed down to them. Whatever the reason, in this view, the New Testament writers honestly thought that the deity and resurrection were factual, not metaphorical, and their audiences accepted the material in the common sense manner.

This is a view which seems to have been held several decades ago by some scholars who emphasized the likelihood of distortions with oral tradition, and emphasized that the gospel writers stood generations removed from the events they tried to describe. With the introduction of redaction criticism, which is the concentration on the editing functions of the gospel writers, these writers were seen as authors in their own right, rather than mere compilers. And so, within the circles that would question the authenticity of the gospel accounts, this option has largely fallen out of favor.

**Option 3.** The NT writers *knew* that many of these stories and claims were *not* factually true (they believed them to be either metaphorically true or simply false), but they portrayed them as *factually* true in order to engender faith in their audience. Their original readers, by and large, (mistakenly) accepted the stories as *factually* true.

This says that the New Testament writers did not believe their stories were factually true, but presented them as if they were. There are two very different "flavors" of this view.

The Nice Version. First, we might say that they understood the stories metaphorically (having invented many of the them), and the claims about Jesus as well, but engaged in a sort of (benevolent) "pious fraud", trying to give Christians something to believe in. I have seen arguments and statements by scholars that give the impression that they affirm this kind of scenario, especially when they talk about gospel writers inventing stories about Jesus in order to bolster certain *claims* about him.

The Mean Version. On the other hand, we might say that the intention of such a fraud was not really so pious and benevolent, and that the writers simply were attempting to buttress their religion with stories and claims they *knew to be false*, having just made them up. This is certainly a view held by some authors wishing to discredit or refute Christianity. Such people have contended that the first Christians intentionally deceived their neighbors, and view Christianity as something of an early cult.

**Option 4: The MG Theory.** The NT writers believed that many of these stories and claims were metaphorically, not factually true, and portrayed them as such. Their original audience on the whole understood that they were metaphorically, not factually, true. Later generations came to interpret these literally.

This says that the New Testament writers understood the stories and claims to be true *metaphorically*, and false factually, that this is how they *intended to portray* their material, and that their original audience also *understood* them metaphorically, is what I call the Metaphorical Gospel theory.

**Option 5.** The NT writers and their audience simply were *not able to make the distinction* between "metaphorically" true and "factually" true.

This view says that the New Testament writers and earliest Christians simply were not able to distinguish between fact and fiction, at least in this arena. Scholars who advocate such a view tell us that the people of the first century experienced a different *mode* of consciousness. Their world view entailed such a twilight zone of thought that they were actually unable to distinguish between things that occurred and imaginary events; that "fact" and "fiction" as we know it was not a clear distinction for them; that they were pre-critical and pre-scientific people operating existing within entirely different categories of thought. I have even read excerpts from a book about the "bicameral mind" which attributes this hazy outlook to physical/electrical differences in their brains (left and right side were not quite hooked up yet).

I won't even comment on the statement I ran across assuring us that the "brilliance" of the Easter experience "dazzled" the disciples to such an extent that their memories were confused and they forgot what Jesus actually had taught them.

We can even use this option as sort of a catch-all option. If we wish to say that the mind-set of the New Testament writers and their first readers was not as *clear-cut* as Options 1, 2, 3, and 4 would claim, we can select Option 5 and say that the distinctions themselves were a bit blurry to the gospel writers. And so here we even have an Option for those who don't like the Options! - for those who think that choosing between such *discrete* options is inappropriate.

**Option 6.** The NT writers and their audience simply *didn't care as much* about the distinction between fact and metaphor as we moderns do.

There are two flavors of this view: (a) Factuality was not *as important* to them as to us, and (b) Factuality was *completely irrelevant* to them.

This is so close to Option 5 that until recently I included it as a sub-view. However, I've read things lately that convince me I need to address this possibility explicitly.

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## Charting the Options

There may be, of course, other formal possibilities - and we could consider each of them - but these six seem to be the most likely alternatives. Let me say here that these options, while not exhaustive, are mutually exclusive. I don't see how anyone can affirm more than one of these at a time. Oh, I suppose you could say that Matthew was working under Option 3, and Mark under Option 4, and John was so confused by his visions that he fell under Option 5, but I think that's a stretch.

To make these alternatives even clearer, imagine them as a grid or table.

### Factually True?

	Stories were Really	NT Writers Believed	NT Writers Intended to Portray	Original Audience Believed
<b>Option 1</b>	Y	Y	Y	Y
<b>Option 2</b>	-	Y	Y	Y
<b>Option 3</b>	-	-	Y	Y
<b>Option 4</b>	-	-	-	-
<b>Option 5</b>	?	?	?	?
<b>Option 6</b>	?	?	?	?

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## A Metaphorical Gospel Scenario

What does the Metaphorical Gospel Theory mean in concrete, everyday terms? How can we flesh out the meaning so that we can clearly understand what the Metaphorical Gospel theory is telling us? I tried to faithfully create an imaginative scenario to do this.

Then I wrote to Bishop Spong (see his chapter), asking him if this is something like the scenario he envisions. He kindly replied, and affirmed that this was indeed, generally, what he means. (I do not know what Borg and Crossan would think of it, but I think they'd agree in the essentials.)

(a) I can imagine myself being born (say) in 70 AD, in Ephesus of Christian parents. There is an ever-growing Christian community there. By the time I am five or so, I have learned that we pray, that my parents meet with others on the First Day for worship, that there is one God, etc. My parents have heard Paul's letters to churches read aloud (especially the one to our church!) at their worship gatherings for many years.

(b) When I am five years old (75 AD), we have a new reading at our gatherings: new and exciting stories about Jesus and the disciples. It came to us from the church in Rome [gospel of Mark, presumably took five years to get distributed]. These stories teach us about who God is, and who we are, and how we are to live.



(c) By the time I am a questioning teenager (85 AD), another work has come to us [Matthew] which goes beyond the gospel which we've heard read in our church, but reflects many of the things that the adults are talking about! It is full of wondrous miracle stories, including one about Jesus' birth. But I wonder why we don't have miracles like that now, and ask my parents. They explain, "No, you don't understand. You're missing the *point* of the stories if you think they are accounts of things that happened before you were born. Jesus didn't really walk on water, for example - we all know that - but we *can* overcome great obstacles if we follow him." And I begin to understand what Christianity is about.

(d) During this time (85 AD) I become aware of a small group of people who are followers of the Apostle John, who lived here in Ephesus for a time. They meet daily to pore over the scriptures and to pray. They are sometimes called upon to read the scriptures at our First Day meetings and to provide commentary. I am very impressed with them.

(e) By 95 AD, I am an adult, twenty-five years old. I have by now learned a trade, and am known in Ephesus as a Christian. The gospel of Luke has recently become available to our church, and I am sometimes allowed to read it myself (in my native Greek). As I am semi-literate, I skip over the words I don't understand, and ask someone later - and my reading improves as I pore over Luke.

(f) Some of my co-workers, being Jews of the Dispersion or Greek worshippers of Diana, are offended by my Christian faith. They mock me, saying: "You Christians are so stupid, even evil. You have secret meals where we suspect you eat babies, you believe that your Leader's dead body came back to life (I don't see him anywhere!), you think that he did other impossible things like walk on water and who knows what else, you worship a *human being* (especially offensive to the Jews), and so you won't give Caesar his due respect (offensive to the Greeks), and you falsely claim that he fulfilled prophecies (another stickler for Jews).

(g) I reply "You could not be further from the truth. We don't eat babies - you're mixed up because we celebrate Christ with a meal of bread and wine, and because we talk about a "new birth"! We have never said that Jesus' body came back to life - in fact, we believe just the opposite, that his spirit went to heaven, as will ours. Stories of Jesus doing miracles aren't to be taken *literally* - they are stories that express how we can overcome, how we must forgive, and so on. We don't worship the man Jesus - we worship God alone by seeking fellowship with God through the Risen Christ. In fact, there is nothing to prevent true Christians from burning incense to Caesar, because a human leader (although metaphorically called a "god") can never be in competition with the Creator!

"And last, we don't pretend that Jesus actually fulfilled prophecies, we are *re-using* the Old Testament accounts and prophecies to honor him. We are doing the same thing that the Jews did in reworking their stories to glorify God! And so, your objections to The Way amount to nothing."

(h) By 100 AD I am thirty years old, and have become a deacon in the Ephesian church. Not only that, I am now part of the Johannine circle, and meet with them as often as I can to pray and discuss the scriptures. This First Day, there is a new gospel to be read to the church for the first time. (We are by now accustomed to new midrash appearing every so often, and are eager to see what this new product is about.) But there's a difference. This midrash creation is home-grown - the Johannine group has written it. Of course, this comes as no surprise to the church, since the effort has been a long and exciting one.

The reading dramatically opens with a discourse about the Word. The story of the

Word first came to us when one of the Johannine circle had a dream or vision of God's Reason, or Logos, flying through the sky, slowly taking human form, and becoming flesh. Pretty soon we get to my contribution. Over years of discussion with unbelievers, I have often had to explain the "new birth", and wrote up a conversation between Jesus and one of the Jewish rulers explaining the "birth from above", which is now part of the gospel!

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## Definiteness of Articulation

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: December 29, 2001

The student who wishes to get to the bottom of this issue must, unfortunately, be prepared to navigate a rather daunting maze of words. The most basic requirement of any good theory is that it should be clearly defined. Yet this is often not what we see.

This may be due in part to the fact that scholars disagree with each other, especially on details. But even among those scholars who most actively *promote* the MG Theory, we sometimes find confusing statements that appear to point in other directions. In fact, when I tried to focus on three representative scholars, it became more difficult in some cases to actually pin them down to a specific view than it did to evaluate the view itself!

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## General Lack of Clarity

### Ultimate Value vs Intent

Sometimes scholars are making a point about the *ultimate value* of the New Testament writings. But we can't easily tell how this relates to the *original intent* of the New Testament authors. For instance, when I specifically asked Borg in an email about the intent of the authors, he talked about the ultimate value:

"To use an example, I regularly say, 'I don't think the virgin birth happened, but I think the stories of the virgin birth are powerfully true.'" (email)

### Ambiguities Due to Euphemisms and Religious Language

Some statements seem to affirm traditional Christianity when they say that the first Christians *believed* the stories were true of Jesus, or when they suggest a rather tight continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith:

"They therefore tell us what these early Christian communities had come to *believe about Jesus* by the last third of the first century." (Borg, *Meeting Jesus* p 10)

"they express what *Jesus became* in the experience and tradition of his followers in the decades after Easter" (Borg, email debate Mar 4)

"Jesus-then becomes Jesus-now. No, better: Jesus-then is Jesus-now. They are always talking about and from the 20s of that first common-era century. But they are also talking about and to the 70s with Mark, or the 80s with Matthew and Luke,

or the 90s with John." (Crossan, email debate)

Quite often, it is abundantly clear that the scholar has simply continued to use the traditional religious language we've always heard in church. He has nicely fit the rhythms and images into a completely different point of view. Spong is an excellent example of such "faith-speak", as he actually manages to fit in a reference to almost every important Christian doctrine in the space of a few sentences. He speaks the *language* of "popular Christianity" in the very books in which he attempts to refute it.

Note, in the revealing quote below, that Spong says he believes in Easter and reveres the biblical texts. He presents Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ of God, our way, our truth, and our life, now a timeless being, our mediator with God.

"I seek now to enter the experience of Easter. I believe that this experience is both real and true but that the details that describe it cannot be literalized. My journey will carry me first deep into the biblical texts, but then ultimately it must carry me beyond those texts into a dimension of timelessness in which a presence I call God ultimately resides. My access to that presence is through a life referred to in history as Jesus of Nazareth but called, by faith and in the language of midrash and mythology, the Christ of God. I believe that this Jesus journeyed through time into timelessness and through finitude into infinity. Beyond that, I believe that those of us who have found our lives inside his life can also make that journey and can know this Christ as our way, our truth, and our life, through whom we too can approach the presence of God, and in that presence we also may know the timelessness of eternity." (Resurrection: Reality or Myth?, p 21)

Adding the third person of the Trinity, the new birth, and joyful worship, and you *appear* to have traditional, Historic Christianity.

"But if by asking 'Is it true?' one intends to inquire into the meaning of Jesus' life that accepts symbols, myths, and romantic imagination, that breaks the limitation of human words when employed to make rational sense out of the mystery of the divine, then the answer is yes. Yes, these narratives capture truth to the eyes of faith; truth that mere prose cannot capture. . . . The Holy Spirit hovers over each of us to assist in the process of the Christ being born in us. So we too can sing glory to God in the highest, and we too can journey to those places that become Bethlehem for us, the places where God is experienced as dwelling in our midst and inviting us to come, worship, and adore." (Born of a Woman 158-9)

Historic Christianity is, of course, the last thing that Spong would endorse, but many innocent readers might be hard-pressed to know it from the smooth language he uses.

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## Statements that look like Option 2 ("Believed True, but Mistaken")

Many statements seem to affirm the view that the New Testament writers *believed* the stories and claims about Jesus were factually true, but were wrong. They do this by emphasizing how far removed the writers were from the facts and how gullible they were in the olden days.

What kind of statements would affirm Option 2? The kind of statements that said, for instance, that the gospels were written long after the eyewitnesses had died, by people who were, in addition, far removed from the events geographically. They would emphasize the distortions that naturally occur (the "telephone" game is a popular example) with a long line of oral tradition. In short, they would point out that the writers didn't *know* the truth.

A further step would be to emphasize how easy it was for the New Testament writers to *believe*

things that *weren't* true. Such statements might emphasize that the people in the ancient world believed that miracles could happen, and so naively believe reports of such events. And these scholars would continue by saying that, of course, now that we know that these events are scientifically impossible, they could not have occurred.

When you add in the assumption that these writers acted in good faith, you get the conclusion that they honestly believed in the factual truth of what they wrote, but were simply wrong.

A recap of these statements is:

1. Writers removed from the events: second- or third-hand.
2. Stories easily distorted through oral tradition.
3. Writers prone to believe stories of the miraculous.
4. Such events are impossible, therefore not true.
5. Writers acted in good faith.

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So, the writers believed the miracle stories, although they were not true.

We will remember, then, when we see these kinds of statements (especially the one about miracles), that the author is affirming Option 2.

### **Real Life Examples**

Spong himself, in an early work, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, seems to present a somewhat different view than the one spelled out in his later books. In this earlier book, he emphasizes the point that the earliest Christians lived in a pre-scientific age with an unacceptable world-view. He says they believed that miracles could occur, and were so literal-minded that they saw the universe as a three-story affair (heaven above, earth in the middle, hell below). In his more recent works, he appears to shift the view a bit, and relegates this superstitious world-view to the *later* literalizers of the gospels, not the original Christians at all.

It is interesting to note that the "miracles and three-story universe" argument goes all the way back to Rudolph Bultmann, one of the fathers of modern New Testament criticism, and even then represented a contradiction within a single scholar's viewpoint.

For Bultmann clearly affirms the Metaphorical Gospel view whenever he emphasizes how the earliest Christians were indifferent to the real facts, because they cared only about their present spiritual experiences and problems. He says:

"I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources *show no interest* in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary, and other sources about Jesus do not exist." (Jesus Christ and Mythology, p 15)

Bultmann here is saying that the early Christians presumably did not care about the historical Jesus because they were concerned only with the "spiritual" story. Bultmann was one who wanted to "de-mythologize" the gospels, retaining the spiritual essence, and because of this often seems to imply that this spiritual essence, rather than a straightforward factual account, was what the writers original meant to convey.

On the other hand, he appears to affirm Option 2 ("believed it was factually true, but were mistaken") when he argues that people in those days (a) *believed* that miracles could happen, and so *believed* that the miracle stories actually *occurred*, and (b) were so *non*-metaphorical that they even interpreted obviously figurative statements about the physical location of heaven

and hell, God's throne, etc. as literally, factually true.

"The whole *conception of the world* which is presupposed in the preaching of Jesus as in the New Testament generally is mythological; i.e., the conception of the world as being structured in three stories, heaven, earth, and hell; the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the course of events; and the *conception of miracles*, especially the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the inner life of the soul, the conception that men can be tempted and corrupted by the devil and possessed by evil spirits. This conception of the world we call mythological because it is different from the conception of the world which has been formed and developed by science since its inception in ancient Greece and which has been accepted by all modern men. *In this modern conception* of the world the cause-and-effect nexus is fundamental. . . . modern science does not believe that the course of nature can be interrupted or, so to speak, perforated, by supernatural powers." (R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, New York, Scribener, 1958 - p 15)

This is simply perplexing. In statements like this one, Bultmann says that first century people were gullible, pre-scientific, and superstitious - *believing* every account of a miracle, no matter how impossible - and that we (being scientific people) can't believe those stories in the way that *they* did. What is the point of saying this if he says in the next breath that they did *not* believe these miracle accounts, but that they understood the miracles only metaphorically? Since Bultmann seems to support incompatible views on this issue, it is simply not clear to me which position he holds. This is sometimes true of other scholars as well.

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## Statements that look like Option 3 ("Knew False, but Presented as True")

This view has two parts: (1) the New Testament writers *didn't* believe the stories and claims about Jesus factually, but (2) portrayed them as fact. The presence of these two kinds of statements will clearly identify a view as Option 3.

1. The kind of statements that would affirm this view, then, would of course not emphasize how the writers were easily *deceived* - rather, they would say that the New Testament writers *invented* stories. And surely, if one makes up a story, it is impossible for a sane person to believe that the event he made up actually happened. And so, when we run across a statement that says the authors embellished their work, or invented stories, we'll start to look for the *second* part of the view.

2. The second part of Option 3 is that the writers *portrayed* the stories *as if* they were factually true. The kind of statement that would fit this would be one which says that the writer wanted his readers to *believe* the events took place.

Putting these two parts together, an excellent example would be a statement that said a New Testament writer *embellished* his account by creating stories emphasizing Jesus' power, in order to *convince* readers that Jesus was *indeed truly* powerful.

Another example would be the statement that a New Testament writer *invented* a situation that would seem to give Jesus credentials he didn't really have - such as being a descendent of David - so as to *impress* the readers with his *genuine* Messianic claim.

In trying to flesh out this Metaphorical Gospel theory, and in trying to discover who affirms it and who doesn't, I ran up against such a strange inconsistency that I sometimes wondered what the authors really thought. Here's what I mean. One type of argument that puzzles me is that early Christians developed stories to *answer critics* and to *defend Christianity*.

It seems to me that stories that were invented to show that Christianity is true could only have a positive impact if they are presented as factually true. Think of it this way. If I write stories that have Jesus performing great miracles, and present these stories as spiritual accounts that have no direct relation to anything the man Jesus ever actually did, the most it can do is to *inspire* others in a certain way.

These stories actually reveal more about my imaginative and story-telling abilities than they do about Jesus. Some *other* "spiritual" writer who followed another teacher could also write amazing stories about *that* man.

However, if these stories are presented as factually based *claims*, then (and only then) can they be useful as a "reply to critics" and as a "defense" of Christianity.

## Real Life Examples

For instance, Spong mentions "claims" about Jesus:

"In order to protect their fragile tradition from erosion, Jews began to attack Christian claims about Jesus. In rebuttal Jewish Christians began to defend their claims. Between 70 and 85 the polemical defenses of Jewish Christians against their Jewish attackers began to change the way the Christians told the stories of their faith, and these defenses came to be written down and incorporated into the developing Christian tradition." (*Resurrection: Reality or Myth?* p66)

I will list three examples of this puzzling logic. First, regarding Matthew's addition of miracles.

"Mark's Gospel had left far too many unanswered questions to be of great use in this battle, so the author of Matthew ... adapted the text to *heighten the power* of the miraculous." (*Resurrection: Reality or Myth?* p 67)

What good would inventing additional miraculous stories be in defending Christianity if everyone understood that these were *only* to be understood metaphorically, and that nobody was suggesting that such miracles ever actually *happened*? The whole point of the miracle stories is presumably to make Jesus appear more powerful - *really* more powerful. Matthew could have only been effective if he made his readers think that the events he describes really took place and really *were* quite miraculous. He could have piled on as many *metaphorical* miracles as he liked and never strengthen his case.

The second example is inventing genealogical authority for Jesus:

[re Hebrews] "Since Jesus was not of the authentic priestly line, however, a *valid claim* to priesthood had to be developed for him by the early Jewish Christians." (*Resurrection: Reality or Myth?* p 125)

Similarly, if the claim to priesthood was intended only metaphorically, how would introducing that *metaphor* do anything to answer the charge that Jesus was not *really* of the authentic priestly line? Such a claim is only *valid* if it is factual.

A third example is the claim for priority of the apostle John in the community of believers:

"...the Johannine community from which the individuals emerged who authored the gospel, the Epistles, and the Book of Revelation, all of which bear John's name, gave their beloved mentor the honor of being first in faith, though that faith seems never to have moved from the beloved disciple to anyone else ...When this Gospel portrayed John as the first believer, ... it supplied the final coup de grace for the

Johannine tradition. In the same vein this school of thought also portrayed John alone of the twelve as present at the foot of the cross ..." (Resurrection: Reality or Myth? p91)

"Portraying" John as the "first believer", etc., would only have been effective if people who read the gospel believed that he *was* the first believer."

What makes these two examples so puzzling is that Bishop Spong in the one person in the world I am *sure* wholeheartedly the Metaphorical Gospel theory. He told me this himself. These statements seem to represent an inconsistency or confusion in his position.

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## Statements that look like Option 5 ("Couldn't Tell the Difference")

There were times when the scholars I read seemed to be saying that the New Testament writers were of such a confused mind-set (living so long ago and all) that they could not tell the difference between a story that relates what really happened and a metaphorical story.

### Pre-Critical People

In corresponding with Dr. Borg via email, he cautioned me at one point that first century people were "pre-critical" people, and mentioned another time that "fact" and "fiction" were not understood exactly in the way we understand them. This is a remarkably peculiar view for one who holds the Metaphorical Gospel theory - for, as we have seen - this theory explicitly claims that the New Testament writers did *not* intend to provide factual information! I don't see, logically, how they can have it both ways.

### Blurring Distinctions

Crossan sometimes appears to blur the distinction between Jesus-then and Jesus-now to such a degree that he seems to affirm Option 5 (*italics mine*):

"But those quite divergent and extremely creative interactions do not differentiate between then and now by saying, for example, Jesus said or did this then BUT here is what it means for us now." (email debate)

"My main point, however, is to note how each evangelist goes back to moments in the life of the historical Jesus, be it arrest or death, and builds a dialectical process of past/present and then/now in which those twin elements interpenetrate and *interweave totally together*." (email debate).

Option 5 is certainly a formal possibility. However, even though scholars sometimes flirt with the notion that first-century people could not make the necessary intellectual distinctions (we will see cases later), I can't quite believe that they seriously buy it.

Even a cursory reading of Paul's letters (for instance) would demonstrate his ability not only to distinguish between fact and fiction, but to draw sophisticated philosophical and theological distinctions.

Dozens of other examples could be produced, as well. When one considers the Jewish rabbis' meticulous detailed arguments about the Law, the Greek lovers of philosophy who met at the Acropolis, the worldly Roman leaders and their complicated and eminently *practical* military strategies - even the homespun crafty bartering techniques of the common person in the public marketplace - we see the obvious ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, literal expressions and figures of speech. *This* degree of clear thinking would be impossible in the world described by those who propose Option 5.

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## Statements that look like Option 6 ("Didn't Care About Facts")

One explanation was posted to an internet discussion group in answer to my questions (emphasis mine):

"Most scholars are not trying to guess the intentions of the writers. It may be clearer to say (and may be what Borg and Spong are actually saying -- I don't have the books here with me now) that the question of "whether or not these things took place" was simply not *as important* to the gospel writers as it has been for many of us."

I recently received an email from Mark Allan Powell regarding Borg's view. Dr. Powell had, up until Borg's latest book, seen his view as being more like Option 6 than like the MG Theory. He said:

"My perception of Borg--based on his writings, lectures, and just personal contacts--was that he had moved away from this [the MG Theory]. He has started with it, based on ideas of NT colleagues from the Jesus Seminar, but had really come to a different way of thinking, which I tried to describe for you previously. I think I would have summarized his position this way: 'Although the Gospel writers might have assumed the reports to be literal, they did not find essential meaning in the literalness--so it wouldn't have really mattered to them if the reports were not literal, as we now know they (probably weren't).'

But in *Reading the Bible Again* he definitely seems to revert to the Spongian concept." (email Dec 27, 2001)

Imagine this. The "Definiteness of Articulation" in this case is so poor that even the head of the Historical Jesus section of the SBL, a trained professional, can't tell what his close colleague thinks about this important matter!

There are two flavors of this view, and I think that they resolve either to Option 4 (the MG Theory) or possibly Option 5 ("Couldn't Tell the Difference"), depending on the degree of indifference to factuality.

1. Weaker Thesis: factuality was not *as important* to them as to us
2. Stronger Thesis: factuality was *completely irrelevant* to them

The first is a thesis about relative importance. It says that facts were indeed *somewhat* important, which logically entails that the people in the ancient world could indeed distinguish between fact and fiction (so this leaves out Option 5). This would seem to fit in the MG bucket the best, since the *meaning* of the accounts is what *is* important. The authors would probably not be presenting their tales as fact, since they factuality is not very important.

The second is a thesis about the complete indifference regarding fact and fiction. This extreme case possibly fits within Option 5 ("They couldn't tell the difference").

Another possibility is that this stronger thesis, too, most fits within the MG Theory. An example: If my wife says, "Would you like to go to see this movie or that movie?", I might reply "I don't care", but that doesn't mean I can't *tell the difference* between them! Presumably, the indifference to fact is only symptomatic of interest in the metaphorical meaning.

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## Conclusion

We have seen statements in writers who clearly affirm the Metaphorical Gospel theory, which appear to support other options.

- We are first told (2) the first Christians believed in miracles and thus construed the miracle accounts literally.
- We are then told (3) the writers invented details that would only be persuasive if their readers accepted them factually.
- We are then presented with statements which seem to say: (5) these people couldn't tell the difference.
- Finally, we're told (6) they didn't care about the distinction.

There appears to be a haziness or inconsistency in the views of people who hold the theory, which makes it difficult for them to clearly articulate it. In fact, a certain amount of detective work is necessary to bring the theory to the surface. This is often because the theory exists more as an implicit assumption than an explicitly stated assertion.

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## John Shelby Spong

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: September 11, 2002



The Right Reverend John S. Spong

### **Bishop John Shelby Spong**

Bishop John Shelby Spong is the now-retired Episcopalian Bishop of Newark, New Jersey who periodically took time off to do research and work on his books. In these books, he attempts to convey the results of current, state-of-the-art New Testament scholarship to the popular

audience. He has sometimes been criticized for not being a "true" scholar, but in fairness to Spong, his works are indeed influenced by recognized scholars with whom he comes in contact.

See [Diocese information page](#) regarding Bishop Spong.

See [Letters with Spong](#) for our dialog.

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I start with Bishop Spong because, of the three scholars, he sets forth the Metaphorical Gospel Theory in the clearest and most direct manner. Spong's mechanism for such an understanding is the concept of "midrash."

I think his pithiest quote on the subject is as follows (I already used this quote earlier in the article):

"As I sought to explain this biblical background, my friends around the room looked increasingly incredulous. 'You mean', one of them said, 'that maybe these things did not actually happen?'

'No', I suggested. 'What we have in the Gospels is an interpretive narrative based on an earlier part of the tradition and designed to enable the reader to see the reality of God in Jesus and to be drawn to this reality in faith.'

'This means', my questioner continued, 'that you are saying that Luke was lying. He told these things as if they were true when he knew they were not!'

The luncheon would not be long enough to address these issues, I thought to myself in despair. This woman believed that the Gospels were something like a television documentary or a researched biography. She knew nothing about the style of writing that was in vogue in the Jewish world when the Gospels were written."  
(*Born of a Woman* p 17-18)

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## Summary of his View

- Midrash (inventing stories about Jesus where he "re-enacts" Old Testament stories) was common practice in the first-century world.
- The New Testament writers were of Jewish background, and freely created stories about Jesus, including the resurrection accounts.
- They intended for these stories to be understood as spiritual, theological, metaphorical statements of faith - of Jesus' meaning in their spiritual lives, rather than as accounts of events that occurred.
- The original readers/hearers, predominantly Jewish, understood the texts in this way, too.
- However, Christian Gentiles living much later took the accounts literally. (This began at least with Polycarp and Justin Martyr.)

First, Spong says that the authors invented stories and intended to portray the stories and claims about Jesus' deity and resurrection as metaphorically, not factually, true.

"This author [of Matthew] neither suggested nor believed that everything he wrote was factual." (*Born of a Woman* p 62)

"It was designed to portray a truth that could not be captured in the vocabulary of

time and space but that employed this vocabulary in the hope that the meaning would be understood, because there was no other vocabulary at their disposal." (*Resurrection: Reality or Myth?* p 21)

"To force these narratives into the straitjacket of literal historicity is to violate their intention, their method, and their truth." (*Born of a Woman* p 19-20)

"Midrash" is the key to Spong's view. According to him, midrash was a technique of Jewish Scripture reading and composition. He explains it in more elegant terms, but the basic ideas come down to this:

- reading Old Testament stories of heroic, miraculous, or divine acts
- wishing to honor Christ
- inventing stories in which Jesus "does" those kind of acts (although they know he didn't really)
- without intending to make the reader think that the man Jesus really did exactly these things
- to inspire the reader and connect Jesus conceptually with these mighty stories of faith.

This explains how stories, sayings, and claims about Jesus could have been made up, and made up in *good faith*. If they were intended only symbolically, metaphorically, they are not lies. And, according to Spong, the writers of the gospels and their first readers were Jewish Christians who were completely tuned in to midrash. It was so much a part of their world-view, that they quite naturally interpreted the New Testament metaphorically. Everybody was aware of this at the time.

"[midrash] ... style of writing that was in vogue in the Jewish world when the Gospels were written. (*Born of a Woman* p 18)

"The readers of the Gospels who understood this midrashic method of probing Scripture would understand. Only to a generation living hundreds of years later, separated from their Jewish religious roots and clinging to a peculiarly Western mind-set, would the choice appear to be between literal truth and overt lies." (*Born of a Woman* p 19)

"I am convinced that the original audience at this pageant, and its original authors as well, viewed it as a play that attempted to explain the source of Jesus' adult meaning [as opposed to the facts of his infancy]." (*Born of a Woman* p 110)

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## Letters with Bishop Spong

It was crucially important for me to make sure I understood Spong's view, even though it seems that he has clearly spelled it out in his books. So, in November of '95, I wrote him a letter which he answered with a month. In the letter, I tried to spell it out as clearly as possible. Here are my questions and his answers:

### Bishop Spong's View (Gospels)

(1) The gospels were written from about 70 to 100 C.E. (I believe you place Mark at 70, Matthew at 80, Luke at 90, John at 100, all rough estimates).

**The range of dates for the gospels for Mark 65-73. I date it just before the fall of Jerusalem 69-70 C.E. Matthew's range is 75-85. I date it in the early 80's ca. 82. The range on Luke is 85-90. I date Luke ca. 88 - John is more difficult. But as a finished work is dated 95-100. I date it 96.**

(2) Each was a midrash work. The authors were not trying to present eyewitness accounts (whether second-hand, third-hand, etc.) of what Jesus and the disciples said and did. Although of course a few stories may point to things which actually occurred, the majority of the text was created to illustrate or embody the spiritual experience and understanding of the writers by making up stories (usually taken from Old Testament writings) with Jesus as the main figure. As you say in a nice phrase, "Above all it was language that could not be literalized being employed to process an experience that could not be denied." (Res, p21)

**All gospels are midrashic in my opinion. But that does not mean they "made up" the stories. The task of identifying the original nugget is however not important to me. Originally I think the gospels were preached on the texts of the Torah and Prophets. More about this in the next book - Aug 96**

(3) This midrash-consciousness, arising from Jewish tradition, became part of the spiritual and cultural milieu of Jewish-Christianity in the 70-100 period. "Because the Christian enterprise had its beginning in a Jewish context, this Jewish way of searching the Scriptures for clues that would interpret present events became the Christian habit." (BW p137)

**Correct**

(4) Also, as evidenced by Luke, by the 90's this midrash approach had taken on a decidedly Hellenistic flavor as well. "Before Luke's story was complete [90 AD], the gentile direction was not only established, it was in full control..." (Res, p74)

**Correct but modified by next book Aug 96**

(5) The gospel writers indeed attempted to portray their works as midrash, and their original audiences (as their works were read in the churches of Ephesus, Rome, Corinth, etc.) *understood* that they were not to be taken literally (i.e. factually. In fact, this midrash understanding was a central element of what it meant to be a Christian at that time. "I am convinced that the original audience at this pageant, and its original authors as well, viewed it as a play that attempted to explain the source of Jesus' adult meaning." (BW p110)

**Have revisited this - result in book out Aug 96**

(6) However, by the second half of the second century, Christian leaders such as Polycarp, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus made a serious exegetical mistake: they honestly thought that the stories were to be taken as literally true! They believed that Jesus' body was revived, that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he walked on water, healed the blind, was truly God in human form. Being Greek (rather than Jewish), and removed by time from the midrash period, they were simply unaware of the true interpretation of the gospels. "This removal from and ignorance of the midrash tradition became commonplace among the early church fathers of the second and third centuries. Not one of them was Jewish. They were not familiar with the midrash tradition." (BW p75).

**Again much better spelled out in Aug 96 book**

(7) For centuries after that, literalizing Christians and their theologians systematically missed the point of the stories as they tried to defend their literal truth.

**Still correct**

(8) To those who say "What difference does it make?" , we say "Plenty." Literalization guarantees (spiritual) death. "... the heart cannot finally worship what the mind has already rejected." (BM p176)

**Still correct**

**Not Bishop Spong's View**

(1) Some people believe, or used to believe (to start with something obvious) that the gospels are, essentially, eyewitness accounts of what happened, and were written by apostles (Matthew and John) or associates of apostles (Mark or Luke). This is *not* Spong's view. (Although Bp. Spong might hold that John Mark, the companion of Paul, wrote Mark - don't know.)

**Generally correct - I don't know who wrote the gospels - But certainly Matthew and John the Disciples did not. I suspect that all were products of a Community with one major editor**

(2) Some people (such as Marcus Borg) think that a kernel of genuine teaching by Jesus has been overlaid by the church, and that we can and should go back to discover Jesus' teaching. As scholars have separated the Jesus of History from the Christ of Faith, a wheat-and-chaff situation is sometimes created, and intuitions differ about which side is valuable and which is not. Spong would not emphasize the man Jesus. (As Mark Lewis said to me, "My faith would not be substantially changed if I were to find out that Jesus never lived.")

**I love the Jesus Seminar and have the greatest respect for Marcus - However I believe they represent the last gasp of 19th C. liberalism who really don't believe Sweitzer put an end to the quest for the historical Jesus.**

(3) Some earlier views had the gospel writers as compilers, rather than creative redactors, of material. In this view, the "compilers" truly believed that the accounts were factual, but were too far removed in time to know that they were legends passed down orally. The compilers lived in a three-story universe and readily believed literal accounts of miracles, and so did the original audiences. This is *not* Spong's view.

**Even more convinced - See Aug 96. No longer believe there was a Q M or L**

(4) One possible view is a hybrid scenario, with a two-tier hierarchy (sort of an "elite vs. the masses" approach), with the spiritually sophisticated leaders of the church sponsoring such works as the gospels. These gospels are creative midrash, and of course the writers and leaders operate from within that tradition. However, the masses are not sophisticated, and easily fall into a literal understanding of the material presented to them. This could have two flavors, neither of which appears to be advocated by Spong:

(4a) Perhaps Midrash was not part of the *overall* culture, whether because of a Jewish-Gentile distinction or merely through lack of sophistication, although it was part of the educated or sophisticated ("elite") culter. Therefore the redactors and leaders *failed* in their honest attempts to present these spiritual stories as midrash. They intended to portray them as spiritual accounts, but their audience by-and-large did *not understand* what was being presented. This is *not* Spong's view, for he explicitly says (i) that the audience understood, and (ii) that later generations literalized.

(4b) Perhaps the redactors and leaders engaged in what has been called "pious fraud", intentionally deceiving their audiences for their own good. Knowing that their hearers would take the stories literally, they created accounts that would glorify Jesus and thus strengthen the faith of the community. They knew that these accounts were midrash, but *portrayed* the material in the most literal way possible, to create a belief in the facticity of the events. This is clearly *not* Spong's view.

**Addressed in Aug 96 Book**

(5) A very subtle hybrid scenario may be consistent with Spong's view, but is probably not. This is the view that the vast majority of Christian were in sync with the midrash view (it was "in vogue"), but that a small majority either misunderstood or tried to falsify the understanding by re-interpreting the midrash stories as factual accounts. That there must have been a few who did this would probably be accepted by Spong, but he points out that John seems to have acted to correct that misinterpretation by recasting the origins of Jesus' life in a more abstract way than did Matthew and Luke. Thus we have, at the close of the first century, an efficient *corrective* of any such tendencies. And so, the view that a small minority were effective in advocating literalism by 100 C.D. is *not* a position held by Spong.

**That is NOT my issue.**

### **An Illustration of Spong's View**

I will try to put this view into concrete, everyday terms, and imagine what it means in terms of life in the 70-100 period.

#### **Illustration - This is an interesting approach and basically I like it.**

(a) I can imagine myself being born (say) in 70 C.E., in Ephesus of Jewish-Christian parents. There is an ever-growing Christian community there. By the time I am five or so, I have learned that we pray, that my parents meet on the First Day for worship, that there is one God, etc. My parents have heard Paul's letters to churches read aloud (especially the one to our church!) at their worship gatherings for many years.

(b) But now (75 C.E.), we have a new reading at our gatherings: new and exciting stories about Jesus and the disciples. It came to us from the church in Rome [gospel of Mark, presumably took five years to get distributed]. These stories teach us about who God is, and who we are, and how we are to live.

(c) By the time I am a questioning teenager (85 C.E.), another work has come to us [Matthew] which goes beyond the gospel which we've heard read in your church, but reflects many of the things that the adults are talking about! It is full of wondrous miracle stories, including one about Jesus' birth. But I wonder why we don't have miracles like that now, and ask my parents. They explain, "No, you don't understand. You're missing the point of the stories if you think they are accounts of things that happened before you were born. Jesus didn't really walk on water, we all know that - but we *can* overcome great obstacles if we follow him." And I begin to understand what Christianity is about.

(d) During this time I become aware of a small group of people who are followers of the Apostle John, who lived here in Ephesus for a time. They meet daily to pore over the scriptures and to pray. They are sometimes called upon to read the scriptures at our First Day meetings and to provide commentary. I am very impressed with them.

(e) By 95 C.E., I am an adult, twenty-five years old. I have by now learned a trade, and am known in Ephesus as a Christian. The gospel of Luke becomes available to our church, and I am sometimes allowed to read it myself (in my native Greek). As I am semi-literate, I skip over the words I don't understand, and ask someone later - and my reading improves as I pore over Luke.

(f) Some of my co-workers, being Jews of the Dispersion or Greek worshippers of Diana, are offended by my Christian faith. They mock me, saying: "You Christians are so stupid, even evil. You have secret meals where we suspect you eat babies, you believe that your Leader's dead body came back to life (I don't see him anywhere!), you think that he did other impossible things like walk on water and who knows what else, you worship a *human being* (especially offending to the Jews), and so you won't give Caesar his due respect (offending to the Greeks), and you falsely claim that he fulfilled prophecies (another stickler for Jews).

(g) I reply "You could not be further from the truth. We don't eat babies - you're mixed up because we celebrate Christ with a meal of bread and wine, and because we talk about a "new birth"! We have never said that Jesus' body came back to life - in fact, we believe just the opposite, that his spirit went to heaven, as will ours. Stories of Jesus doing miracles aren't to be taken *literally* - they are stories that express how we can overcome, how we must forgive, and so on. We don't worship the man Jesus - we worship God alone by seeking fellowship with God through the Risen Christ. In fact, there is nothing to prevent true Christians from burning incense to Caesar, because a human leader (although metaphorically called a "god") can never be in competition with the Creator! And last, we don't pretend that Jesus actually fulfilled prophecies, we are *re-using* the Old Testament accounts and prophecies to honor him. We are doing the same thing that the Jews did in reworking their stories to glorify God! And so, your objections to The Way amount to nothing.



(h) By 100 C.E. I am thirty-five years old, and have become a deacon in the Ephesian church. Not only that, I am now part of the Johannine circle, and meet with them as often as I can to pray and discuss the scriptures. This First Day, there is a new gospel to be read to the church for the first time. (We are by now accustomed to new midrash appearing every so often, and are eager to see what this new product is about.) But there's a difference. This midrash creation is home-grown - the Johannine group has written it. Of course, this comes as no surprise to the church, since the effort has been a long and exciting one.

The reading dramatically opens with a discourse about the Word. The story of the Word first came to us when one of the Johannine circle had a dream or vision of God's Reason, or Logos, flying through the sky, slowly taking human form, and becoming flesh. Pretty soon we get to my contribution. Over years of discussion with unbelievers, I have often had to explain the "new birth", and wrote up a conversation between Jesus and one of the Jewish rulers explaining the "birth from above", which is now part of the gospel!

It was comforting to know that I was on the right track. For the entire correspondence, see [Letters with Spong](#).

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## Powell's Comments on Spong's View

Mark Allan Powell, in critiquing an earlier version of this work, offered this summary of Bishop Spong's view and puts it in context with contemporary N.T. scholarship:

Midrash. This is primary for BISHOP JAMES SHELBY SPONG's work. There is no doubt that "midrash" existed--and still exists today. The Jewish term "midrash" refers to fictional "expansions" on stories--sort of like "urban legends" that get passed on by word of mouth.

Let's start with a few examples from the modern day:

- a) the magi who come to visit Jesus in Matthew 2 are often identified as kings (as in the hymn "We Three Kings of Orient Are," though the Bible itself never identifies them as royal figures; likewise, in popular legends (midrash), they even have names (Caspar, Melchior, Balthasar) and one of them is a black man--but *none* of this is in the Bible;
- b) Mary Magdalene is often identified as a converted prostitute, although the Bible never says this, nor does it even indicate that she had led a sinful life or been regarded as an outcast; some people even readily identify her as the "woman taken in adultery" in John 8 or as the woman who anoints Jesus' feet in Luke 7--this does not come from the Bible, but from popular expansions on it (midrash).

No one is ever quite sure where these ideas come from, but they do become popular knowledge, such that some people find it difficult to separate what is historical fact from what is fictional midrash. We also know that the same thing happened in the early days because we have all sorts of fanciful legends about Jesus and his followers from the second century--for example, stories about things Jesus did as a child. So, the possibility arises--if the Gospels were not written until 30-50 years after Easter, couldn't elements of midrash *already* have come into the tales before they were written down?

Obviously, they *could* have? But did they? There are scholars who have devoted their entire careers to studying midrash--how it develops, how long it takes, what its identifying characteristics are. This is not the place to go into a detailed report, but the general view of scholars of *all* persuasions (liberal, moderate, conservative) is that the amount of midrash in the written Gospels is slight. Some midrash-friendly scholars think that the stories of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke may be midrash--in other words, they question the basic historicity of the virgin birth and think the whole shepherds/angels/ manger story in Luke (or magi story in Matthew) is fictional.

Some scholars also think certain *elements* of some miracle stories (e.g., the demon-possessed

pigs running into the water to drown) might owe to midrash. Such views may be troubling to conservative Christians. But what is most important for the current argument is to note that virtually *no* scholar of any persuasion thinks that the miracle stories as such or the resurrection accounts as such are midrash through and through. Spong is simply not on secure ground here. He relies primarily on the work of a British scholar named M. D. Goulder, who is way out of the mainstream in terms of critical consensus. Virtually no one who studies midrash (not even Goulder) would use the category the way that Spong does--to dismiss the *intended* historicity of the bulk of the narrative material preserved in the Gospels.

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## Spong's Account of "Literalization"

If the gospel was originally Metaphorical, there logically must have been some transition to the view now held by "popular Christianity." For it is a matter of common knowledge that, starting at some point in time, Christian leaders and writers have consciously affirmed the factuality of the events in the gospels and the claims about Jesus. And therefore, in any Metaphorical Gospel theory an implicit charge of "literalization" must exist. Bishop Spong realizes this and makes this charge explicitly:

"But, beginning at least with Polycarp and Justin Martyr in the second century, the typical Christian understanding of this tradition was that the Jewish prophets had simply predicted concrete events in the life of the messiah who was to come, and Jesus had fulfilled these predictions in an almost literal way as a sign of his divine origin." (*Resurrection: Reality or Myth?* p5)

The reasons Spong gives for this literalization process are fairly general, sweeping assertions rather than any specific evidence: (a) the literalizers were Gentiles, not Jews, and (b) the literalizers were separated from the origin of the gospels both by time and distance. He tells us,

"If the readers of his [Matthew's] Gospel ever ceased to be part of the religious heritage of the Hebrew people, or to have their religious memories shaped by that historic tradition, then misunderstanding and distortion would be inevitable. Without the background required to resonate with the story, literalizing would occur... When in the early years of the second century of the Christian era, the church ceased to be primarily Jewish and began the process by which it first became Gentile, then Greek, and finally Western, that is exactly what occurred. First, we did not understand, then we literalized, and finally, in this modern world, we rejected." (*Born of a Woman* p84-85)

"In my book that comes out next August, I will try to trace the development from midrashic Jewish gospels into Gentile literalistic interpretations of those gospels. I think the clue is in that people like Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Polycarp are Gentiles and not Jews and that by the end of the first century the whole Christian movement was anti-Jewish in its flavor." (Letter, Dec 22, 1995)

"My point in the book was that after 100 A.D. the Church was almost totally Gentile, and that these Gentile persons did not know the Jewish origins of the gospels, nor the background of the gospels, and so they read them in terms of history and biography. It is that reading that I contend is wrong." (Letter, Nov 6, 1996)

Spong's account is by far the clearest charge of "literalization" of the three scholars we're considering, and therefore his quotes are included here. The reader must remember that the charge of literalization is not an optional one for those who hold the Metaphorical Gospel theory. It must logically be an inherent part of the theory, whether spelled out or not.

I was able to ask him some interesting follow-up questions about details, along with his reasons and evidence. For more about this, See [Analysis of Spong's Literalization Account](#) .



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## Summary

As you can see from the above, there can be little doubt about Bishop Spong's Metaphorical Gospel Theory. He personally confirmed with me that the Metaphorical Gospel (as I've defined it) is indeed his considered view. He objected somewhat to the name "Metaphorical Gospel Theory" to describe his view, but did not offer a more suitable alternative.

But Bishop Spong is just one person. Do other scholars agree with him, or would the Metaphorical Gospel be just a "straw man" theory (one that is easy to refute and doesn't represent a prevalent theory)?

[To MG Home](#)

## Marcus Borg

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: September 11, 2002



Marcus Borg is the Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University and a fellow of Robert Funk's Jesus Seminar. He has been national chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature and co-chair of its International New Testament Program Committee. He was the principal organizer of the "Jesus at 2000" gathering in Oregon. He has written several books which attempt to provide scholarly information to both a scholarly and popular audience.

See his autobiographical sketch on the web entitled [Me & Jesus - the Journey Home](#)

See [Email Correspondence with Borg](#).

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## Introduction

Dr. Borg has enjoyed an illustrious career explaining how we can benefit from a spiritual, metaphorical understanding of the gospels without taking them literally. He even chose to subtitle his 2001 book *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* "Taking the Bible Seriously but not Literally." He also proposes to reconcile the results of New Testament and Historical Jesus scholarship with a modern, even redefined Christian faith.

In one sense, it is clear that Borg holds the Metaphorical Gospel theory. But in another sense, his position is not entirely clear. There are at least four possible reasons for this:

1. Where Spong comes right out and says "They didn't mean it *literally*!", Borg rarely specifically talks about *authorial intent*. And he typically doesn't discuss the issue of how the original readers understood the gospel claims. His agenda is elsewhere.

2. Borg seems to be open to dialog and change, much like Bertrand Russell was - and therefore, his position has possibly changed or become refined in various ways over the years. Therefore, it may be unfair to cite 1995 books to describe his position now.

3. While he does not have his PhD in New Testament Studies, Borg is a respected Historical Jesus Scholar and a professor of philosophy to boot. It's possible that his view is so finely nuanced that the questions I'm asking are too simplistic. And, since his books have not dealt specifically with this particular issue, at least in depth, it's not fair to try to derive his view from these sources.

4. Perhaps, since his main field of study was not New Testament, he has simply relied upon a set of NT scholars whom he considers the state of the art for these exegetical issues. And perhaps the apparent confusion on this topic is simply a symptom of confusion in his own mind.

I have, accordingly, approached the Borg view with caution and care. Here's how I have dealt with each of these issues:

First, I completely understand that Borg is not Spong, and shouldn't be viewed with Spongian lenses. And I accept that he's not nearly as concerned as Spong to make a stand in this arena. However, he does make statements in his books that seem to logically entail the MG theory; and he makes additional statements that actually state it. It's as though he takes the truth of the theory for granted.

Second, I have tried to give extra weight to his most recent publication (2001) *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. It appears to be consistent with his earlier works on this topic. Even if he, as a private person, had changed his views on this, Marcus Borg as a *public writer* must be what counts in the final analysis.

Third. The best way to find out if I correctly understand his position is to *ask him*. Fortunately, Dr. Borg did reply to my (several) emails, and I give a great deal of weight to his replies. See [Email Correspondence with Borg](#).

Fourth. If this comes down to a confusion in his own mind, at least this should be stated. I complain in this work about the lack of "Definiteness of Articulation" - that any theory which isn't, or can't be, well articulated is not a sound theory.

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## Summary of His Basic View

In 1997, after reading several of his books and carefully attending to the "Jesus at 2000" debates, and corresponding with Borg via email, I tried to summarize his view and asked him to confirm. Here's what I said:

1. Regarding the deity of Jesus, you believe that the earliest disciples and Christians attributed some form of divine nature to the post-Easter Jesus, based upon their experiences of him. The NT writers did not think that the pre-Easter Jesus was divine, but wrote of him AS IF he were, because of the their understanding of the post-Easter Jesus.

2. Regarding the resurrection of Jesus, the NT writers did not mean to say that Jesus' body literally came alive; they used these stories, however, to convey a message that he was indeed alive in the experience of his followers (which you think goes beyond a mere psychological reality).

3. And so, the object of discourse of the gospels (at least in these cases) is the post-Easter Jesus rather than the pre-Easter Jesus.

4. You would also take many of the stories about Jesus to be spiritual, symbolic accounts of the meaning Jesus, and were not intended to be taken factually. For instance, the raising of Lazarus, the feeding of the 5,000, etc.

5. Where Jesus is said to have fulfilled Jewish prophecy, you would probably see this as midrash, where the gospel authors are honoring Jesus by creating stories tying him to the prophets and their prophecies.

These points are examples of what I have called the "metaphorical gospel" view, namely that the deity and resurrection of Jesus, and many/most of the accounts about him, were INTENDED as symbolic, spiritual accounts rather than factual accounts - with the corollaries that (a) the original audience understood them in this spiritual way, and (b) later generations literalized these accounts.

Borg confirmed that this was correct:

Yes, you have understood my position correctly, and have stated it with significant clarity. I would enter a caveat or two - for example, I would certainly not take the midrashic interpretation as far as Spong does. But I accept/ follow the "principles" you outline. Well done.

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## Background



Dr. Borg, unlike Spong, does not *argue* for the Metaphorical Gospel theory. Rather, he assumes it to be true.

In one of his most quotable passages, you can see that Borg is primarily concerned to defend the metaphorical *understanding* of the gospels. He doesn't often *specifically* say that the gospel writers' intent was to portray their material as metaphorical - he is making the somewhat weaker claim that the real *truth* of the material is symbolic/metaphorical.

"My journey from the childhood state of precritical naiveté' through the critical thinking of adolescence and adulthood now led to hearing John (and the bible as a whole) in a state of postcritical naiveté' -- a state in which one can hear these stories as "true stories", even while knowing that they are not literally true."  
(*Meeting J*, p 16-17)

"Nor do I subscribe to the assumption that history can be normative for faith . . . I have argued against the kind of "historical reductionism" that says that something

must be historically true to be true. To use an example, I regularly say, "I don't think the virgin birth happened, but I think the stories of the virgin birth are powerfully true." (Jesus at 2000 Email Debate, Feb 27, 2000)

In Borg's brief autobiographical sketch (see above) called "Me & Jesus", he says in the section entitled "Adult study, phase one: deconstruction":

"Taught by Welsh scholar W. D. Davies (said to be one of the two favorite students of C. H. Dodd, the premier British new Testament scholar of this century), the course focused on Jesus and the synoptic gospels, and I was there exposed to the central claims of modern gospel scholarship (mostly German, despite Davies' British connections).

The effect was, for me, dramatic. I realized that the image of Jesus from my childhood -- the popular image of Jesus as the divine savior who knew himself to be the Son of God and who offered up his life for the sins of the world was not historically true. Moreover, I learned that scholars had been saying this for almost two hundred years.

This mind-boggling realization was based on the understanding of the gospels that has developed during the last two centuries. I learned that the gospels were neither divine nor particularly historical."

At seminary, he learned the "deconstruction" of a way of seeing. This view undergirds his entire effort. In fact, Borg's recommendation of the journey from precritical naiveté, through critical thinking, breaking through into postcritical naiveté mirrors his own spiritual journey.

### **Jesus and Christ of Faith**

One key, I think, to Borg's position regarding the intent of the New Testament writers is the distinction between the man Jesus and the Christ of Faith. Borg calls the historical Jesus the pre-Easter Jesus and the Christ of Faith the post-Easter Jesus. In Borg's view, the post-Easter Jesus was the object of the first century Christians' spiritual experience.

"Beginning with Easter, the early movement continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death, but in a radically new way. After Easter, his followers experienced him as a spiritual reality, no longer as a person of flesh and blood, limited in time and space, as Jesus of Nazareth had been. Rather, Jesus as the risen living Christ could be experienced anywhere and everywhere. Increasingly he was spoken of as having all the qualities of God. Prayers were addressed to Jesus as God, and praise was offered to Jesus as God in Christian worship." (*Meeting J*, p 16)

For many scholars, the Christ of Faith is some sense of a "spiritual presence," or perhaps the vaguer idea that Jesus' memory somehow lived on. Borg, however, actually comes relatively close to an evangelical position when he seems to say that the post-Easter Christ *really is* Jesus' spirit, actually communicating with us from heaven.

"When I say, 'Easter means that the followers of Jesus continued to experience him, even though nothing happened to his body,' I do NOT mean any of the following: The spirit of Jesus lived on (as the spirit of Martin Luther King may be said to live on); or that his memory lived on; or that Jesus lived on in the birth of Easter faith among his followers. All of the above are true, but they are not, in my judgment, the meaning of easter. They are too weak, pallid, and reductionistic." (Email Debate, March 25, 2000)

In Borg's view, then, are the authors of the gospels talking about the man Jesus when they attribute deity, miracles, and a bodily resurrection to him, or are they *really* referring to the

Christ of Faith (the "post-Easter Jesus", or "Jesus-now") of their present experience? What is the "object of reference" of the gospels?

The common sense view would simply be to say that they refer to the man Jesus, to his actual words and deeds, and to his position as the incarnation of God; and that, since the Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History refer to exactly the same person, these stories apply to the "post-Easter" Jesus as well.

As real as the post-Easter Jesus might be, the crux of Borg's view is that Jesus has changed. Attributes that apply to the post-Easter Jesus become stories and claims and sayings *thrown back* into the life of the man Jesus. The attributes of the post-Easter Jesus were written into the story *as if* the man Jesus had said and done these things - but he didn't really.

"... why would the early Christian community out of which John's gospel comes portray Jesus as saying about himself, "I am the light of the world", "I am the bread of life", I am the way, the truth and the life", if Jesus did not speak that way about himself? I now see the answer: this is how they experienced the post-Easter Jesus. For them, the post-Easter Jesus was the light that led them out of darkness, the spiritual food that nourished them in the midst of their journey, the way the led them from death to life." (*Meeting J*, p 16)

These stories, sayings, and claims were intended metaphorically about the man Jesus; the gospel writers did not mean that Jesus of Nazareth *actually* said, did, and was those things.

"Moreover, for me, as language about the post-Easter Jesus, I see all of these titles as true - that is, they express what Jesus became in the experience and tradition of his followers in the decades after Easter (I also see them all as metaphorical, of course; their multiplicity points to metaphoricity; and metaphorical language can, of course, be true). (Jesus at 2000 Email Debate, March 4, 2000)

Borg believes that this was a commonly accepted practice. He presents something similar to Spong's description of midrash.

"I see much of the passion story as non-historical at the level of details. Many of the details seem to be "prophecy historicized" rather than "history remembered" (Dom's phrases, though the notion is widely-held by mainline scholars, including Raymond Brown; the differences seem to be of degree), and/or the use of symbolism drawn from the Jewish tradition (e.g., the temple curtain tearing)." (Jesus at 2000 Email Debate, March 25, 2000)

And finally, we see what he means when he says,

"Thus the gospels are the church's memories of the historical Jesus transformed by the community's experience and reflection in the decades after Easter." (*Meeting Jesus* p 10)

The conflict is between two very different ways of reading the Bible. In language I will use later in the book, it is a conflict between a "literal-factual" way of reading the bible and a "historical-metaphorical" way of reading it. (Reading the Bible Again ix)

## **2001: Reading the Bible Again for the First Time**

Marcus Borg's newest book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (published in late 2001) bears the provocative subtitle: "Taking the Bible Seriously but not Literally."

I had wondered whether Borg had perhaps refined or even altered his view since I

corresponded with him in 1997. And if ever a book could be expected to fully explain his reasoning behind the Metaphorical Gospel Theory ("not Literally"), this would be it! But sadly, he spent almost no time explaining *why he thought that the MG Theory was true*, but instead explained how one might glean spiritual wisdom from the Bible, given the fact that many of the stories were not accounts of events that actually happened.

Borg calls his approach the "historical/metaphorical" approach. There are, as the name suggests, two components. His book focuses for the most part on the second of these, the metaphorical approach.

One surprise for me was that Borg does not discuss the deity or resurrection of Jesus in his book. However, he has covered that topic elsewhere, so maybe I should have expected it.

Although he fails to mention the most important event (or pseudo-event), in the Bible - the bodily resurrection of Jesus - he does turn his attention to the historicity of the gospel stories. Dr. Borg explicitly reiterates his view that some of the stories in the gospels are "history remembered", some are "history metaphoricized", and some are "purely metaphorical stories." Among the purely metaphorical stories are the entire birth narratives, raising of the dead, turning water into wine, walking on water, and the feeding of the five thousand (p 46)

Borg provides (borrowing from Crossan) the simplest description of the MG view I've yet seen:

. . . John Dominic Crossan calls stories like these "parables." Jesus, he says, told parables about God. The early Christian movement likewise told parables about Jesus. (p 206)

The issue that naturally arises is "How do you tell which is which?" That is, which accounts are intended factually and which metaphorically? As Borg wryly observes,

". . . the Bible does not come with footnotes that say, "This passage is to be read literally; that passage is not." Reading the stories of creation or the stories of Jesus' birth literally involves an interpretive decision (namely, a decision to read them literally) equally as much as does the decision to read them metaphorically.

Thus any and every claim about what a passage of scripture means involves interpretation. There is no such thing as a noninterpretive reading of the Bible, unless our reading consists simply of making sounds in the air. As we read the Bible, then, we should ask not, "What is God saying?" but "What is the ancient author or community saying?" (p 27-28)

And this will be *our* quest in this book - what *were* the original authors really saying?

So, how do you tell whether a passage is intended to be "literal" or metaphorical? Borg mentions three tests:

1. Signs within the story itself (his example: the Creation stories)
2. The Limits of the Spectacular (Borg maintains a line of plausibility which separates some "miracles" (he prefers not to use the term), such as healings, from others, presumably more extreme, such as the "nature miracles")
3. The Results of Historical Criticism

It is the third test which bears the most weight in deciding that many of the stories are not historical. The second point is actually a way in which Borg can accept the results of scholarship, yet affirm his own spiritual views. (In fact, this is a point where he's being lenient, accepting "some" extra-normal events as genuine.)

## **Further Clarification**

My primary reviewer for an earlier version of this work was Mark Allan Powell, chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the SBL, and colleague and friend of Marcus Borg. He was concerned that I had, in my own mind, too closely identified Borg with Spong's ideas.

His impression from his interaction with Borg was that (1) he might really hold the view that the evangelists naively passed along the stories they inherited, rather than consciously inventing metaphorical tales, and (2) the issue of literal vs. metaphorical was not consciously in their minds, and so trying to *make* this distinction is an anachronism based upon post-Enlightenment thinking.

I was worried that I yet - even now! - had misunderstood Borg, and so started up the email correspondence again. As before, his answers were very brief, yet I believe that they are revealing. I reiterated my explanation of the MG theory, very briefly, and asked him if he had any position or account of the logically-entailed "literalization" that later must have occurred (see below). The first two points he made were:

1. I do not wish to defend Jack Spong's understanding of the gospels. I think his midrash theory is simply wrong. So I will comment only on how I see them.
2. A specific example. Should we think that Luke when he wrote the infancy stories thought that he was writing literal factual history? That, for example, he thought that his characters burst spontaneously into song and sung those magnificent hymns (the Benedictus, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis)? I would be very surprised if he thought he was. My probability judgment is that Luke knew that he was using early Christian hymns, or possibly composed them himself.

I gladly accept that Borg does not use Spong's midrash theory as mechanism for developing metaphorical stories, and it's good to keep these two straight. But that doesn't mean he disavows the MG theory.

The second point is most telling. He had a perfect opportunity to say that he leaned more toward the view that Powell describes above, or to clarify his view in some other way. Instead, he confirms the MG view with an example: one which is presumably a *telling* example. The thought that Luke was really trying to report what Mary said is rendered ridiculous by evoking an image of a Broadway musical.

Since I was specifically asking him what he thought, I *must* conclude that he still vigorously upholds a Metaphorical Gospel understanding.

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## Borg's Account of Literalization

As far as I can tell, Dr. Borg has offered no published account of the supposed literalization of the gospels.

On the other hand, it is absolutely clear, and universally understood, that by the time of Justin Martyr (writing c. 150 C.E.) and Irenaeus (writing c. 180 C.E.), mainstream Christianity held a "literal" view.

So, if the N.T. authors held a metaphorical view, and if the early church fathers held a literal one, a "literalization" occurred during the intervening period. I believe that *some* account of this phenomenon is required by the Metaphorical Gospel Theory, since it logically entails an "apostasy" fairly early in church history. Second, I believe that Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp are *counter-examples* of the MG theory (later in the book), and I wonder how he deals with that.

So, I asked Borg what his view on this was. I specifically wanted to know if he thought the literalizers were people at the time of, or just before, Irenaeus and Justin, and the Apostolic Father's view was similar to the evangelists - OR if the Apostolic Fathers (Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp) *themselves* were literalizers. His answers to my two emails trying to clarify this are:

I don't think the early church writers were "concerned" to defend the literal factuality of the Bible and the gospels. I think that "concern" is modern (post-Enlightenment). I think many (most?) of them took the literal meaning for granted, for they had little or no reason not to (this is "natural literalism"). And for most of them, what they emphasized was not the literal meaning, but the "spiritual meaning" (which is very much like what we mean by metaphorical meaning).

I don't know how much you have read in my books. If you want to know more fully what I mean, I suggest that you read "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time." My point there is that it has always been the metaphorical (the "more than literal") meaning of the Bible that has mattered - including the early fathers, most of whom were natural literalists. Thus I would say that some biblical narratives include "historical memory," but even when they do, the primary concern is the "more than literal-factual" meaning. The "happenedness" of the events did not become a major concern until after the Enlightenment.

It seems as if he makes a real distinction here between the Evangelists (the gospel writers) and the Apostolic Fathers. The former held a metaphorical view; the latter were "natural literalists" who took the literal meaning for granted. Borg promotes something of an either/or by contrasting the spiritual meaning with the factuality, which I address later on in this work. But more interesting, he contends:

- the Apostolic Fathers were not "concerned" to defend the literal factuality of the Bible and the gospels and
- the "happenedness" of the events did not become a major concern until after the Enlightenment"

Now, exactly what does this mean? I interpret this as saying that Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp did not base the truth of the gospel on whether or not these things actually happened, whether Jesus was really God in the flesh, whether his body came out of the grave, etc. - it was the spiritual truth that mattered to them and which they defended.

Naturally, I had a follow-up question, since "church fathers" is somewhat ambiguous: Does this apply just to these three, or does he also contend that the factual basis of Christianity was also not a concern for the Apologists: Justin and Irenaeus? It seems to me clear that Justin and Irenaeus *argue* for the factuality of these things, and against the metaphorical gospel understanding as they counter gnosticism. If that's so, then to say that *this concern* was not in people's consciousness until after the Enlightenment is demonstrably false.

So I asked him. He replied that he has no position regarding the mid-2nd century fathers.

I don't know. I would have to re-read Justin and Irenaeus to have an informed opinion.

I admire his candor, but not his position. It appears that there are two wedges that would be extremely difficult to justify evidentially.

- the gospel writers, who understood their works metaphorically
  - the Apostolic Fathers, who understood their works literally but didn't care
  - the Apologists, who either were like the Apostolic Fathers or were the first Literalizers.
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## Conclusion

Even though uncovering Marcus Borg's considered view about the MG theory is somewhat difficult, it seems inescapable that he is a respected, influential, and strong supporter of the view.

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## John Dominic Crossan

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: Wednesday December 24, 2003

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**John Dominic Crossan**

John Dominic Crossan is Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at DePaul University in Chicago. Crossan is co-chair of the Jesus Seminar, and, according to his publisher, Harper Collins books, is considered "the preeminent expert on the historical Jesus."

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## Summary of his View

The first thing I want to say about John Dominic Crossan is that he is undoubtedly one of the top New Testament scholars in the world, and is considered by his peers to be absolutely brilliant. He is an original.

It is also clear that his view is much more complex than Borg's and Spong's. His New Testament work is his own, from scratch, while Borg and Spong build upon the foundation of others.

It is a pity (for me, at least) that I have so far been unable to correspond with Crossan. I include him, nevertheless, because he is a proponent of the essentials of the 'Metaphorical Gospel' theory.

His most important points are:

- Parables. Jesus told parables about life; his disciples told parables about him. They

didn't intend for these stories to be taken literally.

- Miracles. These parables included many (all?) of the miracle stories and accounts generally considered to be part of the gospel's foundations (virgin birth, certainly the 'nature' miracles such as walking on water; burial in a tomb, resurrection of Jesus' body and empty tomb, etc.)
- Prophecy Historicized. Early Christians invented "fulfillments" of prophecy, creating also a plausible framework for to support them.
- Gospels writers sometimes created stories which were even diametrically *opposed* to "what happened"; yet these were "true as gospel" for the writers. We should emulate the gospel writers in doing this.

Of course, Dr. Crossan's complete view of the New Testament is considerably more complicated and comprehensive than these few bullet points - but these are the points that are especially relevant to our discussion.

## Metaphorical Gospel

Where do you go to find a scholar's point of view? - to his autobiography! Crossan has two - a web bio and a full-length book. The [Westar Institute web autobiography](#) "Almost the Whole Truth - an Odyssey", he is clear enough:

"The last chapters of the gospels and the first chapters of Acts taken literally, factually, and historically trivialize Christianity and brutalize Judaism. That acceptance has created in Christianity a lethal deceit that sours its soul, hardens its heart, and savages its spirit. Although the basis of all religion and, indeed, of all human life is mythological, based on acts of fundamental faith incapable of proof or disproof, Christianity often asserts that its faith is based on fact not interpretation, history not myth, actual event not supreme fiction. And because I am myself a Christian, I have a responsibility to do something about it."

## Parables

Crossan's fuller (book-length) autobiography is called *A Long Way from Tipperary*, a candid and revealing account of his life and development - all too brief - it becomes clear that Crossan passionately believes that (many of) the gospel accounts were not intended literally, but rather metaphorically.

It was interesting to note that, as a boy raised in the Catholic church, he learned about Jesus not from the New Testament or from scholarly treatises, but from the songs, chants, liturgies, and prayers of church life. In his experience, these stories were not presented *either* as literal *nor* as figurative - the issue as such simply did not exist.

"They were not called stories but mysteries, and although they were distinguished as, respectively, the Joyful, the Sorrowful, and the Glorious Mysteries, any one was presumably as mysterious as another. Nobody insisted they were literal; nobody suggested they were not." p 132

After he had studied the New Testament, especially as it relates to the Historical Jesus, for a number of years, Crossan's professional assessment was that the Metaphorical Gospel view was true. Jesus told parables about life; his followers told parables about *him*.

"We began [with the Enlightenment] to think that ancient peoples ("other" peoples) told dumb, literal stories that we were no smart enough to recognize as such. Not quite. Those ancient people told smart, metaphorical stories that we were now dumb enough to take literally." p 148

Crossan is eloquent and passionate about how we should interpret the Bible - understanding the

powerful metaphors, parables - but he is clear that a metaphorical (only) understanding was indeed *precisely the intention* of the original writers.

"Both concerns derive from my attempt to understand what certain stories meant to the people who first told them" p 163

"I had used the example of misreading Aesop to explain the vacuity of hearing an ancient story as historical when it was never intended as such. ... My own term for reading a piece of recorded past as history when it was intended as parable is the Aesopic fallacy." p 133-4

Crossan mentions in another context that he resolved never to add to anti-semitism, nor to "brutalize the Gospel writers" (p 163) by interpreting them literally. To say that the stories are "only" fictional, for Crossan, misses the point, and trivializes the issue. It's the meaning that matters.

"If the story had been created, and especially when it had, that only pressed the question: What was its purpose, message, meaning? If it was history, that might be explanation enough. If it was parable, the explanation was only beginning. ... You have to ask, first if it was intended as fact or fiction, and, if as fiction, what its purpose was -- was it a pure entertainment or a teaching device? ... Was it, for example, a parable, that is, a fictional story with a theological punch, a made-up tale that kicked you in the rear when you weren't looking?" p 133-4

At times, he seems to say that this "parable" stance was not self-conscious.

The question comes back to me immediately and inevitably. Undergraduates asked it, and audiences still ask it: "Yes, but are you saying everyone knew they were only parable back then, or that they thought they were history back then, but you think they are parable right now?" I try not to show pain at that slipped-in word *only*, and I used to answer something like this. Ancient people could hear those stories and not ask that question about literal truth. If they believed them, they were true. If not, not. I do not speak like that anymore. It was a condescending answer because, more and more, I find those ancients just like us and us moderns just like them. In matters of vital importance, moderns and ancient alike accept or reject stories far more on an ideological than an evidentiary basis. We too, Enlightenment or not, ask far too seldom: "Yes, but is that literally true?" ...

However, the Metaphorical Gospel view is so fundamental, so crucial, to his whole view of the New Testament and of human life itself, that he in a sense sums up his book with an appeal to it. He tells a poignant story of a former minister who had "stayed away" from the church for thirty years. When meeting with Crossan and others, this man had finally opened up about his ordeal. And the man died within minutes.

"He talked at length about what had happened years before and how he had felt about the church all those years ever since. He saw now that there might be hope for a church that would never do such things again, *that would not demand people believe literally stories that were intended metaphorically*, and that would insist on justice inside and outside itself." p 203 (emphasis mine)

Note that not only is the literal interpretation of the gospel stories the very thing which apparently motivated this tragedy, but it is set in opposition to justice itself.

## **Prophecy Historicized**

In Crossan's view, the gospel writers consciously and intentionally took Old Testament stories

and themes and created fresh stories in which the hero (Jesus) seemed to fulfill prophecies of old. This view is similar, although not identical with, Spong's midrash explanation.

"Recall, first, how "searching the Scriptures" created Jesus' infancy narratives in Matthew, Luke, and even before them." (*Jesus - a Revolutionary Biography* p 143)

"What we have now in those detailed passion accounts is not history remembered but prophecy historicized. ... I mean such units sought out backward, as it were, sought out after the events of Jesus' life were already known and his followers declared that texts from the Hebrew Scriptures had been written with him in mind." (*Jesus - a Revolutionary Biography* p 145)

"Next comes the prophetic passion -- the search by scribally learned followers ... Finally came the narrative passion -- the placing of such prophetic fulfillments into a sequential narrative with its origins well hidden within a plausible historical framework." (*Jesus - a Revolutionary Biography*, p 145)

The crucial question, "Why did the gospel writers *create* such stories", is answered by saying that they were metaphorically understood by the writers.

"But if the Barabbas incident did not actually happen, why did Mark create such a story?... His narrative about Barabbas, was, in other words, a symbolic dramatization of Jerusalem's fate, as he saw it. Finally, whenever such stories are judged to be authorial creations, their author's purpose is seldom just literary embellishment. It is usually either symbolic dramatization, as here (process become event in my earlier terms); or prophetic fulfillment, as with the Triumphal Entrance; or both, as with the infancy stories seen in Chapter 1." (*Jesus - a Revolutionary Biography* p 142-3)

## **True as Gospel**

As a participant in the well-publicized "Jesus at 2000" email debate, Crossan gave an extremely vivid example of what he means when he talks about this phenomenon. He gives an example of two stories which are, in his view, factually false yet "true as gospel."

"Mark describes the Son of God almost out of control, arrested in agony, fear, and abandonment. John describes the Son of God in total control, arrested in foreknowledge, triumph, and command. Each interpretation spoke directly to and from the experience of the writers' communities but different experiences begot different theologies of the passion's inception." (Email Debate, Feb 18)

"Two radically different interpretations of the same event. As history, they cannot both be true, even if we were never able to tell which, if either, actually happened. . . . But *as gospel* they are both true." (Email Debate, Feb 18)

"In my opening message I said that Mark and John made up two radically divergent accounts of Jesus' passion, one intended to help persecuted Christians die and the other intended to help marginalized Christians live. I said both were true as gospel but neither was true as history (that is, I do not think either writer knew the exact details of Jesus' arrest or death).

*True as gospel*, of course, means symbolically true for the Christians who *wrote* those stories and for us Christians who still read them as statements from faith, for faith, to faith." (Email Debate, March 19)

He holds this technique up as a model to be followed. The authors, he asserts, took the basic historical incident and *adapted* - that is, completely changed - the story to fit their own

circumstances and needs.

What is the relation between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith? The man Jesus is used, as it were, as a peg to hang one's coat, as a catalyst, around which stories are developed. Without the historical peg there is no hero; without the man Jesus there would be no Christian movement. But the content - the coat on the peg - can, apparently, be anything which the growing spirituality of the church can imagine or desire, without any basis in fact.

Crossan has the ingenuity to give a modern advertising spin to the very meaning of "good news." The "good news", or "gospel", is no longer the plain story of what Jesus said and did - that is, an account of events which are truly beneficial.

Instead, "good news" is about *non-events* which are *perceived as beneficial* by the audience regardless of their inherent worth. It is, simply put, a message which *continually changes* so as to suit our changing needs and desires.

"Gospel is good news: good means from somebody's specific point of view; and news means it must be permanently updated for different times and places. But the way the gospels of Catholic Christianity do that is always to have the one and only Jesus of the 20s speak directly to the changing presents they represent" (Email Debate, Feb 18)

"Jesus-past acts and speaks as Jesus-present; Jesus-then acts and speaks as Jesus-now. And that is how he is Christ and Lord." (Email Debate, Feb 18)

Since Crossan did not respond to emails, I was unable to personally confirm that I correctly understood him, but - all things considered - the only view I can see Crossan taking is that of the Metaphorical Gospel theory.

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## Powell's Comments on Crossan's View

Mark Allan Powell offers this summary of Borg's view and puts it in context with contemporary N.T. scholarship:

Prophecy Historicized. This is primary for JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN's work. Most Christians are aware that Jesus does many things in the New Testament that fulfill prophecies of the Old Testament. Skeptical scholars suggest that, in some instances, the Gospel writers are creating facts about Jesus *in order to have him* fulfill the prophecies. Thus, they invented the story of the virgin birth because Isaiah 7:14 speaks of a virgin bearing a son, and they decided to say that Jesus was born in Bethlehem because Micah 5:2 indicates the Messiah will be born there. While a number of scholars may allow that such influences come into play here or there, John Dominic Crossan thinks that much (most?) of the Gospel accounts of Jesus came about this way--including everything in his last week of life.

According to Crossan, all the Gospel writers knew about that last week was that Jesus got grabbed by the Romans and crucified (possibly, according to Crossan, he was just caught up in a mob of Jewish rabble that got crucified for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Gospel writers, Crossan thinks, made up the rest--the stories about Jesus' trial before Pilate, about the release of Barabbas, about Simon of Cyrene, the thief on the cross, the centurion's confession, the burial in a garden, and of course the resurrection--the Gospel writers made it all up out of nothing to show that Jesus had fulfilled a bunch of Old Testament prophecies.

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## Crossan's Account of Literalization

As far as I can tell, Dr. Crossan has offered no account of the supposed literalization of the gospels. Since he does not argue for the view, he is less inclined to articulate all of its parts. However, I'll state again that the view logically entails *some* transition, however complicated, from metaphorical interpretation to factual - and should be made explicit.

## Crossan's Time Periods

Whereas Bishop Spong's account of literalization is fairly simple, Crossan's *cannot* be. For Spong, the New Testament may be treated as a unit: *All* the canonical books are from the "metaphorical" pre-100 period. It is only the following writers - some time in the second century - who begin to literalize the gospel story.

But, for Crossan, it is not clear how the gospel ever came to be 'literalized.' According to his Historical Jesus appendix material, Crossan sets up a framework of general time periods. (I highlight the canonical gospels blue, and the "internal evidence" and "external evidence" epistles in black.)

### 60-80

Gospel of the Egyptians  
2 versions of Mark ('secret gospel' plus early Mark)  
P. Oxy 840  
2nd version of Thomas  
'dialogue collection' in Dialogue of the Savior  
**'signs gospel' in John**  
**Colossians**

### 80-120

**Matthew**  
**Luke**  
Revelation  
**1 Clement**  
Barnabas  
Didache  
Shepherd of Hermas  
James  
**1st edition of John' Gospel**  
**Ignatius letters**  
1 Peter  
**Polycarp Philippians chp 13-14**  
**1 John**

### 120-150

**2nd edition of John' Gospel**  
**Acts**  
Apocryphon of James  
**1 and 2 Timothy**  
**2 Peter**  
**Polycarp Philippians chp 1-12**  
2 Clement  
Gospel of the Nazoreans  
Gospel of the Ebionites  
Didache fragments  
Gospel of Peter

What are we to make of this? Note the 80-120 layer. Matthew, Luke, and 1st edition of John share the time period with Clement, Ignatius, and part of Polycarp! Note the 120-150 layer. The final edition of John and Acts are placed here, coming very near Justin Martyr's era!

This certainly seems to preclude a generation-like transition from metaphorical to literal understanding, as in Spong. Crossan must, logically, hold either that (a) the Apostolic Fathers were themselves speaking "metaphorically", or (b) both metaphorical and literal streams co-existed throughout the post-70 Christian world.

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## Truth and Faith

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: July 31, 2003

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Perhaps the most frequent criticism of this article has been the statement that "After all, isn't this a matter of Faith? Some will believe and some won't." People tend to think of this as a religious issue, not a matter for factual investigation.

The entire question of the nature of "faith" and its relation to truth and to knowledge, cannot be adequately covered here - it requires a book in itself. I can only present, here, my general approach to this question.

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## This Inquiry and the Truth of Christianity

This article does not directly inquire into the truth of Christianity, and therefore does not fall within the realm of apologetics, or the defense of the Christian faith. It would be more accurately described in these terms as "pre-apologetics."

(Parenthetically, there is a good spin and a bad spin on the idea of "apologetics." The bad spin is the implication that the "apologist" stakes out a position first, then tries with all his might to defend it. This simply becomes "lawyer tactics." The game is to find any argument that supports my position and make the most of it. Then refute, or simply avoid, all counter-arguments. The good spin is to say that apologetics tries to give a coherent explanation when asked "Why do you think this (Christianity) is true?", which is only reasonable.)

Before we can make any kind of meaningful decision about Christianity, we must know what "Christianity" means. And it seems plausible to me that central to the issue of Christianity is the question about the Claims of Christianity. And central to the Claims issue is the Metaphorical Gospel Theory question.

And so what is needed is a clear, definite analysis of the New Testament statements and related evidence, as we are trying to do here. Do the authors of these documents really make the claims that Historic Christianity has always made - about Jesus, and about gospel accounts?

Following the Argument. For many people, topics such as the Metaphorical Gospel theory directly affirm or challenge personal convictions, spiritual beliefs, religious commitments. For some, this theory, if it is true, represents really *bad* news. On the other hand, for others, the MG Theory feels like a liberating force from ancient dogmatic attitudes. But, either way, isn't

this simply beside the point? We should not make the mistake of entrenching ourselves in positions that we *want* to be true, thinking that this somehow has anything to do with determining what *is* true.

This is about Truth. We should simply use the Socratic approach of "following the argument where it leads." If the MG Theory, for instance, is true, then so be it. If not, let's expose it. Let's examine the evidence, think it through, and let the chips fall where they may.

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## Faith and the Gospel

This addresses the concerns of conservative Christians who challenge the whole endeavor of inquiring into "reasons for faith."

From my earliest days in Sunday school, I was taught that "faith" was a good thing. I was also taught that faith meant believing something. It was believing something that you wanted to be true (Hebrews 11). And it was believing something that you didn't *know* was true. And, finally, the implication was that the more evidence there was *against* the thing hoped for, the more *faith* was required - and, therefore, the more credit you got with God.

This is exactly the definition of "wishful thinking" and "make believe", isn't it? One story has the little child giving a definition of faith, "Believing something you know isn't true."

When I got old enough to think for myself, I just concluded that this was a flaw intrinsic to Christianity. And I started wondering, "But why should I believe *this* thing (Christianity) is true, and not something else?" I was puzzled that the Bible doesn't seem to give people this credit when they choose to believe something *else*; it wasn't just the process of setting your mind to something you want and believing that it was true that was commended as Faith, there was something more to it.

And I saw that Jesus, in the gospels, didn't ask people to just believe in him for no reason at all. He said "If you don't believe in my words, at least believe in my works" (his miracles). He responded to John the Baptist, who had asked whether he was The One, "The lame walk, the blind are healed, ..." His character backed up his words. His power backed up his words. And, finally, his resurrection backed up his words.

That's all I can say about this here, but I would ask traditional Christians to think about these issues, and perhaps realize that God has provided "many infallible proofs" for us, and it's ok to use our minds and discover them.

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## Truth and Party Politics

This addresses my own concern about the way both conservatives and liberals appear to approach these matters.

### An Outsider's View

I concede that the following is a gross over-simplification and does not apply to everyone. However, from the outside, I have to point out what I think I see. I see these issues (to my mind, extremely crucial ones) sometimes treated as matters of Party Politics rather than as matters of Truth. It sure looks to the outsider as if the scholarly game is to pick your team (based on whatever), and *then* interpret all the evidence based upon your team's philosophy. Thus, at its heart this becomes an "us vs. them" contest.



I well understand the fact that some people arrived at their Christianity by way of religious experience rather than by investigating the New Testament documents themselves, and that they will tend to understand the gospels in light of their other reasons for belief.

I also understand the scholar who has become critical of Historic Christianity and feels that modern thought has in some sense invalidated or refuted it, at least in its traditional form; and s/he is still somehow attracted to Jesus and wants to re-examine it all. These people will also tend to understand the gospels in light of their new insights.

But this ought not to be! We cannot say, *a priori*, "My understanding of Christianity is the right one, and the gospels must agree with me." Put this baldly, this is obviously false; but I see this attitude again and again.

### **A Word about the Tone of the MG Writers**

Pursuing this theme, I will comment on the Party Politics tone of the MG writers first, since that's what we are discussing here. The overwhelming impression given by these writers is that *they* are the educated ones, the critical thinkers, the smart ones. They are the ones who are in step with the times, who are presenting the results of modern scholarship to the masses.

On the other hand, their *opponents* are old-fashioned, dogmatically bound, ignorant of modern scholarship, unwilling or unable to see the truth. They cling to their antiquated beliefs in the teeth of clear and convincing evidence. They *only* believe what they do because of their prior (misguided) religious convictions.

Nowhere in the writings of the authors I discuss here do I find the slightest indication that people who disagree with them might have a case. (The only example I can think of is the co-authorship of a Jesus book by Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, in which Borg obviously acknowledges Wright's position.)

They do not say "Now, this is in many ways a difficult issue; there are several cogent arguments that have been raised against my view. Here's what they are and how I answer them." In fact, they typically demonstrate no awareness that there *are* arguments on the other side. This is either terribly arrogant, or inexcusably ignorant.

One of the odd things is that Mark Allan Powell tells me that Borg does introduce his college students to opposing viewpoints:

"I know for a fact that he also tells his students that there are highly respected scholars who disagree with him (in fact, he uses one of my books as a required text, just as I use one of his)." (Powell, critique of MG 4)

Why does he not do this in his published work?

### **A Word about the Tone of the Responses**

Spong's, Borg's, and Crossan's books are indeed marked with disdain for the "other side." And more's the pity that their stance has been often been met with equal disdain and invective rather than genuine argument. That kind of name-calling only makes the situation worse!

I read several works which offered critiques of these scholars, but I could not find a clear and straightforward, step by step analysis of the issue. That's what I attempt to do here.

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## **Fact vs. Faith, the Great Reversal**

This addresses an extremely interesting phenomenon - the appropriation of "faith." Consider the claims made by two of the MG scholars (Borg and Spong).

1. A literal understanding, that is, a belief in the "happenedness" of the gospel story, is *set against* meaning and present significance, because it distracts us from the important things (Borg):

"Moreover, when what is said about the canonical Jesus is taken literally and historically, we lose track of the rich metaphorical meanings of the gospel texts. The gospels become factual reports about past happenings rather than metaphorical narratives of present significance. (Reading the Bible Again p 191)

But if we focus on the event's "happenedness", we easily become distracted and miss the point. We then wonder if such a thing could really happen; and if we think it could and did, we then marvel about what Jesus did on a particular day in the past. But the meaning of this story does not depend upon its "happenedness." Instead, it is a "sign", as John puts it. Signs point beyond themselves; to use a play on words, they sign-ify something, and what they signify is their significance. (Reading the Bible Again p 204)

2. A belief in the the truth of a set of statements about Jesus is *set against* personal commitment to the risen Christ (Borg):

"Now I no longer see the Christian life as being primarily about believing. The experiences of my mid-thirties led me to realize that God is and that the central issue of the Christian life is not believing in God or believing in the bible or believing in the Christian tradition." (Meeting, p 17)

"*Believe* did not originally mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings; in both Greek and Latin its roots mean "to give one's heart to." *Believing* in Jesus does *not* mean believing doctrines about him. Rather, it means to give one's heart, one's self at its deepest level, to the post-Easter Jesus who is the living Lord " (Meeting J, p 137)

3. In fact, a belief in the "literal truth" of the gospel words, an adherence to Historic Christianity, is regarded as the exact antithesis of true spiritual experience, encounter with the living Christ, and the doorway to God (Spong):

"Once we *lay aside a commitment to the literal truth of the literal words* of a biblical text, we discover that there is a way through these words to enter the timeless dimension of eternal love, graceful acceptance, and inclusive community." (Rescuing the Bible, p 127)

"No one seems yet ready to invest the energy that will be required to engage the task of *reformulating* the Christ story for our day if, indeed, it can be reformulated. *Yet that alone*, in my opinion, is the pathway to a living Christianity and a *living Christ*." (Rescuing the Bible, p 36)

"This God calls those who have been divinely created in this God's image to be the persons God created them to be, for in the fullness of humanity the presence of God can still be experienced. *A literal view of Holy Scripture will never lead one to this vision*." (Rescuing the Bible p 184)

"Literalize John and you will lose this Gospel. For that which is literalized becomes *nonsense*, while truth that is approached through sign and symbol becomes *the very doorway into God*. It is a pity that those who seek to defend biblical truth so often fail to comprehend its message. " (Rescuing the Bible

4. Those who hold to Historic Christianity are not only missing the point, they are barred from spiritual life. They are, in fact doomed to (spiritual) *death* (Spong):

"A title more proper than "liberal" might well be "open" or "realist." They are the ones who know that the heart cannot finally worship what the mind has already rejected. They know what fundamentalists do not seem to know, namely that *literalization guarantees death*." (Born of a Woman, p 176)

### **How has this Reversal Come About?**

Now, it is simply astounding that the MG scholars have managed not only to lay claim to true faith and relationship with God, but they have somehow snatched these things away from the Christian faith that has existed for two thousand years.

How was this accomplished? I've known for a long time that this was going on, but I never saw it so starkly. These guys are not saying "Hey, we're Christians too." They saying, to traditional Christianity, "We're Christians, and *you're not!*" I pondered this a great deal, and I think that I can lay out a step by step progression, each step a fairly plausible movement from the previous, until the roles are completely reversed.

This tracks *only the spiritual rationale*, without even adding in the weight of historical criticism. The latter provides the factual basis of their views, but almost more importantly the progression below provides the religious power. See what you think.

1. It used to be the case that Christians believed Jesus really said and did the things attributed to him (including his bodily resurrection) in the gospels. People who weren't Christians doubted or denied that these things really occurred. The Christians, precisely *because* they believed these things were true, put their faith and hope and trust in Jesus of Nazareth as their Risen Lord, set out to follow his teachings, and most important of all came to know him in an experiential way. They believed that the gospel was true, both factually and spiritually. Not surprisingly, they were called "believers."

2. Later, Christianity had become so institutionalized as to be part of the fabric of life. People such as Kierkegaard (rightly) took nominal Christians to task for giving verbal assent without making the effort to appropriate the gospel spiritually. S.K. pointed out that without this *appropriation*, mere verbal assent was worthless. In fact, such assent was only hypocrisy ("play-acting") without the fruit of spiritual commitment and growth.

3. It was easy to miss the central point of this critique of Christendom. Rather than realizing that verbal assent without relationship was simply a fraudulent Christianity, verbal assent was seen as "intellectual assent", as if one's core beliefs didn't affect one's behavior. Thus, a Christianity of the mind (belief that certain things happened) is starting to be set against a Christianity of the heart (appropriation of the gospel message).

4. It was just a short step to conclude, therefore, that issues of factuality are merely secondary - beside the point, irrelevant. In fact, it is contended that the *real* believer is one who believes "spiritually", since that's the bottom line, isn't it? At this point, it doesn't matter whether you belief factually or not, it is the spiritual experience that matters.

5. And so, what about people who *focus* on the factuality of the gospel story? Aren't they *distracted* from the meaning of the gospel? - which means they are

missing the meaning of the gospel, which is bound to negatively impact their spiritual life.

6. And what if they continue to *insist on the importance of factuality*? That is bound to be a *perversion* of the spiritual gospel, and must be eliminated if possible.

7. Thus, in our time, we are earnestly told that we must now *renounce* the model of "belief" in favor of spiritual "relationship" We discover, finally, that the *true* believer, the one with faith, the one with spiritual life and entrance to God's throne . . . is the one who believes it is true spiritually, while maintaining that it is *false* factually.

### Like an Expert Wrestler

This is It used to be the case that people who thought that these things really happened were "believers" and those who thought they didn't happen were "unbelievers."

"Believers" were once people who maintained the spiritual significance of events that *happened*. Now these people are *not* believers anymore. Instead, "believers" are precisely those who maintain the spiritual significance of events that *didn't* happen.

This situation is like an expert wrestler, who deftly reverses position from the bottom to the top. The unbeliever and the believer appear to have switched roles.

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## What Does it Matter?

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: Friday January 30, 2004

"Light and truth are what you need not just when your intellect is curious and needs stimulating but when your whole being is lost, downcast, depressed, thirsty for God." - N.T. Wright

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## Introduction

Does it really matter whether the MG Theory is true or not? Most people think it does. The proponents of the view certainly think their view is true and important

### What if it's not All That Important?

But first, what if it *doesn't* matter all that much? What if, at the end of the day, it's all a wash: all of the *deeper Christian meaning* turns out to be true whether Historic Christianity is true or the MG Theory is true, or something else is true - and we discover that nothing life-threatening or life-saving is at stake here? Would that mean that this inquiry is illegitimate, that to determine the truth of the matter would somehow be an unworthy endeavor?

Early in my study of this subject, I talked on the phone with a Fuller seminary professor. He wanted to know right away whether (a) I was experiencing a crisis of faith or (b) this was merely an academic exercise. Either way, he didn't want any part of this. He didn't envision the possibility of a legitimate interest in his own field by an outsider!

No, even if it were proven that there are no practical benefits to be gained, I still believe that to get to the *truth* of this subject is justification enough. Truth matters, even if it's mundane truth.

But I wouldn't have spent all this time if I thought this had no practical importance.

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## It Matters to Them

Let me start by pointing out that the advocates of the MG Theory are the ones who have pushed the issue by "taking it to the streets." They believe that they are providing nothing less than a fundamental and crucial contribution to Christian thought by explaining the *true meaning* of the Bible. They see this as a modern-day Copernican revolution. They expect nothing less than to overturn and redefine ("re-vision") Christianity.

### It Matters to Marcus Borg

Marcus Borg is primarily concerned to show us how the Bible should be *understood today*. He wants to make room in the Christian fold for the critical thinker who has rejected Christianity because s/he has found it untenable in today's world. Borg's view includes and presupposes the truth of the MG Theory. In his most recent work, he says (emphasis mine):

"Conflict about the bible is the *single most divisive issue* among Christians in North America today. And because of the importance of Christianity in the culture of the United States, conflict about the Bible is also central to what have been called "the culture wars. (Reading the Bible Again ix)

As we enter the twenty-first century, we need a new set of lenses through which to read the Bible. The older set, ground and polished by modernity, no longer works for millions of people. These lenses need to be replaced. The older way of seeing and reading the Bible, which I will soon describe, *has made the Bible incredible and irrelevant* for vast numbers of people. (p 3-4)

The very last words of his book are these:

"Through and within the Bible's many voices, we are called to discern the voice that addresses us in our time. And listen: what we hear matters greatly. It makes all the difference." (p 302)

Borg clearly understands that his opponents consider this to be not only important, but hugely important, as well:

"Yet not all Christians agree about the need for new lenses. Many vigorously defend the older way of seeing the Bible. For them, what seems to be at stake is nothing less than the truth of the Bible and Christianity itself." (p 4)

### It Matters to Bishop Spong

Spong, the one who has made an entire literary career out of "Liberating the Gospels" and "Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism" agrees, loud and clear. In this passage he actually declares that a "literalist" view means *death* (metaphorically speaking, of course - see, I can tell):

"A title more proper than "liberal" might well be "open" or "realist." They are the

ones who know that the heart cannot finally worship what the mind has already rejected. They know what fundamentalists do not seem to know, mainly that *literalization guarantees death.*" (Born of a Woman, p 176)

## It Matters to Dominic Crossan

Crossan does not mince words when he characterizes a literal interpretation as "brutalizing" the Gospel writers (Tipp p 163), and explicitly vowed never to do that to them. One reason is that it's simply a mistake and unfair to the genre. We should care about getting it *right*.

A second reason is that viewing things historically can defuse the quest to find the real meaning.

If it was history, that might be explanation enough. If it was parable, the explanation was only beginning.

And finally, and most important, he feels passionately that the 'literal' interpretation of the Bible has motivated injustice within the church and in the broader world; it has tragically ruined lives.

"He talked at length about what had happened years before and how he had felt about the church all those years ever since. He saw now that there might be hope for a church that would never do such things again, *that would not demand people believe literally stories that were intended metaphorically*, and that would insist on justice inside and outside itself." p 203 (emphasis mine)

Crossan's objection to the literalization of the gospels, and championing of the Metaphorical Gospel Theory, is passionate and clear:

"The last chapters of the gospels and the first chapters of Acts taken literally, factually, and historically trivialize Christianity and brutalize Judaism. That acceptance has created in Christianity a lethal deceit that sours its soul, hardens its heart, and savages its spirit. ... And because I am myself a Christian, I have a responsibility to do something about it." [Westar Institute web autobiography](#)

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## The Great Misunderstanding?

What does it matter? If the MG Theory is true, nearly all Christians throughout history have unwittingly been the victims of the greatest misunderstanding of all time. I'd consider that a big deal.

First, I'd like to point out the sheer *magnitude* of the claim. The theory contends not only that Christianity as it has been believed for centuries is *untrue*, but that it has *never even known what its own beliefs were supposed to be*.

I'm not saying that this means the MG Theory is false, but I *am* saying that if it's true, this is a big deal.

## Historic Christianity Not True?

First, the MG Theory contends that Christianity, as held by most believers throughout the centuries, has simply been *refuted* by rigorous scholarship. This is the claim. If these scholars are right, then Christians should abandon their (false) beliefs and participate in this Copernican revolution.

If the MG Theory is right, there is no weaseling around it.

If the MG Theory is right, "traditional Christians" will unfortunately be shown to be like children who believe in a literal Santa Claus. It is not an option to hold on to Historic Christianity by saying the "spiritual" meaning of Christianity is still valid and beyond scholarly proof or disproof. For part of Historic Christianity's very *contention* lies the claim that these things actually happened and that Jesus is God's Son, raised from the dead - in a real and literal sense.

No, if Historic Christianity can be shown to be untrue, it must be abandoned.

### **Christianity Has Always Misunderstood Itself?**

According to the Metaphorical Gospel theory, Christianity has radically and systematically *misunderstood* itself - virtually always and everywhere, throughout the ages! It took a hard right turn immediately after the gospels were written and has been going astray ever since!

The MG Theory's truth, if established, would entail that virtually all of the saints, martyrs, and theologians throughout history (until the last few decades) were victims of a horrible exegetical mistake, thinking that their gospel was about who the man Jesus of Nazareth was and what he really said and did.

Joseph Campbell once commented that all religions have an archetypal, or metaphorical, or mythical, or spiritual "view", and that all religions *except Christianity* accompany this mythical view with an explanation. Unfortunately for Christianity, he says, it actually believes that its mythical view *is* the explanation, and therefore *has* no explanation. Campbell further suggested that Hinduism's explanation might be used as a key to unlock the meaning of Christianity. This understanding is entirely in harmony to the Metaphorical Gospel theory, for it contends that Historic Christianity has done just that - it has mistaken its metaphorical symbols for a literal explanation.

### **I'm a Skeptic**

I think that we should exercise our critical thinking in these matters. We should be skeptical of the skeptics.

I've heard this sort of thing before. I've heard other people claim that the disciples of the Founder of every World Religion all misunderstood their Founder and his teachings - that none of the followers of Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius, the writers of the Bhagavad Gita, etc. ever understood their message. Until now. Fortunately for us, these folks have figured it out - for *they alone* truly understand what was really meant.

Now this new (MG) claim is all very exciting, and comes wrapped up in a package of scholarly words, copious footnotes. It seems to be on the forefront of our quest for knowledge. But we shouldn't believe everything we hear just because it sounds good and is new.

This kind of claim is not only important, but it truly requires significant and rigorous proof.

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### **Teacher or Dialog?**

[In this section, I'll pretend that the only two, or primary, alternatives are Historic Christianity and MG Christianity. In reality, of course, there are lots of possible scenarios where *neither* are true. I'll leave it to the reader to delineate the implications of these scenarios.]

If the Metaphorical Gospel theory is true, there is a profound practical impact which is acknowledged by proponents and opponents alike. The whole relationship of the Christian with the New Testament is different.

Borg, from the MG standpoint, sees a stark contrast. To him, Historic Christianity views the Bible as a dictator, while the MG Theory views it as a partner in Dialog with us:

"Like an ancient monarch, the Bible stands over us, telling us what to believe and do.

The result: the monarchical model of biblical authority is replaced by a dialogical model of biblical authority. . . Yet because the Bible is a human product as well as sacred scripture, the continuing dialogue needs to be a critical conversation."  
(Reading the Bible Again, p 30)

## Teacher

Borg is more or less correct, except I'd view the Bible more as a "Teacher" than as a monarch under the first scenario. Here's why.

If Historic Christianity is true, then the New Testament is the record of what Jesus really did and said, and stands as *teacher* in relationship to us. If I want to follow Jesus, and Jesus said this and that, then that's what I must do and believe. It acts as a fairly specific guide in life, although it is not nearly as detailed a "handbook" as Borg might think.

There are many areas of Jesus' teaching that I like and enthusiastically accept. "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden" is my absolute favorite, for fairly obvious reasons.

Unfortunately, there are also, to be candid, several areas of Jesus' teaching that I don't like. I would explain them away if I could.

1. The call to deny myself and follow him can be a hard one.
2. I'm not very eager to love my enemies (ok, I actively *don't want to*) and would have that expunged from the gospels if I could.
3. Billy Graham pointed out to Dick Cavett that chastity was the "least popular of the Christian virtues."
4. C.S. Lewis once commented, about someone who thought the Sermon on the Mount was beautiful, that they probably hadn't read it closely enough, because in reality it was frightening.

Thus, if I think Historic Christianity is true, I am *stuck* with the *whole* teaching - the parts I like and the parts I don't like. The hard sayings, too. I have to deal with something that I would never have made up. And if it really *is* true, then I will have been forced to *learn something new*, to change, to come around to a new way of thinking, to wrestle with the brute fact of it and become better for it.

## Dialog

However, if the MG Theory is true, what we have in the New Testament is a collection of human opinions. True, we may view them in general as "responses to the divine", mostly good and wise opinions, no doubt, but we must still view them critically and embrace that which makes sense to us.

Borg and Spong, especially, have talked about layers or strata of teaching in the Bible. Some they can accept, and some they cannot. In the MG view, we are free to select those strata of teaching that are true, that are valuable, and reject the rest. In fact, we must do so. There



is, therefore, a certain unavoidable element of subjectivity in the process.

According to Borg, there is a certain balance to be maintained. The Bible is our Dialog partner. If we discontinue the Dialog, we are no longer Christians, we are something else. We may, thus, legitimately profit from certain aspects of the Bible while operating from within another Dialog, with Buddhism or Hinduism, or presumably some personal world-view.

But this must also be a "critical" Dialog. There's the difference. The benefit here is quite clearly that all those messy problems posed by the New Testament may be quietly disposed of. We are free to acknowledge the fallibility of the writers, the uneven-ness of their wisdom, and embrace only that which seems right to us. Thus, we have a built-in mechanism for keeping our world-view coherent.

The downside is that it will be especially difficult for New Testament to *teach us anything new*. That's because, when all is said done, we stand in relation to the Bible primarily as critic rather than as student. Presumably, if we are always on our guard, we might be able to be so honest with ourselves that we are even yet open to new truths, new teachings, even when they seem to go against the grain of our cherished beliefs. But this will be difficult, and will be rare.

What is more likely (and I have seen this phenomenon in practice) is that people tend by nature to accept those elements they have *already come to believe* and jettison the rest. Thus, Jesus' words cannot act as our teacher, they can't tell us new things, they can't challenge and even starkly disagree with us. They cannot convert us. We can never be forced, by them, out of the spiritual ruts we have dug for ourselves.

### **Which One?**

Now, which situation is better? If I'm honest with myself, I have to say that sometimes I like having a Teacher and sometimes I'd rather have Dialog. Do I want direction in a confusing world, or do I want to be left alone to break away from the constraints of all the demands made on me? Depends.

But the way to decide the issue is not to examine my desires. The way is to examine the evidence and decide where the truth lies.

Either way, this makes a difference.

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## **The Concrete and the Spiritual**

[Again in this section, I'll pretend that the only two, or primary, alternatives are Historic Christianity and MG Christianity. In reality, of course, there are lots of possible scenario where neither are true. I'll leave it to the reader to delineate the implications of these scenarios.]

I have corresponded with several people, discussing the "power of the story" - the story itself, fiction as well as non-fiction. This caused me to think about the movie Braveheart, which is one of my favorite movies. What impressed me was William-Wallace-as-portrayed-by-Mel-Gibson. This character as a hero, person. I have rarely seen that kind of quality person portrayed in any movie. His clarity of thought and expression, his passion, his desire for peace but readiness to lay his life down - all of that and more. Even Gibson's facial expressions were telling: when he was angry, he'd kind of snort inward through his nostrils; when he was arguing for the truth, the sincerity on his very face was compelling.

Now I know that's based, more or less, on things that really happened, but I don't really care. Not at all! I value this as an archetypcal portrayal of the "noble man" - at least one kind of noble man. If William Wallace was really like that, then so much the better. But the point to

me is *not* necessarily what this man - a long time ago - was like and what he did; but the point is what kind of man there could possibly be. It functions as a beacon, as a magnet, do draw people to this ideal.

So, as I explained with the idea of metaphor, I totally "get it." I don't de-value the "power of the story." I was moved by Lord of the Rings a long time before it came out in movie form. "The Wall", a short story by Sartre, stunned me with the issues of life and death, so much so, that I walked the streets near Pomona College late at night wrestling with those issues.

But there's more to this issue than the power of stories to move us. There's the issue of Reality, as well.

## **Santa**

A very good friend of mine, singer/songwriter Bob Bennett, has a line in one of his songs about "the integration of the concrete and the spiritual." There is a very practical, experiential thing that happens when the "spiritual" meets the hard realities of dust, flesh and bone, sky and sea. I am sure that I cannot do justice to this insight.

When I was a kid, I believed in the physical existence of Santa Claus. I even had proof: the milk and cookies we set out Christmas Eve were replaced with a very nice thank you note in the morning. I remember thinking about that Man, Santa, the very best person in the whole world, who spent all his time giving precious gifts to children like me. He was the smartest person, too, since he knew each of us by name and knew all about us. Best of all, he was more real than God and Jesus, because he was made of flesh and blood, and really came to our house.

I imagined what it would be like just to see Him, to touch Him, to talk to Him. To do that, I would gladly have traded all the toys in the world. This was, I think, a real experience of numinous wonder. (But, alas, I knew meeting Santa was impossible, because Santa would not allow it - he only came when you were asleep.)

When I finally discovered it had all been "make-believe", I was disappointed. And even though I have always believed in the "meaning" of Santa, and never again received the thrill, the physical sensation, of being near Greatness in that way. I can testify from my own experience that my "religious experience" of Santa may well be truer now, more spiritually grounded, but is not as vivid and profound and moving as it was, and never will be again.

Interestingly, it appears that one of the essential components to my experience of this archetype was precisely the integration of the concrete and the spiritual.

## **Jesus**

I grew up with the teaching that faith was pretty much the same thing as make believe, although nobody ever phrased it exactly in those terms. Once, I actually asked my Sunday school teacher whether I could fly if I just believed it strongly enough. Unfortunately, he said "yes." Christianity, for many of us, was make believe. Tinkerbell would only recover if we really *believed* she would. God was spirit, and spirit wasn't connected in any noticeable way to the real world around me.

On the other hand, I remember wondering what Jesus was really like. It was too bad, I thought, that he lived so long ago and I lived here and now, because if I lived back then I would have hung around him, listening to stories, touching him, getting to know him. That fired my imagination. But, there was nothing I could do about it.

Later, after having my own spiritual encounter with him, I read about the Shroud of Turin. Whether it's genuine or not, it focused my attention on the physicality of what happened. On the reality of it. That fired my imagination again.

Around that time, I read C.S. Lewis' science fiction trilogy. The viewpoint hit me, like a ton of bricks, that this "Christianity" was not a religion, an opinion, a "faith", a "spiritual" thing, removed from reality - but was the fundamental FACT of God entering time and space.

And then I read some of the books by John Warwick Montgomery, where he made a surprisingly strong evidential case for the truth of Christianity, and followed up with other books. I grew, more and more, to distrust the view the "faith" in the Christian sense means "make believe."

## Integration

And so, if Historic Christianity is true, I see a wonderful integration of the concrete and spiritual. If the MG Theory is true, this is gone. To me, this is a huge practical difference. If I become convinced that the MG Theory is true, Jesus will be debunked just like Santa was. That would be a great loss. Even the archetypal experience would never be the same.

But if it turns out that Historic Christianity is true after all, I'd like to introduce the MG guys to the concrete risen Lord.

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## Direct and Indirect Evidence for the MG Theory

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: January 3, 2002

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### Internal Evidence

There are two kinds of Internal evidence to which proponents of the Metaphorical Gospel Theory might appeal: Direct statements and Indirect statements.

#### Direct Statements: *None*

The evidence that would help the case of the MG Theory immeasurably would be several direct statements which comment on how the accounts and claims about Jesus are to be understood, and which say clearly and unambiguously that they are *not* to be understood factually, but metaphorically. Surely, it was within the abilities of the writers to do this.

Yet, as far as I can tell, the MG scholars do not point to even a single such statement. In fact, I can't find any, either.

#### Indirect Evidence

The most prominent "indirect evidence" arguments I've seen are the following:

Appeal to Authority says:

1. Historical Criticism has already proven the MG theory
2. Therefore, it's true, and I don't need to provide specific proof

The Argument from Alleged Contradictions says:

1. The type of differences you find in the gospel accounts amount to actual contradictions. They are mutually exclusive.
2. Therefore the authors must have intended the accounts to be taken spiritually.

The Argument from Theory Intersection says:

1. If the MG theory is true, then you would find such-and-such in the New Testament (which also happen to apply to its opposing view).
2. You do find such-and-such in the New Testament,
3. Therefore the MG theory is true.

The Argument from the Spiritual Body Resurrection says that Jesus' resurrection was a spiritual one, not a bodily one, for these reasons

1. "Flesh and blood" will not inherit the kingdom of God
2. Jesus' appearance to Paul was a spiritual one, and Paul experience Jesus just like the disciples did
3. Paul says that our resurrection will be spiritual, not physical; Jesus' resurrection was like ours will be
4. Paul would have mentioned the empty tomb if the tomb had been empty; he doesn't mention it

All four of these approaches depend upon a fairly complex reasoning process. After more careful examination, there is good reason to think that they are all based upon definable logical fallacies.

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## External Evidence

The witnesses who are in the *best position* to know the truth of the matter are the Apostolic Fathers: Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna. They were actually part of the audience which the MG theory claims understood the stories and claims about Jesus metaphorically, not factually. What do they say about this? Do they make any direct statements confirming the theory? Do they make any indirect statements which make better sense under the theory, or only make sense if the theory is true? In a word, NO.

### Direct Evidence - None

There's not a single statement in their published writings that unambiguously confirms that the MG Theory is true.

### Indirect Evidence - None

I know of no appeal to indirect external evidence, either.

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I will next examine each of the four appeals to Indirect Evidence

# Appeal to Authority

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: January 4, 2002

The proponents of the MG Theory are not typically concerned primarily with *establishing* it on rigorous terms, they are concerned with enlightening the public regarding the results of work already done. In short, they believe, in a very general way, that Historical Criticism has already provided the foundation necessary to move forward. And, as I try to briefly describe below, it is this mantra - "Historical Criticism" - that is invoked as the warrant for the entire theory.

## Historical Criticism

Yet the history of Historical Criticism has been anything but such a smooth path. This area has been, in fact, one of the most turbulent areas of study in the last century. It has been, and continues to be, highly charged with controversy.

In the earlier days of this discipline, one of the pioneers was Rudolph Bultmann. Bultmann was quite clear that he makes the foundational assumption, based on a prior philosophical commitment, that miracles *cannot* occur. He thus classifies such accounts as myth, and seeks to peel them away to find an existentialist core meaning of the gospels. This approach has been rightly criticized for circular reasoning. Bultmann ignored that which he didn't want to believe, looked for that which he wanted to find, and thus - not surprisingly - found it!

Now, it is clearly risky to deny the foundational premise of a system while keeping its conclusions. (This has been called the "castle in the sky" fallacy.) But scholars such as Borg, who seem to be much more lenient about extraordinary events such as healings, etc., continue to accept these *conclusions*, and even build their own cases on them.

To make matters worse, the scholars themselves speak with "many voices" about what's known for sure, what's in dispute, and what can't be known.

## Yin and Yang

Consider my own case. I am aware of the theologians and N.T. scholars, of the early twentieth century, both "liberal" and "conservative." I have known people who swore that the demythologizing programs of Form Criticism and Redaction Criticism were the last word in scholarship, that the "old views" had been simply proven to be false.

And now, Spong says that a better name for "liberal" would be "open" or "realist." Spong, Borg, and Crossan certainly come across as saying "This is the way it is. Period. Live with it." I will offer some quotes, below, which support this impression.

Yet, in earlier days, I was able to personally meet with and talk to F.F. Bruce (no mean scholar), Donald Guthrie (who's voluminous Introduction to the New Testament stands as a well-reasoned and -researched work). I also studied under, and worked with John Warwick Montgomery, who is not a New Testament scholar but is a world-class thinker who holds more earned degrees than I care to type. Now, *these* guys - along with books and articles by R.T. France, John A.T. Robinson (a famous liberal), Edwin Yamauchi, and many others - assured me that the results of this kind of scholarship were *flawed*, actually in many areas flat-out *wrong*.

And now, current scholars such as Mark Allan Powell (also quoted below), caution me that the MG scholars are *not* speaking from the "assured results of modern scholarship", that in many cases they do not represent the consensus of New Testament scholarship at all. And in some

cases (e.g. Spong's reliance upon Michael Goulder) they take up the banner of a fringe opinion.

## Appeal to Authority

Now, which is it?! I have to say, as an outsider, that this is a very peculiar state of affairs. The only conclusion I can reach is that if Historical Criticism does indeed prove the MG Theory is true, it itself stands in need of such proof. And when, for instance, I asked Dr. Borg for specific books to read that specifically prove the MG theory by appeal to internal and external evidence, he replied that he didn't know of any such books. In order to examine this such, then, I presumably need to read the entire corpus of works on Historical Criticism and pick out these arguments for myself.

Thus, this appears to me to be simply an Appeal to Authority - ironically, the very thing the MG scholars criticize their opponents for.

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## Historical Criticism

Bishop John Shelby Spong is clear in the introductions to his books that he is trying to present the results of rigorous scholarship to the public in an understandable way. Certainly, he thinks that current scholars are still adding to the compendium of knowledge, but he believes that modern scholars have laid the big issues to rest.

Marcus Borg explicitly attributes the analysis of the meaning of the first century texts to a disciple called "Historical Criticism." This is variously called "Higher Criticism" and several corresponding German names. He lists the components as:

- source criticism
- form criticism
- redaction criticism
- canonical criticism

Borg says:

By "historical approach", I mean all the methods that are relevant to discerning the ancient historical meanings of the biblical texts. The chief concern of the historical approach is the past-tense question, "What did this text mean in the ancient historical setting in which it was written?" (RBA p 37-38)

*What It Is* The historical approach includes the traditional methods of source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and canonical criticism. It also includes more recent interdisciplinary methods of historical study.

The focus of a historical approach is twofold: the *historical meaning* of a text in its *historical context*. (RBA p 39)

. . . historical criticism treats only the ancient meaning of the text. . . "What did this text mean in and for the ancient community that produced it?" (RBA p 40)

Critical thinking in the form of historical criticism sees the story of the virgin birth as a continuation of the theme of special births from the Hebrew Bible. It is aware that the story of the special star and the wisemen bringing gifts is not history but rather is almost certainly Matthew's literary creation based on Isaiah 60. It knows that Jesus was most likely born in Nazareth and not Bethlehem, and so forth. (RBA p 51)

This is why the MG scholars do not carefully present all the evidence for their view. They

believe it has already been established in another forum.

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## Modern New Testament Criticism and Seminaries

To put it mildly, the views taught in many (not all) seminaries are distinctly at odds with traditional Christianity, and have been for decades. In the sixties and seventies, many ministers wrestled with the tension between the simple faith of their parishioners and the more sophisticated views they themselves had come to hold as a result of their training. Even today, the results of commonly-accepted scholarship are presumably so obscure to the average "person in the pew" that Robert Funk organized the "Jesus Seminar" to bring such views to public attention.

### Borg - Taught in Seminaries

One who at first lost his faith, and then adapted, was Marcus Borg. He gives the best thumb-nail sketch of this seminary experience I know of.

"There [at seminary] I learned that the image of Jesus from my childhood -- the popular image of Jesus as the divine savior who knew himself to be the Son of God and who offered up his life for the sins of the world -- was not historically true. That, I learned, was not what the historical Jesus was like.

The basis for this mind-boggling realization was the understanding of the gospels that has developed over the last two hundred years of biblical scholarship. I learned that the gospels are neither divine documents nor straightforward historical records. . . . Nor are they eyewitness accounts written by people who had accompanied Jesus and simply sought to report what they had seen and heard.

Rather, I learned, the gospels represent the developing traditions of the early Christian movement. Written in the last third of the first century, they contain the accumulated traditions of early Christian communities and were put into their present forms by second- (or even third-) generation authors. Through careful comparative study of the gospels, one can see these authors at work, modifying and adding to the traditions they received. ...

It is not so much that memories grew dim, or that the oral tradition was unreliable. Rather, two primary factors were at work. First, the traditions about Jesus were adapted and applied to the changing circumstances of the early Christian movement. Jesus himself spoke in a Palestinian Jewish milieu. The gospels were written in and for communities that had begun to move beyond Palestine and into the larger Mediterranean world, and the gospel writers adapted the materials about Jesus to these new settings. Second, the movement's beliefs about Jesus *grew* during those decades. We can see that growth by arranging the gospel material chronologically, from earlier to later writings.. . .

The gospels are the products of communities experiencing these developments. As such, they contain not only the movement's memories of the historical Jesus, but those memories added to and modified by the growing beliefs and changing circumstances of the movement. Thus the gospels are the church's memories of the historical Jesus transformed by the community's experience and reflection in the decades after Easter. They therefore tell us what these early Christian communities had come to believe about Jesus by the last third of the first century. They are not, first and foremost, reports of the ministry itself.

This understanding of the gospels is the basis for the well-known scholarly

distinction between *the Jesus of history* and *the Christ of faith* . . . namely, what Jesus became in the faith of the early Christian communities in the decades after his death." (Borg, Meeting J, p8-10)

Borg, as a first-year seminarian, was authoritatively told that after two hundred years of rigorous scholarship, certain things had been firmly established:

- The "popular image" of Jesus as the Son of God who died for the sins of the world is not historically true.
- The gospels are not eyewitness accounts or straightforward stories of what happened.
- They were written in their final form 70-100 AD, after many modifications and developments.
- The stories were adapted and applied to changing circumstances and reveal that a growth of belief took place over a period of time.
- And so, the gospels tell us what early Christians "believed" (in some sense) about Jesus, but are not, for the most part, reports of what happened.
- Finally, the "Jesus of History" was the man Jesus, and the "Christ of Faith" as what the early Christians "believed" about him, and they are not the same. (Borg, Meeting J, p8-10)

As Marcus Borg has so clearly described, these seminary students are told that Jesus simply never claimed to be more than a mere man, that many of the gospel stories simply never happened, that many of Jesus' sayings were never said by him, and that his body certainly never came back to life on Easter.

### **Powell: Thinking, Not Propaganda**

Dr. Mark Allan Powell, Professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus Ohio and currently head of the Historical Jesus section of the Society of Biblical Literature, sent me this response to the above in an attempt to round out the picture. He stresses that the proper role of the teacher at seminary is not to indoctrinate but to introduce ideas for critical review.

Regarding Borg's four points:

1. Jesus simply never claimed to be more than a mere man
2. many of the Gospel stories simply never happened
3. many of Jesus' sayings were never said by him
4. his body certainly never came back to life on Easter

he says:

"I want to add some important caveats about seminary education, however, and I hope that I do not come off as too defensive in doing so (being a seminary professor myself). The theological professors who I know do not present these points as "assured results" or even as "commonly accepted scholarship." Any professor who did so (and, unfortunately, there probably are some who do) would be regarded as irresponsible by his or her peers. The issue, rather, is to present such points as "matters of debate," and to challenge students to engage in theological discourse regarding them.

Two examples: 1) I do not personally agree with any of the four points, but I regularly present all four of them to my students as views that are held by some highly respected scholars (like Borg) who also identify themselves as Christians. I want my students to consider whether such views could possibly be correct, and how it is that a professing Christian can hold them. 2) Marcus Borg holds all four views to be correct and I'm sure he argues for them, but I know for a fact that he also tells his students that there are highly respected scholars who disagree with him (in fact, he uses one of my books as a required text, just as I use one of his).



The point in every case is for people in an academic program to engage a diversity of opinion and to formulate responses to it.

There is, of course, a world of difference between a professor requiring students to *understand* a particular argument and requiring students to *agree* with that position. To my thinking, it is completely appropriate for a professor to expect theology students to be able to articulate why some prominent theologians believe such things as the items on Borg's list. It would be irresponsible for the professor to require students to subscribe to those views, or to fail to inform the students of arguments that have been raised contrary to the position the professor favors.

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## The Roots of Historical Criticism

Dr. Powell also provided a nice synopsis of the Bultmannian roots of modern-day criticism. (I divided his statements up into smaller paragraphs.) He says:

"Mythology: Rudolf Bultmann proposed in the 1940's that the New Testament Gospels sometimes make use of "mythological language." His views remain controversial but many modern scholars accept the basic premise--the real debate (again) concerns when and where such language is used.

I find it helpful to note that Christians still use what Bultmann called "mythological language" today. For instance, when Christians confess in the Apostles Creed that Christ is "seated at the right hand of the Father"--or when an evangelical Christian says "Jesus lives in my heart." They are using language that is not literally accurate from a scientific perspective ("mythological" is not so much the opposite of "literal" as it is the opposite of "scientific"). If astronauts go into space they will not find Jesus sitting there, or if a doctor cuts open a heart, she will not find a little Jesus inside of it.

But what language in the NT is mythological? Bultmann thought that pretty much *everything* that defies scientific explanation (including all of the miracles and the resurrection of Jesus) should be classed as "mythological." By calling such material "mythological," furthermore, he meant to infer that the events did not actually happen in history (thus, "mythological" also becomes the opposite of "historical").

Today, most scholars would grant that certain stories in the New Testament may be mythological--the prime example is the temptation of Jesus by Satan recorded in Matthew 4:1-11. If someone had been there with a camcorder, what would they have been able to capture on film? Many--not all--scholars assume that the events reported in Matthew 4:1-11 took place in Jesus' mind, such that a camcorder would only show Jesus meditating and praying--the story of Jesus conversing with the devil and the two of them traveling to the pinnacle of the temple, etc. offers a "mythological description" of Jesus' internal struggle with tempting thoughts. Of course, not everyone agrees. But be that as it may, most scholars would be reticent to describe the miracle accounts as "myths"--even scholars who think the miracles did not actually occur.

The stories could be exaggerations or outright falsehoods, but (unlike the temptation account) the miracles are reported in the same style and with the same language as other historical events. It seems obvious to most scholars (contra Bultmann) that the biblical writers were not simply trying to convey "existential truths" (Bultmann's favorite term) but wanted us to believe that these events literally happened."

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## Conclusion

It appears from the above that there is not really a rock-solid consensus about the proper results of Historical Criticism. What one person considers settled, another considers up in the air, and another considers to already be an outmoded view.

It is clear to me that a simple appeal to "Historical Criticism" does not magically sweep the issue away. We need to see the *reasons* why we should believe the MG Theory. We should not simply be subjected to this Appeal to Authority.

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## Argument from Alleged Contradictions

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: December 31, 2001

Both Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan appeal to the argument that the New Testament is so full of contradictions that it cannot be relied upon to give accurate information about the life and sayings of Jesus. Then take this a step farther to conclude that the gospel writers intended to portray their material as metaphorically true, rather than as factual accounts.

Many people have listed alleged contradictions, ranging from God changing his mind to discrepancies between gospel accounts. Several of these are trivially easy to reconcile. Others require a careful look at context and grammar. Rather than try to examine every possible charge of contradiction, I think the best course to take is to find a really good example and evaluate it carefully.

Dr. Crossan, in his first offering for the Jesus 2000 email debate, presents just such an example to press home his views. He is no run-of-the-mill writer, and the J2000 forum was no trivial event. He is considered a world-class scholar, presenting his ideas to serious readers. I therefore assume he intentionally picked this example as the best illustration he could find. If he knew of better examples he surely would have used them. The techniques used in analyzing this example can be used with any other alleged contradictions that are introduced.

Here is the essential contention, in his words:

"We call it the Agony in the Garden but there is no Garden in Mark and no Agony in John. In Mark it is Jesus who is prostrate on the ground (14:33-35), who asks if the cup of suffering could be avoided although he is willing to accept it if necessary (14:35-37), and who watches his disciples abandon him and flee (14:50-52). In John it is the full 600 soldiers of Jerusalem's auxiliary cohort who are prostrate on the ground (18:4-6), while Jesus asserts his unqualified intention of accepting the cup of suffering (18:10-11), and then commands the cohort to let his disciples go (18:7-9). Two radically different interpretations of the same event. As history, they cannot both be true, even if we were ever able to tell which, if either, actually happened. But as gospel they are both true.

Mark describes the Son of God almost out of control, arrested in agony, fear, and abandonment. John describes the Son of God in total control, arrested in foreknowledge, triumph, and command. Each interpretation spoke directly to and from the experience of the writers' communities but different experiences begot different theologies of the passion's inception."

". . . Four should be enough to get the point since, at least in Indo-European tradition, a triple repetition is usually considered adequate to establish pattern. Those four are our mistress models, our master examples." (email debate)

There are two things that concern me about this example. The first is that there are serious conceptual problems with the reasoning that is presented. The second is that he employs a well-worn fallacy to allege contradiction in the accounts. I want to address the conceptual problems first. (I will give Crossan's fuller quote, and the gospel texts, as we address the charge of contradiction.)

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## Overall Analysis of Crossan's Argument

Let's take a look now at Crossan's total argument. He claims that the differences in the accounts constitute a contradiction. "Two radically different interpretations of the same event. As history, they cannot both be true, even if we were ever able to tell which, if either, actually happened."

He also claims that the writers intended these (false) accounts to be construed metaphorically. "But as gospel they are both true." "Four should be enough to get the point since, at least in Indo-European tradition, a triple repetition is usually considered adequate to establish pattern. Those four are our mistress models, our master examples."

This breaks out into three separate statements (which I will list in a short-hand way) which are extremely interesting:

1. If Argument from Silence holds, then contradiction
2. If contradiction, then both false
3. If both false, then intended metaphorically

I came to a realization as I studied these arguments. Not only are the arguments invalid, the premises are - each of them - actually *irrelevant* to their conclusions! Nothing could be more amazing. I'll take them one by one.

### Argument from Silence -> Contradiction

We will see below that the Argument from Silence is in fact a commonly recognized fallacy. In order to be truly mutually exclusive, two accounts must either (a) have statements which directly contradict each other, and/or (b) be impossible to harmonize in a valid, consistent proposition. Omissions cannot of themselves constitute a contradiction. Some *other* factors must be used to determine this. We will say much more about this, below. Since these factors, not the Argument from Silence, are used to decide contradiction, the Argument from Silence is actually irrelevant to the conclusion.

### Contradiction -> Both False

Crossan needs this premise. If either Mark or John are *true*, his argument is seriously impaired, if not ruined. (He formally acknowledges the possibility that one or the other *might* be true, and then proceeds as if both are false.)

Let's say that accounts B and C do, in fact, contradict each other. Of course, if the contradiction is a formal logical contradiction (A and  $\sim A$ ), one side must be false and the other true. In this case, they could *never* both be false.

But this isn't the kind of contradiction that is being asserted. Crossan's charge is of mutual

exclusion. Let's say that he has found two mutually exclusive accounts, not of formal contradiction. The only way we can tell from the fact of mutual exclusion that one of the accounts is false is if we already know that the other is *true*. Otherwise, we need further evidence to tell us whether each side is true or false.

If we had *this* information, we could have simply applied it to the accounts without regard for this alleged contradiction, and come up with the same answer. It is this *further evidence* (whatever that may be) that actually decides whether either account is false - not the fact that they are contradictory. The knowledge that there is a contradiction is actually irrelevant to the conclusion.

### **Both False -> Intended Metaphorically**

Let's say that accounts B and C are contradictory, and we have proven that both are *false*. Let's say, further, that Crossan has proven all four gospels to be contradictory and false. Does it follow that the Metaphorical Gospel Theory is true?

You may remember that there are several possible Options when evaluating the New Testament accounts:

Option 1. The NT writers believed that these stories and claims were factually (as well as spiritually) true, and they were correct.

Option 2. The NT writers believed that these stories and claims were factually true (the "creative" changes having occurred earlier in the process), portrayed them as such, but were mistaken.

Option 3. The NT writers knew that these stories and claims were not factually true (they believed them to be either metaphorically true or simply false), but portrayed them as factually true in order to engender faith in their audience. Their original readers, by and large, (mistakenly) accepted the stories as factually true.

Option 4. The NT writers believed that these stories and claims were metaphorically, not factually true, and portrayed them as such. Their original audience on the whole understood that they were metaphorically, not factually, true. Later generations came to interpret these literally.

Option 5. The NT writers and their audience simply were not able to make the distinction between "metaphorically" true and "factually" true.

To show that Option 1 is false is only to remove one possibility. Let's say that we also reject Options 5 and 6, just because they are implausible. This leaves us with Option 4 (the MG theory), and Options 2 and 3.

We are still left with the problem of how to decide between these three possibilities. Options 2 and 3, no less than Option 1, say that the writers intended their material to be construed factually. Option 4 says that the writers intended their material to be construed metaphorically. How can we arbitrate between these two claims? Certainly not because we know the accounts to be false! These are all consistent with false accounts. That has *no bearing* on this decision at all! We must bring in further evidence to establish the intention of the writers. And if we had *that* evidence we could have invoked it already. To know that the accounts are false is, again, irrelevant to the total conclusion.

### **Conclusion**

Dr. Crossan presents three inferences that are invalid. What is more surprising is that each inference is irrelevant.

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## Contradictions

Before we look at our example, we should take a moment to talk about what a contradiction is, and how to tell whether two accounts of an event are, in fact, contradictory.

When it comes to contradictions, intuitions often differ. Two people can look at a set of statements: to one they will seem contradictory, to the other they will seem to be in harmony. Therefore, rather than try to appeal to such general intuitions, it is better to clearly understand what we mean by "contradiction." I'll try to describe what kinds of contradictions exist, what classes of differences are found, which differences do and do not entail contradiction, and what procedure can be used to evaluate alleged contradictions.

There are several kinds of conditions which are called contradictory.

### Logical Contradiction.

The strongest kind of contradiction is, of course, the logical contradiction between the statements  $A$  and  $\sim A$  ("not- $A$ ").  $A$  and  $\sim A$  cannot both be true at the same time. Indeed, one must always be true and the other false.

### Mutual Exclusion with Third Option

It may be the case that two statements cannot both be true at the same time in the same way, yet they *can* both be false, because there is a third alternative. For instance, the statement

(A) "Jesus said to bring a staff" and

(B) "Jesus said *not* to bring a staff" are mutually exclusive (assuming that they refer to the same Jesus, the same act of speaking, etc.),

yet there is a third possibility: perhaps

(C) Jesus didn't say anything about staffs at all.

In this case (if C is true, for instance), both of the statements can be false.

### Mutual Exclusion with Hidden Premise

Consider the statements:

(A) "At 2:00 today I was in Seattle"

(B) "At 2:01 today I was in Los Angeles"

These can't both be true because of a certain law of nature, namely that (barring a miracle) I couldn't possibly get from Seattle to Los Angeles in one minute. There is no formal logical contradiction, but they can't both be true given the implied third statement:

(C) "No one can travel from Seattle to Los Angeles in one minute"

which is, of course, derived from more general principles, namely those of physics.

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## Differences in Accounts

Quite obviously, having two accounts of an event that are identical in every respect is of no more value than having one account. If they are *exactly* the same, they are merely two copies of the same account. In order for a second account of an event to be of any value at all, it must differ from the first in *some* way.

According to lawyers, the very *best* kind of differences in the accounts, which would establish them as independent testimony, would be superficial differences which can be harmonized at a deeper level. The *worst* kind are (a) no difference at all, which shows collusion, and (b) accounts that are truly contradictory.

Having two truly contradictory accounts certainly does not mean that *both* should be thrown out. In fact, if the contradiction is a formal logical contradiction (as defined above), it means that *one* of the accounts *must* be true. This is rarely the case, however - usually the alleged contradictions are of the "mutual exclusion" variety. In such cases, as I mentioned early, other evidence must be brought to bear in determining which one, if either, to accept, and it is this other evidence which individually determines the truth-value of each statement.

What kinds of differences can there be, and what is their value? There are three broad classes:

1. Two accounts asserting the same proposition, using different words
2. Two accounts asserting one or more contradictory propositions
3. One account asserting something which is not asserted in the other account

It is clear that the first class of differences is excellent evidence of independent testimony, and never creates even the appearance of a contradiction. It is just as clear that the second class does create not only the appearance, but the reality, of a contradiction. This is the kind of statement we should ideally present when charging that two accounts are contradictory.

### Argument from Silence

The third class is the interesting one. To charge that account A contradicts account B because B has a statement not found in A is called the "Argument from Silence", one of the age-old logical fallacies. Let's take an example to make this clearer:

(A) John was really nervous on they way to the playoff basketball game yesterday. We got there early so we could get some shooting in. Once the game got under way, though, he warmed up and eventually scored 24 points. He said he felt confident as soon as his first shot went in.

(B) John scored 24 points in the basketball game yesterday. He was pumped. I've never seen him so confident.

Now, are these contradictory? Certainly not. The first merely adds information about what happened before the game.

Why does "silence", or omission, ever appear in accounts? "Silence" will exist simply because *any* account of event is, by necessity, a partial, selective account. To give an exhaustive account of any non-trivial event is simply impossible. Any writer must select, both consciously and unconsciously, the "slices" of reality which he wishes to present. Does this inevitable selection mean that the account is subjective, that is, renders a false account? Certainly not. Does it mean that two independent writers will typically select somewhat different material to present? Of course.

There are two reasons why the "Argument from Silence" is such a fallacy. First, "silence" is an inevitable, and desirable, feature of independent testimony.

The second is that the Argument from Silence assumes, merely from the fact that a writer failed to mention X, that the writer *disagrees* with X. It is as if the writer - by silence - asserted that the X was false.

This is, however, only one of four possibilities:

- (a) the writer didn't know about X
- (b) the writer knew about X but simply didn't think to put X in
- (c) the writer thought about X and decided it did not suit his/her purposes
- (d) the writer disagreed with X

### **Argument from Silence with Literary Dependence**

The Argument from Silence is so *obviously* a fallacy that it's amazing people continue to commit it. This makes one wonder, is there some extenuating situation which makes it a more plausible inference?

Let's suppose that the writer of account B had read account A, and then - with the first account in front of him/her - *intentionally* left some parts out - either phrases or entire passages (so, this eliminates 'a' and 'b', leaving 'c' and 'd'). And perhaps we think that this indicates writer B not only did some editorial work, but actively *disagreed* with the deleted portions (leaving us with 'd').

This is the assumption many New Testament scholars seem to make when dealing with the gospels, especially the Synoptics. They assume that the gospel writers had other gospels in front of them as they wrote, and that they intentionally made "corrections" based upon their own views. Therefore, any omissions are thought of as *disagreements* - and therefore they amount to contradictions.

But, isn't it possible that the author decided ('c') that X did not suit his/her purposes? It would be a strange requirement that each gospel must incorporate *every statement* found in its predecessors.

I know of a contemporary example which illustrates why the Argument from Silence is unreliable, even when dealing with literary dependency. Elton John re-wrote "Candle in the Wind" (originally written about Marilyn Monroe) for Princess Diana's funeral. The original had a phrase "the press still hounded you", which obviously applied to Diana's situation even more than Marilyn's. It would have been entirely natural to have left that phrase in. However, it was replaced. I suppose that the reason it was omitted was that it was not fitting for a eulogy-centered song - it was not right for the funeral.

Using the Argument from Silence, even with direct Literary Dependence, one could plausibly conclude that a contradiction existed: that Elton John *took out* the phrase "the press still hounded you", therefore he disagreed with it. Nothing could be further from the truth.

### **Argument from Apparent Contraries**

There is an entirely different fallacy which is sometimes committed when alleging contradiction, which I call the "Argument from Apparent Contraries."

Sometimes one account will assert a quality X of someone, and another assert the quality Y. These two qualities are thought of as being opposites, yet they are not *exact* opposites. I can best illustrate this with another contemporary example.

Michael Jordan, in the NBA playoff finals, had a bad case of the flu during one game. I remember watching the game on TV. The camera frequently zoomed in on him, sitting on the bench with his head in his hands, or bent over double during free throws, obviously in agony. The announcers continually wondered how long he would last, and speculated about how the opposing team might best capitalize on this weakness. As the game was coming to an end, Jordan had scored over 30 points, and the announcers were commenting on his "domination" of the game - he was in total control. It was truly a heroic effort as he led the Bulls to victory.

On the one hand (X), he was truly described as "sick", "wobbly", "in agony." On the other (Y), he simultaneously "dominated" the game, was "in total control." X and Y, while being generally opposites, are not true contradictories, because they do not refer to the same attribute. In this case, X is the description of one's bodily condition and perception of pain; Y is the description of one's effectiveness in pursuing a goal.

It is easy to see how one account might concentrate on X and another account concentrate on Y, and yet these accounts would not be contradictory in the least.

### **Evaluating Alleged Contradictions**

Let us return to an example used previously. Let's say we have the following two accounts.

(B) John scored 24 points in the basketball game yesterday. He was pumped. I've never seen him so confident.

(C) I drove John to the game yesterday. He was a nervous wreck. I've never seen him so nervous.

First, I would probably agree that being "a nervous wreck" and being "confident" are descriptions of the same attribute, the first being merely a deficiency of confidence. Therefore, a true contradiction seems to be asserted.

[Now, let's say that we *don't* know the full description, which is the following:

(A) John was really nervous on the way to the playoff basketball game yesterday. We got there early so we could get some shooting in. Once the game got under way, he warmed up and eventually scored 24 points. He said he felt confident as soon as his first shot went in.

The *truth* is that John was originally nervous, yet overcame that nervousness and became confident.]

As we examine B and C, we notice that C is talking about the drive to the game, and B is talking about the game itself. Isn't it possible that John was first nervous, and then became confident? Especially in light of the fact that athletes do often develop confidence as the game progresses, this is entirely plausible. And so we construct the resolution:

(A') John was a nervous wreck while driving to the game, but scored 24 points during the game and became extremely confident.

And, in this example, A' squares perfectly with the truth of the matter, A. At first, the two accounts B and C appeared to be contradictory, but we were able to resolve them by paying attention to exactly what was, and was not, said.

### **Definition of Contradictory Accounts**

This leads us to an important principle. Let's say we have two statements, B and C.



1. If B and C contain only statements that assert the same propositions using different words, they are not contradictory.
2. If B and C contain statements that assert propositions which are *direct contradictions*, they are contradictory.
3. If B contains assertions not found in C, or vice versa, the following rule should be used:

***If a valid, consistent statement A' cannot be constructed which includes every proposition in B and C, the two accounts are contradictory, in the sense of "mutual exclusion." If such a valid statement A' can be formed, these accounts are not contradictory.***

Such a statement is typically a superset of B and C, together perhaps with other statements not found either in B or C. Note that this does not prove that B or C are true, or that the superset A' is true. It only shows that B and C do not contradict each other.

Notice that A' must not only be consistent, but must also be a valid statement. I take this to mean that it represents a possible state of affairs in this world. A' serves as a guide, a hypothetical solution, when searching for evidence to verify/falsify B and C.

I realize that what constitutes a "possible state of affairs" may become a bit difficult to determine.. It should be more restrictive than "anything which is logically possible", even more restrictive than "anything which is 'factually' possible." There should be at least some plausibility to A'. The degree of plausibility may be linked to the "purity" of the superset A': the more additional statements that must be added to A' to harmonize B and C, the less pure the superset, and the less plausible is A'.

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## Crossan's Example

Let us turn to our example. I'll start just by giving you Dr. Crossan's statements. I have highlighted, in bold, the statements that specifically pertain to our alleged contradiction, but include the rest for context. (I leave out a discussion of the crucifixion account, because this discussion is already long enough, but my argument concerning the crucifixion accounts would be similar).

... Lest this discussion is too abstract, I give you concrete examples of what I have in mind by comparing the start and end of the passion narratives in Mark and John. Watch as each author goes back to the same moment in time and place and has the Jesus-of-then speak very differently as the Jesus-of-now.

**We call it the Agony in the Garden but there is no Garden in Mark and no Agony in John. In Mark it is Jesus who is prostrate on the ground (14:33-35), who asks if the cup of suffering could be avoided although he is willing to accept it if necessary (14:35-37), and who watches his disciples abandon him and flee (14:50-52). In John it is the full 600 soldiers of Jerusalem's auxiliary cohort who are prostrate on the ground (18:4-6), while Jesus asserts his unqualified intention of accepting the cup of suffering (18:10-11), and then commands the cohort to let his disciples go (18:7-9). Two radically different interpretations of the same event. As history, they cannot both be true, even if we were ever able to tell which, if either, actually happened. But as gospel they are both true.**

**Mark describes the Son of God almost out of control, arrested in agony, fear,**

**and abandonment. John describes the Son of God in total control, arrested in foreknowledge, triumph, and command. Each interpretation spoke directly to and from the experience of the writers' communities but different experiences begot different theologies of the passion's inception.**

If we turn to the ending of the passion in Mark and John we find exactly the same process. The moment is the same in each, the last words of Jesus on the cross just before his death. In Mark 15:34-37 Jesus cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The bystanders mistake Jesus' last words by taking "My God" or "Eloi" for "Elijah" and derisively attempt to keep him alive for a few extra minutes to see if the prophet comes to his aid. The drink is their own mocking idea. In John 19:28-30, of course, there is no cry of desolation and no mockery, and the drink is Jesus' idea and brought at his command. For Mark, the passion of Jesus starts and ends in agony and desolation. For John, the passion of Jesus starts and ends in control and command. But I repeat, as gospel, both are equally but divergently true. Both speak, equally but divergently, to different times and places, situations and communities. Mark's Jesus speaks to a persecuted community and shows them how to die. John's Jesus speaks to a defeated community and shows them how to live.

My main point, however, is to note how each evangelist goes back to moments in the life of the historical Jesus, be it arrest or death, and builds a dialectical process of past/present and then/now in which those twin elements interpenetrate and interweave totally together. Those are but focal instances of how the Catholic Christian gospels consistently work and my counter challenge to Luke Johnson postulates that dialectic as normative for Catholic Christianity past, present, and future. Jesus-past acts and speaks as Jesus-present; Jesus-then acts and speaks as Jesus-now. And that is how he is Christ and Lord. We are asked, by the New Testament, to watch that process occur four times. **Four should be enough to get the point since, at least in Indo-European tradition, a triple repetition is usually considered adequate to establish pattern. Those four are our mistress models, our master examples.** Catholic Christian faith IS that dialectic itself, modeled in our canon, repeated again and again in our tradition, and proposed anew today wherever faith is dynamically alive. (Crossan, First email, J2000 debate)

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## The Gospel Accounts themselves (NIV)

If we are going to evaluate these two accounts, we should be able to see the gospel texts for ourselves. Here it is:

### Mark (14:26-42)

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." "I tell you the truth", Jesus answered, "today - yes, tonight - before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times." But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

### Jesus Prays at Gethsemane

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and began to be

deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

### **The Arrest**

Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, and teachers of the law, and the elders.

Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. The men seized Jesus and arrested him. Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Everyday I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled." Then everyone deserted him and fled.

A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.

### **John (18:1-11)**

When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was an olive grove, and he and his disciples went into it.

### **The Arrest**

Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. So Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons.

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.

Again he asked them, "Who is it you want?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." "I told you that I am he," Jesus answered. "If you are looking for me, then let these men go." This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have

not lost one of those you gave me."

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.)

Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"

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## Analysis of Crossan's Example

First, Crossan's claim is explicitly that these two accounts contradict each other in the sense of 'mutual exclusion' - "Two radically different interpretations of the same event. As history, *they cannot both be true*, even if we were ever able to tell which, if either, actually happened."

The overall contradiction is the following:

Mark describes the Son of God almost out of control, arrested in agony, fear, and abandonment.

John describes the Son of God in total control, arrested in foreknowledge, triumph, and command.

This conclusion is due to three pairs of contradictions in the accounts:

1. Mark - Jesus prostrate on the ground; John - soldiers prostrate on the ground
2. Mark - asks to avoid cup of suffering, but willing to accept it; John - unqualified intention of accepting the cup of suffering
3. Mark - watches his disciples abandon him and flee; John - commands cohort to let disciples go

We should begin by trying to find specific individual statements in the two accounts that are contradictory. Surprisingly, *there are none*. The three examples to which Crossan appeals are all Arguments from Silence: account A makes a statement that account B omits. Notice this:

1. Mark never says that the soldiers *didn't* fall down. John never says that Jesus *didn't* fall down to pray.
2. Both Mark and John actually *agree* that Jesus fully resolves to accept the cup of suffering. Since John omits the entire story of Jesus praying, he naturally doesn't cover the internal struggle that took place there.
3. Both Mark and John *agree* that Jesus' disciples fled. Mark never says that Jesus' *didn't* request that his disciples be spared.

In order to see what's at the heart of Crossan's argument, we should notice the sleight-of-words that Crossan uses as a literary device when introducing the topic. Few people tend to keep the gospel accounts entirely separate in their minds; instead, they tend to think of them as four partial accounts of the same events. Crossan tries to create a wedge between the accounts by giving us a surprise. "We call it the Agony in the Garden but there is no Garden in Mark and no Agony in John." A clever technique, but without true weight.

The trick is, of course, to compare the combination of *two* accounts in Mark (Jesus Praying in Gethsemane, and the Arrest) with only *one* account in John (the Arrest). If you do this, you'll (naturally) find that John omits all the features found in the Gethsemane account. It will come as no surprise that John's account has no "agony", for "agony" only pertains to the Gethsemane account. Crossan does his best to get as much mileage as possible from this trick. In fact, two of the three "contradictions" depend upon it.

Is the fact that John omits the Gethsemane account a contradiction? Obviously not. According to the principles outlined above, it fails to meet any of the requirements for a contradiction. If it did constitute a contradiction, Crossan wouldn't need the individual examples to make his point. All he would have to do is to say that John's omission is a contradiction, and leave it at that. But it is *not* a contradiction - therefore, it's not logically valid to present isolated *portions* of it as contradictions, simply by virtue of the Argument from Silence.

### Constructing Account A'

According to our principle above, if a valid, consistent account A' can be constructed which includes every proposition found in Mark and John, the two accounts are not contradictory. Here is the outline of such an account.

#### Gethsemane account

1. Jesus takes his disciples to Gethsemane, which is, or contains, an olive grove, and is located near the Kidron Valley, on or near the Mount of Olives.
2. He prays three times while his disciples sleep. In agony he asks that God take "this cup" from him, and concludes by fully accepting the "cup."
3. He goes forth, fully knowing that he will be betrayed, arrested, and killed .

#### The Arrest

1. Judas knew that Jesus and the disciples often met at Gethsemane, and betrayed Jesus by bringing a crowd of soldiers and officials, sent by the Jewish leaders.
2. Jesus went out to meet them, knowing what would happen.
3. Judas pointed Jesus out by kissing him.
4. Jesus asks "Who is it you want?" They say "Jesus", he says "I am he", they draw back and at least some fall down (it's no more necessary to conclude that everyone fell down than it is to think they all shouted "Jesus of Nazareth" in unison).
5. Jesus says "If you are looking for me, then let these men go."
6. Peter cuts off the right ear of the high priest's servant (Malchus). Jesus tells Peter to put his sword away, and "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"
7. Jesus then asks why they've come with swords and clubs to capture him, as if he were leading a rebellion - after all, he'd been available every day in public places.
8. The disciples flee. A young man runs right out of his clothes.

There is nothing implausible at all about this account. There is no contradiction.

*[Oddly enough, Crossan misses his best chance at a genuine contradiction. In one account, Jesus is identified by Judas' kiss; in the other, he proactively identifies himself. If, in John's account, the dialog had been prompted by the soldiers ("Ok, which one is Jesus?"), we would have had an interesting situation. As it is, Jesus himself initiates the dialog in John, and it is perfectly conceivable that he should say "Who is it you want?" after Judas has secretly pointed him out.]*

### Revisiting the Alleged Contradictions

With these in mind, let's look at the three alleged contradictions again.

1. **Mark - Jesus prostrate on the ground; John - soldiers prostrate on the ground.** There is nothing connecting these ideas except a clever play on words. The "prostration" appears in accounts of two entirely separate events. Since John doesn't talk at all about Jesus Praying in Gethsemane, it is not surprising that he doesn't have Jesus on the ground. It would, rather, have been a potential contradiction had Jesus been speaking from a reclining position during the Arrest account.

2. **Mark - asks to avoid cup of suffering, but willing to accept it; John - unqualified intention of accepting the cup of suffering.** Once again, John doesn't mention Jesus Praying in Gethsemane, so it is not surprising that the internal struggle occurring there is not mentioned. When the accounts deal with the *same event* - namely, the Arrest - Jesus faces his fate with the same resolve. In Mark's account he uses different words, but words which imply the same acceptance, "the Scriptures must be fulfilled."
3. **Mark - watches his disciples abandon him and flee; John - commands cohort to let disciples go.** This is the only alleged contradiction which is centered around the same event, the Arrest. Yet it is still an Argument from Silence. Jesus, of course, watches his disciples abandon him and flee in both accounts. In John, he requests that the cohort let the disciples go; in Mark, he confronts them with the criticism "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?" In Mark, his position as the one "in command" is equal to that in John.

To summarize, Crossan's argument is that these three alleged contradictions lead to the conclusion that in Mark Jesus is in agony, out of control, and in John Jesus is in control, not in agony. However, since none of the three points are really contradictions, the conclusion is left without support.

## General Impression

We have spent a long time trying to closely analyze Crossan's contention. We have tried to explicitly define the notion of contradictory accounts and to specify what it takes to evaluate alleged contradictions. We have used these principles to evaluate the three alleged contradictions Crossan presents. But perhaps his point is somewhat different. Perhaps it is not simply the presence of three explicit contradictions that lead to his conclusion; perhaps it is simply the *general impression* given by Mark and John (which are illustrated by these three points) which constitutes the contradiction.

Mark describes the Son of God almost out of control, arrested in agony, fear, and abandonment.

John describes the Son of God in total control, arrested in foreknowledge, triumph, and command.

Is this a fair way to characterize the two accounts?

Agony. It is true that Mark's account contains more agony than John's. But that is because he includes Jesus' Prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane, where all the agony takes place. Perhaps this lends a general tone to Mark's account that is lacking in John's. This is freely granted. However, this is far from saying that the general impressions are *contradictory* - that they both can't possibly be true! I have already pointed out that it is unfair to expect John to describe Jesus' agony when he doesn't talk about the event in which the agony was displayed. I have pointed out, even so, that "agony" and "total control" are not contradictory: X is the description of one's bodily condition and perception of pain; Y is the description of one's effectiveness in pursuing a goal. (I mentioned above the illustration of Michael Jordan in the NBA championships, who combined agony and domination in real life.)

Abandonment. The disciples' abandonment in Mark is just as complete as in John. There is no problem.

Total Control, Triumph, and Command. It is a bit misleading to say that Jesus is in "total control" and "triumph" in John, for - after all - he is arrested, tortured, and killed. True, he is ultimately triumphant, but that is later in the resurrection - just as it is in Mark. Yet it is true that, in John's account, Jesus is in control. Let's be clear that his "control" consists of (a) his foreknowledge, and (b) his proactive willingness to embrace his fate.

Now, in Mark's account, does Jesus lack such foreknowledge and proactive willingness? - and therefore is out of control? No, both his foreknowledge and resolve are clearly portrayed in the very passage we studied:

He knows he will be arrested, and that he will rise.

"But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." "I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, "today - yes, tonight - before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."

"The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

He proactively accepts his task.

"Yet not what I will, but what you will."

"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Everyday I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled."

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## Conclusion

The force of Crossan's charge of contradiction is due more to his literary and imaginative talents than to valid argument. Where there *is* an argument, it relies heavily on the fact that John's gospel does not contain the narrative of Jesus praying at Gethsemane. If one admits that this omission does not amount to a contradiction, the argument falls apart.

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## Argument from Theory Intersection

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: January 4, 2002

Bishop Spong's latest book, *Liberating the Gospels*, is an attempt to support the Metaphorical Gospel theory by "seeing the gospels through Jewish eyes." He says, in essence, "Let's assume that the Metaphorical Gospel theory is indeed true. Let's read the gospels with 'midrashic' understanding, and see how they fit the theory." At one level, this is a perfectly acceptable preliminary attempt to show that the evidence is *consistent* with his theory. It is also one good way to falsify a theory - if the material understood this way *fails* to fit the theory, we are given reason to reject it.

Spong goes into elaborate detail - including interesting facts regarding the Jewish festival calendar, for instance - as he tries to construct a plausible case.

There is one thing wrong with this extended argument, understood as evidence for the Metaphorical Gospel theory. The particular examples he raises can only give a certain *prima facie* plausibility to his theory. They can never establish its *truth*. That is because he commits two fallacies - or, rather, he commits one fallacy, understood in two different ways.

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## Affirming the Consequent

Spong says, in essence, "If A is true, then B is true. Well, look - B is true. Therefore I conclude A is true." In logic, this is called the fallacy of "affirming the consequent."

[C.S. Pierce developed a logical system around this, and called it "abduction" (as opposed to deduction and induction). In probabilistic terms, used carefully, this type of reasoning can indeed have some value. However, used as we see it here, it is simply a logical mistake.)

To demonstrate that this is indeed a fallacy, it is only necessary to present some examples.

1. If it is night, it will be dark in my room.
2. It is dark in my room.
3. Therefore, it is night.

... is invalid, because it might be day and my shades are drawn.

1. If the mailman comes, the dog will bark
2. The dog is barking
3. Therefore the mailman is here.

... is invalid, because the dog might be barking at something else.

1. If the gospels were intended metaphorically, we would find a lot of Old Testament themes
2. We do find a lot of Old Testament themes
3. Therefore, The gospels were intended metaphorically

... is invalid, because the Jesus might actually be the fulfillment of Old Testament themes.

This kind of argument is actually *backward* reasoning. From  $A \rightarrow B$ , it *does* logically follow that  $\sim B \rightarrow \sim A$  (if not-B, then not-A). But it does *not* logically follow that  $B \rightarrow A$ .

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## Arguing from Theory Intersection

Another way to describe Spong's basic logic is to say that he is arguing from "Theory Intersection." That is to say, he offers evidence which not only supports his own theory but also supports the *opposing* theory. It should be obvious that such evidence can never, *by definition*, show that his theory is right and the opposing theory is wrong!

Let's see what he does. The two basic points Bishop Spong makes are

1. The New Testament contains many themes which have Old Testament counterparts
2. At least three of the gospels seem to be ordered in a topical, rather than (strictly) chronological, arrangement, apparently suited for lectionary use.

### Usage of Old Testament Themes

I will include one short quote that conveys the general sense of his argument. Spong presents dozens, possibly hundreds, of such examples.

"Matthew certainly believed that he was portraying accurately, if not literally, the teachings of Jesus. However, it is very clear that the Sermon on the Mount was a Matthean creation and was patterned by Matthew on Psalm 119, the psalm of Pentecost. Psalm 119 also began with the word 'blessed.' 'Blessed are those whose



way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways' (Ps 119:1-3). The whole Sermon on the Mount was a midrashic attempt to reveal Jesus as the new Moses presiding at the new Sinai, the giver of the new law of the new covenant. This sermon gathered together what Matthew believed to be the teaching of Jesus and cast it into the appropriate mold of the Jewish liturgical celebration of Pentecost. It came at the exact spot in Matthew's gospel to fit the Pentecost celebration. It included the proper themes of Pentecost. It was modeled on the psalm of Pentecost. What more powerful proof could be provided that this gospel was written against the background of the liturgical calendar of the Jews?" (*Liberating the Gospels*, p 115)

## Topical Arrangement

Since the 1930's or so, New Testament scholars have commented on the similarities between Matthew's *form* (arrangement of material) and the Torah. Some scholars were convinced that Matthew represents an attempt to forge a "modern" Torah based on Christian themes. Spong tries to bring us up to date on this.

"B.W. Bacon recognized the uniqueness of these units and was aware of the long-acknowledged Jewishness of Matthew's gospel. He offered the suggestion that Matthew had deliberately punctuated his gospel with five blocks of teaching material in order to suggest that this book was to be a kind of christian Torah." (*Liberating the Gospels*, p 89)

"It was Michael Goulder, a student of Austin Farrer, who broke the log jam by applying his mentor's insights to a different background. The five teaching blocks in Matthew were not related to the Torah, said Goulder, as attractive as that theory had once seemed. They were related rather, he argued, to the five great celebratory festivals in the Jewish liturgical year. Those festivals were Pentecost (Shavuot), New Year (Rosh Hashanah), Tabernacles (Sukkot), Dedication (Hanukkah), and Passover. . . . The Gospels were not, Goulder asserted, written as 'a literary genre' at all. 'A Gospel is a liturgical genre,' he asserted. The Gospels, at least the synoptics of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, were designed, he argued, to be lectionary books." (*Liberating the Gospels*, p 91)

According to Spong and Goulder, the Old Testament template for Matthew was not the Torah, but the Jewish festivals. I have no idea whether they are right or wrong - I will assume that they are correct. (It does not follow, however, that a 'liturgical' genre is not one kind of 'literary' genre, however).

Here are some passages from Spong which summarize what he's trying to say, to give you a feel for his point.

"The teaching units of Matthew fall at the five major festivals in the Jewish liturgical calendar. Matthew has front-end loaded Mark because Mark had not covered the first five and a half months of the liturgical calendar. Matthew has provided the exquisite fit of the Sermon on the Mount to cover the one major festival that did not get into Mark's truncated year, which only stretched backward from Passover to Rosh Hashanah, or New Year's.

The organizing principle of Matthew's gospel has been discovered. It was not the life of Jesus or some version of objective history. It was the Jewish liturgical calendar with its festival celebrations. . .

By discovering his organizing principle of the Jewish liturgical year, we are enabled to gaze through this Jewish lens at our Lord in a new way and to begin to see him in a new light." (*Liberating the Gospels*, p 117-118)

"The Gospel of Luke was written to illumine the Torah with occasional references to the prophets and the psalms, with a bow to the liturgical year of the Jews and with an attempt to harmonize the texts of Mark and Matthew. But above all, it was to illumine the Torah, to show Jesus as the fulfillment of all that Moses wrote. This was the work of a convert to Judaism. He did his work well, so well indeed that only eyes trained to see things from a Jewish perspective will be able to see the meaning of the gospel that bears the name of Luke." (*Liberating the Gospels*, p 164-5)

"To build this case, it is important first to cite the obvious. The Book of Acts is approximately the same length as Luke and Matthew. Since both of those books were designed to provide a lection per week, as well as to provide for readings to mark the festivals and fasts of the Jewish liturgical year, we can begin with the assumption that the length of the Book of Acts does not disqualify it for consideration as a proper lectionary book. The fact that it is divided into fifty-two lections in the early manuscripts further strengthens that claim. Fifty-two lections would provide a lection per Sabbath of the Jewish year, with enough flexibility to accommodate those added days when the Jewish calendar would be brought into harmony with the Julian calendar, and this enabled the Jewish calendar to remain relatively constant with the annual cycle of darkness and light." (*Liberating the Gospels*, p 173)

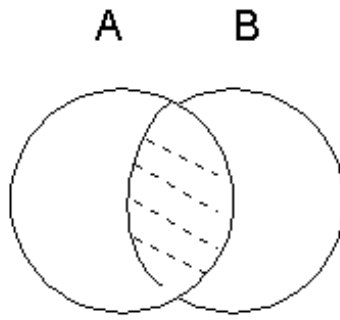
### **Theory Intersection**

[One component of his view is the literary dependence of the gospels upon each other. He follows Goulder, I believe, in affirming a straight succession of gospels - Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John - in which each gospel modifies its predecessor. This is not crucial to his argument, and requires an entire book to address. I will try to cover this topic when I write the article called "Structured Stories with Eyewitness Control."]

Now, Spong provides a real service in noting the extensive parallels between Old Testament and New Testament themes. However, every single bit of evidence he presents equally supports the "other side." "Historic Christians" have from the very beginning, in fact, appealed to this same evidence in supporting *their* case. I have many times listened to sermons which present Old Testament themes as "shadows of things to come", fulfilled by Jesus. I have often heard that Jesus fulfilled dozens of prophecies at his crucifixion; that Jesus is like Joshua in his victory, like Moses in his authority, like Jeremiah in his suffering, like Isaac in his sacrifice; that Jesus is the 'New Adam', John the Baptist is 'Elijah', and the disciples are like the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

What Spong does, of course, is to turn this argument upside-down. He says that this amazing correspondence is not proof that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament, but rather is the proof that the stories were simply "borrowed" from the Jewish scriptures and re-used for Christian story-telling.

Whether he's right or wrong, the *point is* that he is arguing from what I call "Theory Intersection." He is arguing, from the existence of evidence consistent with *both* theories, that *one* theory - namely, his - is true. To make this clear, consider this picture:



It is quite possible, and in fact is quite common, for two competing theories to have significantly large areas of evidence with which each is perfectly compatible. Otherwise, they would not both be tenable theories. I represent this by the shaded intersection of A and B.

The thing which distinguishes the *correct* theory from the incorrect is evidence which supports *it*, and does *not* support its competitor. When put this way, in the abstract, this is almost too obvious to mention. In order to prove that A fits the facts, I must come up with some facts which support A and not B. In order to prove that B fits the facts, I must come up with some facts which support B and not A. Therefore, to prove that one of two competing theories is true, I must concentrate not on the evidence supporting *both* theories (the shaded intersection) but on evidence *distinguishing* them.

There is, of course, *some* reason to spend a little time on the shaded area (Theory Intersection) described above. I can, for instance, profitably do this to "keep up" with my opposition. I can turn my opponent's argument against them and show that the evidence *also* supports my position. However, I can never use this technique to *surpass* my opposition - I can never show that their theory is wrong as long as I continue to argue from evidence that supports both sides.

### **The Arrangement of the Gospels**

Let's assume that Bishop Spong is correct in assessing the arrangement of the gospel material. Let's say that the gospel stories are indeed arranged in topical order, rather than chronological. What does this prove? Is this a big surprise to believers in "Historic" Christianity? Not at all.

For an example, consider *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, a collection of stories compiled about a hundred years after St. Francis' life. This book was written primarily to inspire rather than merely to document. It's hard to tell how much of the material is historically accurate, and many stories have a "legendary" flavor. It is chock full of miracles. And it is arranged in topical, rather than chronological, order. But this does not make us doubt that the writer *intended* his readers to construe these as factual accounts.

In the case of the gospels themselves, we have known since the days of Papias (early second century) that the accounts were not necessarily arranged in strict chronological order. (Of course, the *general* chronological order must be preserved to make sense - the birth before adulthood, trial before crucifixion, death before resurrection, etc. - but the individual accounts need not be.) Papias says,

Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered. It was not, however, in exact order that he related the sayings of deeds of Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied Him. But afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who accommodated his instructions to the necessities [of his hearers], but with no intention of giving a regular narrative of the Lord's sayings." (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Fragments of Papias, VI)

It therefore should have come as no surprise to the New Testament scholars who, as early as the 1920's, discovered that the stories existed as "pericopae", small units not necessarily

arranged chronologically. Now, does this mean that the stories are not relating facts? Not at all. It only means that they are somewhat topically arranged.

A second point that is often overlooked is the fact that the phrasing of the gospels does not always imply chronological succession. Many times a story is prefaced by "And another time Jesus . . .".

It turns out that a *topical* arrangement of the accounts fits the "non-Metaphorical Gospel" equally well. Therefore, Bishop Spong is appealing to the "shaded area" on our chart: Theory Intersection.

### **Not Theory Intersection?**

Yet Spong doesn't feel that this is a case of theory intersection. He tries to present an argument designed to convince us that the "factual" view (he calls it the "literal" view) is *inconsistent* with the evidence he's found. He says,

"Throughout the ages Christians, treating the Gospels as historical accounts, have drawn some rather interesting literal conclusions from these texts. They assumed, for example, that the public ministry of Jesus was but one year in duration because they did not recognize that the ordering principle of the synoptic Gospels was not the life of Jesus, but the liturgical year of the Jews, which covered that life on an annual cycle. They assumed that Jesus journeyed only once to Jerusalem, and that was for the climactic moments of his life. They assumed that the outline of Jesus' life was covered by the story of the Galilean phase, culminating in the journey and concluding in Jerusalem. It is of interest to note that John countered each of these assumptions in his gospel." (p 95-6)

Now, is this true? Have Christians predominantly understood from a "historical understanding" of the gospel accounts that Jesus' public ministry lasted just one year? It does not follow, from the proposition that the synoptics cover only a year of Jesus' ministry, that Jesus' ministry only *lasted* a year - any more than it follows, from the fact that Mark only describes Jesus' adult life, that he was never a child. If some people have made this mistake, it is not something that is entailed by a "historical" understanding of the gospel accounts. It is something that is caused by poor thinking.

But do people really make this inference in real life? I have, in my experience, never met such a person. I have met two kinds of "Historic Christians":

1. those who have never thought about how long the ministry was, and
2. those who are enough aware of John's gospel (which covers about three years of ministry, judging from the festivals Jesus attends) to realize that the synoptics either cover the last year or appear to combine three years into one because they omit references to the various festivals.

### **Conclusion**

Bishop Spong's book presents an extended "Argument from Theory Intersection." If you set aside the several comments expressing his personal views, the parallels between the Old Testament and New are still valid. In fact, ironically enough, this book could be repackaged as a compendium of proofs from fulfillment of Old Testament themes.

His case would have been helped considerably by presenting some *direct* internal evidence. He could have furthered his cause even more by presenting evidence that didn't equally apply to competing views.

# Spiritual Resurrection in Paul

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: January 2, 2002

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## "After the Flesh"

The first passage to consider is a meta-gospel statement Bishop Spong uses to support the Metaphorical Gospel theory. This passage is used to claim that Paul cared nothing about the historical Jesus and cared everything about the spiritual Christ of Faith. This interpretation has become one of the oldest fallacies in New Testament criticism. Paul says (in the King James translation)

**"Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh; yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more." (2 Cor 5:16-17, King James)**

Knowing Jesus "after the flesh" is taken to mean knowing about his earthly life, which is then to be contrasted with knowing him spiritually, in the present. To interpret the passage in this way is understandable in a casual reader, but it is inexcusable in a scholar.

First, it has been long known that Paul often uses the Greek word for "flesh" (*sarx*) to refer to something other than body parts. It typically refers to the "old nature", the tendency to sin. "After the flesh" can mean "accordingly to worldly views",

'Therefore from now we judge no one from an outward point of view.' (*Word* 135)

['according to the flesh'] - Now we do not know, we do not make judgments, according to merely human standards. (*Jerome* 281)

'Now' - that is, this side of, after Christ's resurrection - Paul no longer contents himself with that apprehension of Christ. Just as he no longer considers Christ as if he had not been raised from the dead, so also he now asserts that 'we can no longer consider anyone' simply from the flesh, with that phrase standing now for regarding people from all the misleading, inadequate ways that offer themselves and that Paul has been careful to reject in the previous paragraphs, from 4:7 forward. (*New*, 93)

And, rightly, the New International Version translates this 'from a worldly point of view.' Only a reader of the King James Bible (or a reader of the Greek who is unfamiliar with Paul's usage of the term) would even be *tempted* to think of this phrase as providing a contrast between the physical Jesus and a spirit being called "Christ." The NIV renders this passage:

**"So, from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer." (2 Cor 5:16-17, NIV)**

Note the *immediate context*. Notice that the first part of the sentence says that we know *no man* after the flesh. If Spong's interpretation is correct, then Paul is saying that we apply this historical/spiritual distinction to *everyone*, not just Jesus. We should care nothing about anyone's earthly ("fleshly") life, and only know them in their resurrection appearances. But this is absurd.

Note the *wider context*. What part does this sentence play in the overall argument? The whole

section (1 Cor 2:17-5:17) could easily be entitled "Be Reconciled to God", and contrasts the "old creation" (the worldly view, which is death) with the "new creation" (the spiritual view, which is life). One should be *forsaking* the "worldly" and embracing the "spiritual." Paul contrasts all of these things.

peddling the Word for profit	speaking with sincerity
letters written with ink	written by the Spirit on your hearts
written on tablets of stone	written on human hearts
the Old covenant (death)	transformed into his likeness (life)
the letter kills	the spirit gives life
preaching with deception	setting forth the truth plainly
in life, carrying body of death	reveal Jesus' life
hardships and suffering	heavenly dwelling

What is the pattern here? Toward the conclusion of this array of contrasts, Paul says that we are to forsake the "Worldly" side of things, and embrace "Life" as we are reconciled to God. Nothing could be plainer.

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## "Flesh and Blood"

Sometimes a second passage is claimed as support for the MG theory, to prove that Jesus' resurrection was not a bodily one.

**I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 15)**

This is a perfect example of blatant disregard for context. Only someone unfamiliar with Paul's *argument* could even for a minute believe that he is referring to the resurrection of a disembodied spirit. Paul is in the midst of explaining how the perishable body must be "sown", and will then be *changed*, into the imperishable body. The whole *point* is that the mortal body must undergo a transformation and be "clothed" with new attributes. "Flesh and blood" refers to mortal attributes, which must give way to immortal ones. There is no notion whatsoever of resurrection being the ascension of the disembodied spirit.

This is high irony indeed, for this passage has been wrested from the passage in which Paul most explicitly explains the factual resurrection of Jesus.

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## "Spiritual Body"

Mark Allan Powell sketches the case for the "Spiritual Body Resurrection", in behalf of (some) MG scholars. I will quote him fully here, and then summarize the points in the [Internal Evidence - Paul](#) chapter.

First, a DISCLAIMER. I do not personally subscribe to this view. I think the argument is wrong. I believe that Jesus did physically rise from dead, that his body got up and walked out of the tomb on Easter morning. But I am going to try to describe the contrary view as convincingly as I can--in order to be fair to those who hold this position. It is significant that a number of Christian theologians hold this view and do *not* consider it contrary to biblical faith.

Borg, Crossan, and Spong do *not* deny the resurrection of Jesus. There have, of course, been people throughout history who claimed the resurrection story was simply a lie, that Jesus is dead and gone, and that's the end of it. Borg, Crossan, and Spong do not think this.

Borg's view at least (and I think Crossan's) is also different from that of Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann denied the physical resurrection of Jesus as a historical event but continued to regard himself as a Christian because, he said, "Jesus continues to live in the preaching of the Church." He was the first prominent theologian to argue that the resurrection story was "a myth," intended to convey metaphorical truth *only*. (Spong often seems to follow Bultmann but his view may in fact have more in common with that of Borg and others who are a step closer to orthodoxy)

The newer development (Borg and others) is a view that agrees with Bultmann that the "empty tomb stories" are metaphorical tales, but also insists (unlike Bultmann) that Jesus really did rise from the dead and continues to live today in a real (though spiritual) sense--not just in some symbolic way (e.g., through the ongoing influence of his ideas). Bottom line: they *do* believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ, while granting that somewhere over in Palestine, there is a skeleton of Jesus. How can this be?

Most New Testament scholars make a distinction between "the resurrection of the body" and the "resuscitation of a corpse." With regard to Jesus, it is possible (though not necessary) to affirm the former as literal and historical, while still regarding the latter as only metaphorical.

The argument, in a nutshell, is based on the writings of Paul (which pre-date the Gospels). Paul, so it is said, does not believe that God is going to resuscitate our dead corpses at the end of time--like zombies out of some "living dead" movie. Rather, Paul believes that God will raise us up on the last day with new, spiritual bodies. Thus, it does not matter what happens to our corpses--whether they get cremated or eaten by worms. Resurrection is like creation -- in fact it is called a "new creation" -- God gives us new bodies, made from scratch.

It is against this background that Paul supposedly understands the resurrection of Jesus. Paul knows that people have been raised from the dead before (Elijah raised a widow's son)--but all that happened in those instances was that a dead corpse was brought back to life. The person was simply restored to his (or her) original life, not given the new life that comes when God creates new spiritual bodies for us. Of course, those people eventually died again. But when Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul realized that God had done something new and unprecedented. God had not just resuscitated the corpse of Jesus and restored him to his original life. The Jesus Paul beheld had a new, spiritual body, leading Paul to conclude that Christ was the "first fruits" of those who would be raised from the dead, proof positive that we--like Christ--would have eternal life. According to this argument, it would not have bothered Paul in the least if the crucified corpse of Jesus was still rotting in a tomb somewhere.

Here is what seems to be support for this argument: Paul talks often in his letters about the resurrection of Jesus, but he never once mentions the empty tomb. Paul knew Peter and the other disciples of Jesus well--surely they would have told him about the empty tomb, if what is reported in the Gospels really happened. But Paul doesn't seem to know these stories. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul lists all of the resurrection appearances that serve as proof of the resurrection of Jesus. He is trying to garner as much evidence as he can to prove that Jesus is risen. He mentions *some* of the stories that we have in the Gospels: stories about Jesus appearing to his disciples, perhaps in the "upper room" or out by the Sea of Galilee or on the mountain where he gives the Great Commission. But what he does

*not* mention is *any* story of Jesus appearing to people *at the tomb*. Why not?

The proposed answer is this: Paul wrote twenty to thirty years before the Gospels. At that time, there were no stories about Jesus body getting up and walking out of the tomb--there were no stories about how women came to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, found the tomb empty and then met Jesus himself in the garden outside the tomb. Jesus' own disciples--who Paul knew--did not tell Paul those stories because, in fact, nothing like that ever happened. All that really happened is the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples just like he did to Paul on the Damascus road--in a new, spiritual body. Thus, they like Paul, knew that Jesus was risen without caring about what had happened to the corpse in the tomb (if there was one). In fact, the corpse of Jesus was probably still in the tomb--or rotting away somewhere--but none of Jesus' original disciples or Paul cared about that. They believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead with a new spiritual body--which is much more important than God simply bringing the dead body of Jesus back to life (as God did with Lazarus and Jairus' daughter, and others). The stories about the empty tomb and the physical body of Jesus coming back to life got made up later by people who were using mythology to express a metaphorical truth.

I think this argument is wrong, but I believe it makes more sense than you allow. I can see how a reasonable person might be convinced that this is right--and yet still be a Christian. Indeed there is no reason why one cannot believe this argument and still believe in Jesus Christ as their "personal Lord and Savior" or as "the Lord of the Church." One can believe all of the above and still have a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ as a living, risen Lord (as Borg, Crossan, and Spong all claim they do).

This may not be the time to express why I think the argument is wrong, but I'll drop a few hints. A principal reason is that careful examination of the "empty tomb stories" reveals that they are *not* myths but historical reports. The original authors clearly intended to report what they believe to have happened in history. They do so with details (names of persons and places) that would still have been verifiable at the time they wrote. Also, no opponent of Christianity (Jewish or Roman) ever *denied* these stories--in fact, they agreed that the tomb of Jesus had been found empty on the third day and merely alleged that this was because the disciples had stolen his body. Furthermore, all of the empty tomb appearances are made to *women*: to three women in one instance (Matthew) and to Mary Magdalene alone in another (John). Since the testimony of women in that day was not regarded as credible (cf. Luke 24:11), it is unthinkable that anyone would *invent* a story about an empty tomb appearance with *women* as the only witnesses. In that day, women were not even allowed to give testimony in a court of law--even if they were eyewitnesses to a crime--because the testimony of women was never regarded as reliable. If, then, the author of Matthew's Gospel wanted to make up a story about the physical body of Jesus coming out of the tomb and appearing to people, why would he have the only people who saw this be women? Why not make up a story with more reliable witnesses? Indeed, this probably explains why Paul does not refer to the empty tomb stories. In 1 Corinthians 15, when he lists witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, he lists only *male* witnesses, because he assumes that they are the only ones whose testimony will count for his readers. (email to me, December 2001)

Powell, in this last paragraph, points to arguments from the gospel accounts. I will try to summarize this kind of argument and then respond to the first two arguments. I will respond to the third in the next section, which deals with the [Internal Evidence](#) against the Metaphorical Gospel Theory.

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## Three Arguments

I will try to outline the three types of arguments that are sometimes used to show that Paul's conception of Jesus' resurrection was a "spiritual" resurrection which was, in fact, compatible with the decay of his dead body in the tomb.

There are, first, two important assumptions that must be brought out.

### Assumption 1 - Ok

Paul's evidence is earlier than the Gospels, and thus primary. Paul should not be interpreted with the eyes of "gospel understanding", but should stand entirely on his own.

I agree that his evidence is earlier than the Gospels, and am willing to let him speak for himself on his own terms. No argument here.

### Assumption 2 - Bad

There are two possibilities: resuscitation or spirit being. That is, either Jesus' body was revived like Lazarus', only to die again, *OR* the body remained in the grave and Jesus' continued existence was based on something else (either a soul, a pure spirit, or a "spiritual body", whatever that might be, depending upon the commentator).

Bishop Spong points to Paul's understanding of Jesus' resurrection as internal evidence that he held a *non-physical* view of it.

"There is no sense at all in Paul of a physical resurrection of Jesus back into the life of this world. God did not, for this apostle, raise Jesus from the grave back to life on this earth. Rather, for Paul, God raised Jesus from death into God's presence; ... Paul was the earliest author in what we now call the New Testament, and in his writings there was no resurrection of a physical body. Indeed Paul specifically denied that claim." (Resurrection: Reality or Myth? p 50-51).

Note first how disingenuous this is. Spong pretends not to know there is a third possibility, namely *the one held throughout the ages* by Christianity! - that Jesus' body came back to life and was transformed into a new kind of body with new attributes. Not only is this a valid formal possibility, it is the position against which Spong should be arguing. Instead he attacks a straw man, that of resuscitation.

### Outline of Three Arguments

#### A. Argument from Jesus' Appearance to Paul

1. Jesus appeared to Paul (Damascus road) in a spiritual, not bodily form
2. Jesus' appearance to Paul was like his appearance to the other disciples
3. So, Jesus' resurrection was in a spiritual, not bodily form

#### B. Argument from Paul's Failure to Mention the Empty Tomb

1. Paul talks about resurrection but does not mention the empty tomb
2. If Paul had known about the empty tomb, he would have mentioned it

If the tomb was empty, Paul would have known about it

3.

4. So, the tomb was not empty

#### C. Argument from Paul's Description of Our Resurrection

1. Our 'resurrection' will be a spiritual, not a physical continuation of our existence.

2. Jesus' resurrection is the model for our own.

3. So, Jesus' resurrection was spiritual, not physical

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### Argument from Jesus' Appearance to Paul

The first argument in a nutshell is this:

1. Jesus appeared to Paul (Damascus road) in a spiritual, not bodily form

2. Jesus' appearance to Paul was like his appearance to the other disciples

3. (implied: Jesus' appearance to the disciples was a clear indication of his spiritual/physical status)

4. So, Jesus' resurrection was in a spiritual, not bodily form

I dispute the first two premises. The conclusion does indeed follow, if the implicit premise #3 is included, which seems fair enough.

#1. How did Jesus appear to Paul in Acts? First, it is clear this is not technically portrayed as a vision (a purely subjective, mental event), since the observers experienced a light and a sound. Paul saw and heard *something*. What's difficult to say is exactly what *form* this appearance took. Does Luke say that Jesus was a pure spirit, or a spirit being? Is there anything inconsistent between Paul's experience and Jesus having a transformed, glorified, risen body (we will see that described below)? I can't see that there is.

When unsure about this, we should judge the difficult things from the clear (the resurrection accounts in the gospels). Paul's letters may be primary, but it would be a strange logic to set Luke's narrative in Acts as the interpretive norm for his narrative in Luke.

#2. Paul gives a list of Jesus' appearances in 1 Corinthians. Certainly, he did not see the Risen Jesus in *exactly* the same way as did the disciples, since he experienced not only the risen Jesus but the *Ascended* Jesus (as is implied by "as one born out of season." Is he claiming that the disciples *did not* experience Jesus bodily in this passage? On the contrary, it seems as if he is attempting to show that his experience was *just as real as theirs*.

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### Argument from Paul's Failure to Mention the Empty Tomb

This second argument in a nutshell is this:

1. Paul talks about resurrection but does not mention the empty tomb

2. If Paul had known about the empty tomb, he would have mentioned it
3. If the tomb was empty, Paul would have known about it
4. So, the tomb was not empty

I accept the contention that Paul never mentioned the empty tomb; I certainly don't know of any statements where he does. I also accept #3 and #4. I question premise #2.

2. We should always be wary of using arguments from silence. Certainly, an argument from silence should not overturn a sound argument based upon positive evidence.

Why wouldn't Paul have mentioned the empty tomb? It does seem as if he *could* have mentioned it - or told the stories regarding angels at the tomb, the linen, the dramatic questions, appearances to the women, etc. Instead, he cites the various appearances (the twelve, 500 at the same time, etc.) when giving evidence for the resurrection. Why? Here are possible reasons:

- He didn't tell the stories simply because he didn't tell any gospel stories. He wasn't writing a gospel!
- He wasn't so much *forging an apologetic* for the resurrection as to try to help his readers understand it better. He wasn't trying to convert unbelievers, he was trying to teach believers.
- It's quite possible that the story of the empty tomb was such common knowledge that he didn't need to mention it.

There are all kinds of possibilities. There is no *compelling reason* to think that Paul *must have* including a discussion of the empty tomb had he known about it. I just thought of three plausible possibilities. I'm sure there could be others.

Thus, bottom line, since premise #2 is not logically valid, the argument is not sound.

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## Evaluating the Internal Evidence

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: July 28, 2003

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### Approaches

#### Introduction

The issue of using internal evidence, in this case, is a fascinating one - for the "internal evidence" is simply the gospel accounts themselves. And that is what is being debated. How can we pull out arbitrary passages and use them as evidence? Anything we can produce would itself be in need of proof!

Sure, one might want to say, "Look, Thomas *touched* Jesus' wounds. It says *right here* that Jesus was born in a particular place at a particular time; he went to this place and not that place; he died by crucifixion, under Pilate's authority, at a specific time and place. This shows that these stories were meant factually." But all of these are *part of the story!* In themselves,

they no more point to factual intent than do the many details of *Lord of the Rings*. Is there any way to resolve this?

### **Anticipating the Modern Novel?**

One approach would be analyze the form of the stories from a purely literary perspective. Do they have the characteristics of factual reportage? There are indeed several instances of interesting detail - The grass is "green grass" in Mark, the number of fish caught, etc. - that have been discussed in respect to this issue.

One way to counter these questions is to appeal to verisimilitude - "The writer wanted to increase the sense of realism, and so he added little realistic touches." And so ... Why the "green" grass? Verisimilitude. Why the exact number of fish? Verisimilitude. This can be the response to *every* such question posed. In fact, any material that really is factual reportage could be explained away in just this manner, one item at a time.

But perhaps the cumulative effect of these details can be considered. C.S. Lewis, discussing such stories as the Samaritan woman at the well, the healing of the blind man at the pool, and the woman caught in adultery, points out how remarkable the details and the dialog must be if they are made-up tales.

I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage - though it may no doubt contain errors - pretty close to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative. If it is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read. (p 281, *Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism; Collected Works*)

How could this be countered? I have to admit that I know little about the kinds of fiction that was actual, or possible, in the ancient world, and so it's difficult to evaluate Lewis' very strong declaration. But, if we take his expertise at face value, and agree that the realistic details must have their roots in eyewitness experiences, it does not necessarily follow that *all* of the material, or even *most* of the material is derived from those sources.

Yet, to counter this, one could always say that the redactors incorporated some actual stories into their work, yet invented many others, and even embellished these. In fact (just to take one example) that's exactly what's said about Luke's use of "we" and "they" in Acts. Rather than implicitly claiming to have been there in the "we" sections, some critics say he was just using a travel diary.

I believe that this is a valid approach, but will leave it alone here.

### **Narrative Criticism - Transitional Cues**

It is rarely contended that the four gospels are *complete* fiction. Usually it is assumed by MG proponents that historical narrative and fictional stories have been combined in some way. How can we determine which is which? In the case of parables, which are essentially fictional stories, it is pretty simple. (1) The narrator puts the parables on Jesus' lips, rather than simply mixing them with other accounts; (2) The form of the story often lets you know that this is a parable ("There was once a king ..."); and (3) He often explicitly says that it is a parable.

Mark Allan Powell makes the excellent point that the narrator does *not* give us these kinds of clues about which gospel accounts are to be taken factually and which metaphorically. He discusses this in terms of Narrative Criticism, and concludes:

When any one of the Gospels is read as a unified narrative, there is no literary reason to identify the episodes Spong cites as belonging to a different genre than the work as a whole. If the Gospels are viewed generally as relating narratives about historical persons, situations, and settings (and they are), there is no reason why implied readers would be expected to think that these narratives shift periodically into a purely metaphorical style of storytelling (regarding events with no basis in history) and then back again. (Powell - article in the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, V1.2, July 2003, "Authorial Intent and Historical Reporting: Putting Spong's Literalization Thesis to the Text")

This is a strong argument, but I believe it can be countered. One might simply concede this point, and agree that the first readers were not provided the transitional cues that would distinguish between factual and metaphorical content. But, one might continue, the first readers didn't care primarily about what was factual and what was metaphorical - it was the *meaning* of the stories that mattered to them.

In fact, Marcus Borg points out something very similar to that:

"... the Bible does not come with footnotes that say, 'This passage is to be read literally; that passage is not.' Reading the stories of creation or the stories of Jesus' birth literally involves an interpretive decision (namely, a decision to read them literally) equally as much as does the decision to read them metaphorically.

Thus any and every claim about what a passage of scripture means involves interpretation. There is no such thing as a noninterpretive reading of the Bible, unless our reading consists simply of making sounds in the air. As we read the Bible, then, we should ask not, 'What is God saying?' but 'What is the ancient author or community saying?' (p 27-28)

Again, I believe this is a valid approach, and Powell does an excellent job of following up these points in his Journal article. But I will leave it alone here.

### **Point-Counterpoint**

Spong, Borg, and Crossan all speak with authority - the authority of contemporary New Testament scholarship. Borg seems to me to be the humblest of the three (just personal opinion), and even he is quite sure that his views are not only consistent with, but the product of the best N.T. scholarship over the last 200 years.

The basis for this mind-boggling realization was the understanding of the gospels that has developed over the last two hundred years of biblical scholarship. I learned that the gospels are neither divine documents nor straightforward historical records. . . . Nor are they eyewitness accounts written by people who had accompanied Jesus and simply sought to report what they had seen and heard.

Rather, I learned, the gospels represent the developing traditions of the early Christian movement. Written in the last third of the first century, they contain the accumulated traditions of early Christian communities and were put into their present forms by second- (or even third-) generation authors. Through careful comparative study of the gospels, one can see these authors at work, modifying and adding to the traditions they received. (Borg, *Meeting J*, p8-10)

Their picture is so convincing that I myself accepted that N.T. scholarship had, as a whole, taken a hard turn to the left, and that the F.F. Bruces and Donald Guthries of the world had been replaced by the Jesus Seminar. Mark Allan Powell strongly corrected that impression in an email to me:

I want to add some important caveats about seminary education, however, and I

hope that I do not come off as too defensive in doing so (being a seminary professor myself). The theological professors who I know do not present these points as "assured results" or even as "commonly accepted scholarship." Any professor who did so (and, unfortunately, there probably are some who do) would be regarded as irresponsible by his or her peers. The issue, rather, is to present such points as "matters of debate," and to challenge students to engage in theological discourse regarding them.

It was only after I had written several drafts of this paper, for instance, that I started to read N.T. Wright. Wright turns out to be truly a world-class scholar, former Chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the SBL, on a par with Crossan, who vigorously disagrees with the Metaphorical Gospel Theory. In fact, he has written three large, densely argued volumes (from 1996 to 2003), presenting a methodology and conclusions which directly contradicted the MG Theory on the way to establishing an impressive Theory of his own.

I have written down several quotes from his first volume: *The New Testament and the People of God* (Vol 1 of "Christian Origins and the Question of God") Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1992.

See [N.T. Wright Quotes](#)

See [Wright and Borg Quotes](#)

And so, another approach would be simply to say "Read N.T. Wright's books" and leave it at that. Wright has the background to convincingly argue, against Spong for instance, that the Jewish mind-set would produce documents talking about God's action on behalf of his people in history, *not* myth-making 'midrash.' (following Goulder).

But what is the non-specialist to do? Spong/Goulder say that the Jewish world-view is X, and Wright just as confidently says it is Y. We could simply pile up quotes from one scholar against another - a kind of Point/Counterpoint, but for many people this would just wind up in a draw.

And so, while this is not only a valid but an excellent approach to pursue, I will leave it alone here.

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## "Meta-Gospel" Statements

And so, a straight appeal to the gospel stories themselves leads to something of an impasse. We need to move outside the stories. Perhaps we must give up and go right to the External Evidence. But is there yet Internal Evidence that will give us this needed "Archimedes' Lever"? I believe there is. They are what may be called the "meta-gospel" statements: statements within the New Testament that are *about* the gospel accounts.

### Meta-Statements

So, "Meta-gospel" statements are statements *in* the gospel *about* the gospel? To be more precise, they are statements in the New Testament about the meaning and intent of the gospel message. Meta statements have been an interesting field of discussion in analytic philosophy. To acquaint the reader with the "meta" statement idea (which is not to be confused with "metaphorical"), I'll give an example.

Take this statement (we'll call it Sentence A):

***"At yesterday's class, I saw the professor's point."***

Some "meta-statements" about this statement would be:

- The sentence 'At yesterday's class, I saw the professor's point' is a declarative sentence.
- Sentence A is false.
- I doubt whether Sentence A is true.
- "yesterday" in Sentence A means the "yesterday" as of March 25, not any old "yesterday."
- Sentence A *doesn't* mean that the professor had an object that was pointed, like a stick.
- In Sentence A, "I saw", and "the professor's point" are meant *metaphorically*.
- Sentence A asserts *a fact* that the speaker attended a class - *this* is not metaphorical.

You see, this is our Archimedes' Lever. Archimedes once made a famous statement that he could move the world if you gave him the right place to stand. Meta-gospel statements, in a technical sense, are not part of the story as such. They are *commentaries about* the story, statements *about* the story.

How do we apply meta-statements in our investigation? We can look for statements about the intent of the gospel stories, and meaning of the gospel claims, within the New Testament itself to see if they support or contradict the Metaphorical Gospel theory.

For instance, are there any places in this body of literature where the author says "Now, don't think - as some common people do - that these stories actually happened. They are intended spiritually, from faith to faith." Or, "the mature Christian understands that Jesus and the Christ are not the same person. For who would worship a mere man? The Christ is our eternal, abiding presence. We worship the Christ, not the man Jesus." Or, "Those who twist the scriptures to mean that Jesus' body came back to life are carnal and not spiritual." Or, something of the sort.

Or perhaps we might find writings that say the opposite, "These stories are not something that was made-up, they are not myths, but they are events which really happened." Or, "Those who deny that Jesus and the Christ are identical are wrong, and you shouldn't listen to them." Or, we might find statements that only make sense if they are construed literally.

### **A Few Words About Methodology**

My first caution would be not to expect to find many of these crucial indicators. In fact, it's entirely possible that the entire New Testament could have *none*! After all, it wasn't written primarily with this topic in mind.

This takes a certain amount of detective work - reading through a lot of material to find just the right kind of statement. (But detective work is just what N.T. scholars love to do the most; that is how they manage to develop the new theories that they do.)

1. The first thing I did after I had made sure I understood Spong's, Borg's, and Crossan's views about the MG Theory (even as I read their books) was to just sit and think. Immediately, I thought to myself, "Wait - doesn't 2 Peter say something about not following cleverly devised stories, but eyewitness accounts?", and "Luke sure seems to lay it out in his prologue - he investigated the matter thoroughly, back to the eyewitnesses themselves, and write up on orderly account about what happened." I started thinking about the deity and resurrection passages to see if there were any clear, unequivocal statements that would force a 'literal' interpretation.

2. Next, I tried to gather together any positive reasons for thinking the MG Theory was true, and spent some time considering them and writing up my thoughts.

3. At about the same time, I decided to read quickly through the N.T. from start to finish, looking for my detective clues. To do this, I tried to read everything as if the MG Theory were true. For page after page, I would see something and then remark to myself, "Oh, that's just part of the story. That's not definitive." - and constantly thought about the level of detail one finds in fiction stories such as *Lord of the Rings*. Every once in awhile, I'd run across something

that made me stop, then seemed to pose a genuine problem. (It wasn't until I had read several times through that I noticed what now seems obvious, the editorial aside in Matthew about the disciples stealing the body.)

I made a list of 'problem texts.' Then I threw out any for which I could come up with an answer from the MG viewpoint. Then, I wrote up my findings in a first draft. I continued to quick scans of whole books from time to time, in search of more clues. I published what I had found on my web site and asked people for feedback. I adjusted as necessary, creating version after version of the web article.

I have to confess that, for all my searching, I never did find any texts that clearly and unambiguously make statements that favor the Metaphorical Gospel Theory. I must also admit that perhaps I'm just not tuned in enough to spot those, and haven't perhaps corresponded with the right people. I hope that those who favor the MG Theory will give me more ammunition.

Eventually, I have come to the point where I proposed the eight strongest passages (or sets of passages), those which most clearly refutes the MG Theory.

4. In my first several drafts I simply quoted the passages and made brief comments. It was more of a "hey, look at this" approach. I really expected that I would dialogue with people via email, and that they would outline objections. I would consider the objections, and either overcome them or withdraw the passage. Thus, the whole presentation would be refined over time.

However, such dialogues were rare, and no substantial detailed objections were forthcoming. I finally decided that I needed to provide a more detailed discussion. I began by going to the standard commentaries to see what they might say. For this purpose, I selected three for primary usage, although I looked at other commentaries and books as well. Recommended to me were:

- The Word Biblical Commentary - '*Word*'
- The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary - '*New*'
- The Jerome Bible Commentary - '*Jerome*'

I call these "the commentaries" in the text. Word is certainly a large commentary (many large volumes), has entries by leading scholars, and goes into great detail. It would be considered, I think, conservative-to-moderate. Jerome, on the other hand, is considered more liberal (it states, for instance, that Paul's speech on the Aereopogus was a pure invention), and would possibly be a good source supporting the MG view.

And so, I integrated these discussions into the text.

5. Objections and Answers. Then the hardest job. Partly from cues in the commentaries, and partly from my own thinking, I came up with some Objections. I sat there and said, "What could an MG proponent possibly say to counter this evidence that seems so solid to me?" And, of course, I then had to answer the objections (especially since one of my criticisms of the MG Theory is that it doesn't answer objections very well!).

For the purposes of reading, I would not necessarily recommend reading through all the Objections and Answers unless that is your interest! Just read the main portion, skim the Objection titles, and drill down if you thing the Objection is interesting.

If you think that these Objections are pathetically weak, I assure you that I do too. But they are not weak because I intentionally create a straw man. They are weak either because (a) the evidence truly is so solid that there are no good objections; (b) my mastery of the material is limited, and I just don't understand what the proper objections ought to be; (c) I'm just not smart enough to think of good ones. I welcome better Objections and will try to deal with them



as they come!

## Common Sense Philosophy

One of the things that was impressed upon me was how tedious, and sometimes difficult, it can be to always be defending the obvious. I thought of G.E. Moore, the "Common Sense Philosopher", who argued in works like "A Defense of Common Sense" (1925) against the prevailing trends in philosophy, especially idealism. It is sometimes absurd to be forced to prove that a statement actually means what it obviously says - but a worthwhile endeavor nonetheless.

On to the evidence.

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## Luke's Prologue: Statement of Purpose

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: Thursday July 31, 2003

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### Luke's Statement of Purpose

A "meta-gospel" statement, as I described earlier, is a statement *about* the meaning of the gospel message. What we want is to find a meta-gospel statement from within the gospels that, in a sense, stands *outside* the gospel, pointing to it. And we do find just such a statement in Luke's prologue (introduction).

The author of Luke appears to give us a clear and straightforward Statement of Purpose for his work. He says:

"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Luke 1)

Let's look at this closely, piece by piece. I will append, in brackets, the *prima facie* meaning:

*"Many have undertaken to draw up an account:*

- of the things that have been fulfilled among us [events which really happened]
- just as they were handed down to us [faithfully communicated]
- by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word [eyewitness accounts, those who were in a position to know first-hand]

*Therefore since I myself have [personally]*

- carefully investigated everything [did research, not invention, or merely combining texts without getting behind them]

- from the beginning [going back to confirm the veracity of his sources]
- it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account [presumably without creative embellishments] for you, most excellent Theophilus,

So

- that you may know the certainty [have evidence of the factual truth]
- of the things you have been taught [the gospel message]."

## Overall Sense

The commentaries seem to agree that this preface, or prologue, is written in a particular literary style. Namely, it is a "deliberately secular style" which "invites comparison of his work with that of the historians of his day" (Word 11); one interesting comparison is to Josephus's prefaces to *War* and *Against Apion* (Word 4-5). Comments such as the following are typical:

Indeed, it is true that Luke is self-conscious about the role of historical evidence in commending Christianity to a degree not reflected by the other evangelists. (*Word 11*)

From this, the *prima facie* case for historical, factual interpretation is strengthened. Luke appears to be going out of his way to *tell us* that these are events which really happen. However, it is clear that the sense of several elements has been disputed.

## Meaning of the Constituent Parts

In general, the commentaries debate and discuss fine points of the wording, but the assumption is, all along, that Luke is saying what he appears to be saying: he is reporting what really happened, based upon his own careful study, going back to the eyewitnesses themselves.

### things (that have been fulfilled)

These are most naturally thought of as "events", which "suits well the historian's craft." (*Word 7*)

### fulfilled

... although "fulfilled" refers to expectations, specifically scriptural ones, Luke "insists that what he is writing about has really happened." (*Jerome 119*)

### eyewitnesses

... is taken in its normal sense, i.e. someone who was there, who saw something and tells about it. "autoptai, 'eyewitnesses', echoes once again the language of the historian. It is found only here in the NT. Being present as an eyewitness is the basis for becoming a witness (martus)" (*Word 7*)

### handed over

... again, taken at face value, "The original eyewitnesses made it their business to pass on what they knew." (*Word 9*)

### investigated/followed

Much of the discussion has to do with whether Luke was a participant in the events, was a companion of the apostles, interviewed eyewitnesses, or simply read the works of the 'many.' The consensus seems to be:

"it is most likely that "investigated" is the sense to be attributed to Luke's use of the verb." (*Word 9*);

"The Gk pf. tense of the verb indicates Luke's competence; he has made a thorough investigation." (*Jerome 119*);

and that his method was something weaker than participation but something stronger than simply reading his predecessors' books.

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## Objections and Answers

I have found three avenues of interpretation which have been used to support some form of the MG Theory.

### 1. Later Scribal Insertion

A very old objection, which tacitly agrees with all the foregoing but still allows the scholar to support the MG Theory, is to simply say that the prologue is not part of the (original) Gospel of Luke at all: it was tacked on at a later date in order to lend credibility to the work during the second century. Alfred Loisy, the 19th century critic of Christianity and fierce defender of a metaphorical understanding of the gospel, makes exactly this charge:

Perhaps a day will come when enlightened criticism, on the sole evidence of the prologues which stand at the head of the third Gospel and of Acts, will decide that the author who there addresses himself to Theophilus, and those who arranged the canonical edition of his work, must both be ranked in the same category as the apologists of the second century, who pleaded the cause of Christianity before the Antonines, and that he and they doubtless lived in that age. (Alfred Loisy, *The Origins of the New Testament* - original in French 1936; English translation 1962) Chapter VI.

First, I would emphasize that this approach *agrees with* the standard analysis of the meaning of the prologue's claims, and thus supports my own contention, that Luke's Gospel (as it now stands) contains at its outset an explicit *denial* of the MG Theory.

Second, none of the three MG scholars being considered has contended (as far as I know) that the prologue is a later addition.

Third, there is no textual evidence to support the contention. Loisy's claim that the form of the prologue fits with the second century Apologists (e.g. Justin Martyr) forgets the Hellenistic parallels and Josephus himself (90's A.D.) There is no reason, on the basis of the style alone, to deny Luke even a pre-70 composition.

### 2. Far Removed from the Facts

It is possible to read the the prologue as implying a temporal distance between Luke and the facts, combined with an implied disregard for facts in favor of establishing 'correct' doctrine. Loisy is an instructive and provocative example of such an attempt.

#### the many

How many were the "many"? Most commentaries caution against a reading that requires dozens, or hundreds of previous authors. Many could be as few as a handful. Loisy presses "many" and concludes that the previous works, on this basis, must have been long established.

No small difficulty confronts the critics who would have us believe that the person here speaking is Luke, and make out that he wrote his two books before the year 70. Their difficulty will be to explain how, by that time, many writers had already produced an account of the origins of Christianity or even of the career of Jesus. Yet the writer makes it clearly understood that the literary work on which he now embarks is of a kind largely cultivated before his time; and he must have known its products better than we do. A writer who uses language such as this cannot have written before the second century. (Loisy, Chap VI)

### ministers (of the word)

Next, the commentaries discuss whether 'eyewitnesses' and 'ministers of the word' refers to one set of people, or two, usually judging them to be essentially the same. However, the Jerome commentary sees 'ministers' as separate from 'eyewitnesses', and hence:

Luke is drawing not only upon strictly eyewitness records but also upon the instructions, prayers, and popular stories through which the eyewitness accounts were "ministered" in the Church. (*Jerome* 119)

### investigated/followed

How did Luke 'follow' the action? Loisy here takes Luke's activity in the weakest possible sense, that he simply read the works of the many. He also jumps to an interesting conclusion, that Luke's claim of accuracy means that the earlier works could not make such a claim, and therefore everything is very late (and, therefore, that Luke's claim, too, is false!):

Our author "for a long time past" as attentively "followed", not the course of a history of which he has not been a witness, but the documents of a tradition he sets out to interpret, the documents, that is, of a legend elaborated before his time even in regard to the so-called apostolic age ... The fact that our author is at pains to announce that this work will carry every guarantee shows clearly that he knew of others which, in his view, could make no such claim. (Loisy, Chap VI)

### ordered

Commentaries typically focus their discussion on the point that 'order' may mean various kinds of logical, or topical, order - rather than chronological order. Loisy manages to see 'order' as one of conforming to orthodox doctrine:

What he claims to do is to present a well ordered and continuous exposition, conformable to a certain type of received doctrine; briefly, a safe compendium for the believer of what for us is the gospel catechesis, or legend, and the legend of the apostles. (Loisy, Chap VI)

Answer. It is of course *possible* that Luke's literary predecessors preceded him by several decades; that he merely read their works as the foundation of his own version; that he combined these works with further 'instructions, prayers, and popular stories' in order to produce an account structured in accord with the orthodoxy of the day - and the final result is the 'legend of the apostles.' But that issue is beside the point here. What *is* germane is: Is this what Luke is *claiming*?

Luke appeals to 'things [events] that have been fulfilled among *us*', indicating a closeness to the base events, not a distance. It simply seems intuitively obvious, and I won't labor the point, that 'many' writers - even if construed as scores - does not *in itself* push the date back to the second century.

Separating 'ministers of the word' from 'eyewitness' is weak. First, it ignores the parallelism so prevalent in the New Testament ('kai' is often used to re-state something in a slightly different form, rather than to introduce a contrast) - and even granting that, it is indeed an ambitious move to leap from the personal 'ministers of the word' to the impersonal 'instructions, prayers, and popular stories' postulated above.

Choosing 'conforming with orthodoxy' as the interpretation for Luke's 'order' is certainly not impossible, but what justifies it? Is that what Luke is *claiming*? He doesn't actually *say* what kind of order he means; his statements are more general, merely claiming that he's putting the accounts into an orderly form; he doesn't say what kind of order. Interpreting it this way relies on an unfounded assumption.

Even more to the point is - What does Luke mean by 'interpreted' or 'followed'? Does he mean to say that he merely *read* other accounts, without trying to go behind them to the facts? Then why doesn't he say that? In the text, he is actually *contrasting* the act of reading the other accounts with going back and looking at it all for himself. He goes out of his way to assert a statement entailing fresh investigation.

### 3. Truth - Spiritual or Factual?

The desired result of Luke's work is "that you may know the certainty of" that which Theophilus has been taught. What is this knowledge? One interpretation is that the result is intended to be a spiritual appropriation of the mysteries of faith, rather than an attainment of factual knowledge.

#### know the certainty

It is claimed that the content of the gospel is 'the word', the Christian preaching, and that the result is 'assurance', which may transcend historical knowledge.

Luke's concern is not merely historical, though. He signals that his narrative will relate the things "that have been fulfilled," that the events are "the word" (the Christian message or preaching), and that his account will provide Theophilus with "assurance." (*New*, 40)

It is pointed out that Luke does not explicitly fault the accuracy of the previous writers. Perhaps historical accuracy is not his goal at all. Perhaps his intention is to remedy false doctrine, or to simply strengthen existential faith in some way.

In contrast to other prologues, Luke's does not criticize other accounts as inaccurate. At most there is the implication that his work will supply "the truth." This term can mean "security", "safety", "assurance", or "certainty." One debated issue that arises from these verses concerns Luke's aim and purpose in writing a gospel. Is he supplying (a) an orderly account to correct (historical) inaccuracies in other accounts, (b) (doctrinal) truth where false teaching was a threat, or (c) assurance where uncertainty had prevailed? (*New* 40)

In fact,

The Greek can also mean "that you may be more solidly and certainly grounded in the mysteries of salvation." (*Jerome* 119)

Answer. First, I want to point out that the specific words themselves are fairly neutral in tone. There is nothing that forces a 'spiritual' interpretation of 'certainty', much less a purely spiritual meaning which *rules out* historical truth. We cannot assume this point, because, in fact, it is just this issue which is the center of our MG discussion! I have critiqued the philosophical view that pits the spiritual *against* the factual in my earlier section about Truth and Faith.

Given that, I think it's pretty clear that the total context of the statement should be kept in mind when trying to interpret this one phrase. As I tried to establish in point #2, everything that leads up to this statement indicates that Luke was trying to report what happened (no matter how spiritually significant it was). The sense of 'certainty' should be governed by the premises leading up to it.

This brings me to my main observation:

To my mind, the most telling point of all is the inescapable fact that Luke chose to use an existing literary style, practically shouting his intention to do historiography in the classical sense - to tell the facts. And he did that at the introduction to his work, where you might reasonably expect to see a Statement of Purpose.

He could easily have said something else. He could have said *almost anything* else, and proved the literal view wrong. He could have simply said that he was speaking 'from faith to faith', ushering the reader into the 'mysteries of salvation', speaking in figures that which cannot be said literally. He could have claimed to be writing from visions or revelations, or to be recording holy stories. But he didn't do that.

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## Conclusion

1. I conclude, first of all, that the mainstream scholarly interpretation of Luke's prologue squares with the plain sense. The scholar who wishes to turn the prologue around semantically to mean something deeper or different ought to bear the burden of proof.
  2. Taking each element individually, I think it's clear in several instances that interpreting an element in the MG direction requires a fairly arbitrary choice, without clear foundation.
  3. Taking the elements together, they tend to reinforce each other in the plain sense.
  4. A consideration of the style and placement of the passage as a whole not only give *pima facie* credibility to the traditional interpretation, it is - in itself - compelling evidence that the author intended his work to be taken as an account of 'what happened.'
  5. Finally, if the Prologue fails to convince the MG scholars, at least in respect to Luke's Gospel, then I would ask them, "If Luke *had* wanted to express his intention of writing out an account of what really happened, what would he have done differently?" It is very difficult to think of a stronger, clearer, better passage that could have been written.
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## Matthew: Editorial Aside

By: Erick Nelson  
Last Updated: July 25, 2003

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### Editorial Aside

Matthew does not provide us with a Statement of Purpose at the beginning of his gospel, as Luke does. He starts by listing Jesus' genealogy, and then plunges into the story. There is, however, one editorial 'aside' that is fascinating. It is the kind of thing you would ordinarily pass by as merely an innocent comment. It is the story that the Jewish leaders bribed the guards to say the disciples had stolen Jesus' body.

#### Disciples Stealing Jesus' Body

The writer is telling a story about the aftermath of the stone-rolling incident. The guards have apparently failed in their mission, and have to go back to the leaders and report this failure. In the story, the leaders promise to keep the guards out of trouble, secure their cooperation with some money, and instruct them to say, "The disciples stole the body while they slept." Here is the text:

While they were on their way some of the guard entered the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had occurred. They, deliberating in session with the elders, gave the soldiers considerable money, telling them, "Say 'His disciples came by night and stole Him while we were asleep.' And if this reaches the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble." So the guards accepted the money and did as they were instructed,

**and this story has been current among the Jews until the present day. (Mt 28.11-15)**

Notice that the writer suddenly *steps out of the story* and tells us that this story has persisted, in real life, until the current time. A great deal of information is packed into this editorial aside.

First, we see - unless the writer is simply lying - that one of the defenses used in the first century against the Christian resurrection claims is that Jesus' disciples stole the body. This implies that the resurrection claim (of Matthew, at least) entails an empty tomb.

The apologetic tale of the guard at the tomb (vv. 62-6) refutes the criticism of 28:15, that is, rebuts Jewish slander against the disciples by showing that they could not have stolen Jesus' body (*Oxford* 884)

And *this* implies that Matthew's view of the resurrection is indeed a bodily one ... which implies that his account of the resurrection is not a metaphorical story but "sober truth." Even the Jerome Commentary, certainly no fundamentalist publication, draws this inference:

What can be concluded from the story is that the Jews charged the disciples with the theft of the body of Jesus. What can also be concluded is that Jews and disciples both agreed that the body of Jesus was missing from the tomb on the third day. (*Jerome*, 113)

## **Editorial Aside**

But whether or not we can conclude that the tomb was really empty goes way beyond our aim here. What is most telling for us is the editorial aside *that this story has persisted* until the gospel composition. It has not only persisted, but it has (according to Matthew) been 'spread widely':

"The story concocted by the Jewish authorities 'was spread widely' (used elsewhere in Matthew only in 9:31 where it refers to the news about Jesus' power to heal), as the explanation of the empty tomb and the disappearance of Jesus' body--'a type of antigospel' (R.E. Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 1298)." (*Word* 877)

We are looking for clear meta-gospel statements, and this one really does seem to comment about the gospel from an *exterior standpoint*. This is not a statement from 'within the story', but the narrator's voice and standpoint.

And the implication, of course, is this - If the narrator informs us of a then-contemporary dispute about the *reason* the tomb was empty, the logical inference is that there was common agreement *that* the tomb was empty, at least between the disputants. And this presupposes a non-metaphorical gospel.

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## **Objections and Answers**

The commentaries tend to just lightly touch on this passage, without a lot of comment or analysis. They certainly do not question whether the author is (a) claiming that this bribing really took place, or (b) claiming that this story - the disciples stole the body - really is a



'current' objection to Christianity which has had a history going back to Jesus' death.

It seems inconceivable that one would doubt that *this* is indeed what the author means.

## 1. Later Scribal Insertion

It would be possible to take the position that this (and possibly other 'asides') is *not* the work of the author of the gospel, or even of a final redactor, but a comment inserted by a (much later) scribe, which then got carried into the text with MS transmission. In fact, we could say that the original story in Matthew was meant metaphorically, but a much-later scribe (mis-)interpreted it literally.

If we place the scribe in the mid-second century, then it's no wonder that a non-MG view is being presented. Furthermore, if this scribe writes at this late date, he can't be expected to know the entire transmission history of the story - for all he knows, the story might have been first told well after the completion of the gospels.

Answer. It's *possible* that it is a scribal interpolation, but how can we tell whether it truly is? How can we tell whether *any* passage is a later addition? - for certainly, if we find a part of the text we don't like, we can *always* appeal to 'interpolation.' This turns out to be a crucial question for meta-gospel statements, but they are just the ones that *comment on* the story.

1. We can't use a prior viewpoint regarding the meaning of the immediate or wider context, especially in cases such as we are considering, for we are looking at these specific passages as *clues* to the meaning of the context - and so, that would be circular.
2. It's difficult to appeal to actual MS evidence - either way - because first-century MSS (needed for such an arbitration) are not extant (yet).
3. A pragmatic guideline, I think, should be two-fold: (1) the burden of proof is on the one who wishes to claim later interpolation, and (2) we should be cautious of choices which are 'too congenial' to our views (to paraphrase the Jesus Seminar).

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## Conclusion

Therefore, until a compelling case is made proving that this statement is most likely a later interpolation, we must conclude that it is part of the original text, and thus that a non-metaphorical understanding of the empty tomb was shared by both Christians and their opponents alike.

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## John's Gospel

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: Thursday July 31, 2003

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## Eyewitness Claim

Are there any internal, meta-gospel statements that describe for us how we are to understand this work? There do, indeed, appear to be two direct claims in John's Gospel that this material includes eyewitness reportage about events which really transpired.



## End of Chapter 20

In the gospel of Luke, the prologue obviously appears to function as a statement of purpose. John's prologue starts, not with such a statement, but with the Logos narrative. However, at the end of chapter 20, he concludes:

"Jesus did many other signs also **in the presence of His disciples**, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." (20.30-31)

This appears to many scholars to be the ending of an original work, with chapter 21 added on. John seems to sum up here with a statement of purpose. He could have said a number of things which explicitly supported a metaphorical understanding of the work, but he didn't. Instead he indicates two things: (1) The stories presented here are "signs" that were done in the presence of the disciples, who function as eyewitnesses to the events; (2) The reason for writing these accounts is that the reader might believe the truth of the Jesus Claims. They are evidence for the deity of Christ.

## End of the Gospel

The actual ending of the Fourth Gospel is a direct meta-gospel declaration.

**"This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down.** We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." (21.23-25)

The point clearly seems to be that one of Jesus' twelve disciples wrote down "these things" as his eyewitness testimony. This statement is followed by further testimony: Some set of people ("We") who knew this disciple bears witness that these things did take place (or alternately, that they were penned by the disciple in question).

The commentators seem to agree that a real connection with eyewitness testimony is being asserted here.

The sentence plainly emphasizes the signal importance both of what the soldiers refrained from doing and of what they did. An eyewitness guarantees the truth of what has just been stated: it is simplest to view him as the person referred to as 'that one' (but often simply 'he'). ... Most exegetes have considered 21:24 to be an editorial addition to chap. 21, and viewed it as the earliest attestation of authorship, or at least the source of, this Gospel. There is a growing consensus that v 35 comes from the same editorial hand, and that it was inserted as a recollection of the Beloved Disciple's witness to this event, thereby underlining its importance (and his). (*Word* 354)

Who are 'We'? Who is the 'disciple'? One commentary draws a distinction between the beloved disciples' eyewitness testimony and the actual written Fourth Gospel.

First, one must examine the relationship between the expressions 'who is testifying to these things' and 'has written them.' ... As the verse is constructed, the reference to writing is given as corroboration of the beloved disciple's witness. That is, the beloved disciple is pivotal to the community, not merely because he provides the oral testimony of an eyewitness, but because his testimony has found its way into the written form of this Gospel. By corroborating the beloved disciple's witness, v. 24a stresses the connection between this Gospel and the beloved disciple's witness, while at the same time seeming to attribute the actual authorship of this Gospel to someone other than the beloved disciple himself. John 21:24 thus has the same function as 19:35: to point to the beloved disciple as the *source of the traditions* about Jesus that are interpreted in the Gospel. (New 863)

Jerome concurs that the disciple's 'writing it down' does not necessarily mean *personally*,

It is this same disciples who is the witness for these things: It is the beloved disciple who is the author of the foregoing Gospel. It is he who wrote these things: The question of actual literary composition of the Gospel is, of course, not solved by this attestation; just as 19:19 says, literally, that 'Pilate wrote a title', when the sense is that he was responsible for its being written, so here. (Jerome 466)

It does seem a stretch to deny that 'writing it down' means that he personally wrote it down - the comparison with Pilate is inexact because of context. It appears to be the *point* of the passage that the disciple himself wrote it down. However, for our purposes, it is enough if the Gospel writer is simply claiming to be faithfully recording the content of eyewitness testimony about *what happened*. It's not even important (here) whether the author got it right! The important thing is the explicit claim - The disciples really witnessed (many of) Jesus' works, and the 'beloved disciple' (whoever that might be) gave his testimony, encapsulated in the gospel account. Even, per *Jerome*,

[20.30-31] The meaning of these signs. It is on this note that John concludes his Gospel. He says, in effect: The first disciples believed, seeing Christ's visible presence; but you, who have not seen it, yet have as much reason to believe. You have the eyewitness testimony of this Gospel, and you have in the living presence of the Church the 'signs' that have been pointed out here ... (*Jerome 464*)

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## Objections and Answers

There are two possible objections: (1) 'so that you may believe' refers a spiritual 'faith' rather than a knowledge about, or belief in, matters of fact; (2) These are later scribal insertions, not part of the original gospel.

### 1. Spiritual Faith Engendered

This interpretation was already encountered and discussed in the section on Luke's prologue. This approach relies on two possible ambiguities.

#### eyewitness

It is contended, in reference to 2 Peter, that 'eyewitness' may refer to 'spiritual initiate', rather than bearing the common sense.

It means 'observer, spectator' ... The term was also used technically for the higher grade of initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries, evidently as those who had seen the vision of the divine mysteries. Most commentators think that this technical usage is echoed in 2 Peter. (Word 215)

#### believe

Some commentators, as mentioned in the discussion about Luke, interpret 'belief' and 'faith' as referring to a spiritual faith in opposition to factual belief.

Answer. First, I did not see in any of the commentaries on this passage, especially in *Word*, any indication that 'eyewitness' meant anything other than a person who had physically watched something transpire (see above). Second, in this same commentary, the question about the meaning of 'believe' had more to do with whether it implied 'come to believe' or 'continue to believe, even more strongly.'

'These have been written *that you may believe*' ... But in what sense? ... Strictly speaking, the former should indicate making an act of faith putting one's trust in Jesus as the Messiah, etc; the

latter, a continuing to hold the faith already reposed in Jesus. (Word 387, emphasis theirs)

Third, the referent of that belief is 'that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God', which we will try to flesh out below.

## 2. Later Scribal Insertion

This is an approach already seen with Luke and Matthew. It is possible that every narrative comment comes from a later scribal insertion.

Answer. I would point the reader to answers given in the Matthew section. In addition, it is interesting to note that, in John, the narrator's presence seems to be experienced throughout the story, therefore if it *is* to be accounted for on the basis of scribal insertion, it is a rather large set of additions.

First, the intrusion of the narrator's voice directly into the storytelling (vv. 30-31) is not unusual in the Fourth Gospel; indeed, it is one of the distinctive traits of the Fourth Evangelist's narrative style. ... the narrator comments on the source and veracity of the testimony in 19:34. The narrator's words in 20:30-31 belong to this same category of interpretive comment; the Fourth Evangelist interrupts the flow of the narrative to ensure that the reader grasps the significance of what has just been recounted. (New 851)

Be that as it may, the standard interpretation is *not* to see this as coming from a mid-second century scribe, but to as belonging to the beloved disciple's close followers (if not to John himself in many places). However, if this is the case, the *prima facie* meaning is not diminished or changed in the least. Why is that? Because the secondary source is backing up, certifying, testifying to the factual validity of the stories and claims in John.

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## Deity and Resurrection

### Resurrection

It is certainly clear that the resurrection of Jesus is *described* as a physical one: Jesus is buried; the stone is rolled away and grave clothes lying to the side, the tomb is empty; appearances to the disciples culminate in Thomas' confession. But this is all part of the *story itself*. Certainly, within the story these are the things that took place. But does the author really intend to tell us that Jesus got up and walked out of his tomb?

The closest thing to a clear meta-gospel statement about this is the close proximity of the resurrection accounts with the eyewitness claims quoted above. If we agree with the reasoning above, then, surely, the empty tomb and appearances are part of the narrative attested to. In fact, they are the culmination of the "signs" done "in the presence of His disciples." The writer can hardly, in this context, mean that all the stories *except* the resurrection are to be taken factually.

### Deity

It is common knowledge that John's gospel emphasizes the deity claim in the clearest and most persistent manner of the four gospels. Jesus is not, within this story, a mere human who is spiritually in tune with God. He is the Logos Himself, emptying himself and coming to earth to dwell temporarily as a human being. Again, within the story, the deity of Jesus comes together with the resurrection in Thomas' famous "My Lord and My God." Although we are clued in, as readers, from the first, we also see a development of Jesus' self-disclosure to his disciples.

It is obvious that "Son" is a metaphor. Even given the virgin birth, by which Jesus is quite

literally the "son" of God, he is not the Son of God in exactly the same way that I am the son of my father. Calling him the Logos rounds out the image, but only by using another metaphor. And so, it's clear from even the most orthodox perspective that metaphor is at work here.

But, for John, is there a Fact behind this metaphor? Is he serious about his contention that Jesus pre-existed, was God's agent in creating the world, deserves true worship, etc.? We are stuck *within* the story, like Wittgenstein's fly in the bottle. Once again, we must look for meta-gospel clues. And once again, the short Statement of Purpose - examined above - is telling:

"Jesus did many other signs also in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." (20.30-31)

This takes us out of the story, out of the bottle. *And outside the story*, we are presented with the meta-gospel claim that Jesus is the Son of God. It seems to me that this gives us warrant to interpret "Son of God" by means of the explanations provided in the prologue: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

### **The Prologue and John the Baptist**

The next point is a very indirect point, but one that seems interesting and fruitful to me. I have always thought it odd that the Logos-oriented prologue should be interrupted by short statements about John the Baptist. It interrupts the flow of thought and jerks us away from the lofty imagery. In fact, this has led some commentators to think that the John the Baptist phrases are later, rather clumsy interpolations within an earlier poetic hymn.

Recently it occurred to me that perhaps the author did this on purpose: the purpose being to precisely *anchor* the "Word became flesh" in history. John the Baptist was undeniably a real person, in fact a rather famous prophet figure. The writer intertwines his lofty expression with the dirt-and-grit of the Baptist. He not only uses a historical figure, but he makes John the Baptist's *purpose in life* to prepare the way for, and bear witness to, Jesus.

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## **Conclusion**

I am struck by the fact of the explicit claim in the narrative that it is based not only on eyewitness accounts, but on the personal experiences of Jesus' "beloved disciple." This claim may be true or it may be false, but it is a claim. It is a striking case of exactly the kind of meta-gospel statement we are trying to find.

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## **Paul - The Deity of Christ**

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: January 2, 2002

First, I must point out that there is a wealth of material about Paul and his views regarding the deity and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I am under no illusion that I can adequately cover the

terrain here, and I have no wish to construct a lengthy analysis of this topic. I do, however, want to lay out the main arguments as clearly and succinctly as I can.

It is universally acknowledged that the Apostle Paul wrote Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Philippians, and so a passage from Philippians, which I am discussing here, is directly representative of Paul. What were his views about the deity of Jesus?

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## True Incarnation

According to the Metaphorical Gospel theory, Paul saw the deity of Christ not as an attribute of the man Jesus but as a metaphor that *at most* describes the Risen Christ, or 'Christ of Faith', in some way. Remember that one kind of statement that would indicate a "factual" understanding of Jesus' deity would be a statement of his pre-existence. This is exactly what we find in Philippians 2:6, written during Paul's imprisonment in Rome, approx 60 A.D.

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, **being in very nature [morphe] God**,  
did not consider equality with God something to be **grasped**,  
but made himself nothing [emptied himself],  
taking **the very nature [morphe] of a servant**,  
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,  
he **humbled** himself  
and became obedient to death -  
even death on a cross!

This is usually taken as a classic description of the true and factual incarnation. Jesus, already in the "form" of God, emptied himself, humbled himself, *taking on* human flesh. The whole point of the passage depends upon Jesus' pre-existence - otherwise there is no emptying.

This is not a random statement in an obscure letter. It stands out as a startling definition of the incarnation in a letter universally acknowledged to be Paul's. Because of its poetic form, most commentators view it as a hymn, or a creed, which preceded even Paul's earliest letters - taking us back very, very close to the beginnings of the Christian faith.

Together [several points made earlier] they demonstrate beyond doubt the fact that these verses comprise an early hymn, or at least part of an early hymn that had as its subject Jesus Christ (cf. Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; and the interesting remark of Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia-Pontus, written to the Emperor Trajan A.D. 112-13, that Christians were in the habit of singing hymns "to Christ as to a god", Epistles 10.96) (Word 77)

Because of its centrality and importance, this passage has been scrutinized and fiercely debated by scholars. One commentary even admits that everything that *can* be said, *has* been said:

The number of genuine exegetical problems and the sheer mass of books and articles it has called forth leaves one wondering where to begin, despairing about adding anything new, and well-nigh stricken with mental paralysis. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that although much has been written on these verses there is little that can be agreed upon (Word 76)

However, the mainstream conclusion is that Paul is pointing to the real and true deity of Christ - including pre-existence in the 'form' of God, emptying himself of divine prerogatives, and becoming a man: the incarnation.

Philippians 2 is the earliest passage in the Pauline literature to raise in our minds serious questions about the pre-existence of Christ. ... we have moved a step beyond statements that 'God sent his Son' to an emphatic declaration that Christ's incarnation was a deliberate act of self-emptying (New 502)

Paul begins his hymn by remarking that Jesus, because he existed in the form of God, did not consider this high position as a prize to be held on to, but rather to be surrendered in order that he might serve (Word 79)

There are three crucial words, describing this motion, this humbling: form, grasped, emptied. Let's look at them briefly:

### **Form [morphe]**

The Greek word for 'form', like the English 'form', typically refers to the shape, visible form of something. Since God is spirit, it seems obvious that a metaphor is being used here. And since the word is intentionally used to describe the 'form' of a slave, the commentaries have generally settled on something like 'nature' to describe this mode, condition, or state - with caveats that perhaps 'nature' does not perfectly do justice to the word.

Why, then, in Philippians 2 does Paul use the particular term morphe, whereas similar statements in Romans 8 and Galatians 4 refer to God's Son? The basic meaning of the word seems to be 'visible form', and since children are often like their parents, it has been suggested that the phrase is comparable to the title 'Son of God.' ... Or perhaps it is the expression of the inner reality that is at one and the same time concealed by and revealed by the glory. This presumably lies behind the NIV's 'in very nature God', a translation that is nevertheless misleading. (New 506)

Morphe theou, then, may be correctly understood as the 'essential nature and character of God'.

To say, therefore, that Christ existed en morphe theou is to say that outside his human nature Christ had no other manner of existing apart from existing 'in the form of God', that is, apart from being in possession of all the characteristics and qualities belonging to God. This somewhat enigmatic expression, then, appears to be a cautious, hidden way for the author to say that Christ was God, possessed of the very nature of God, without employing these exact words. It appears to be a statement made by one who perhaps, although reared as a strict monotheist and thus unable to bring himself to say, 'Christ is God', was compelled nevertheless by the sheer force of personal encounter with the resurrected and living Christ to bear witness as best he could to the reality of Christ's divinity. (Word 84)

Furthermore, when the hymn says that Christ took the 'form of a slave' after his kenosis, it is not likely that its author had in mind that Christ merely looked like or had the external appearance of a slave. (Word 82)

### **Exploited/Grasped**

What was it that Jesus had, in his pre-existence; and what was it that he gave up? This turns, in part on the word harpagmos, which can mean either (a) something one has that he does not cling to, or (b) something that one could acquire but chooses not to acquire. Commentators are somewhat divided on this, but generally settle on the first interpretation.

The meaning of the word harpagmos, 'something to be exploited/grasped', has proved even more contentious than that of the word morphe. From the time of the church fathers, there have been many different interpretations of it. The main dispute has been about whether the word referred to something Christ already possessed, but did not cling to, or whether it referred to something he did not yet possess, but might have clutched at. (New 507)

It now seems, however, that the most likely interpretation of harpagmos is that it

refers to 'something to be exploited.' In this view, equality with God was something that Christ already possessed, but which he chose not to use for his own advantage. (New 507)

### Emptied

Finally, of what did Christ empty himself? In one radical 'kenotic' theory of the 70's, it was put forward that Christ *completely* emptied himself of his divinity, becoming not the God/man, but simply a man. This interpretation has been abandoned. Commentators generally agree that this is *not* the meaning of 'emptied.'

he emptied himself ... Christ did not cease to be 'in the form of God.' (New 508)

For the purposes of this discussion, there are two separate questions: (a) Is Paul claiming pre-existence in *at least* some super-angelic state for Jesus?, and (b) Is Paul claiming here full deity for the pre-existent Christ?

Let's look at the deity claim. It should be understood that the meaning of 'exploited/grasped' will not turn on fine distinctions in Greek, for this was debated by the Greek fathers themselves, and Greek was their everyday language. The best approach is simply to look at the context. If Jesus was in the 'form' of God, and '*emptied*' himself, then it seems perfectly clear that harpagmos refers to something that Jesus *had* which he *gave up*! Thus, his pre-existence did not involve, according to the context, the *future possibility* of being divine, but the *reality*.

However, even if we were to grant that *in this hymn* the full deity of Christ is ambiguous, we still have something which directly contradicts the MG Theory - the pre-existence of Jesus.

And if we can fully settle on the fact that Paul *really thought* Jesus was a pre-existing being who came into the world in human form (and especially if we take 'form of God' seriously), this will open up the meaning of many, many other *prima facie* deity references that permeate his letters.

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## Objections and Answers

I have found no objections in the commentaries to this interpretation. However, the most promising line would assuredly be to simply *ignore* the analytical meaning of the passage, and focus instead on the fact that this is a piece of poetry, a hymn.

It is conceded on all sides that Paul is, here, not doing a theological analysis or argument concerning Jesus' deity. He is quoting an existing hymn. The point of this section is *humility*, not (primarily) Christology. Jesus is our example here because he didn't lord it over people, even though he was (in some sense) Lord. Therefore, we simply should not press the details of the illustration. It is the mystical majesty - the spiritual mastery, perhaps - of Christ, which Jesus did not flaunt, which counts.

Answer. This *sounds* good, but is it fair? Look at the form of the passage.

1. A poem or hymn might use metaphor and analogy, as: 'Jesus is the Vine', or the Good Shepherd, or the Solid Rock, the Lamb, or the Door - and we do find exactly this kind of imagery throughout the New Testament. Or even something like 'the Brightness of Heaven', 'Glory of God', 'King of Kings.' His humility could be expressed poetically as we see in Suffering Servant passages. In poetry, we use our 'poetic license' when emphasizing and coloring our points, and the exegete must be on the lookout for hyperbole.



Is this passage an example of hyperbole, of a fantasy illustration? I find that it actually reads more like a statement of faith - in fact, a *creed* - than a hymn of the type that is sung in church or read, or poetry found in devotional booklets. In fact, it reads suspiciously like a sober, careful, thoughtful description of the Incarnation.

Purely as a matter of form, it has more in common with 'God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten not made, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven ...' than with 'A Mighty Fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing ...'.

2. Are the types 'hymn' (poetic hyperbole) and 'creed' (assertions to be taken factually) mutually exclusive? One Lutheran hymn comes immediately to mind: 'Beautiful Savior, king of creation, Son of God and Son of Man ...', which contains creedal phrases - 'Son of God' was intended literally to express Jesus' deity.

3. Finally, which interpretation makes more *sense*? Note, for instance, that there are *two* movements of humility in the passage - one more than is needed to make the point. (1) Jesus first empties himself to become a man; (2) then he humbled himself to become a crucified criminal. Paul could easily have made his point using either one. In fact, why introduce the super-hyperbole of emptying, when Jesus' human humility ('greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friends') is more than sufficient?

If I were to use, say, Albert Schweitzer as an example of humility, I would rightly mention his purposeful 'emptying' of his career (as both a world-class scholar and accomplished organist), in order to labor as a doctor in the jungle. Wouldn't that be enough? Would it occur to *anyone* to introduce the imagery that Schweitzer somehow pre-existed in the 'form of God', but emptied himself to become a man? If that is ridiculous today, how would that be seen by a first-century Jew?

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## Conclusion

Convincing to me are:

- The form of the passage is more like a creed than a poem
- Hymns can express creed-like assertions, and
- The phrase about pre-existence is not needed at all to make the point - it is completely superfluous.

I have to conclude that Paul was not just waxing poetic, but making a serious assertion - that Jesus pre-existed as divine in some sense, and that he become a man. Furthermore, this is most probably an existing formula, or hymn, or creed, that expresses the common Christian understanding, and possibly goes back to the earliest days of Christianity.

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## Resurrection in Paul

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: July 27, 2003

I must again point out that entire books have been written about Paul and his views regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I am under no illusion that I have adequately covered the terrain here, and I have no wish to construct a lengthy analysis of this topic. I do, however,



want to lay out the arguments as clearly and succinctly as I can.

It is universally acknowledged that the Apostle Paul wrote Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Philippians, and so this is a good place to start. What were his views about the resurrection of Christ?

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## The Resurrection of Jesus

One argument for the MG Theory, outlined in an earlier chapter, runs as follows:

Argument from Paul's Description of Our Resurrection

1. Our 'resurrection' (as described by Paul) will be a spiritual, not a physical, continuation of our existence.
2. Jesus' resurrection is the model for our own.
3. (thus, knowing the mode of our resurrection will tell us the mode of Jesus')

So, Jesus' resurrection was spiritual, not physical

I agree with premises #2 and #3, and agree that the conclusion follows from the premises. I dispute premise #1.

### Resurrection in the New Testament World

First, it is commonly understood that the notion of "resurrection" is one of the things that separated the Pharisees from the Sadducees (the Pharisees believed in it). Their view was that of a *bodily* resurrection. Bodies coming out of the graves. The presumption is that Paul would share that view. In addition, the very (Greek) word *anastasis* used to describe this denotes a bodily resurrection.

Next, it is indeed clear that Paul and other writers see Jesus' resurrection as the "first fruits" of our own, not something which only happened to Jesus. Statements which tell us what kind of resurrection we should expect also give us information about the author's conception of *Jesus'* resurrection (premise #3).

N.T. Wright puts this well:

Already we see an important point emerging. For the first-century Jew, *resurrection* was not a general term for "life after death." It was one point on a spectrum of beliefs about life after death. (Wright Vol 2, p 113)

There is no evidence for Jews of our period [the first century] using the word *resurrection* to denote something essentially nonconcrete. (Wright Vol 2, p 115)

Similarly, the commentaries certainly recognize that a bodily resurrection is claimed.

In any case, he knows that some Corinthians deny the resurrection of the body. This denial, it seems was due to their concept of the body as a hindrance to the soul's activity, - a characteristic Greek and Platonic concept. Paul answers by declaring that the bodily resurrection of Christ, which lies at the very heart of the apostolic preaching, is a fact duly attested by chosen witnesses. (Jerome 272-3)

the Apostles deals with the difficulties attending a materialistic conception of the resurrected body that the Corinthians had probably acquired from Jewish speculation on the subject. The resurrected body will be transformed into a perfect instrument for the new conditions of the life of glory. (Jerome 273)

Statements regarding the future resurrection in Jewish literature, and in the gospels, always imply a bodily resurrection. The burden of proof would be on the one who disputes this.

### **Transformation Resurrection**

Then how does Spong conclude that Jesus' resurrection is spiritual only? He does so by committing a logical fallacy: called the 'false dilemma'. He says that Jesus' resurrection must *either* be a resuscitation of a corpse *or* a spiritual event that has nothing to do with the body. He avoids the third possibility: that the claim of Jesus' resurrection is that Jesus' *own* body was *transformed*.

Let's see for ourselves how this works out in more detail, looking at the classic resurrection passage, 1 Cor 15. Paul here explicitly teaches the "transformation" resurrection of the body. He goes out of his way to provide an explanation about Jesus' resurrection.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures . . .

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. . .

But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. . .

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

This is a sustained *argument* about the reality and nature of Jesus' resurrection. The main

points are:

1. The truth of the gospel hinges on the reality of Jesus' resurrection - to disprove Jesus' resurrection would be to falsify the gospel.
2. Jesus' resurrection is of the same mode as our own (future) resurrection. (If there is no resurrection, then Jesus wasn't raised; he is the first occurrence of our own resurrection)
3. The nature of the resurrection is that of the *transformation* of the mortal body. Rather than being either a revitalized corpse on the one hand, or a disembodied spirit on the other, the resurrection body clearly has *continuity* with the mortal body, but has taken on different characteristics. "It" is sown perishable; "it" is raised imperishable. Rather than the removal of the spirit from the body, the body is described as "clothed" with imperishable attributes.

## Our Bodies

What is a "spiritual body"? This seems at first like a contradiction in terms. Body is physical, extended, tangible, etc. Spirit is not. Paul's statement, in fact, seems to first utter a tautology (it is sown a "physical body") and then a contradiction (it is raised a "spiritual body")! What goes on here?

**it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.**

The NIV does well to translate the first one "natural" body. The translators might have translated the second item "supernatural" body, because that is the contrast Paul is drawing. One reason they might have resisted this is "spiritual" loosely implies direction by the "Spirit", which would be somewhat obscured under the other rendering.

Earlier in that same letter, Paul had said, in an extended commentary about *bodies* (he uses the term 8 times in 7 verses), and within that context it is natural to interpret the resurrection as applying to the body.

"The *body* is not made for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the *body*. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your *bodies* are members of Christ himself ... " (1 Cor 6:15+)

What does Paul have to do, explicitly say that our *bodies* will be *transformed*? He does:

**"We eagerly await for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our *bodies*."  
(Rom 8:23)**

**". . will transform our lowly *bodies* so that they will be like his glorious body"  
(Phil 3:21)**

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## Side Note

Interestingly enough, John Dominic Crossan, who has no motive for attributing literalness to Paul's view, was forced in his rather famous popular work about Jesus, by the obvious evidence to agree that Paul taught the bodily resurrection. He only doubts whether this should be normative for all of first century Christianity. Crossan says,

"During the winter of 53 or 54 AD . . Paul was writing to the church he had founded at Corinth and defending the possibility and *actuality of bodily resurrection*. . . . For Paul, in any case, bodily resurrection is the only way that Jesus' continued presence can be expressed. . . . The question is not what it is that Paul means, because that is surely clear enough. The question is whether he speaks for all Christians then

and thereafter. Is resurrection, so understood, the only way or just one of the ways to express faith in the continuing power and presence of Jesus in the world?" (Jesus - a Revolutionary Biography p 165; emphasis mine)

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## Objections and Answers

The issue of Jesus' resurrection is central to the MG dispute. Crossan accepts that *for Paul*, Jesus' resurrection is a bodily one. For Borg, Jesus lived on in a spiritual state (not just in the memory of his followers) and interacted with people as the 'post-Easter' Jesus, but his body did not come back to life in any sense.

Objection. Spong definitely holds to a spiritual survival view. At least he tries to argue for it, giving his own twist to 1 Cor 15. See this, and an additional explanation by Mark Allan Powell, in "[Evidence in Favor of the MG Theory](#)" > [Resurrection in Paul](#).

Answer. The above section serves as the 'Answer' to these objections.

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## Kerygma in Acts

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: July 27, 2003

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### Introduction

So far, we have considered major meta-gospel statements: Luke's prologue, John's eyewitness claim, Matthew's editorial aside, and Paul's descriptions of Jesus' deity and resurrection. The next set of statements are *not* direct meta-gospel statements, but something else.

In Acts we see a story about the apostles and the spread of the gospel. Of course, in the MG view, Acts (the second part of the work by the author of Luke) is every bit as metaphorical as the gospels. The writer did not intend to convey these as stories of what *actually happened*. Remember, on the MG view:

- Jesus fulfilled no prophecies; rather, the authors *created stories* based on Old Testament passages (in Spong, 'midrash'; in Crossan 'prophecy historicized')
- Jesus' resurrection was not a physical one

And so, if the MG Theory is true, how would Luke portray the preaching of the gospel (the 'kerygma', or proclamation) in Acts? It seems logical that he would, at the very least, show the apostles preaching a *spiritual* gospel. He might invent fabulous tales of miracles accompanying the message, but the preaching would not be the 'literalistic gospel.'

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## Kerygma

In reading Acts, let's assume for argument's sake, with the MG scholars, that Luke freely invented stories about the disciples and their preaching of the gospel. These disciples are often pictured as *presenting* the gospel to the public, and Luke has presumably put words in the mouths of his characters for some reason. This is a perfect place to give us an indication that

the gospel events are to be construed symbolically, not literally, if that is what Luke has in mind.

## Appeal to Personal Eyewitness

First, I will point out the fact that the disciples repeatedly appeal to their own personal eyewitness experience of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Luke has them claiming that these things are true in the plain sense.

"You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this." (Acts 3:14)

And this eyewitness information is so important, in Luke's story, that they are even willing to lay down their lives for it. When Peter and John were arrested, they were told to keep quiet. They replied:

"Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:18-20)

## Peter

The first prominent speech in Acts is by Peter, at Pentecost.

"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, **as you yourselves know**. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

David said about him: 'I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, *nor will you let your Holy One see decay*. You have made known to me the paths of life; and will fill me with joy in your presence.' (Psalm 16:8-11)

Brothers, I can tell you confidently **that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet** and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on this throne. **Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.**" (Acts 2:22-32)

What is this? Peter clearly is claiming the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He specifically addresses the decay of the body in the grave. Nothing could be plainer than that. He appeals to a prophecy in the Psalms and says that his hearers should believe him precisely *because* Jesus has (really) fulfilled this prophecy.

In fact, *every time Peter presents the gospel* he appeals to the claim that Jesus' sufferings and resurrection were real, that Peter and his companions knew this from personal experience, and that they had been predicted. When explaining the good news to Cornelius, Peter says:

"We are **witnesses** of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. **He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen - by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.** He commanded us to preach to the

people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. **All the prophets testify about him** that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10:39-43)

The commentaries agree that this is indeed presented as an argument from prophecy:

Peter's argument from prophecy shows that the 'promise' of the Father has truly been fulfilled. (*Jerome* 173)

Notice that they "ate and drank with him" after the resurrection (again, a bodily resurrection). What can Luke be thinking? A pattern quickly develops, as you move through Acts. Virtually everybody who presents the gospel in Acts uses a similar argument.

Peter after healing blind man:

"You killed the author of life, but God **raised him from the dead**. We are **witnesses** of this. . . But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. . . Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have **foretold** these days." (Acts 3:14-24)

## Paul

When Paul is on trial for this life (a trial he eventually lost), his primary defense at each hearing was "I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." And he appeals to fulfilled prophecy:

"I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen - that the Christ would suffer and, **as the first to rise from the dead**, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles." At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."

"I am not insane, most excellent Festus", Paul replied. "What I am saying **is true and reasonable**. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because **it was not done in a corner**. King Agrippa, **do you believe the prophets?** I know you do."

The commentaries agree with the plain sense of the passage (even Jerome, see below):

### **true and reasonable**

"Paul's retort is in kind and appeals to precisely what Festus values: 'What I am saying' is true and reasonable.' ... Hardly insane, what he says is *sophrosune*, a word that denotes intellectual sobriety." (Oxford 341)

### **Pharisees and resurrection**

"Paul's discourse before King Agrippa. In Luke's story, this--Paul's last defense--is the culmination of his career. ... The whole is dominated once again by a concern to present Paul's belief and ministry as the logical consequence of Pharisaism and the fulfillment of Scripture. ... Paul implies: The true Pharisee must logically become a Christian." (Jerome 210)

As a Jew, aware of the Pharisaic belief in the resurrection of the dead and probably also of the death of Jesus of Nazareth, he is one to whom Paul can legitimately appeal. (Jerome 211)

Note also that Jesus is the first to rise. This is no spiritual journey to heaven that happens to everyone. This is a genuine resurrection he's claiming.

Again, Paul recapitulates the same argument employed by Peter. The Jewish leaders killed

Jesus, he rose bodily, and this was predicted (referring to the same prophecy was Peter):

"The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. . .

The fact that God raised him from the dead, **never to decay**, is stated in these words: "I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David." (Is 55:3) So it is stated elsewhere: "**You will not let your Holy One see decay.**" (Ps 16:10)

For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and **his body decayed**. But the one whom God raised from the **dead did not see decay**. (Acts 13:26-37)

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## Method of Evangelism to the Jews

### Systematic Appeal to Prophecy

In Acts, one of Paul's major strategies in the story is to go to a synagogue and prove to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah by appealing to fulfilled prophecy. Now, even if you think he uses special pleading in interpreting the O.T. passages, this method could only have convincing force to the hearers if Jesus had actually *done* the things prophesied. What kind of apologetic would it be if Paul were to say "Here are a bunch of Old Testament passages, and we've invented stories just as if Jesus had done these things, ... but he didn't"? If Paul used metaphorical stories about Jesus, he couldn't possibly use these stories as *evidence* of fulfilled prophecy. It would be absurd. Yet this is exactly how he is portrayed.

Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 9:22)

As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. . . .

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." (Acts 17:2, 11)

The commentaries agree that Paul is presented as *arguing* from Old Testament prophecy. The *argument* is, quite obviously, that prophets of old predicted certain sets of events, and that these events occurred.

Luke means that Saul constructed arguments from OT passages to bolster his preaching. (Jerome 187)

17.1-4. This feature [Bible teaching] of Paul's mission is nicely captured by this text, where he is said to perform a sequence of tasks apropos of a trained exegete of Scripture: 'from the scriptures', he 'argued', 'explained', and 'proved'. The first task should not be viewed as argumentative but as that of the scholar who carefully sifts textual evidence is mounting a persuasive case. (New, 238)

17.10-12. The new word introduced here, 'examine', is a legal term used nowhere else in the NT for the study of Scripture. Luke uses it here for Paul's appeal to Israel's Scriptures as a legal 'witness' to warrant his gospel's claims about Jesus. That is, his claims about Jesus are not the by-product of an imaginative reading of Scripture. Rather, they are judicious and give competent testimony by which a fair verdict may be rendered by his auditors; indeed, 'many of them therefore believe'. (Oxford, 239)

Apollos followed suit:

"On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ." Acts 18:27

And Paul continued this through his ministry.

From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets." (Acts 28:23)

What could Paul possibly be trying to convey by the argument that Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy is proof that he is the Messiah? How is it that someone could be portrayed as spending his time arguing that "Jesus" satisfied O.T. predictions when it is *commonly known* that *the man Jesus* did not do these things?

How can an appeal to imaginative reconstruction impress *anyone* enough to be called "reasoning with the Jews from the Scriptures"?

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## Objections and Answers

Let's look at it from the MG point of view. Now, even if none of these events really happened and Luke invented these dialogues out of whole cloth, *why would Luke put these kinds of words* in the mouths of his characters?

### 1. A Made-up Story

I have not found any clear answers from the commentaries. I'm not even sure that proponents of the MG Theory have even considered this issue. The *Jerome* commentary comes the closest to a 'liberal' view that I saw. First, it denies the historicity of Paul's speech on Mars Hill.

17.22-34. Paul's discourse at the Areopagus. ... It is actually a Lucan composition, another example of the inserted discourse. It mirrors the reaction of a Christian missionary confronted with pagan culture ... (Jerome 199)

But Jerome gives us no insight about the question before us. The commentary contents itself with criticizing the fairness of O.T. citation.

But once again Luke's reference to the OT is vague; *the reader is supposed to believe that in the OT Christianity is in some way foretold*. But specific references to OT passages as support for the following summary of Christian belief are strikingly lacking; they reveal Luke's cavalier manner of handling the OT. ... Not only does he conflate the two figures (Messiah with Suffering Servant) - a conflation that is still unattested in pre-Christian times - he even asserts that the OT implies the resurrection of this conflated figure; yet no references are given to OT passages. (*Jerome* 211; emphasis mine)

Answer. However, note that even in this view, it is assumed that the reader is *expected to*



*construe* the Old Testament passages as genuinely predicting Jesus' resurrection. And so, even if the entire books of Acts is a complete fabrication, the intent is to portray the real resurrection - as fulfillment of prophecy - as a reality.

## 2. Stylistic Verbiage

Perhaps someone could say, "The accepted metaphors about Jesus have to do with his miracles, deity, prophecy, resurrection. These are powerful themes. The writer of Acts was simply tapping in to these images when he constructed these stories." I haven't seen this argument, but it is logically possible.

Answer. First, I don't know how this argument would be defended. It's the kind of thing which might be simply asserted.

Second, Why go out of his way to *emphasize* the *bodily* resurrection ("decay"), "argued from the scriptures", and personal eyewitness, when there is a wealth of gospel imagery available to draw from?

Third, These passages were not written 'in a corner' - they present (a) the kerygma, the *essence* of the gospel message, and (b) the method of evangelizing the Jews.

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## Conclusion

Here again are the points that are repeatedly reinforced in the Kerygma and method of Jewish evangelism:

- Their message is rooted in their own experience of Jesus' teaching, and especially his resurrection
- Jesus' resurrection was a bodily one - he did not experience decay, nor was he abandoned to the grave
- This resurrection, among other things, was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Those who are Jews should accept him because he was the foretold Messiah.
- Jesus' role as Messiah, as Christ, is founded on these things.

These points simply make no sense if you assume a MG Theory view. The burden of proof is on the MG proponents to show the *point* of these stories, when seen through the MG lens.

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## Epistles: Myth vs. Fact

By: Erick Nelson

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### Deutero- Epistles

What is a "deutero-" epistle? Some scholars believe that several of the New Testament letters commonly attributed to Paul, Peter, and John were not written by them, but in fact were composed by their *followers*, "in their name", *as if* the apostles were writing. These pseudonymous letters are called "deutero-" epistles to emphasize their derivative nature. Among such letters are generally included: 2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, 2 Peter, and 1-3 John, and sometimes 1 Peter.

Norman Perrin explains this view in relation to Paul:

"The writers were most probably pupils of the apostle who consciously imitated their teacher, wrote in his name, and totally identified themselves with him. This was permissible in the ancient world, indeed, in that world it was an accepted literary practice. (*The New Testament: an Introduction*, p 119)

A major aspect of the importance of deuterio-Pauline Christianity is that it shows the influence of the apostle living on in the church. These are Paulinists who were taught by their master, who possessed and meditated on his letters, who developed further some of his ideas, who carefully and conscientiously attempted to meet in his spirit the challenges and needs of the churches, and who wrote formally in his name. (*The New Testament: an Introduction*, p 134)

While this 'deutero' view is disputed, for the purposes of this study it doesn't matter whether these letters were penned by apostles or by their followers. For the sake of argument, I will grant the point. The important thing is that their writings contain meta-gospel statements, that try to *explain* the meaning and intent of gospel.

### **Deutero-Epistles and the MG Theory**

To review the MG claim: The contention of the MG Theory is that the writers of the New Testament did not intend to portray the deity and resurrection of Jesus as literal truths, nor did they view many of the gospel stories - especially those with miraculous elements - as historical accounts.

Since these letters are part of the N.T., it is to be assumed that their authors, too, held the MG view. Thus, they would consciously believe that the key gospel stories were not accounts of events that occurred, but were imaginative stories or tales, metaphorically true, pointing to spiritual truths.

Note. John Dominic Crossan would probably agree with the points made in this section, but would not agree that they count against *his* version of the MG Theory. He dates the deutero-epistles very late (120-150), during (for instance) Justin Martyr's lifetime. They would presumably be part of the 'literalizing' period. Crossan's position actually contributes toward the case against *Spong's* form of the theory; otherwise, these comments don't apply to him.

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## **The Gospel Stories as Accounts of What Happened**

Do we find indications that these letter-writers believe that (many of) the gospel stories were not accounts of events that occurred, but were imaginative stories or tales? Or do we find the reverse?

### **Deutero-Paul**

First, we have the author of 1 Timothy, supposedly a disciple of Paul writing in his name and authority. This writer is counseling the reader to resist false doctrines, which are taught by "deceiving spirits." The thing that most characterizes these doctrines is that they are myths. The author says:

"As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to **myths** and endless genealogies." (1 Tim 1:3-4)

"The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow

deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. . . . Have nothing to do with **godless myths** and **old wives' tales**" (1 Tim 4:1, 7)

The natural opposite of "myth" would be "fact", that is, things that were not just made up. And the author does urge Timothy to stick with the "true doctrines", which comprise "the faith", and which are not made up. What do the commentaries say?

### Myth

First, what does the writer mean by 'myths'? Whatever they are, they are part of the false doctrines being opposed by Paul; he goes so far as to say that they are demonic deceptions. There seems to be no doubt about the fact the concept of 'myth' is indeed antithetical to 'fact', what happened.

By calling them 'myths', Paul is pointing out their legendary and untrustworthy nature and is implicitly contrasting them with the gospel that is rooted in historical events. Many compare the myths and genealogies to Jewish allegories of creation of interpretations of the OT patriarchs and their family trees such as are found in Jubilees or Pseudo-Phil Biblical Antiquities ... [To several citations,] add the possibility of speculative rabbinic exegesis. Some see a mixed background of Judaism and Gnosticism ... who includes stories about Jesus. The word [muthoi] occurs five times in the NT, four in the PE [Pastoral Epistles]. Elsewhere Paul calls the myths profane, silly, and Jewish (Word 20)

'Myths' are a regular target, the term already familiar in the sense of 'untrue story, fiction', as opposed to historical truth, and always used negatively in the NT. (New 790)

'fables and endless genealogies' seems to refer to legends and fictitious genealogies of OT personages in the manner attested to in *Jub.* (Jerome 353)

In every occurrence, 'myth' is used in a negative sense (Word 21), it is contrasted with godliness (in addition to factuality) (Word 250), and "The immediate contrast is between 'the faith' and 'deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.'" (New 812)

### Deutero-Peter

If we are trying to read this epistle with MG lenses, we run up against an obstacle in the very introduction. In fact, when I first heard of the MG theory, this relatively obscure passage was one of the first things that came to mind. Right away, I wanted to ask, "What about 2 Peter?"

We did not follow **cleverly invented stories** when we told you about the **power and coming** of our Lord Jesus Christ, but **we were eyewitnesses** of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." **We ourselves heard** this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain." (2 P 1:16-18)

"But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. . . In their greed these teachers will exploit you with **stories they have made up.** " (2 P 2:1, 3)

The writer seems to be saying that the message about Jesus was specifically *not* something that was freely created, but was an eyewitness experience regarding the man Jesus. And he follows this up by warning against the false teachers, who turn out to be the ones who *do* make up their own stories.

Now what could he possibly be trying to convey by this? He appears to be *explicitly contradicting* the ideas found in the Metaphorical Gospel theory. Perhaps the commentaries

yield a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding.

## Myths

Whereas the letter to Timothy counsels to resist the myths of the false teachers, in this letter the author at first seems to be countering the charge that *he* is a follower of myths. (point made in *Word* 213) What is meant by 'myth'? There are three identifiable senses, according to the commentators: (1) a story not literally true but having deep moral, philosophical, or spiritual meaning; (2) a story that's simply not true; (3) a fable or fairy story.

What did they mean by this charge? The connotations of the term *muthos* in the first century A.D. were almost as various as those of the modern English 'myth.' The old Greek myths, the stories about the gods, could be seen as stories which were not literally true but expressed religious, moral or philosophical truth in pictorial form. They could be subjected to allegorical interpretation, as by the Stoics. The Hellenistic age was in many respects one which showed a 'growing preference for *muthos* [myth] over *logos* [rational argument] as a means of expressing truth. This preference is characteristic of gnosticism: the saving *gnosis* is often cast in the form of a myth' (C.K. Barrett). (*Word* 213)

On the other hand, there was a strong tradition of criticism and repudiation of myths, as morally unedifying, or as childish, nonsensical or fabulous. Here *muthos* can come, like 'myth' in much modern English usage, to mean a story which is not true, a fable or fairy story (again in the derogatory senses). (*Word* 213)

'cleverly concocted' corresponds to the common description of myths as 'invented', 'fabricated', but is more expressive in incorporating the idea of 'cleverness' in a bad sense. (*Word* 214)

The writers of that era clearly understood the difference between myth and 'history', and consciously separated them:

Strabo and Diodorus of Sicily oppose myth to history; Plutarch contrasts a myth and a true account. (*Word* 213)

Surprisingly, it is characteristic of Philo to distinguish the biblical history from myth, as truth from fiction. His concern is not only to reject the pagan myths, but to repudiate the suggestion, no doubt made by Hellenized Jews as well as by pagans, that the biblical stories were mythical. (*Word* 213)

The phrase 'following myths' is used by Josephus in contrasting Moses, who did not invent fictional stories, with other legislators, who followed fables (*Ant* 1.22, cf. 15-16) (*Word* 214)

## eyewitness

And the writer explicitly contrasts the claim of 'myth' with the factuality of his own claim. He appeals directly to his own (and his companions') personal experience, in this case their witness of the Transfiguration described in the gospels. He stresses not only 'eyewitness' but hearing the 'voice' on that mountain.

Refutation of accusations against Christian doctrine often emphasized apostolic eyewitness testimony to historical events. (*New* 342)

It is sometimes said that an emphasis on eyewitness testimony is characteristic of the later NT documents. What the evidence adduced really proves is that a stress on the apostolic eyewitnesses occurs when there is a need for apologetic defense of the Christian message in some way be reference to its historical basis. (*Word* 216)

## stories they have made up

And, finally the writer turns the argument full circle against his opponents - *they* are the ones peddling myths!

The false teachers' claim that the apostles preached a myth has been turned back upon them. (New 344)

### Deutero-John

Just as the prologue to Luke spells out his purpose, the prologue to 1 John says a great deal about the author's intent. The author explicitly claims to base his teaching on that which he has personally experienced in the real world. Note the emphasis on the tangible: seen with his eyes, hands have touched. This is reminiscent of the Gospel of John:

That which was from the beginning, which we have **heard**, which we have **seen with our eyes**, which we have looked at and our **hands have touched** - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have **seen** it and testify to it . . . We proclaim to you what we have **seen and heard**, so that you also may have fellowship with us." (1 John prologue)

The commentaries agree that the author is indeed stressing the factuality, even the tangible nature, of the message; and not only that, but the personal, first-hand experience of the one who is testifying:

('we have heard ... we felt [with our hands]'). Perhaps for the benefit of those of his readers who were entertaining docetic (i.e. humanity-denying views of Christ's person, the writer stresses the reality of God's self-disclosure in time and space. (Word Vol 51, p 7)

Whereas John highlights the pre-existent glory of the Word who indeed became flesh, 1 John stresses the empirically verifiable reality of the Son, 'which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched.' (New 382)

the 'we' is a Johannine characteristic, referring to the apostolic testimony. ... The substance of the apostolic testimony remains what has been seen and heard; in turn, this rests on specific facts that were sensibly experienced (Jerome 406)

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## Objections and Answers

### 1. Only Certain *Kinds* of Myths

One might counter, however, that Paul, in 1 Timothy, is not opposing *all* kinds of myths, but only opposing *certain* kinds of myths (namely, "godless" myths) at variance with his own.

In addition, one would have to continue the argument by contending that the writers object only to:

- myths *combined with* genealogies (1 Tim)
- 'old wives' tales', as opposed to deep spiritual truths (1 Tim)
- *cleverly* invented stories, as opposed to sincere portrayals of myth (2 Peter)
- stories the *false teachers* have made up (2 Peter)

Answer. In these passages, the authors have a perfect opportunity to explicitly contrast the "bad" myths with the "good" myths of the gospel. They do not do so. Instead, Peter contrasts the myths with his own personal experience in the everyday physical world. John, in addition, stresses his personal, very tangible evidential view.

## 2. 'Eyewitness' Used in a Different Sense

It has been pointed out that 'eyewitness' may have a different meaning than the normal one. It could mean a person who has been initiated into spiritual mysteries - in Peter's case, the mystery of the Transfiguration *vision*.

It means 'observer, spectator' ... The term was also used technically for the higher grade of initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries, evidently as those who had seen the vision of the divine mysteries. Most commentators think that this technical usage is echoed in 2 Peter. (Word 215)

Answer. Even if this were granted, it would only apply to the Petrine witness, and even then, it would *still refer to the author's own experience*. That is to say - in this case (if we concede the point), it's true that the experience is not one of the everyday world, but a visionary one. But it is still something which (purportedly) *happened*, not something which was made up!

## 3. 'Cleverly Invented Stories' Refers to the *Second Coming*

To what do Peter's 'cleverly invented stories' refer? Since the ending of the epistle focuses on the return of Christ, the second 'coming' [parousia] of the Lord, one could say that the 'coming' [parousia] referred to in this passage is also that future eschatological event. Thus,

The *eschatological* teaching of the apostles is held [charged] to be, not prophecy inspired by God, but the fabrication of merely human cleverness, doubtless with some unworthy motive. (Word 214; emphasis mine)

In this view, Peter is not talking about the gospel message of Jesus' life on earth, but to a future event. He is appealing to his experience of the Transfiguration to give authenticity to his claim to know the future (prophecy).

Answer. It is not clear from the context that the charge of cleverly invented stories refers to future events. For the wider context - at this point of the epistle, Peter has not introduced *that* controversy yet; he appears to be *reminding* his readers of some basic gospel elements. For the immediate context, he is immediately contrasting the 'invented stories' with past personal experience.

Second, even if the point is conceded, Peter is appealing to his own experience of the Transfiguration, which was a pivotal miraculous event in the life of Jesus.

Third, this argument only applies to the one example; it does nothing to refute the other examples.

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## Conclusion

It is actually surprising that these short epistles would provide any direct evidence one way or the other. They are concerned with their own issues. It just turns out that one of their issues appears to be something very like our Metaphorical Gospel question. In their view, it is the *false teachers* who create their own metaphorical stories.

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## Jesus vs. Christ: Epistles

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: Thursday July 31, 2003

## MG Theory and the Jesus/Christ Distinction

One of the points made by MG scholars, following Bultmann, is to contrast the 'Jesus of History' with the 'Christ of Faith.' Marcus Borg's distinction is between the 'pre-Easter' and 'post-Easter' Jesus. Whether 'post-Easter' Jesus or 'Christ of Faith', this entity is the 'Jesus' experienced by the Church. This early Christian experience, for the MG scholars, is what was instantiated in the stories they created. For Spong, it was motivated by 'midrash'; for Crossan, 'prophecy historicized'; for Borg, it was at least in part the ecstatic declarations by early Christian prophets which inspired spiritual stories.

Some writers (Crossan) place primary value on the Jesus of History. Others (Spong) put their emphasis on the Christ of Faith. And of course, there are scholars (Borg) who emphasize both aspects, each in its own way.

And so, the *details* of the Jesus vs. Christ distinction vary somewhat between the MG scholars, but *that* there is a vital distinction, and the general outline of that distinction, is common to all three.

If the Metaphorical Gospel Theory is true, then the New Testament writers would (all of them), at least tacitly, have this distinction in mind. They would believe in - and teach - a clear and definite distinction between the man, Jesus of Nazareth, and the object of the Christians' experience, the risen "Christ of Faith."

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## Jesus vs. The Christ

One would not expect to find much discussion about this in the gospels; but that could be because this is an unstated background assumption. Since the epistles tend to *explain* Christianity, one might have better luck. In fact, that is just where we ought to find clear support for the theory, if there is any. Paul, in particular, makes theological distinctions all the time, and since the nature of Christ is a central theological theme to him, we should see this distinction completely laid out for us.

But we *do not find* this to be the case. But perhaps Paul is *so unconcerned* with the historical Jesus that it doesn't even occur to him to address this issue. Scholars such as N.T. Wright have disputed this 'unconcern', convincingly in my view, and so this explanation appears weak.

And so, looking further, do we find *any* indications that New Testament writers believe in a clear and definite distinction between the man, Jesus of Nazareth, and the object of the Christians' experience, the risen "Christ of Faith?" Or do any of them stress a fundamental identity of Jesus with "the Christ?"

### 1 John

The writer of 1 John (whether John the disciple or another is irrelevant to this point) is concerned to deny a certain false teaching, or perhaps two different teachings. We are warned in these statements to be suspicious of those who separate Jesus from "the Christ", for they are deceivers.

Who is the liar? It is the man **who denies that Jesus is the Christ**. Such a man is the antichrist - he denies the Father and the Son. (1 John 2:22)

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that **Jesus Christ as come in the flesh** is from God, but every spirit



that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. (1 John 4:2-3)

The first case could refer either to the one who simply denies the Messianic status of Jesus, or to one who says that Jesus and the Christ are separate. The separation of the Christ (a spiritual being) and Jesus (the man) appears to be the teaching that the writer opposes in the second passage.

### **The Christ**

There are, of course, two senses in which someone could deny that Jesus is the Christ, and this depends on the meaning of 'Christ' in each case. The first, most obvious interpretation, is the denial that Jesus was ever the Jewish Messiah. The second would be to posit a second spiritual being or principle, 'the Christ', that filled Jesus or inspired him or for a time became part of him, but which is essentially separate from him.

If we combine both statements, it seems clear that the Messiahship of Jesus is not the point in question. This rather lengthy explanation is a good one:

Thus in v 22, when John says that 'the liar' is the person who 'denies that Jesus is the Christ', he could be referring to the (ex-pagan) docetic heretic who refused to acknowledge the real humanity of Jesus Christ, or the unity of his human and divine nature. For that person the Christ was not *Jesus*. Equally, he could be describing the ex-Jewish heretic who did not believe that Jesus was the *Christ*; and this is, after all, the obvious meaning of the Gr. as it stands. It is doubtful if this signifies an assault on the Christian faith as such, by Jews who denied that Jesus was the Messiah expected in the OT, since this was not the problem addressed by the writer of either these letters, or indeed of the Fourth Gospel. Rather, the author may be describing the person whose estimate of Jesus was inadequate, in accepting his humanity but failing to acknowledge his divinity. Support for such an argument may be derived from the second part of this v, where denial of Jesus as the Christ is equated with disowning the Father and the (divine) *Son*.

In either case John is asserting the reality of the Incarnation, and claiming that in Jesus two natures, human and divine, were present. However, in view of the fact that the heretics who led the breakaway from the Johannine community were probably docetic in outlook, and (as a group) in the ascendant, it is likely that John has chiefly (but not exclusively) in mind at this point those of a similar inclination: schismatics who thought of Jesus Christ as divine, but not as properly human. To such people John asserts (by implication) that Jesus is the Christ, thereby seeking to preserve the truth against the inroads of heresy. (Word 114)

### **Docetism**

The most common explanation is that the heretics John is opposition advocate some form of Docetism, a view that we know became popular at least by the early second century. One definition of Docetism (from <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txc/docetism.htm>)

Docetism is a term used to refer to a theological perspective among some in the early church who regarded the sufferings and the human aspects of Christ as imaginary or apparent instead of being part of a real incarnation. The basic thesis of such docetics was that if Christ suffered he was not divine, and if he was God he could not suffer. The combination of the two natures, Son of David and Son of God, affirmed by Paul in Rom. 1:3 - 4 was apparently already under attack in the Johannine community (see 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). Docetic thinking became an integral part of the perspectives of Gnostics, who viewed Jesus as the alien messenger from outside the present evil world and one who was untouched by the evil creator. This alien Jesus came to awaken Gnostics to their destiny outside the realm of creation. While the framers of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds were opposed to docetic teaching and clearly assumed the two natures of Jesus, the drafters of the Definition of Chalcedon (451 AD) made explicit the Christian teaching concerning Jesus Christ as "truly God and truly man." G L Borchert (Elwell Evangelical Dictionary) Bibliography: J N D Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines



The (somewhat later?) arch-heretic, Cerinthus, is a possible example of one holding these views:

But what is meant by saying that they were denying the nature of Jesus as 'the Christ'? ... Cerinthus, who probably lived c A.D. 100, was a gnostic Jewish-Christian who claimed that the divine emanation (or aeon) 'Christ' came upon the man Jesus at his baptism in the form of a dove, sent by God, and left him before his crucifixion. Thus the human and divine natures of Jesus were never properly united, there was no genuine Incarnation as such, and only the *human* Jesus suffered and rose again. (Word 111)

However, it is simply not clear precisely what the condemned heresy is:

'The exact nature of the false teaching which is denounced in these Epistles has been much disputed, and is still a matter of controversy. The opponents have been held to be Jews, or Judaizing Christians, or Gnostics, Judaizing or heathen, or some particular set of Gnostics, Basilides, Saturninus, Valentinus or Cerinthus. Some have supposed the chief error denounced to be Docetism, others Anti-nomianism" (A.E. Brooks). (Jerome 410)

But there is a clear parallel in Ignatius (discussed in another section of this article):

An alternative explanation of the christological error which the writer is attacking in this passage is to identify it with the heresy opposed by Ignatius. (Word 113)

What relationship does this have to the MG Theory? Do the MG scholars hold to a form of Docetism? They certainly don't teach the doctrine that 'Jesus suffered, but Christ didn't suffer.' But limiting John's criticism to this narrow heresy is unnecessary and probably inaccurate. It's not at all clear, first, that 1 John is objecting to *that specific* doctrine; in fact, the heresy proposes a more general thesis: that (a) Jesus is not the Christ, and (b) that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh.

However you slice it, John is opposing any view which separates Jesus and 'Christ.' If he wanted to maintain that a certain kind of separation (such as pre-Easter and post-Easter) was, nevertheless, valid, he had the perfect opportunity to say so. Instead, this author is clearly determined to identify the two. They are precisely the same person. Jesus *is* the Christ.

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## Objections and Answers

### 1. This Epistle is Post-MG

Crossan dates 1 John in the 80-120 period. If he (or anyone else) pushes it to the 110-120 side, then the letter is contemporaneous with Ignatius' epistles, and thus would possibly reflect the 'literalizing' tendency already under way. The wording is very similar to Ignatius.

Thus, one might agree with everything said above, but counter that this letter should not be used as evidence regarding the MG Theory.

Answer. First, I believe that Spong and Borg do not themselves hold to this late of a date, and I'm not clear about Crossan's actual date (if it's more like 80, then this objection would be less effective). The burden is on the one who proposes a second-century date.

Second, Given a first-century date for this epistle, along with 2 Peter, etc., we would have a different MG view - a mixed view. The view would hold that some of the New Testament

writers (namely the gospel writers and Paul) wrote metaphorically, but that other writers (deutero-epistles) wrote literally, even though they were roughly contemporaneous. I specifically asked Bishop Spong about his position on these matters.

4) One possible view is a hybrid scenario, with a two-tier hierarchy (sort of an "elite vs. the masses" approach), with the spiritually sophisticated leaders of the church sponsoring such works as the gospels. These gospels are creative midrash, and of course the writers and leaders operate from within that tradition. However, the masses are not sophisticated, and easily fall into a literal understanding of the material presented to them. This could have two flavors, neither of which appears to be advocated by Spong

He pointed me to his then-upcoming book of Aug, '96, which did not indicate at all that he advocated that kind of theory.

## **2. John's Critique is Specific - Does Not Address MG**

One could try to develop the point that John only objected to the *specific form* of division advocated by his opponents. Perhaps the heresy was denying that Jesus ('Jesus Christ') ever was a human being - not that Jesus was a human and Christ was a spiritual force. In such a case, John would only be affirming that Jesus was the Messiah and was a real human being: either (a) he never existed as a historical person, or (b) he was a super-human being who just looked like a man.

In either case, *this* heresy is not what is affirmed by the MG theory. And so, John's comments do not refute it.

Answer. It seems to me that this is actually a possible interpretation of the text, if you look at only the second statement. I would respond by saying that *my* point does not necessarily depend on an isomorphic match between the MG theory and the condemned heresy. I would reaffirm that when John talks about people who deny that Jesus is the Christ, he is not talking about people who deny the Messiah-ship of Jesus, but people who take issue with the Christ coming *in the flesh*.

Thus, if you take *both* statements, together, you see that John is objecting to one form of the general fallacy of separating Jesus and the Christ. His response is to tighten the connection. And so, John's statements run counter to the MG theory in that it seeks to separate what should not be separated. For John, Jesus and 'Christ' essential describe the same person. Jesus IS the Christ.

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## **Summing up the Internal Evidence**

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: Thursday July 31, 2003

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We have seen that attempting to use passages within the gospels as evidence of intent, relative to the MG Theory, is problematic. However, we can find a set of meta-gospel statements: statements *about* the meaning and intent of the gospel stories.

## **Affirming the MG Theory**

Surprisingly, there is not one meta-gospel statement that directly affirms the MG theory or even implies it.

The limited amount of indirect evidence cited - contradictions, theory intersection, Paul's view of the resurrection - have been, I contend, shown to be based on fallacies.

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## Opposing the MGTheory

There are eight passages, or sets of passages, that seem to provide the sharpest evidence regarding the theory, with clear and unequivocal statements refuting it.

### Luke's Prologue

Can we find statements in the gospels that sum up what the author is trying to do, especially in regard to the MG question? Many companies and projects have "mission statements": carefully crafted, succinct descriptions of their purpose and goals. This is, of course, the most direct and most obvious meta-gospel statement of all. Yes, this is provided in Luke's prologue. Luke claims that he investigated the gospel stories thoroughly, going back to the eyewitnesses, put them together in an orderly fashion in order to tell what really happened. He uses the literary form typical of historiography.

### Matthew's Editorial Asides

Are there statements where the author makes comments directly to the reader? Certainly, there are places where gospel writers explain traditions, customs, and Aramaic phrases. Do they also say anything about the factuality of the stories; or do they caution us against interpreting things too literally? At Matthew tells the story of bribing the guards to say the disciples stole the body, the author steps out of the narrative and says that this explanation - that the disciples stole the body - was current even at that time. The implication, of course, is that a literal empty tomb was part of the gospel message.

### John's Eyewitness Claim

The Fourth Gospel appears to present the 'literal' deity and resurrection of Jesus. It explicitly claims to be the work of, or at the very least based on the work of, an eyewitness - the beloved disciple.

### Paul's Statement of the Deity of Jesus

Paul is, of course, the primary commentator about the application of the gospel message to our lives, and of the theological meaning of the gospel. Does he explain what is meant by the deity of Christ? In Philippians, both universally acknowledged to be from Paul himself, he describes the deity of Jesus clearly and succinctly. He certainly does not follow the MG interpretation.

### Paul's Statement of the Resurrection of Jesus

Does Paul take a stand on the corporeality of the resurrection? In 1 Corinthians, Philippians, and Romans, again universally acknowledged to be from Paul himself, he describes the resurrection of Jesus directly and in detail; he even answers follow-up questions. He most certainly describes a transformation of the physical body

### Resurrection and Fulfilled Prophecy in the Acts Kerygma

While not specifically meta-gospel statements, there may be places where the relationship between stories or passages makes more sense when viewed either through the lens of the MG theory or the traditional view. There are several scenes in Acts where the gospel is being defined and articulated by the apostles. It is logical to assume that these speeches might be used to make the meaning of the gospel clearer. Do the apostles present a metaphorical gospel, or do they appear to present the opposite? The kernel of the kerygma, we can see, is the very claim of the physical resurrection, and the argument from fulfilled prophecy.

### Deutero-Epistles - Myth vs. Fact

1 Timothy, 2 Peter, and 1 John (often called 'deutero-epistles' because it is thought by some scholars that they were composed by followers of Paul, Peter, and John rather than the apostles themselves) specifically and consciously attempt to refute the 'myth' view of the gospels with eyewitness claims. They stress the point that these are not cunningly devised stories, but are events that took place in the real world. It appears the authors were opposing 'false teachers' (in their view) who taught a form of the MG theory.

### Deutero-Epistles - Jesus vs. Christ

One might think that the 'Historical Jesus' vs. the 'Christ of Faith' was a modern invention (or discovery, if you accept that view); however, in reality this is an ancient distinction. In a sense, the MG view is correct - there *were* teachers in the first century who separated 'Jesus' and 'the Christ'; but they were, according to 1 John, *false* teachers.

As we look for meta-gospel indications, we find a consistent thread affirming the "factuality" of the issues in question (as I define at the beginning of this work) and expressly denying the Metaphorical Gospel Theory.

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## Conclusion

I have resisted the temptation to follow three fruitful lines of approach: (a) appeal to the 'ring of truth' of the gospel accounts, judging by their form that they are to be understood factually; (b) use narrative criticism to determine the matter; (c) appeal to world-class scholars such as N.T. Wright and/or use his arguments.

Instead, I have pursued the 'meta-gospel' approach, in part so the non-specialist reader can see for him/herself what the evidence is, and can wrestle with the implications. Meta-gospel statements give us a unique perspective on the stories, a perspective that comes from *outside* the stories themselves.

The gospel writers occasionally preface their narratives, or interrupt them, to let us know what they *mean*. The epistle writers come right out and *explain* what they mean by certain theological statements. And the preaching of the gospel itself is represented as being "factual" at its core. All the relevant evidence convergences in one direction.

According to the internal evidence, the MG Theory is demonstrably false.

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## The Apostolic Fathers - Times and Places

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: January 2, 2002

The Metaphorical Gospel theory states that the world-view of the Christian community at the time of gospel writing and distribution was one of metaphorical, rather than factual, understanding. Later Christians literalized the gospels.

It is time to examine the external evidence that can be brought to bear on this issue. Do we have written evidence authored by Christians who lived during that era? What do they have to say about how the gospel message should be understood?

### **Why This is Important**

Since the meaning of the New Testament passages are in question, it is difficult to use them as evidence in this inquiry. We need to find statements that are particularly clear and relevant. Because of this, it is extremely important to try to find *outside* witness to the meaning of the New Testament statements.

Second, this external witness must be placed right at the scene, if possible. Therefore, we need to first make sure we agree on the time period under question, and then produce evidence as close to that time as we can.

### **Papias**

The earliest extant account specifically regarding the gospel composition comes from Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, who lived sometime between 70 and 160 A.D. His writings are usually dated 115-130 A.D. We know, if he is writing in good faith, that he interviewed those who had personally known the disciples. It is unclear whether the "presbyter John" mentioned by Papias refers to John the disciple or to a later elder (I have seen arguments both ways), but it's clear that Papias was in an excellent position to know how the gospels were composed and what they meant. Papias tells us of his own credentials:

"If, then, any one who had attended on the elders came, I asked minutely after their sayings, - what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the Lord's disciples: which things Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say. For I imagined that what was to be got from books was not so profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice. . . ." (Papias Fragments, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I.1)

He tells us that Mark wrote a gospel, and derived his material from Peter's sermons. Note that, according to Papias, (a) Mark was careful to be accurate, not to make any mistakes; and (b) not to put anything fictitious into the statements.

"And the presbyter said this. Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered. It was not, however, in exact order that he related the sayings of deeds of Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied Him. But afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who accommodated his instructions to the necessities [of his hearers], but with no intention of giving a regular narrative of the Lord's sayings. Wherefore Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things as he remembered them. For of one thing he took especial care, not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements." (Papias Fragments, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VI.10; preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, iii.39)

This unambiguous statement should give us a *prima facie* reason for believing that the Metaphorical Gospel Theory is false. Papias had a more direct access to the minds of the New Testament writers, and to the world-view of the era in question, than we will ever have.

However, since he says that Mark put the content of *Peter's sermons* into written form, wouldn't it be possible to contend that Peter *himself* held the MG view, and that this view was the absolutely primal kerygma message? I'm not sure if anyone says that.

### **The Crucial Time Period**

What is the time period in question? We will follow the approach established earlier, and try to grant to the proponents of the MG theory everything possible. According to their views on authorship and dating of the gospels, the time period of New Testament composition and distribution is clearly 70-110 AD.

The commonly accepted dates and cities of origin are:

- Mark 70 AD Rome
- Matthew 80 AD Antioch
- Luke 90 AD Caesarea, or Corinth?
- John 100 AD Ephesus

Allowing ten years for full distribution of the last gospel (which scholars typically do for each gospel, since distribution of a wide geographical area was not instantaneous), and that brings us to 110 AD. Therefore, the time period being discussed is 70-110 AD.

[Note that there is evidence which supports much earlier dating for the gospels, but I am not arguing that point here.]

It also seems clear that the *really crucial* time period is 100-110. Since it is typically held that each gospel goes beyond its more primitive predecessors in its use of symbol and theological imagery, the implication is that each gospel was *more* theological, *more metaphorical*, than the one before.

And so the "Height" of the Metaphorical Gospel era ought to coincide with the full distribution of John's Gospel, 100-110 AD. If *anyone* ever understood the gospel stories and claims about Jesus as metaphorical, rather than factual, it would have been the Christians in leadership living *precisely* during this time.

And so, remember these dates:

NT period: 70 - 110 AD

Crucial period: 100 - 110 AD

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## Intro to the Apostolic Fathers and their Letters

We are fortunate to have good texts of some very early Christian writings. The text is easily available in Lightfoot's edition, or the Ante-Nice Fathers series. You can even view these writings on the Web.

### The Letters

There are writings that were done anonymously, such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache ("The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles"), which are dated variously in the late first or early second century. There are also writings of the "Apologists", such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, dated 150-180 AD, in which the authors provide more elaborate explanations of the Christian faith.

And third, we have the writings of church leaders who lived during the last part of the first century A.D. They are Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna. These are sometimes called the "Apostolic Fathers" because they are the first well-known Christian leaders after the apostles themselves. Thanks to the meticulous scholarship of J.B. Lightfoot and others, some of the writings of these individuals, in the form of letters to churches, are available for our examination.

(Clement of Rome is not to be confused with the somewhat later Clement of Alexandria; similarly, Ignatius of Antioch is not to be identified with Ignatius Loyola, who live centuries later.)

These letters simply cannot be trivialized as mere "tradition." They are the actual correspondence of specific recognizable individuals at specific times to specific Christian communities. They were not composed by unknown authors (as in the case of the Didache). It should be stressed that these letters we will examine are universally accepted as genuine (we will ignore the letters thought to be spurious: II Clement and some pseudo-Ignatian letters).

These letters are even acknowledged by the very scholars who hold the Metaphorical Gospel theory. Spong appears to accept Polycarp's letter (on what other basis could he form an opinion?) when he calls him a "literalizer." Crossan actually appeals to Clement and Ignatius to prove one of his points:

"Neither do the Twelve Apostles appear in *First Clement*, a letter written around 96 or 97 AD from the church at Rome to that at Corinth. Finally, they are not mentioned in the letters that Ignatius of Antioch, traveling under guard to martyrdom in Rome between 110 and 117 AD, wrote to various Christian communities along his route." (Crossan, *Jesus - a Revolutionary Biography* p 109)

Dr. Charles Hill, a church historian of repute, says this of the corpus of letters:

"By way of quick response to your specific questions, yes, what we have of Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp is practically universally considered genuine (there is a little ongoing wrangling about the number of authentic Ignatian letters by a man named Ruis-Camps, but it is generally disregarded). . . . Some scholars still hold to P. N. Harrison's view that Polycarp's epistle is composite, with the first part coming from a time somewhat later than the last part - but even Harrison thought the whole letter was genuine Polycarp. (email critique of MG4)

There should be no doubts that we have the actual writings of these church leaders.

### **Timeline - In a Position to Know First-Hand**

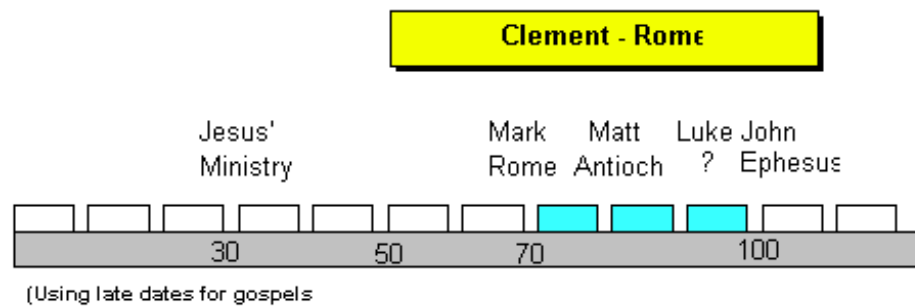
Take a look at this time-line, below, which graphically shows the life-spans of Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp in relation to the writing of the gospels (using late dates), and the general era under discussion. This is extremely important. Most people think of these three only as *writers*, as authors of their respective letters. And thus the dates associated with them are typically 97, 115, and 120, respectively, which gives many the (mistaken) general impression that they lived only long after the New Testament had been written.

However, consider that they wrote their letters only when they were fully adult leaders of the churches. Note how far back in the process their lives extend! They all lived *entirely* through the "NT period" of 70-110 and were leaders of their respective churches during the "Crucial period" 100-110.

We wanted to find out how the *first audience* of the New Testament commonly understood these writings. Well, we have three definite, named individuals who were actually *part* of that audience! Beyond that, they were truly representative of the attitudes of the churches at the time, since they were respected leaders of main Christian churches.

**Polycarp - Smyrna**

**Ignatius - Antioch**



## Clement

### The Letter

This is actually a letter from the Roman church of to the church of Corinth. The author of the letter is not mentioned by name, but since the letter is usually dated around 96-97 AD, and Clement was the leader of the Roman church at that time, it is considered obvious that he was the primary contributor, if not the actual writer. Therefore, this is not considered an "anonymous" letter.

The purpose of the letter was to settle a controversy in that church; certain members had sought to establish themselves as rulers over the appointed leadership. Therefore, most of the letter is concerned to emphasize humility and harmony. Of the seventeen pages (in my edition), he only gives us a few nuggets and scraps to give us a clue about his view on the Metaphorical vs. the Factual gospel. But what he does say is instructive.

### Clement's Credentials as a Witness

I will list Clement's credentials, moving from most certain to less certain.

1. Adult Christian during the NT Period (70-110). Notice first that Clement was quite probably an adult Christian during the entire period under question, if he was born around 50 AD.
2. One of the most influential Christian leaders during the Crucial Period (100-110). In fact, he wrote his letter in the late 90's.
3. Connection with Mark's Gospel. It is commonly accepted that Mark's gospel was written in Rome, which just happens to be Clement's church. It is generally accepted that Clement had been a co-presbyter with Linus and Cletus in the 70's, and succeeded them to the leadership of the church in Rome. (J.A.T. Robinson even places Clement's letter around 70 AD, exactly contemporaneous with Mark. If Clement held this position, and if Mark's gospel was written in Rome, I can't see how Clement could not have known the intent of the author.
4. Connection with the author of Mark himself. Whether John Mark wrote the gospel, as is traditionally held, or some anonymous writer acted as final redactor of this gospel, it is usually accepted that this was something of an official or semi-official community-authorized work. If this is true, I can't see how Clement could have avoided knowing the author or authors personally.
5. Connection with the Jesus' apostles. Irenaeus (c 180) writes about Clement (emphasis mine):

The blessed apostles, then, having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate. Of this Linus, Paul makes mention



in the Epistles to Timothy. To him succeeded Anacletus; and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement was allotted the bishopric. *This man, as he had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them, might be said to have the preaching of the apostles still echoing [in his ears], and their traditions before his eyes.* Nor was he alone [in this], for there were many still remaining who had received instructions from the apostles. In the time of this Clement, no small dissension having occurred among the brethren at Corinth, the Church in Rome dispatched a most powerful letter to the Corinthians, exhorting them to peace, renewing their faith, and declaring the tradition which it had lately received from the apostles, ... (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, 3.3)

Clement himself says (emphasis mine):

"But not to dwell upon ancient examples, let us come to the most recent spiritual heroes. Let us take the noble examples furnished *in our own generation*. Through envy and jealousy, the greatest and most righteous pillars [of the Church] have been persecuted and put to death. Let us set before our eyes the illustrious apostles. *Peter*, through unrighteous envy, endured not one or two, but numerous labours and when he had at length suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him. Owing to envy, *Paul* also obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown into captivity, compelled to flee, and stoned. After preaching both in the east and west, he gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world, and come to the extreme limit of the west, and suffered martyrdom under the prefects. Thus was he removed from the world, and went into the holy place, having proved himself a striking example of patience. (1 Clem. 5.1-4)

6. Connection with Paul. This Clement may have been Paul's companion "Clement" mentioned in Phil 4:3. Whether this is true or not, it is true that Paul was imprisoned and then martyred in Rome around 64 AD. Clement would, in this case, have been in an excellent position to personally hear Paul's preaching in Clement's own community.

7. Connection with Peter. Consider the fact that Peter was also martyred in Rome. The date is typically thought to be 67 AD. If that is the case, Peter lived and ministered and preached in Rome, presumably to Clement's own congregation (among other people). He then would have been a primary role model for Clement during that period.

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## Ignatius

### The Letter

Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, wrote seven letters to churches (dated variously at 107 or 117 AD). Ignatius was led by soldiers from Antioch, where he had been bishop for several years, to Rome, for his execution. As he made the journey, he wrote these letters to the churches along the way. In a very real sense, they constitute his last will and testament.

Ignatius' connection with the rest of the Christian community is obvious.

- He writes seven letters to churches.
- One of them is even a letter to Polycarp!
- One of them is to Clement's own church, the church in Rome (presumably within a very few years after Clement's death)

It is clear that he was a leader in harmony with the thought of the majority of the leading churches. He was obviously held in high esteem by the churches in general, and he supports

the church leaders at every turn. Ignatius was clearly regarded as a spokesman for all of Christianity, both within the churches and to the outside world.

Thus, Ignatius is actually the church leader *most likely to be the representative* of Christianity during the time of his leadership (from before 100 AD to 107-117 AD).

### **Ignatius' Credentials as a Witness**

I will list Ignatius' credentials, moving from most certain to less certain.

1. Adult Christian during the NT Period (70-110). Notice first that Ignatius, just like Clement, was quite probably an adult Christian during the entire period under question, if he was born around 50 AD.
2. One of the most influential Christian leaders during the Crucial Period (100-110). In fact, he wrote his letter somewhere 107-115 AD. That the gospel stories were meant metaphorically, that Jesus "deity" was not factual, that his resurrection was not physical, etc., would have been *exactly* the view that Ignatius was steeped in, if the Metaphorical Gospel theory is true.
3. Connection with Matthew's Gospel. It is commonly accepted that Matthew's gospel was written in Antioch, which just happens to be Ignatius' church. If Matthew's gospel indeed was written around 80 (accepting the dates assumes by the MG scholars), and if Ignatius lived in Antioch at that time, he would have been an adult Christian worshipping in the same church as that hosting the Gospel of Matthew.
4. Connection with the author of Matthew himself. When the disciple Matthew wrote the gospel, as is traditionally held, or some anonymous writer in Antioch acted as final redactor of this gospel, it is usually accepted that this was something of an official or semi-official community-authorized work. If this is true, I can't see how Ignatius could have avoided knowing the author or authors personally.
5. Connection with the Jesus' apostles. Paul, Peter, and other apostles visited Antioch in the 50's and 60's. Ignatius, if he lived in Antioch at the time, would have been in a good position to have met them, or at the very least, to have heard them preach.

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## **Polycarp**

### **The Letter**

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, wrote a letter to the church in Philippi (dated 110-120 AD). I know of no one who disputes the authenticity of this letter. Irenaeus refers to it,

There is also a very powerful Epistle of Polycarp written to the Philippians, from which those who choose to do so, and are anxious about their salvation, can learn the character of his faith, and the preaching of the truth. Then, again, the Church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles.  
(Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, 3.4)

### **Polycarp's Credentials as a Witness**

I will list Polycarp's credentials, moving from most certain to less certain.

1. Lived during the NT Period (70-110). Polycarp, born in 70 AD or earlier, learned his Christianity precisely during this N.T. era, and developed as a Christian leader as the era progressed.
2. One of the most influential Christian leaders during the Crucial Period (100-110). Polycarp became bishop during this period, and wrote his letter either at the end of it (110 AD) or shortly thereafter (120 AD).
3. Connection with Ignatius. Judging from the epistle addressed to him from Ignatius, Polycarp as an esteemed younger associate. It is assumed that Polycarp agreed with Ignatius on essentials. The burden of proof is on those you wish to create a wedge between them.
4. Connection with John's Gospel. It is commonly accepted that John's gospel was written in Ephesus, which just happens to be Smyrna's (Polycarp's) sister church, within 50 miles. If John's gospel indeed was written around 100 (accepting the dates assumed by the MG scholars), and if Polycarp lived in Smyrna at that time, he could have easily have known more about John's gospel, from first-hand experience, than most of us will ever know.
5. Connection with the author of John himself. If some Johannine group in Ephesus composed this work, it would be very unusual if Polycarp never bothered to make the 50 mile trip to Ephesus to meet them, since he was surely the head of their sister church.
6. Connection with the apostle John. There is good reason to think that Polycarp was the student of the apostle John. This contention has been disputed by scholars, and is by no means certain (as Charles Hill points out below). However, I have not seen arguments strong enough to overturn Irenaeus' statements. Irenaeus (c 180) writes about Polycarp.

"But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true. . .

There are also those who heard from him that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, "Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within." (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, 3.4)

Irenaeus also wrote a letter to a man named Florinus, who had been a student of Polycarp together with him. In this letter, Irenaeus applies to *common knowledge* - not trying to convince Florinus of Polycarp's connection with the John the Apostle, but appealing to his knowledge of this fact to help to draw Florinus back into the faith.

"For, while I was yet a boy, I saw thee in Lower Asia with Polycarp, distinguishing thyself in the royal court, and endeavoring to gain his approbation. For I have a more vivid recollection of what occurred at that time than of recent events (inasmuch as the experiences of childhood, keeping pace with the growth of the soul, become incorporated with it); so that I can even describe the place where the blessed Polycarp used to sit and discourse - his going out, too, and his coming in - his general mode of life and personal appearance, together with the discourses which he delivered to the people; also how he would speak of his familiar intercourse with John, and with the rest of those who had seen the Lord; and how he would call their words to remembrance.

Whatsoever things he had heard from them respecting the Lord, both with regard to

His miracles and His teaching, Polycarp having thus received [information] from the eye-witnesses of the Word of life, would recount them all in harmony with the Scriptures." (Irenaeus, Letter to Florinus, preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V.20, who took it from the work *De Ogdoad* (not extant))

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## Summary

The most important thing to note is that all three of these church leaders stand in an ideal position to know first-hand the meaning of the New Testament, and are themselves members of that very first audience which, we are told, understood the gospel to be metaphorically, not factually true.

This ideal position exists, *especially* by virtue of the fact that

1. their lives were exactly contemporaneous with the N.T. era, thus they learned their Christianity and grew in it precisely during the time period under question; and
2. they became leaders of their Christian communities during the "Crucial Period" 100-110 A.D.

As far as I can tell, this is simply indisputable, and anything beyond this is simply overkill. However, there is a certain match-up of these writers with the assumed cities of gospel composition that is simply astounding. If the dates for the gospels is anything close to that assumed by the MG scholars, we find these connections:

Mark - Rome 70 AD	Clement - Rome 70, bishop c 90
Matthew - Antioch 80 AD	Ignatius - Antioch 80?, bishop c 100
John - Ephesus 100 AD	Polycarp - Smyrna bishop c 100

(Accepting a much earlier date for gospel composition, say 50-70, would change this argument significantly. If those who advocate the MG Theory wish to reconsider authorship and dating, and settle on these dates, I will be happy to adjust the argument accordingly. I would explore more deeply, in such a case, the connection of these Apostolic Fathers with Jesus' own Apostles; in this discussion, this connection is largely irrelevant, so I won't press it here.)

Dr. Charles Hill, critiquing an earlier version of this work, cautioned me about relying too heavily on some of my subsidiary points (and I have tried to improve my treatment by making some clear distinctions), but confirms that the "time overlap" argument is indeed valid, and goes on to say "I think your approach and overall argument is solid and powerful."

I imagine you may get some argument about whether these and other early Christian writers "must have known whether the NT writers intended these things 'metaphorically' or 'factually'", and particularly about the possibility that they may have actually known any of the apostles or any of the Gospel writers. You don't have that direct testimony from these authors (though this does not rule it out), and more skeptical scholars usually try to discredit the testimonies of Irenaeus, Eusebius and later writers. For instance, most critical scholars reject (wrongly, in my opinion) Irenaeus' statement that Polycarp was a disciple of (or knew at all) John the Apostle.

I think you are right in pointing out the temporal overlaps, however, between these early writers and the authors of the Gospels. If Spong, et al., won't accept that Clement might have known Paul, Peter, and the author of Mark's Gospel, they cannot dispute that, under their dating scheme, Clement was a younger

contemporary (by the way, on Clement's living not long after the apostles, see 1 Clem. 5.1-4). In other words, while you might want to be tentative in pressing any assertions of actual personal contact between any of the Apostolic Fathers and any of the NT authors or Apostles, you can certainly argue, as you have, that these people for a number of reasons are in an excellent and unique position to know about and to share the metaphysical assumptions of the Evangelists. (Charles Hill, Critique of MG4)

## Conclusion

If we had tried to find the very best representatives of the Christian world-view in the 70-110 era, we would be hard-pressed to find three better candidates than Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp. Their writings constitute excellent primary source evidence regarding the very theory we're considering. If anybody knew what the gospels meant, these three did.

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## The Apostolic Fathers - Testimony

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: September 11, 2002

As stated before, Bishop Spong is the scholar who specifically address the issue of external testimony and the Apostolic Fathers. In his books, he has gone on record affirming Polycarp was a "literalist", and in his reply to my specific questions implied that he viewed Ignatius in this way as well.

Marcus Borg has also taken a position on this issue in a private email exchange with me. His view is that the Apostolic Fathers were "natural literalists" and thus believed in the factuality of the gospel claims, but he makes the claim that it didn't matter to them nearly as much as the spiritual truths found therein. They were not "concerned" to defend the literal understanding.

### Did it Matter?

How can we tell from the writings of these three whether the "true" deity, "factual" resurrection, and "happenedness" of the gospel accounts *mattered* to them? First, since the volume of correspondence we're considering is so small, simply the *inclusion* of statements which indicate that they believe these things in this way would indicate that it's important enough to mention! But beyond this, I would suggest these rules of thumb.

It matters to them if:

1. They explain it
2. They support a contention by appealing to it as evidence
3. They argue for it
4. They directly entreat the reader to believe it
5. Their point depends on it for its force

As pointed out in the earlier section, if anybody was in a position to know the meaning of the New Testament writers and the way the New Testament was understood by its first hearers, these men would. Let us look at their statements and see where they fall.

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## Clement's Testimony

Remember that we have only one letter from Clement, and he is not primarily concerned to address the issue which concerns us. However, his views on the nature of the resurrection and deity of Jesus are fairly clear.

## Resurrection

First, Clement gives several analogies which he uses to explain what he means by Jesus' resurrection, and the resurrection of Jesus' followers. In each example, something dies and is itself *transformed*, becoming something else. There is no notion of resurrection as merely the soul's journey into heaven, as is portrayed by Spong, for instance. Notice in this quote that *out of the seed* that dies, fruit comes.

"... there shall be a future resurrection, of which He has rendered the Lord Jesus Christ the first-fruits by raising Him from the dead. . .

Let us behold the fruits [of the earth], how the sowing of rain takes place. The sower goes forth, and casts it into the ground; and the seed being thus scattered, though dry and naked when it fell upon the earth, is gradually dissolved. Then out of its dissolution the might power of the providence of the Lord raises it up again, and **from one seed many arise and bring forth fruit.**" (xxiv)

In case this is not enough proof, Clement clearly states the resurrection of the *body*. There can be no doubt that he means "resurrection" in the terms of Historic Christianity, not as advanced by the Metaphorical Gospel theory.

"Do we then deem it any great and wonderful thing for the Maker of all things to raise up again those that have piously served Him . . . Job says, "Thou shalt raise up this **flesh of mine**, which has suffered all these things." (xxvi)

"... and I will remember a propitious day, and will raise you up **out of your graves.**" (I)

## Deity

Regarding the deity of Jesus, Clement uses "the Lord" interchangeably when referring to God and Jesus; sometimes it's even difficult to know which he's talking about. Clement indeed shows a "high" Christology. Jesus is the Son of God, greater than the angels:

"This is the way, beloved, in which we find our Saviour, even Jesus Christ, the High Priest ... By Him the Lord has willed that we should taste of immortal knowledge, 'who being the brightness of His majesty, **is by so much greater than the angels**, as He hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. . . But concerning His Son, the Lord spoke thus: 'Thou art my Son, today have I begotten Thee. Ask of Me, and I will give Thee the heathen for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession.' And again He saith to Him, 'Sit Thou at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool.' " (xxxvi)

But this could be interpreted metaphorically, could it not? While Clement is not concerned with presenting the true deity of Jesus, he does, almost accidentally, give us two hints. First, he talks about Jesus *coming* in lowliness rather than in pride (as if he could have *arrived* on the planet in an exalted state, had he so chosen).

"Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Sceptre of the majesty of God, did not **come** in the pomp of pride or arrogance, although He might have done so but in a lowly condition, as the Holy Spirit had declared regarding Him." (xvi)

He also mentions that Jesus was descended from Abraham *according to the flesh*, which implies

that he is descended from someone else according to the spirit. (We see the explicit inference in his contemporary, Ignatius).

"From him also [was descended] our Lord Jesus Christ **according to the flesh.**"  
(xxvi)

What is the point of saying "according to the flesh" if Clement is simply saying that Jesus was descended from Abraham?

### **Naive Literalist**

Marcus Borg makes the distinction between a naive literalist and a post-critical literalist. The naive literalist is one who simply takes things at face value and believes that the events in the Old and New Testaments happened as described. It appears that Clement was, himself, a naive literalist. Much of his letters deals with "ancient examples" (1 Clem 5.1): Abel, Joseph, Moses; also Enoch, Abraham, etc. He contrasts these with the "noble examples furnished in our own generation": Peter and Paul. The contrast is not between legendary stories and real people, but between "ancient" examples and contemporary ones.

### **Prophecy**

One of the contentions of the MG Theory is that gospel writers took Old Testament prophecies (among other O.T. themes) and wrote stories that had Jesus appear to fulfill them. A person who understood this would not fruitfully point to fulfilled prophecy to prove his point. Clement quotes the Old Testament, and explicitly applies this prophecy to Jesus:

"as the Holy Spirit had declared regarding Him. For He says, "Lord, who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? We have declared [our message] in His presence: He is, as it were, a child, and like a root in thirsty ground; He has no form nor glory, yea, we saw Him, and He had no form nor comeliness; but His form was without eminence, yea, deficient in comparison with the [ordinary] form of men. He is a man exposed to stripes and suffering, anti acquainted with the endurance of grief: for His countenance was turned away; He was despised, and not esteemed. He bears our iniquities, and is in sorrow for our sakes; yet we supposed that [on His own account] He was exposed to labour, and stripes, and affliction. But He was wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we were healed . . ." etc.

Ye see, beloved, what is the example which has been given us; for if the Lord thus humbled Himself, what shall we do who have through Him come under the yoke of His grace? (1 Clem 16)

### **Does it Matter to Clement?**

1. Clement *argues for* the resurrection of our bodies, as opposed to being too difficult for God to do "Do we then deem it any great and wonderful thing for the Maker of all things to raise up again those that have piously served Him ..." And goes to the trouble to link our resurrection with Jesus' as the first-fruits.
2. Clement *argues for* the elevation of Jesus above the angels, and *appeals to* this in urging humility.
3. Clement *appeals to* the historical events in Jesus' life regarding his suffering as supplying an example (a real, not hypothetical or imaginary or legendary example) for us to follow.
4. Clement appeals to prophecy. Along with the actual events of Jesus' life, *the*

*point's force* depends at least in part on the contention that this was really predicted of old.

The answer is: certainly, Yes.

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## Polycarp's Testimony

As with Clement, it is difficult to build a complete view from Polycarp's short letter to the church in Philippi. However, Polycarp does teach that the resurrection of believers will be like the one of Jesus, and that Jesus is the Son of God, the ruler over heaven and earth, the judge of all.

### Deity of Jesus

Regarding the deity of Christ, he says,

"To Him all things in heaven and on earth are subject. Him every spirit serves. He comes as the Judge of the living and the dead. . ."

"Jesus Christ Himself, who is the Son of God, and our everlasting High Priest." (xii)

Yet each of these *could* be interpreted metaphorically or factually, could they not? I would only point to the statements by Ignatius to Polycarp as evidence that the factual deity was their common assumption.

### Resurrection of Jesus

Polycarp connects Jesus' resurrection with that of believers, and his description of resurrection certainly leans towards a bodily one rather than a spiritual ascension into heaven.

".. our Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sins suffered even unto death, [but] whom God raised from the dead, having **loosed the bands of the grave.**" (i)

"But He who raised Him up from the dead will raise up us also, if we do His will" (ii)

Much later, in the account of his martyrdom (c 156 AD, written by his friends), however, Polycarp almost inadvertently promotes the bodily resurrection. They quote him as saying,

". . . that I should have a part in the number of Thy martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of **soul and body**, through the incorruption [imparted] by the Holy Ghost." (Martyrdom of Polycarp, xiv)

### Jesus and The Christ

The strongest, and most interesting, statement in this short letter is a clear denunciation of the idea that "the Christ" is not the earthly, fleshly Jesus, and that instead of *making up* their own gospel, people should simply believe the gospel preached by the apostles.

"For whosoever does not confess that **Jesus Christ has come in the flesh**, is antichrist . . . whosoever perverts the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts, and says that there is neither a **resurrection** nor a judgment, he is the first-born of Satan. Wherefore, forsaking the vanity of many, and their false doctrines, let us return to the word which has been handed down to us from the beginning" (vii)

Polycarp *explicitly* disagrees with the Metaphorical Gospel theory in this regard.



## Does it Matter to Polycarp?

His comments are so brief that it's difficult to pinpoint anything conclusive about the deity, resurrection, and stories. However, there's no indication - in any way - that it doesn't matter. I'll point to three pieces of evidence that it does, which I think are compelling.

1. He *argues for* the fact of Jesus Christ coming in the flesh. If he held the MG theory, the earthly facts of Jesus' life, perhaps even the question whether he was a fleshly being, wouldn't much matter. Opposing views certainly wouldn't have been condemned as being of the "antichrist." And he emphasizes the "word" handed down from the beginning - an anchor of truth which is contrasted with the newly-invented metaphors of his opponents.
2. If the account of his martyrdom is to be believed, he quite definitely holds the hope for the resurrection of the *body*, and he makes this statement at the moment of his impending execution! I'd say that this would count as supreme evidence that it mattered to him. He *argues for* it with his life.
3. It is generally agreed that Irenaeus was the pupil of Polycarp. It is clear that Irenaeus consciously opposed gnostic views consistent with the MG theory, and that these things mattered enormously to him. It is hard to find reasons why Irenaeus could be so adamant about this point, while it mattered not to Polycarp.

All the evidence points to the affirmative on this.

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## Ignatius' Testimony

While Clement deals with other issues, and Polycarp's letter is frustratingly short, Ignatius writes seven letters, many of which address the very issue we are considering. In addition, as I have already pointed out, since Ignatius and Polycarp were friends (Polycarp was a sort of "junior partner"), it is reasonable to assume that they were in agreement on basic issues. The burden of proof is on those who would say otherwise.

### Deity of Jesus

Ignatius expresses a very factual view of the deity of Jesus. Remember that we said a person who affirms the factuality of Jesus' deity would stress his pre-existence and the notion of a true incarnation (rather than picturing Jesus as a mortal man who was in some sense God's representative).

"There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; **both made and not made; God existing in flesh**; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first passible and then impassible -- even Jesus Christ our Lord." (Ephesians vii)

"For our God, Jesus Christ, was, according to the appointment of God, **conceived** in the womb by Mary, of the seed of David, but **by the Holy Ghost. . . God Himself being manifested in human form** for the renewal of eternal life." (Ephesians xviii, xix)

"Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David according to the flesh, being both the Son of man and the Son of God . . . " (Ephesians xx)

"Jesus Christ, **who was with the Father before the beginning of time**, and in the end was revealed" (Magnesians vi)

He even declares the true deity of Christ to the Roman church, where Clement had been bishop (and was still bishop?), and to Polycarp himself:

"Permit me to be an imitator of the **passion of my God.**" (Romans vi)

"Look for Him who is above all time, **eternal and invisible, yet who became visible for our sakes;** impalpable and impassible, yet who became passible on our account; and who in every kind of way suffered for our sakes." (to Polycarp iii)

## Resurrection of Jesus

There can be no doubt that Ignatius taught the true, real, bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the similar future resurrection of believers,

"And He suffered truly, even as also **He truly raised up Himself,** not, as certain unbelievers maintain, that He only seemed to suffer, as they themselves seem to be [Christians]. And as they believe, so shall it happen unto them, **when they shall be divested of their bodies, and be mere evil spirits.**" (Smyrneans ii)

"For I know that after His resurrection **also He was still possessed of flesh,** and I believe that He is so now. When, for instance, He came to those who were with Peter, He said to them, 'Lay hold, handle Me, and see that I am not an incorporeal spirit.' And immediately they touched Him, and believed, being convinced both by His flesh and spirit. For this cause also they despised death, and were found its conquerors. And after his resurrection He did eat and drink with them, as being possessed of flesh, although **spiritually He was united to the Father.**" (Smyrneans iii)

". . . in the name of Jesus Christ, and in His flesh and blood, in His passion and resurrection, both corporeal and spiritual, in union with God and you." (Smyrneans xi)

## Factuality of the Gospel

Ignatius contrasts the true gospel with "strange doctrines", "old fables", "vain doctrine" which deny the *factuality* of Jesus' birth, suffering, and resurrection. Those who deny the faith do so by trying to mix Jesus Christ with their own ideas, trying to alter the gospel.

"I . . . entreat you that ye use Christian nourishment only, and abstain from herbage of a different kind; I mean heresy. For those [that are given to this] mix up Jesus Christ with their own poison, speaking things which are unworthy of credit, like those who administer a deadly drug in sweet wine . . ." (Trallians vi)

"Be not deceived with strange doctrines, nor with old fables, which are unprofitable. . . there is one God, who has manifested Himself by Jesus Christ His Son, who is His eternal Word, not proceeding forth from silence, and who in all things pleased Him that sent Him." (Magnesians vii)

"I desire to guard you beforehand, that you fall not upon the hooks of vain doctrine, but that ye attain to full assurance in regard to the **birth, and passion, and resurrection which took place in the time of the government of Pontius Pilate, being truly and certainly accomplished by Jesus Christ.**" (Magnesians xi)

"Stop your ears, therefore, when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary, who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified and [truly] died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under

the death. He was also **truly raised** from the dead, His Father quickening Him, even as after the same manner His Father will **so raise up us** who believe in Him by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the true life." (Trallians ix)

"... that He was truly of the seed of David according to the flesh, and the Son of God according to the will and power of God; that He was truly born of a virgin . . was truly, under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch, nailed [to the cross] for us in His flesh. . . through His resurrection" (Smyrneans i)

And, finally, Ignatius points to the fact that he is laying his life on the line for the factual gospel. In one of the most powerful claims made by early Christians leaders, Ignatius says,

"But if, as some that are without God, that is, the unbelieving, say, that He only seemed to suffer (they themselves only seeming to exist), **then why am I in bonds**? Why do I long to be exposed to the wild beasts? Do I therefore die in vain? Am I not then guilty of falsehood against [the cross of] the Lord?" (Trallians x)

**"But if these things were done by our Lord only in appearance, then am I also only in appearance bound."** (Smyrneans iv)

### Does it Matter to Ignatius?

His letters are so short that it's amazing how much of the material is devoted to a denial of the key components of the MG theory! And these letters are not just ordinary treatises about "the faith" - they were written on the road to Rome, facing certain execution. They are often considered to be something akin to his last Will and Testament. He surely means business here.

1. He *explains* the deity of Christ - in several places - in no uncertain terms. Why would he make all these distinctions if it didn't matter to him?
2. He *argues for* the "true" bodily suffering and resurrection of Jesus, again in multiple passages. He uses them as an *example*.
3. He *entreats* his readers to guard the historicity and factuality of these things, and opposes this to "vain doctrine." They should "stop your ears" if they hear anything "at variance with Jesus Christ" as Ignatius sets him forth.
4. He puts his life on the line for it. He specifically *argues for* the "real" gospel, as opposed to "appearance" with his own situation. (The "appearance" view, while not exactly the MG theory, is one which denies many of the things denied by the MG theory.) At least regarding the real factuality of Jesus' suffering, he says, "But if these things were done by our Lord only in appearance, then am I also only in appearance bound." Combined with the other arguments, this is powerful indeed.

Yes, it mattered dearly to him.

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## Verification

I directly asked Dr. Charles Hill whether the Apostolic Fathers do indeed hold to a "factual" gospel and explicitly deny important features of the Metaphorical Gospel Theory (the metaphorical deity and resurrection of Jesus). He replied:

"I absolutely agree with you and think you are on ground which will hold up even

under critical hammering when you say that in these writers in particular "we find a 'non-metaphorical' portrayal of the deity and resurrection of Jesus". (Charles Hill, Critique MG4)

At this point, I believe the burden of proof is on those who wish to dispute this.

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## Summing Up the External Evidence

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: Thursday July 31, 2003

### **The Apostolic Fathers - What did they know?**

If we had tried to find the very best representatives of the Christian world-view in the 70-110 era, we would be hard-pressed to find three better candidates than Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp. Their writings constitute excellent primary source evidence regarding the theory we're considering.

#### **Clement**

Clement of Rome was an adult Christian during most of, or the entire, period under question. He was one of the most influential Christian leaders during the Crucial Period (100-110). In fact, he wrote his letter in the late 90's. Clement's connection with the Gospel of Mark is remarkably strong; if it was written in Rome, it was written at Clement's own church.

#### **Ignatius**

Ignatius of Antioch was also an adult Christian during the 70-110 period. Like, Clement, he was one of the most influential Christian leaders during the Crucial Period (100-110), writing his letters c. 107-115 AD. Ignatius enjoys a strong connection with Matthew's gospel; if that gospel was written in Antioch, it was written at Ignatius' own church.

#### **Polycarp**

Polycarp of Smyrna, a younger contemporary and friend of Ignatius, also lived during the 70-110 period (born approx 70 A.D. or earlier), and learned his Christianity in that era. He became bishop of Smyrna during this Crucial Period, and wrote his letter either at the end of it (110 AD) or shortly thereafter (120 AD). If John's gospel was written in Ephesus, Smyrna's neighboring church, Polycarp would have probably known the gospel writer(s) personally. There is also excellent evidence, in my view, via Iraenaeus, that Polycarp was truly a pupil of John the Apostle.

### **The Apostolic Fathers - What did they say?**

Since the height of the "metaphorical" era was presumably the composition of John's gospel near the end of the first century, these are the very people who would have understood the gospel metaphorically, if the MG Theory were accurate. But they don't. They expressly deny the MG Theory.

#### **Deity of Jesus**

Clement and Polycarp make statements that certainly seem to affirm the 'true' deity of Jesus; Ignatius describes this in more detail and there can be no mistake about his view.

## **Resurrection of Jesus**

All three Apostolic Fathers expressly affirm the corporeal resurrection of Jesus, and of believers. Ignatius is especially adamant about the reality and physicality of the resurrection.

## **Prophecy**

Clement appeals to fulfilled prophecy (Isaiah, long passage ending with 'by his stripes we were healed')

## **Jesus vs. Christ**

Polycarp, much like 1 John, criticizes those who separate Jesus the 'Christ.'

## **Things Which Really Happened**

Ignatius says he's deadly serious about maintaining the factuality of the key elements of the gospel: "But if these things were done by our Lord only in appearance, then am I also only in appearance bound."

In such short works, it's simply amazing that so much can be found. Their testimony directly and decisively refutes the Metaphorical Gospel theory.

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## **Spong and the Literalization Process**

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: September 11, 2002

## **Apostasy Theories**

Many people have attempted to outline "apostasy" theories. An apostasy theory is the claim that Christianity "fell away" from some original position. This sort of claim is nearly always accompanied by some *explanation* of the falling away. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, for instance, claim to be the restoration of the original Christian message. Since you can't have a restoration without a prior falling away, they try to show that an apostasy occurred.

In exactly the same way, the Metaphorical Gospel theory claims that Christianity fell away from an original position: the metaphorical understanding of the gospel stories and claims about Jesus. Since we all agree that Christianity eventually came to understand the accounts and claims *factually*, some kind of "falling away" is logically entailed by the theory.

Dr. Crossan, to my knowledge, does not attempt to give us an account of how, or precisely when, this came about.

Dr. Borg has a fairly vague and general notion of a time when the earliest fathers were naive, "natural literalists" but were not concerned with defending the literal truth; and about those who soon followed (Justin and Irenaeus) - whose apologetic was rooted in a "literal" understanding - he confesses ignorance (and, implicitly, apathy) on this point.

To Bishop Spong's credit, he at least tries to give a general account of the "literalizing" process. In fact, he not only tries to explain this process, but is supremely confident of his answer. There are no caveats, hesitations, or tentativeness with Spong. He speaks as one with authority.

Let's be clear about what such an account would be. It would answer the following questions:

## Who were the first Literalizers? Why did they Literalize?

I intentionally say "first" literalizers, because it doesn't matter who *continued* the literalization in later years. The issue is how the literalization *came about* in the first place. And so, for instance, if I contend that the literalization occurred in the second century, my commenting on Origen (third century), or Athanasius (fourth century), or Augustine (fifth century) is entirely irrelevant to my account. I must talk about second century Christians! - such as Justin, or Irenaeus. Similarly, if I contend that this literalization occurred in the late first century, any comment about second century (such as Justin or Irenaeus) or later writers is simply beside the point.

The second question ("Why?") consists of: (a) did they do this on purpose, or through an innocent misunderstanding? (b) if a misunderstanding, how is it that they misunderstood?

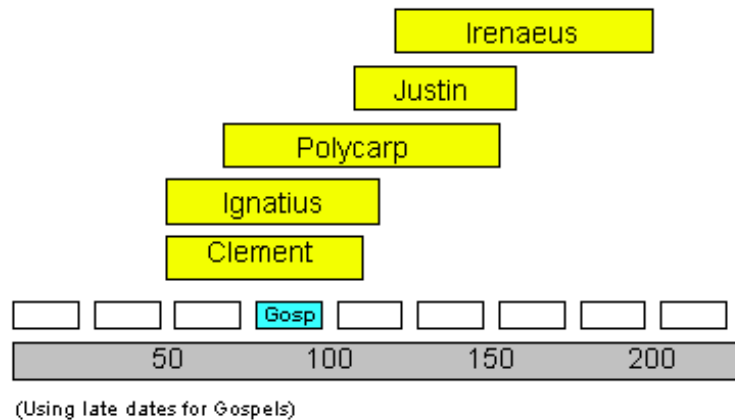
We will try to discern Spong's answer to these two questions.

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### Background

There is no doubt in anyone's mind that *mid-second century writers*, such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, thought that the gospel stories were factually true accounts, and that they interpreted Jesus' deity and resurrection in the most "factual" ways possible. We know this because they not only *mention* these things, they *argue* for them. Bishop Spong therefore rightly places Justin Martyr in the "literalizing" camp. And of course since that time, "Historic Christianity" has uniformly continued this "factual" interpretation. No one questions *this*.

Before we continue with Spong's literalization account, let's be clear on our chronology (since that's an important part of his case). Let's focus on the late first and early second centuries, for if a literalizing did take place, this is where it must have occurred.



(Again, we use the dates accepted by Borg, Crossan, and Spong for the composition of the gospels, which is roughly 70-100 AD. For the sake of argument, to give them every chance to prove their case, we will accept these dates for now. They are represented by "Gosp" box in the chart above.)

Look at the three earliest of the Christian leaders - Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp. You can see by the chart that (given the 70-100 dates for the gospels) they were exact contemporaries with the gospel writers. Polycarp and Ignatius were also friends, and it is very possible that they and Clement knew each other to some degree.

The next two Christian leaders are Justin and Irenaeus. They are the two most prominent writers called the "Apologists", because they conducted a defense (*apologia* in Greek) of the gospel. Irenaeus is particularly interesting because he was a pupil of Polycarp.

With this in mind, it is important to Spong's position to be able to say who the first literalizers were. Were they the Apologists (Justin and Irenaeus)? Or were they the Apostolic Fathers (Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp)? Were they some other group? Or were they individuals?

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## Spong's First View

I must reiterate here that Spong presents his views in a strong, confident way. He gives every appearance of knowing when, and how, this literalization first occurred. Here are some of his clearest quotes:

"If the readers of his [Matthew's] Gospel ever ceased to be part of the religious heritage of the Hebrew people, or to have their religious memories shaped by that historic tradition, then misunderstanding and distortion would be inevitable. Without the background required to resonate with the story, literalizing would occur." (*Born of a Woman* p84-85)

"So it was that Christianity entered its gentile exile, denied its Jewish roots, ignored its Jewish womb, and, in the process, distorted its own deepest insights. In time this resulted in extravagant literal claims for the historicity of what were in fact midrashic retellings of ancient themes in new moments of history." (*Resurrection: Reality or Myth?* p17)

"The readers of the Gospels who understood this midrashic method of probing Scripture would understand. Only to a generation living hundreds of years later, separated from their Jewish religious roots and clinging to a peculiarly Western mind-set, would the choice appear to be between literal truth and overt lies." (*Born of a Woman* p 19)

"When in the early years of the second century of the Christian era, the church ceased to be primarily Jewish and began the process by which it first became gentile, then Greek, and finally Western, that is exactly what occurred. First, we did not understand, then we literalized, and finally, in this modern world, we rejected." (*Born of a Woman* p84-85)

"Before the end of the first century all the Gospels had been written, each deeply shaped by the midrash tradition. But beginning in the second century, these Gospels were interpreted almost exclusively by non-Jewish people who knew nothing of midrash." (*Resurrection: Reality or Myth?* p16)

Let's try to gather together the points he makes. There appear to be two components to his claim.

1. The basic claim is that the gospel writers - and original gospels readers - were (primarily) Jewish and understood that the gospels were "midrash" (that is, understood them as metaphorically true).
2. The literalizers were Gentiles in the second century who did not understand midrash, and therefore inadvertently misinterpreted the Gospels (by thinking that they were simple factual accounts).
3. They did this because they were Gentile and lived in a later generation.

Most of Spong's contentions regarding literalization are extremely vague, but he does get



around to naming names (emphasis mine):

"But, beginning at least with *Polycarp* and *Justin Martyr* in the second century, the typical Christian understanding of this tradition was that the Jewish prophets had simply predicted concrete events in the life of the messiah who was to come, and Jesus had fulfilled these predictions in an almost literal way as a sign of his divine origin." (Resurrection: Reality or Myth? p5)

" I think the clue is in that people like *Irenaeus*, *Justin Martyr* and *Polycarp* are Gentiles and not Jews and that by the end of the first century the whole Christian movement was anti-Jewish in its flavor." (Dec 6, 1995 letter)

These statements give us a fairly definite answer to our two questions. Spong names three of the first literalizers. He says that they literalized because they were culturally removed from midrash (by being Gentiles) and were chronologically removed from the first century period of gospel composition (by living in the second century).

**Who were the first Literalizers? - Polycarp, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus.**  
**Why did they Literalize? - They were second-century Gentiles, not first-century Jews.**

### Consistency Problems

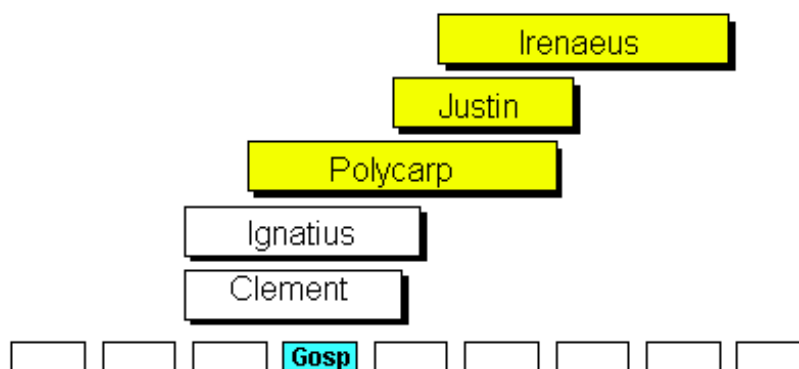
Aside from any examination of evidence to the contrary, there are serious *consistency* problems with each of these answers. The first has to do with Spong's loose sense of chronology. The second has to do with his own statements undermining the necessity of Jewishness in correctly understanding the gospels.

### Problems with "Who" (Chronology)

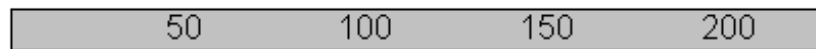
The first issue is that, while Spong typically says that the literalization occurred in the second century (Justin and Irenaeus), he also once makes the extraordinary claim that the literalization occurred *hundreds* of years later ("Only to a generation living hundreds of years later, separated from their Jewish religious roots and clinging to a peculiarly Western mind-set ..."). This sort of misleading generality occurs more than once in his books. We can probably chalk this up to rhetorical exaggeration, and won't press him on this point.

Spong makes a much more serious mistake when he explicitly names Polycarp as a literalizer (so now the three people in yellow are literalizers, and the two in white are . . . "unknown" (Spong hasn't said)).

Bishop Spong is obviously thinking of Polycarp as a second-century Christian writer and martyr (notice that Polycarp was martyred around 156 AD), and he fails to realize that Polycarp was also a *first* century Christian (who would have been 30 years old by the end of the first century), whose views regarding the gospel were formed precisely during the "metaphorical" era. This causes real complications in his theory.







(Using late dates for Gospels)

## Problems with "Why" (First Century Jews and Gentiles)

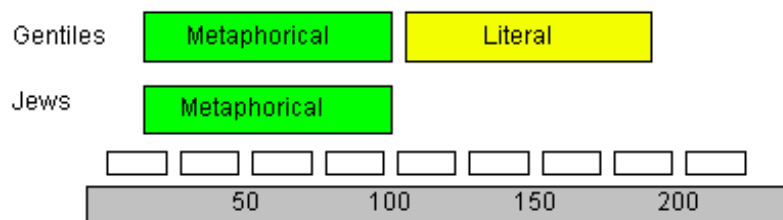
Spong undercuts his argument in a second way. He emphasizes again and again that the gospels were written as midrash, and that the primary reason the first readers understood them correctly was that they were Jewish, or at least heavily influenced by Jewish thinking. But in *Resurrection: Reality or Myth?* he tells us that Luke's gospel was *written* by a *gentile*, and explains this by saying that such metaphorical stories were entirely in harmony with *gentile* thought of the time. So, we are to understand that *both* Jews and gentiles in the first century understood the gospel metaphorically.

Yet Spong takes a hard turn here, and introduces another serious chronological inconsistency. In the bulk of his statements Spong indicates that Jewish thinking prevailed in the church up through the end of the first century. That's how John's gospel, for instance, could have been written and understood as midrash in 100 AD. But here, he seems to contradict this by saying that the "gentile direction" was "in full control" exactly *mid-way* through the 70-100 AD period.

"Before Luke's story was complete [90 AD], the gentile direction was not only established, *it was in full control*... when we consider Luke's account of Easter, we discover that quantitative leaps have occurred in the tradition...'rapture model' .. 'divine man image' ... Mythical stories about Romulus, the founder of Rome, employed this divine man model." (*Resurrection: Reality or Myth?* p74-76)

Given the statement above, there is only one way to reconcile his statements about the "gentile" Luke of 90 and the "Jewish" John of 100, and that is that by about 90 AD, *ALL* first-century Christians - *both Jews and Gentiles* - understood the gospel message metaphorically - and second-century Christians (such as Justin and Irenaeus) literalized it.

And so, this is a very clean distinction. First century = metaphorical. Second century = literal. This can be pictured as follows:



How are we, then, to understand the answers to our two questions? Given this exceedingly clean scenario, we now have:

**Who were the first Literalizers? - Polycarp, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus.**  
**Why did they Literalize? - The lived in the second-century, not the first.**

---

## Spong's Most Current View

But the "cultural" rationale is now a bothersome issue. It seems that a great deal of Bishop Spong's effort has been spent trying to show that a *cultural* difference (Jews vs gentiles) is largely responsible for the literalization mistake - and with his Luke/gentile comments he appears to throw all that away.

As we'll see below, he tries to remedy this defect. Bishop Spong has followed up this collection of books with a new one, *Liberating the Gospels : Reading the Bible With Jewish Eyes*. In this book, he modifies his view somewhat.

## Expectations

Back in December of 1995, and in the early months of 1996, I corresponded briefly with Bishop Spong about his views. I asked him pointed questions about the issues raised in this article. I especially requested that he flesh out his view about the literalizing of the gospels, and that he show how this relates to the earliest church fathers Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp. They are indeed the test-bed for his theory.

Spong's only reply to this was to assure me that he would put forth a better explanation in his new book. In a letter dated Dec 22, 1995, he said (*italics mine*):

"In my book that comes out next August, I will try to *trace the development* from midrashic Jewish gospels into Gentile literalistic interpretations of those gospels. I think the clue is in that people like Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Polycarp are Gentiles and not Jews and that by the end of the first century the whole Christian movement was anti-Jewish in its flavor." (Dec 22, 1995 letter)

I noticed that his chronology was, again, a bit puzzling. He says that "by the end of the first century" (presumably just before 100 AD) the "whole Christian movement" was anti-Jewish. But, surely, he contends that the gospel John was written 100 AD, was Jewish and incorporated midrash, and John's original audience understood this - the most highly symbolic gospel - metaphorically. How can this be consistent with his statement?

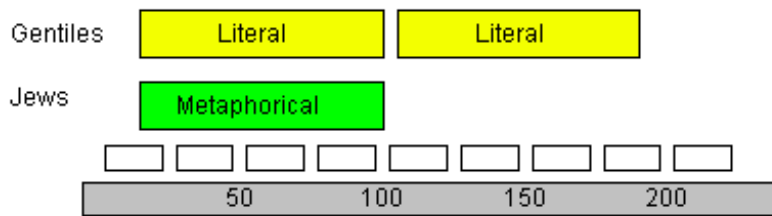
Leaving that aside, it was intriguing to guess what Spong could possibly say to bolster his position regarding the first literalizers. After all, he had promised to "trace the development" of the literalization process. Since the principal question is "Who were the first Literalizers?", it seemed to me that he would either have to put Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp in the literalizer camp or in the Metaphorical Gospel camp. Either way, it seemed to me he would have difficulties. There is no way he could side-step this issue.

## The Book

From the perspective of my expectations (which had been fueled by Spong's assurances), the book was a disappointment. He did not address my issues at all. He mentions Polycarp only once - he *reaffirms* his contention that Polycarp was a literalizer, but doesn't explain further. He never mentions Clement or Ignatius. He actually gives no account of the literalizing process. The entire book is an exercise in what I call the [Argument from Theory Intersection](#).

There was one major change in his position, however. Now he says that *all the gospels* (including Luke) were written by Jewish Christians. He appears to backtrack on his previous statements that the first-century gentile world-view well accommodated metaphorical gospels, thus rescuing his points about midrash from irrelevancy.

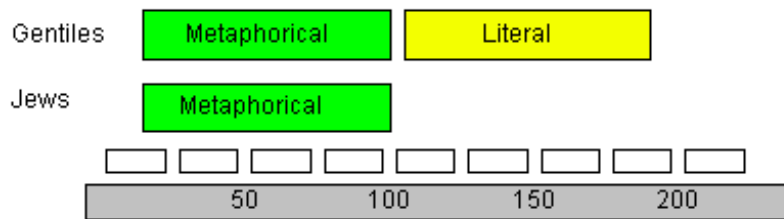
This actually makes his view tidier. But it only addresses one part of the issue. I wondered if Spong had come to realize that Polycarp was a first-century literalizing gentile. While he does not explicitly say that the first century Gentiles were literalists, maybe that's what he thinks. Thus, perhaps *this* is the picture in his mind:



This is not a trivial question. It completely determines Spong's answer to the question "Who were the first Literalizers?", and has significant implications for the second, "Why did they Literalize?" His whole account depends on this issue.

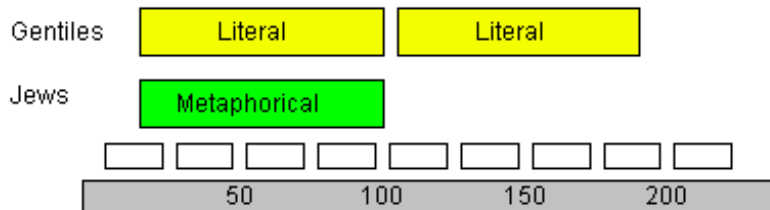
### Who Were the First Literalizers?

**View 1.** Let's say that the first-century gentiles understood the gospel metaphorically (as Spong has implied earlier). Then Justin and Irenaeus would be among the first literalizers, and the reason they were literalizers would have nothing to do with Jewish vs. Gentile understanding. This is how the scheme would look:



If *that's* Spong's position, he will have to retract his contention that Polycarp was a literalizer, or else explain how Polycarp could be "metaphorical" for the first half of his life and a "literalizer" for the second half. And, of course, he would have to explain away the Internal and External evidence provided by this article.

**View 2.** Let's say, on the other hand, that the first-century gentiles understood the gospel "factually" ("literally"). Then *they*, not the second-century Christians, would have been the first literalizers. The reason would clearly be that they lived in a later generation, not due to any difference between Jewish and Gentile understanding. The scheme would look like this:



If *that's* Spong's position, any talk about second century Christians (such as Justin or Irenaeus), or Christians "hundreds of years" later are *completely beside the point*.

Also, what about the Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp? If the first-century gentiles literalized the gospels, we are actually in a position to name three of them: Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp. But Spong has never even mentioned Clement and Ignatius. What is his position concerning *them*?

### Letter to Spong

At this point, I have to admit, on a personal note, that I was somewhat frustrated. By now I didn't care so much whether his view was this or that, I just wanted to know what it *was*! I

kept thinking to myself, "This shouldn't be so hard! I'm going to have to mention this when I talked about "Definiteness of Articulation."

So I wrote Bishop Spong a follow-up letter, asking him once again about these issues.

Remember that Spong has given every impression that he knows all about the literalization process. Here is Bishop Spong's reply (emphasis mine):

"I wish that I had time to correspond and deal with issues that all of my readers write, but I simply do not. I am well aware that there were Gentile Christians in the Church from 70 to 100, but that is not the focus of my book, and I would prefer not to be deviated from my task.

My point in the book was that after 100 A.D. the Church was almost totally Gentile, and that these Gentile persons did not know the Jewish origins of the gospels, nor the background of the gospels, and so they read them in terms of history and biography. It is that reading that I contend is wrong.

**What the Gentile Christians understood originally about the reading of the gospels, I do not know. It is also not my purpose to go into early Church history in this book. I wanted to limit my scope to the formation of the gospel tradition, so I am not terribly concerned about Polycarp, Clement or Ignatius. I share your sense of Ignatius as someone that I would not be terribly interested in studying in detail.**

I wish you well. I am sorry that I cannot engage a serious discussion of this, as time simply does not permit.

This comes with best wishes." (Nov 6, 1996 letter)

Read this carefully. He clearly and directly says that he does not know who the first literalizers were. Perhaps they were first-century gentiles, perhaps second-century gentiles, it's all the same to him. Furthermore, he is not interested in Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp, and appears to know little about them. The reason for this is that they are part of "early Church history" and it was not a part of the purpose of his book to address church history issues.

The answer stunned me. His answer was, simply put, *that he didn't know or care*. How can this be? He claims to have an authoritative account of the literalizing process, and then can't say who the first literalizers were or why they literalized!

I then (somewhat impolitely, I suppose) quickly sent him another letter, explaining why this was so amazing to me, and asked him to confirm that he *has no considered view* on this issue. To this he did not reply.

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## Conclusion

Bishop Spong has written several books in which he attempts to relate the results of modern New Testament scholarship to the lay reader. The thrust of most of these books is to emphasize what I call the Metaphorical Gospel theory, although he does not give it a definite name. In these books he also claims that the early "metaphorical" gospel understanding was lost and that later non-Jewish Christians "literalized" the gospel. He thinks that this literalization is a tragedy of significant proportions, and is at least partly responsible for the possible downfall of Christianity. He wants, thus, to "rescue" the Bible from fundamentalism.

In Spong's treatment of this literalization process, he gives every impression that he knows all

about it. He knows who did the literalization and why. Yet his account is general, vague, and inconsistent regarding crucial issues.

These statements give us a fairly definite answer to our two questions. Spong names three of the first literalizers. He says that they literalized because they were culturally removed from midrash (by being Gentiles) and were chronologically removed from the first century period of gospel composition (by living in the second century).

But at the end of the day, when the dust has all settled, there is no definite rationale given for this charge of apostasy.

**Who were the first Literalizers? - Can't say.  
Why did they Literalize? - Can't say.**

When pressed, he admits that he has not dealt with the External Evidence that bears on the subject, and that he does not even have a view about who the first literalizers were.

And so, we are left with a remarkable situation - one which I, at any rate, never would have expected. One of the three MG scholars, Crossan, does not have a position. Of the other two, Borg and Spong, we find in the last analysis that they confess openly to ignorance and apathy regarding this issue.

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## Conclusion: The Metaphorical Gospel Theory is False

By: Erick Nelson

Last Updated: September 11, 2002

*Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson go camping and pitch their tent under the stars. During the night, Holmes wakes his companion and says: "Watson, look up at the stars, and tell me what you deduce."*

*Watson says enthusiastically: "I see millions of stars, and even if a few of those have planets, it's quite likely there are some planets like Earth, and if there are a few planets like Earth out there, there might also be life."*

*Holmes replies: "Watson, you idiot. Somebody stole our tent."*

(University of Hertfordshire search for the world's funniest joke, reported by Chicago Tribune 3/4/02)

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I have pointed out that that the Metaphorical Gospel theory is affirmed (sometimes implicitly, or sometimes explicitly) by Borg, Crossan, and Spong, and is presented by them as being as the result of decades of careful modern scholarship. It is thought to be a mature, established theory.

### **Burden of Proof**

It is not sufficient for the advocates of the MG Theory to present merely a plausible case, or

even a probably case, as if the burden of proof was on their opponents. Those who affirm the Metaphorical Gospel Theory must rightfully *bear the burden of proof*, because:

1. They claim that the "plain" meaning of the text is not the true meaning
2. They claim special knowledge of the facts (being specialist scholars in the field)
3. They claim that a tragic exegetical mistake was made by early Christians which has been perpetuated throughout most of the existence of Christianity
4. Their view attempts to overturn the traditional view

Earlier in this work I set out the criteria I expect a sound theory (and especially a mature theory) to satisfy. Let's see whether the MG Theory was able to meet these criteria.

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## Definiteness of Articulation

Even before we can gather and evaluate evidence, we must first know what the theory actually *says* - and what it *doesn't* say. This is called the "Definiteness of Articulation" requirement. How can I believe a theory if I don't know what it claims? How can I evaluate a theory which sometimes appears in one guise and sometimes appears in another?

One of the difficult things about addressing the view we're trying to consider is that some of the language is not particularly precise. The other problem is, not so much that scholars differ, but that the same scholars will sometimes contradict themselves.

The scholars I examine fail this first basic test.

1. The language used to describe their views is sometimes so vague, imprecise, or positively misleading that it's hard to tell what they're really saying, especially when they use religious words in new ways.
2. They appear, sometimes, to make statements that would logically support other, competing views, rather than the Metaphorical Gospel view.
3. All three scholars, surprisingly, lack a coherent account of the Literalization process logically entailed by the theory.

## Vague and Illogical Statements

One way you can tell that this theory lacks articulation is that Dr. Borg and I had to send no less than 13 emails back and forth before I got him to agree that he affirmed that view. Another way to is to notice that several people I consulted thought that I was simply wrong ("too simplistic") in ascribing this view to these three scholars. A third example is that even one of Borg's colleagues, Mark Allan Powell, had difficulty when trying to interpret his views.

The attempt to make this theory explicit was more difficult than evaluating it.

One possible reaction to this finding is to say that the MG scholars work with concepts that are highly nuanced, subtle, sophisticated, and thus there is a Burden of Discovery (rather than Burden of Proof) which should be borne by the reader.

I disagree, in principle and in application. Certainly, in specialized fields such as mathematics, one can only proof one's thesis by using specialized - even highly sophisticated - concepts and terminology. However, within those constraints, the proponent of the theory much still speak clearly and precisely. It is just a matter of reality that only those equipped to evaluate such

theories are fitting judges.

However,

1. I don't see that this issue is that highly specialized. It seems to me that the concepts involved are fairly intuitive and that specialized constructs (such as higher math) are not necessary to discuss the issues. It is true that some knowledge of the ancient world may be presumed, but the essential elements even of *this* are not hidden from the discerning reader.

2. I also don't see that clear, simple, logical language is inadequate to put forth this thesis. In fact, Spong (at times) manages to come right out and say what he thinks. And I, in my way, have tried to paraphrase the claims so that they are as clear and precise as possible.

### **Lack of Account of Literalization**

At least Bishop Spong *tries* to give such an account. As I said before, the burden of proof is squarely on the person who claims "all Christians first believed X, and then they all later on believed  $\sim X$ " to give us an account regarding how that came about, or at least how it *might* have come about.

However, Spong's account is provably untenable. And I haven't gotten anything out of Borg or Crossan.

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### **Definiteness of Warrant**

The proponents of the MG Theory should tell us exactly which kinds of events or facts count *for* and against the theory - with clear, valid reasoning from evidence to conclusion.

One of the most interesting part of this study was the lack of a clear, solid case. I was forced to try to gather the best and most representative arguments out of a great deal of rhetoric. The arguments were these:

### **Historical Criticism has Proven It**

One of the reasons that cogent arguments were not forthcoming was the assumption that Historical Criticism has already established this as fact. However, when I asked Borg for some references regarding this specific issue, he was unable to recommend anything.

This is really an umbrella argument. When you think about it, it is really an Appeal to Authority. It is a deferral or deflection of the issue.

### **General Arguments**

The MG scholars do however, from time to time, try to make a case for the theory.

Spong tries to build a case based upon the presence of Old Testament themes in the New Testament. However, he commits the fallacy of appealing to "Theory Intersection", without showing how *his* theory better fits the facts.

Crossan points out how different Mark and John are, and presents his view that they are in such conflict that neither could possibly be true - and that this is evidence that they are intended (only) metaphorically. However, he commits several logical fallacies in the process, and

depends on rhetoric alone (good rhetoric, too) to convince the reader.

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## Evidence

There are two basic kinds of internal evidence: direct "meta-gospel" statements, and indirect statements. "Meta-gospel" statements (statements in the New Testament about the meaning of the gospel message) are the best evidence.

### Supporting the MG Theory

Spiritual Christ. The proponents of the Metaphorical Gospel theory attempt to make three points which are used to deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus and to create a wedge between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith:

1. Paul talks about no longer knowing Christ "after the flesh"
2. "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God."
3. Paul teaches a spiritual, not a bodily, resurrection of Jesus

We have carefully examined these passages and find that the Internal Evidence simply does not indicate this.

### Internal Evidence

There are, however, several statements, from a variety of sources, which are ignored or simply missed by the proponents of the Metaphorical Gospel theory. These statements directly contradict the theory. A few examples are:

1. Luke explicitly tells us that he is providing a collection of eyewitness accounts regarding what happened.
2. Matthew, in an editorial aside, tells us that the story about the disciples stealing the body was still current in his day - thus, we know that the empty tomb was construed literally.
3. John places an interesting stress on the eye-witness nature of the Fourth Gospel,
4. Paul teaches Jesus' true deity and describes his 'form', pre-existence, and 'emptying'
5. Paul teaches Jesus' bodily resurrection; he not only teaches it, he explains and defends it.
6. In Acts, the model of gospel presentation is an appeal to fulfilled prophecy - the reverse of midrash - especially as it relates to the real, physical resurrection of Jesus.
7. In the "deutero" epistles, the writers warn us to *reject* stories that are made up and instead believe the eyewitness accounts of what happened.
8. 1 John emphasizes that Jesus and The Christ are not to be separated.

These are incontrovertible statements which prove that the New Testament writers intended the gospel accounts to be construed as events which actually took place.

The end result is an impressive list of statements in the New Testament itself which are difficult, if not impossible, to explain away. Every meta-gospel statement *contradicts* the MG theory. The surprise is that these scholars, whose business it is to be experts in the New Testament, appeared to be unaware that these statements contradicted their theory. As C.S. Lewis once observed, those who claim to be able to read between lines appear to be unable to read the lines themselves.

### External Evidence

The Metaphorical Gospel is a thesis about the intent of the New Testament authors. Do we have any writings of people who were in a position to *know* the intent of these authors? We do (Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp). What do they say? Do they affirm the theory or contradict it?



The Metaphorical Gospel is a thesis not only of the intent of the original New Testament authors, but is also a thesis about how the New Testament writings were *originally understood*. (The claim is that Christians living in the 70-110 period understood the gospels metaphorically, and that only a later generation literalized it.) This is easy to check out. Do we have writings of Christians who lived during this time? We do (The same people: Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp). What do they say? Do they affirm the theory or contradict it?

Surprisingly enough, Borg, Spong, and Crossan completely ignore this primary source evidence. Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp explicitly contradict the Metaphorical Gospel theory. These church leaders, universally acknowledged to be representative of the church world-view of that day, and presumably in touch with at least some of the gospel writers (if not the disciples themselves), stand as a powerful direct refutation of the theory.

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## Answers to Common Objections

I had the good fortune of being able to correspond with Dr. Borg (by email) and Bishop Spong (by regular mail). I was able to confirm that I understood their positions. I also presented the Internal and External evidence to them on several occasions, in one form or another. Although I understand it's not realistic to expect a full reply or discussion from them on these issues, I thought that they would have some stock responses to my rather elementary questions. I was wrong. They did not even pass the "Prospective Mother-in-Law Test" (see [Responses](#)) - they couldn't answer even the simplest questions.

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## Conclusion

The Metaphorical Gospel Theory, as I have defined it, has simply not passed the tests. It lacks Definiteness of Articulation and Definiteness of Warrant. The Internal Evidence and External Evidence are squarely against it. The proponents of this theory seem to have no good answers to common objections.

The Metaphorical Gospel Theory might be an attractive theory, it is certainly a popular and sophisticated theory - but it is also a false theory. We should not be intimidated into accepting it on the basis of authority or under the pressures of intellectual fashion. As long as the evidence stands, the theory must be rejected.

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