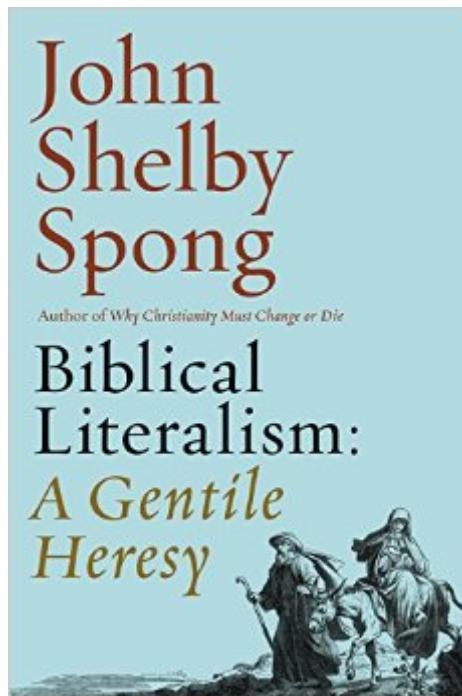


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# Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy: A Journey Into A New Christianity Through The Doorway Of Matthew's Gospel



## Synopsis

A global and pioneering leader of progressive Christianity and the bestselling author of *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* and *Eternal Life* explains why a literal reading of the Gospels is actually heretical, and how this mistaken notion only entered the church once Gentiles had pushed out all the Jewish followers of Jesus. A man who has consciously and deliberately walked the path of Christ, John Shelby Spong has lived his entire life inside the Christian Church. In this profound and considered work, he offers a radical new way to look at the gospels today as he shows just how deeply Jewish the Christian Gospels are and how much they reflect the Jewish scriptures, history, and patterns of worship. Pulling back the layers of a long-standing Gentile ignorance, he reveals how the church's literal reading of the Bible is so far removed from these original Jewish authors' intent that it is an act of heresy. Using the Gospel of Matthew as a guide, Spong explores the Bible's literary and liturgical roots—its grounding in Jewish culture, symbols, icons, and storytelling tradition—to explain how the events of Jesus' life, including the virgin birth, the miracles, the details of the passion story, and the resurrection and ascension, would have been understood by both the Jewish authors of the various gospels and by the Jewish audiences for which they were originally written. Spong makes clear that it was only after the church became fully Gentile that readers of the Gospels took these stories to be factual, distorting their original meaning. In *Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy*, Spong illuminates the gospels as never before and provides a better blueprint for the future than where the church's leaden and heretical reading of the story of Jesus has led us—one that allows the faithful to live inside the Christian story in the modern world.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 416 pages

Publisher: HarperOne (February 16, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0062362305

ISBN-13: 978-0062362308

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.3 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars — See all reviews (101 customer reviews)

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## Customer Reviews

Biblical Literalism by Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong demonstrates with considerable scholarship that the New Testament, and especially the Gospel of Matthew, is not a literal text but rather is a narrative written by a Jewish scribe for a Jewish audience. We have to read it through a Jewish lens and discover its Jewish meaning, namely that the love of God can embrace all. The liturgical life of the synagogue was the organizing principle of the synoptic gospels. The belief that the New Testament is literal history came about when, starting around 150CE, the Christian church became composed entirely of Gentiles and thus its Jewish roots became lost. Biblical literacy is thus a "Gentile Heresy." The bible reflects a worldview of an ancient pre-modern time and holds as true many things that no one believes today. Modern Christianity he says is split in two, between those who claim the bible is the literal recording of actual events and those who say it is all nonsense. His book is an attempt to find a truer meaning. The book is divided into ten parts. While largely focused on the gospel of Matthew, the book also covers the other synoptic gospels (Mark and Luke) and the epistles of Paul. He begins at the beginning of Christ's life, saying that he probably lived from 4 BCE to 30CE. Much of what we believe is not true. Joseph probably was not a real person, Jesus was not born in Bethlehem, there was no star or magi and Mary was not a virgin. Rev. Spong goes on exposing the activities in Matthew as fulfillment of Jewish prophecies. He likens John the Baptist to Elijah and Jesus to Moses. He exposes the parting of the Red Sea as another myth. He shows how Matthew follows the Jewish liturgical process, matching events in the life of Jesus with Jewish feast days and religious ceremonies. The book ends with the Passion Story, which Rev. Spong says is designed to allow people to meditate on the meaning of life and Jesus. The death of Jesus by crucifixion was real "the narrative, however, was developed liturgy. Jesus was not raised literally, but symbolically "into God." The gospel of Matthew is not about God coming to save fallen human beings who cannot save themselves. It is about human beings discovering the divine that is always in their midst. Rev. Spong also debunks Adam and Eve. There was no original perfection; the concept of original sin is simply wrong. Christianity has been transformed into a religion of victimization. We need a theology of fulfillment. Now we have a political party that claims to represent the religious or Christian vote that constantly seeks to cut programs aimed at assisting the poor. It is a Christianity of affluence. I recommend this

book for both religious and non-religious people, as it will help both to understand the true story of Christ and the meaning of his life.

John Shelby Spong argues that a literal reading of the New Testament - specifically Matthew - is an error that developed after the Christ movement left the Jewish faith to form Christianity. The earliest Christian writings were Paul's letters (the ones he actually wrote, not all those attributed to him). Mark was the first gospel written - 30-40 years after the death of Christ, followed by Matthew, Luke, and John. Paul does not mention a virgin birth or a physical resurrection. "...the story of the ascension did not enter the Christian tradition until the tenth decade, in the writings of Luke (Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11). Resurrection for Paul clearly meant that the life of Jesus in some way had become part of the life of God." [p351] Where did the gospels come from then if they were written decades after Christ's crucifixion? Spong contends that what became the gospel of Matthew was originally a year long liturgical story told orally in the temple. Much of this book places the gospel chapters in the context of the Old Testament. This context shows Christ as the new Moses - the new deliverer of God's people. For example, Spong holds that the Sermon on the Mount should be seen in the context of Moses' going to Mt Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. "In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew also has Jesus do a commentary on each of the Ten Commandments. Jesus' message clearly drives each commandment beneath the level of the literal command - that is, it is not sufficient to keep the sixth commandment just by refraining from the literal act of murder. You must, says Jesus, listen to the law against murder in the innermost levels of your life, for it is also a call not to be angry, not to judge another, not to insult." [p129] ... "This is not a spontaneously delivered sermon on a mountaintop. This is a beautifully crafted interpretation of Jesus as the new Moses." [p130]. Clearly bringing the comparison of Jesus and Moses into focus, "Matthew has been building the theme for some time. this is why he placed a Moses story into the birth narrative of Jesus, making both Moses and Jesus the spared agents of God when a wicked ruler tried to destroy both at birth. This was why he likened the baptism of Jesus to the Red Sea experience of Moses. Both split the waters; Moses at the Red Sea [actually the Sea of Reeds - Red Sea is a product of a mistranslation in the King James Bible] Jesus the heavenly waters. This is why he portrays both Moses and Jesus as having been tempted in the wilderness and why he makes the content of the temptations of Jesus identical with the content of the crises that Moses faced. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew reaches the grand crescendo of this theme. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is made to revisit the story of Moses on Mt. Sinai. There is no doubt that this gospel is not eyewitness reporting. Matthew is not recording things that actually happened; he is interpreting, through the

lens of synagogue worship, the power of the Jesus experience." [p130] So what happened? Some decades after Christ's death the Christ movement left the Jewish faith. As the years passed we have lost the Jewish context of the Christ stories and instead have interpreted the stories literally. This brings up serious problems for today's church as can be seen by looking at atonement theology. "It was in that transition movement in Christian history that Christians first co-opted and then corrupted the Jewish concept of atonement, turning it into something they called 'substitutionary atonement.' ... This mantra was captured best in the words that became the Christian mantra ... 'Jesus died for my sins.' This mantra was then incorporated into everything that was called Christian. Substitutionary atonement, which became the Christian view of salvation, presented us ultimately with a god who is a punishing monster, with a Christ who is God's eternal victim and with a humanity characterized by debilitating guilt." [pp 201-202] Spong argues (persuasively I think) that this approach to Christianity will result in a great weakening of the faith over the next hundred or so years. It is no secret that the Christian churches are shrinking year-by-year. Today's youth don't respond to the mistaken view that "the love of God must be limited to those that we are able to love." [p 253]. Somehow we must learn to see again how far God's love stretches. We must come to see that "Matthew's Christ is a barrier-breaking Christ, inviting all people into the meaning of God's life and his love." [p 365] I think Spong is a little heavy handed at times and I certainly am not an expert on the Jewish liturgical calendar but I do think that freeing ourselves from a literal reading of the New Testament can result in a better understanding of God's love. If I were to read only one theology book this year, I'd pass over this for John Dominic Crossan's "How to Read the Bible and Still be a Christian"

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