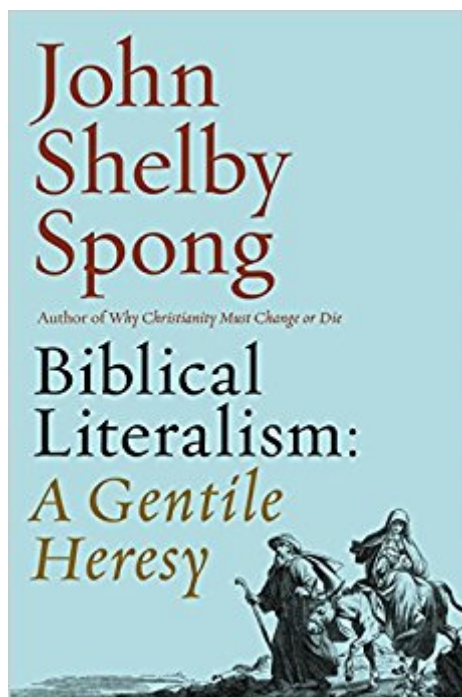




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# Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy: A Journey Into A New Christianity Through The Doorway Of Matthew's Gospel



## 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

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## Customer Reviews

Ã¢â“After reading SpongÃ¢ââs newest book, it will be difficult to read Matthew or any of the Gospels in quite the same way. HeÃ¢ââs done an amazing job of explaining how the book of Matthew was written as weekly liturgies for the Jewish Synagogue year. A wonderful book.Ã¢âÂ• (Fred C. Plumer, President of ProgressiveChristianity.org)Ã¢â“This exciting book recovers the original meaning behind MatthewÃ¢ââs Gospel with profound implications for the way we look at Jesus and follow him today. Spong is a truth-teller who stands up to the ignorance spawned by a Ã¢â“Gentile HeresyÃ¢ââ that has hijacked the story of Jesus for too long.Ã¢âÂ• (Matthew Fox, author of Original Blessing)Ã¢â“Jack Spong confounds biblical literalists by being profoundly biblical. This exciting book is liberating for those looking for a rational and authentic Christian faith that honors its biblical roots and an essential building block in the search for a new Christianity for a new world.Ã¢âÂ• (Peter Francis, warden and director of Gladstone’s Library, Wales)Ã¢â“A brilliant challenge to biblical literalism, Bishop Spong reveals the tragic consequences of idolatry of the written word and why it matters today. A timely, important book.Ã¢âÂ• (Michael Dowd, author of Thank God for Evolution)Ã¢â“Delightedly publishing another book as he nears 85, Spong returns to a main theme of his career, the Jewishness of Christianity, denial of which, he holds, amounts to a heresy so malign that it will destroy Christianity in the twenty-first centuryÃ¢âÂ•vibrantly accessible.Ã¢âÂ• (Booklist)Ã¢â“Skewers historical readings of Matthew and turns the passages toward issues of dignity, social justice, and transformation . . . worthwhile read for the progressive layperson concerned with living out oneÃ¢ââs faith and applying the Bible as a touchstone.Ã¢âÂ• (Library Journal)Ã¢â“Spong offers a radical new way to look at the gospels.Ã¢âÂ• (Publishers Weekly)Ã¢â“There is a powerful message that runs counter to the idea that faith offers nothing but a sweet and secure life.Ã¢âÂ• (Religion Dispatches)Ã¢â“The release of Biblical Literalism - a Gentile Heresy brings him back to State of Belief to talk about his dive into a more contentious area of theology, his potentially-controversial use of the term Ã¢â“heresyÃ¢ââ and the future - and drive towards inclusiveness - of the progressive Episcopal community.Ã¢âÂ• (State of Belief Radio)Ã¢â“For years-decades, really-the former Episcopal bishop of Newark, N.J., John Shelby SpongÃ¢âÂ•has been proposing various controversial ways of understanding what

Christianity is all about [A] In his new-and, he says, perhaps final-book (he'll be 85 years old in June), he's at it again. (Bill's 'Faith Matters' Blog) "If you're keen for a deeper tracing of its history and inscription, then rush to get your hands on a copy of respected theologian Spong's Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy. (Chicago Tribune Printers Row Journal)

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.

If you are looking for a challenging, smart look at the origins of the Gospel of Matthew, you've found it. Bishop Spong acknowledges that he has been called everything from heretical to the Anti-Christ in the preface of this book. He lays out a series of "facts" that the Biblical literalist accept and he challenges from Virgin Birth to bodily resurrection. Knowing that is fluent in ancient Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic and has read and re-read the original text of what we know as scripture, be prepare for an academic treatise that is as approachable as possible. He digs into what happened to the Gospels

between the death of Christ and the first recorded stories. Until 88 CE, when Judaism and Christianity divided, the stories of Jesus were not kept alive over the backyard fence, but in the place where people gathered to discuss religion, the Synagogue. When finally committed to writing, as late as the 10th decade after his crucifixion, the story, Spong posits was highly influenced by not only Jewish tradition, but the Jewish Liturgical year. This is must read by any open-minded Christian and would be a fascinating read for any progressive Jew. There is no proselytizing here. Simply a fascinating dig into the links between Christianity and Judaism.

I am a Presbyterian minister and lifelong Christian believer. Every since days in a Sunday School basement classroom I have sought more knowledge of the Bible. Throughout the years of my ministry I have collected an entire shelf of titles by Bishop John Shelby Spong the 86year old retired Episcopal bishop who asserts that this will be his book. One hope not! His argument is that Christians do not read the Bible through the lens of the Jewish culture from which it was produced. Spong believes that the stories of Jesus are often symbolic and deeply connected with Old Testament stories. He says that the gospel was first read in the synagogue's annual liturgical year. Stores revolve around Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, Yom Kippur and other festivals. The Jews who became Christian believers viewed Jesus as a New Moses leading them into a new Kingdom of God. He also analyzes tales dealing with John the Baptist, the miracles and resurrection. This is a valuable book for anyone teaching Matthew to an educated group of believers. To pastors I would say it is controversial but is a valuable resource. It will make you think!

This is an entirely new way of understanding of the Bible, very carefully researched and much more than the Book Title indicates. Things I have always wondered about are explained in a way an ordinary Bible reader would never be able to discover!

Spong is a preeminent biblical scholar whose books stimulate deep thought about the meaning of modern Christianity. Although this book is based on an understanding of Jewish tradition at the time of Jesus, its conclusions should impact modern Christians as they wrestle with the relevance of Christianity, as we have learned it, to our present day world. The book challenges many long held understandings of the meaning of the scriptures, but it does so in a way that should not engender outrage, but a considered reassessment of what generations of Christians have been taught. At bottom, one can disagree with Dr. Spong's conclusions, but cannot deny his deeply felt belief in Jesus and in the future of the Christian faith.

I admit to having drunk the "kool-aid" of Bishop Spong's prophetic life's work many years ago. I am also existentialist, following Niebuhr and Tillich into the work of Penniman and Jim Adams. And I am clearly in the "Progressive Christian" camp. Even so, this book is highly compelling - exquisitely researched and his arguments thoughtfully presented. A great read for "believers in exile". Also, highly recommended to my dear friends of the Jewish faith for consideration as a bridge between our two world views!

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 prophesies. 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.

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