

A CRITICAL READING OF THE WRITINGS **OF JOHN SHELBY SPONG**

'The Jesus who attracted me was always the Jewish Jesus'

John Shelby Spong, 2007
'Jesus for the Non-Religious', p. ix

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

John Shelby Spong, retired Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, USA, is arguably one of the more influential and controversial Christian writers in recent times. Spong appears, from his writings and public addresses, to regard himself as a leading biblical scholar and author. He has written on a range of topics, from homosexuality and pre-marital living arrangements to a number of books dealing with what he terms 'Christian Fundamentalism'. His writings have sparked a considerable body of reaction across the Christian community, ranging from outrage and polemic from 'Fundamentalists' to approval and support from 'non-Fundamentalists' and those whom Spong calls the 'church alumni' and 'believers in exile'. His opponents have expressed their views in all forms of media; those who agree with his views do not seem to have felt the need to go into print. There appears to be no objective, critical review of Spong's work from an academic viewpoint, looking at his use of the known history of the times and social environment, in particular of the Early Christian period. This thesis will critically examine the content of Spong's writings against 'fundamentalist' Christian beliefs, in particular those connected with the early Christian groups. It is not proposed to deal with his books on other topics such as social issues or inter-faith relationships, nor with Spong's theology.

This thesis arose from reading one of John Shelby Spong's early books. While it answered some questions, it also raised many others. In particular, there

were questions about Spong's handling, or mishandling, of the biblical texts, and was he presenting sound argument or mere personal speculation. Further reading of Spong confirmed that unease, calling for a dispassionate examination of his work from a 'Studies in Religion' viewpoint rather than 'Theology'. While an initial conclusion may have been drawn, there cannot be an objective final conclusion on Spong's approach and work until his writings have been examined in some detail.

As will be seen later, John Shelby Spong claims to write for the laity, not for the biblical scholars. He makes that clear in the Preface to his book *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991:x). In particular, he addresses himself to those whom he calls “the church alumni” and “believers in exile” – those whom he believes to have become dissatisfied with the way Christianity is presented in the modern church practice. Through his various books, he gives a clear impression that he prefers to aim his speaking and writing at a group who may be termed 'informed laity' (for example, Spong 2013:xv). In various places he refers to "average pew sitters"; he appears to regard this group with some disdain, saying that they are "biblically illiterate" (Spong 1991:10). However, it is considered that the majority of that readership would not have ready access to scholarly works and argument; it is also considered to be unlikely that such a readership would be prepared to use such scholarly works. Spong is drawing on the standard Bible texts which are available to the general public, and presenting his own arguments as to the interpretation of those texts. With that in mind, this thesis will seek to uncover what John Shelby Spong is telling his readership about the Christian mythology, compared with the views of some recognised biblical scholars. No views will be expressed on Spong's personal theology, or on the validity or otherwise of the Christian or any other faith and practices. The major questions to be answered are, firstly, whether or not John Shelby Spong is successful in his professed aim of demystifying the Gospel stories and other writings that make up the Christian mythology, and secondly, whether or not he deserves to be accorded a reputation as a religious scholar or a credible author in the field of Early Christianity and the development of the Christian mythology and tradition.

PROPOSAL

This thesis will investigate the questions:

- *Is Bishop John Shelby Spong, in his writings, successful in his aim of demystifying and demythologising the Christian Scriptures for the lay reader?*
- *Should he be accorded the status of a biblical scholar or a credible author in the field of the Early Christian mythology and tradition, on the basis of his writing and speaking to the wider, non-academic community?*

Definitions

It is necessary to define the meaning of certain phrases within the context of this proposal and thesis. The particular phrases from the Proposal are 'biblical scholar' and 'credible author'. In addition, the term 'mythology' must be defined in the context of its use in the overall thesis. John Shelby Spong's use of the term 'midrash' will be addressed separately.

The authority for the definitions of 'biblical scholar' and 'credible author' is *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 4th ed. 2004. Of course, each of those terms consists of two separate words, each with its own meaning; hence, the final definition of each of the terms will be a construct for the purposes of this thesis.

The various definitions are:

- *'biblical'*: "concerning, or contained in, the Bible";

- ‘*scholar*’: [two definitions are relevant here] 1. “a learned person, especially in language, literature, etc.; an academic”; 2. “a person with a specified academic ability”;
- ‘*credible*’: “believable or worthy of belief”;
- ‘*author*’: “a writer, especially of books” [in this case may also be extended to speaking, as much of Spong’s writing is based on his various lecture series].

From those various dictionary definitions, for the purposes of this proposal and thesis, the two terms in question will be defined as follows:

‘*biblical scholar*’: a learned person, specifically in the field of religion and biblical studies;

‘*credible author*’: a writer or speaker who is believable or worthy of belief.

The term ‘mythology’, especially ‘Christian mythology’ appears in various places in this thesis. Following Karen Armstrong’s *A Short History of Myth* (Armstrong 2005:581), in the context of this thesis ‘mythology’ is defined as ‘those stories and texts which provide the bases of a religious faith and tradition’.

The term ‘scholarship’ may be used in relation to John Shelby Spong’s views as expressed in his various books. Drawing on the *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 4th ed. 2004, ‘scholarship’ is defined as “academic achievement; learning of a high level” or “the methods and standards characteristic of a good scholar”.

METHODOLOGY

The major interest for this thesis is the figure of and work of Bishop John Shelby Spong. The question to be addressed is the manner in which Spong presents his views to his purported lay readership. However, because of the breadth of John Shelby Spong’s writings, two of his books have been selected as vehicles for the major research for this thesis; these books present Spong’s views on what are considered to be the two central themes of the Christian mythology and tradition.

Also, they are the only books which Spong wrote on single aspects of the Christian tradition – his others are more general examinations of Church traditions and practice. The book to be examined in greatest detail is *Resurrection, Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity* (1994). *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* (1992) also will be reviewed in some extra detail, as, apart from his views on the traditions of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, it demonstrates John Shelby Spong's 'personal agenda', particularly in relation to the place of women in the Christian church community. Other books by Spong will be investigated and referred to as appropriate.

The approach to Spong's writings will be a critical analysis of his text, with particular reference to his scholarship and his approach to the biblical and linguistic references. The work of other acknowledged biblical scholars and authors writing in the same genre as Spong will be examined briefly, in order to provide a basis for comparison and critique. These 'other authors' are all members of the academic community in the field of Religious Studies and Theology; however, because Spong does not write for an academic readership, but instead for the non-academic laity, these 'other works' are not scholarly papers about aspects of Christian theology and practice. Instead, they are works aimed at the same non-academic readership, intended to make biblical scholarship available to 'the masses'; as such, they provide a fair comparison for John Shelby Spong's output.

In this thesis, 'religion' is regarded as a cultural phenomenon, rather than as a matter of the 'truth' or otherwise of various mythologies. With that in mind, the approach will be in line with what John Barton terms "disinterested scholarship" (Barton 1998:11-12). The validity, or otherwise, of the Christian tradition and Scriptures is not questioned or discussed; the focus is on the figure of John Shelby Spong and his credibility as a religious scholar and author. This is in contrast to the Biblical Commentaries and other academic literature, which generally focus on the interpretations of the biblical texts.

In fairness to John Shelby Spong, material and argument not available to him at the time of his writing any particular book will not be considered in criticism of that or earlier publications.

DISCLOSURE OF PERSONAL ACQUAINTANCE

The writer of this thesis is personally acquainted with John Shelby Spong, having attended several of his public talks, having met him on several occasions at various gatherings, and having had a private, one-to-one, meeting with him to discuss his views. Also, the writer is of the same age cohort as Spong, being only three years younger, and has, therefore, lived through and observed the same world events as has Spong, albeit from an Australian, rather than a North American (USA), perspective.

This acquaintance should not be seen as in any way precluding a dispassionate approach to Spong and his work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As this thesis is an examination of the writings of John Shelby Spong, it follows that the greater part of the literature read has been Spong's books. Broadly, those books can be divided into two groups: those dealing with the Christian scriptures, beliefs and practices, and those addressing Spong's views on the state of the modern Christian community.

The major focus will be on the five books which deal more specifically with Christian beliefs and traditions: *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991), *Born of a Woman* (1992), *This Hebrew Lord* (1993, first published 1974), *Resurrection: Myth or Reality* (1994), and *Liberating the Gospels* (1997). It may be noted that all of those books except *This Hebrew Lord* were written after Spong was consecrated Bishop in 1976. Each of these five volumes will be examined later, in varying levels of detail. However, the focus for closest examination and criticism will fall on *Resurrection*, as the tradition surrounding the Resurrection of Jesus may be seen as the central belief in the Christian dogma.

Other books by Spong are of interest in that they help the critic to reach an understanding of the background to his thinking. These are: *Into the Whirlwind* (2003, first published 1983), *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (1998), the autobiographical *Here I Stand* (2000), *A New Christianity for a New World* (2002),

Sins of Scripture (2005), *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (2007), *Eternal Life: A New Vision* (2009), *Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World* (2011), and *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* (2013). They will be referred to as appropriate. Again, all of these were written after Spong's consecration as bishop; in fact, all but the first two have been written since Spong retired from the active clergy in January 2000.

It should be noted that Spong generally writes in the first person, making his writings a very personal account of his own spiritual journey. It is at times difficult to determine whether he is indeed writing for the 'church alumni' and his 'average pew-sitters', or whether he is exploring his own beliefs and uncertainties.

Six authors other than John Shelby Spong have been selected as representatives of Spong's genre, to be examined by way of comparison. As said above, these authors are all leading academics in the field of religious studies, most, like Spong, either are, or have been, ordained Christian clergy. However, in fairness to Spong, the publications examined are not academic papers or scholarly monographs. Instead, they are written in the same popular genre as Spong's books, intended for a lay readership and covering a range of views on aspects of the early development of the Christian faith. These 'other authors', and their books, are:

Gerd Theissen, *The Open Door: Variations on Bible Themes* (1991); *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (1992); *The Historical Jesus* (1998); and *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World* (1999);

Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (2005); *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (2005); *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (2005); *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (2006); *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (2008); and *Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (2009);

Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians and Their Social Worlds* (1994);

Geza Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (2003); *The Nativity: History and Legend* (2006); and *The Resurrection: History and Myth* (2008);

Robert W. Funk, *Parables and Presence* (1982); and *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (1996); and

John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus, a Revolutionary Biography* (1994).

It is acknowledged that there are many other scholars and writers in the field, such as Marcus Borg, who are of equal standing with the selected group. It is also acknowledged that many of those scholars and writers are women, such as Elaine Pagels and Karen Armstrong. However, considerations of space preclude their inclusion, although they may be cited.

Various scriptural texts have been used as references and sources in the writing of this thesis. In addition to various versions of the Christian Bible, these scriptures include the Jewish *Tanakh* (Hebrew-English version), *The Septuagint*, Greek (Koine) Earliest Christian texts, and the *Greek (Interlinear) New Testament* (the Koine text here follows the ancient texts almost exactly). The different versions of the Christian Bible have been used to check varying English-language renditions of various passages quoted or referred to by Spong. The texts used are the *King James Version* (KJV), the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), the *New English Bible with Apocrypha*, the *New International Version* (NIV), and the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV).

It is acknowledged that the *King James Version* may now be regarded as being based on unreliable manuscripts. However, there are many active members of the 'Christian community' who regard the KJV as the only authentic version of the Bible. While the majority of those appear to be found in the Southern states of the USA, there are, for example, a number of those holding such views who live in this writer's home region in Australia. It is considered, therefore, that the KJV is a valid text, although it may be low on the reliability scale, for comparison of English words in the course of criticizing Spong's attempts to build semantic arguments.

Other sources and authors, not necessarily referenced, have included those dealing with the Gnostics, the Mystery Religions and other outside influences such as Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, to establish what reference Spong may, or should,

have had to those influences. There may also be references to the archaeology of the biblical region, Greek and Roman history in the region, and the general political and social *milieu* of the Jesus period.

It is also acknowledged that there is a considerable body of polemic against John Shelby Spong and his views. However, this appears to emanate mainly from the conservative, evangelical 'fundamentalist' elements in the world Christian community; it appears to be based on 'faith' and a generally literalist view of Christian doctrine, rather than clear history-based argument. These views generally appear as articles in various journals or as web-pages on the Internet. There are also other critics who, while accepting the general thrust of Spong's views, dismiss Spong himself as 'lightweight, doesn't say anything new'. However, those views are usually expressed in the course of general discussion and 'car-park conversation', rather than as scholarly commentary. Such comments have been heard from people who freely admit to never having either read or heard Spong.

It may be noted that this writer was first introduced to the writings of John Shelby Spong by a senior member of the clergy of a mainstream Christian denomination.

CHAPTER 2 – BACKGROUND TO JOHN SHELBY SPONG

This background is drawn from information provided by Spong himself in his various writings, as well as various websites in the public arena. A number of the books referred to throughout this thesis have such details of Spong's life, while *Here I Stand* (Spong 2000) is autobiographical in nature and contains a great deal of personal information.

JOHN SHELBY SPONG

John Shelby Spong was born in June 1931 in North Carolina, USA, one of the old 'slave states' and part of the American 'Bible Belt', where the Bible was seen, and often still is so, as being the literal Word of God, inerrant, infallible, and unchanging. His father died an alcoholic when John was a 12-year-old; he and his siblings were raised by their mother in an evangelical Calvinistic, but still Anglican, household – a very different atmosphere from his later religious views. He says that he had his first experience of racism at about the age of four (about 1935), when his father chastised him for addressing an elderly African-American as 'Sir' (Spong 2000:19).

Spong was ordained as a priest in 1955. He says that during his years of tertiary study he was exposed to religious views that were radically different from those he had known in his earlier years. After ordination, he served in various parishes in North Carolina and Virginia until becoming Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, in June 1976, where he stayed until his retirement in January 2000. His first wife, Joan, died in 1988 after a long struggle with mental illness and cancer – Spong says, in various places, that that experience had a great, generally negative, effect on his views on traditional Christian religious beliefs, such as the power of prayer.

John Shelby Spong achieved his Master of Divinity in 1955, as a pre-requisite for his ordination. He has since undertaken Special Studies at Yale, Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh Universities as well as other institutions, is a Fellow of Emmanuel College Cambridge, and was Scholar-in-residence at Christ Church Oxford. He has been awarded three Honorary Doctorates (two in Divinity,

from the Episcopal Theological Seminary, Virginia, and St. Paul's College, Virginia, and one in Humane Letters, from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). Since retiring, he has been a visiting lecturer at the Harvard Divinity School.

Spong's life, both in his youth and as a clergyman, led him into involvement with various sections of the community whom he saw as being marginalised, both in and out of the church, such as women, the African-American population, and gay and lesbian people. He first came to the notice of the wider Christian community in America in 1974, with the publishing of *This Hebrew Lord* and consequently engaging in a series of public forums with a senior Reformed Jewish Rabbi, Dr. Jack Daniel Spiro, who became a lifelong friend. However, he already had been deeply involved in controversial anti-racist activities, particularly at the time of the civil rights movement in the 1960s – integration of schools, 'freedom marches', and the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Later, he openly supported the 'irregular' ordaining of the first women priests in the Episcopal Church in 1974, and created trouble again in 1989 by ordaining as priest a highly qualified but openly 'gay' man. Both those events created a storm, not merely in the USA but also in the wider Anglican Communion, with evangelical members of the Communion calling for him to be disciplined. He has also been involved in a long-running battle with various American evangelical preachers, such as the late Jerry Falwell, over his religious views and associated matters such as racism and homosexuality. It is noted that he also worked part-time as a radio sports commentator while serving as Rector of his parish.

Spong had established himself as a public speaker – often controversial – before he became an author. However, it may be argued that it is his writings that have given John Shelby Spong his wider reputation, or notoriety. He has written some twenty books and numerous articles, addressing a wide variety of topics, ranging from social issues such as racism and human sexuality to religious topics such as Jewish-Christian relations and various examinations of aspects of the Christian church and its beliefs and traditions. It is the latter topic which has raised the most ire among those whom he refers to as 'fundamentalists', but who probably could be termed more correctly as 'evangelical literalists', or, following James Barr (1981:2), 'conservative evangelicals'. It is worth noting at this point that Spong has

received violent criticism, abuse, physical attack and a number of death threats (Spong, 1998:xvi). He says that this attention has come generally from 'God-fearing, born-again, Bible-quoting' Christian conservatives, mainly from the American 'Deep South', although his death threats include one in Brisbane (Australia). It is also of interest, at this point, to note the remarks of John Barton (Barton 2007:4-5) on the topic of biblical criticism and 'fundamentalists'; he says that it is no longer possible for conservatives to see biblical criticism as attacking the authority of the Bible, or for critical scholars to simply dismiss those conservatives as 'fundamentalists'. While John Spong was serving as rector of a parish in North Carolina, he became a target for demonstrations and threats by the Ku Klux Klan because of his support for the local coloured population. However, he also has a considerable number of supporters, both inside and outside the Christian community. It also may be noted that Spong sees himself as being among the 'believers in exile' (1998:xvii).

When reading Spong's work, it may be noticed that his 'other agenda' – particularly his perception of the Church's 'subordination of women' - can appear to intrude, or to colour his views on many topics. As an example, this can be seen in his *Born of a Woman* (Spong, 1992), in which, in addition to a number of passing remarks, he devotes a chapter (ch. 14 - 'The Cost of the Virgin Myth') to what he sees as a long-term marginalisation of women by the Christian Church.

John Spong is a self-declared 'Hebrewphile'. In the period 1965-1969, he conducted a bible study class in his parish in Lynchburg, Virginia – this was also the time of the beginning of the media interest in his views. He says that in those classes he "almost never roamed out of the Hebrew scriptures", he became a 'Hebrewphile', and, interestingly, admits to never being quite able to address the Gospel story of Jesus in those classes (Spong, 1993:11-12, 31). He appears convinced, almost to the point of obsession, that the Christian tradition and narratives are derived solely from the Jewish and Hebrew tradition and scriptures. He says that he is "not convinced" that there was any influence from any other culture in the development of the Christian tradition in the first century CE (Spong, personal discussion, 01 September 2007). Here he relies for support largely on the work of Michael Goulder, an English religious academic, former Anglican priest and later self-declared 'non-aggressive' atheist. This leads him to reject any suggestion

of influences from other cultures or religious traditions and oral narratives that existed in the Eastern Mediterranean region and further east, either contemporaneously with Early Christianity or in the pre-Christian ages. However, it is on that conviction that Spong bases his views on removing what he sees as the mythology and other accretions that have attached to the probable original events that gave rise to Earliest Christianity.

Spong does not write for the academic community, so his books are not academic tomes, or nice arguments on Christology or whether a particular book in the New Testament is genuine or a pseudepigraph. Instead, he writes for the world at large, and in particular for those whom he refers to as the 'church alumni' or 'believers in exile', or even his 'average pew-sitters'. These are the groups whom he sees as having trouble in coming to terms with traditional Christianity in the context of a twentieth and twenty-first century world. The books are not intended as a series; each is a stand-alone, so there is a certain amount of material that appears in more than one of the volumes. Spong does not play down his place in the religious hierarchy; indeed some of his more controversial books have the sub-title of 'A Bishop's Search For...', or 'A Bishop Rethinks...' (although that is possibly his publisher's doing). All of which has made him a very public and controversial figure – and a very successful author and speaker on religious topics. However, while people either love him or hate him, and many have very definite views on his work, it appears that no one has looked at his writings from a dispassionate academic point of view, to try to analyse the real value of what it is he is saying.

It may be noted that since the 1990s, by invitation from the founder, Robert Funk, John Shelby Spong has been a member of the Westar Institute and the Jesus Seminar. He mentions this, almost in passing, in various places in his books. He was not a 'Charter Fellow' – an original member – of either organisation (both were founded in 1985); however, he does appear to have been the first Fellow not to have held a PhD. He does not seem to have played any particular, outstanding role in Jesus Seminar discussions. It is noted, however, that, at their 2012 Spring Meeting, the Westar Institute inducted Spong into their *Order of David Friedrich Strauss*, as one who has "rigorously applied the historical critical method to the study of the Gospels and creeds that Strauss pioneered" (Westar Institute 2012, 'Directory of

Westar Fellows', <http://www.westarinstitute.org/membership/>; Spong, J.S. 2012, 'On Being Honored by the Jesus Seminar', <http://johnshelbyspong.com/2012/04/12/on-being-honoured-by-the-jesus-seminar/>; Reform Network 2012, *Voice from the Desert* 12 April 2012, <http://reform-network.net/>).

MIDRASH

It is considered necessary, at this point, to make comment on John Shelby Spong's use of the term '*midrash*' (also '*midrashic*', '*Christian midrash*').

Spong believes that there has been a loss to the understanding of the Gospel narratives caused by a lack of knowledge and understanding of the Hebrew/Jewish practice of '*midrash*'. However, he seems to misuse the term, in spite of quoting the definition of '*midrash*' from *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (Spong 1994:15). He appears to believe that the tradition involves searching the older scriptures – in this case the Hebrew Bible – to find passages that justify the veneration of someone or something in later contemporary times and situations. This leads him to understand '*midrash*' as being a revised reading of early texts to suit a later situation, rather than being a commentary on a scriptural text. Spong actually admits that he has been taken to task, by both his publisher and his close friend Rabbi Dr Jack D. Spiro, for his interpretation and use of the term (1997:xi). As a consequence of that criticism, he uses the terms '*midrashic*' and '*Christian midrash*' (1992:19); however, he also continues to freely use the basic term '*midrash*'.

Apart from the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, there are many references available which clearly define and explain *midrash* – particularly *haggadic* *midrash* – in the Jewish tradition, although only two examples will be quoted here. Jacob Neusner explains it as 'exegesis' or an 'interpretation and explanation' (Neusner, 1987:xi, 8, 108). Hermann Strack and Gunter Stemberger make it clear that *midrashim* are 'interpretive writings' or commentaries on a biblical passage (Strack & Stemberger, 1992:255-262). On p. 258, they also make the interesting comment:

"Midrash-like texts have also been identified in the New Testament; the term '*midrash*' has been used especially for the

infancy gospels and for the story of Jesus' 'temptation'. To be sure, the classification of a text as midrash has become a fashionable trend, especially in New Testament scholarship; in this context the particular character of rabbinic midrash has not always been properly recognized as a point of departure."

It is suggested that what Spong calls 'midrash' should more properly be called *peshet*, which Neusner defines as "An interpretation or explanation of a verse of scripture, in which a given statement, for example of a prophet, is identified with an event or personality in the present time." (Neusner 1987:109)

It is noted that John Spong says that he was not aware of the midrash tradition until February 1991 (Spong 1994:14; 295 n. 1 to Ch. 1). That discovery brought about a radical change in his view of how passages from the Hebrew Bible came to be included in the various Gospels in the New Testament. An example of this is seen in his handling of the topic of the influence of Psalm 22 on the Gospel stories of the Crucifixion in p. 58 of *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, dated at January 1991 (1991:xiv), compared with p. 226 of *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?* (1994).

However, irrespective of whether or not Spong is correct in his view of midrash, and the concept of 'Christian midrash', he does make the legitimate point that present-day readers, with a "peculiarly Western mind-set", cannot hope to know properly what was in the minds of the early Christian writers. He also provides examples, some of which may be regarded as being somewhat tenuous, to show that many of the stories about Jesus appear to be a re-telling of various narratives from the Hebrew Bible.

CHAPTER 3 – SPONG’S VIEWS ON THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

John Shelby Spong’s treatment of this subject forms the chief focus of this thesis. His major book on this topic is *Resurrection, Myth or Reality? A Bishop’s Search for the Origins of Christianity*; that book will now be the subject of detailed examination.

The Resurrection of Jesus may be seen as probably the most fundamental of the core Christian beliefs; Spong, in his opening sentence of the Preface to *Resurrection* (p. ix), says “The subject of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth lies at the foundation of Christianity itself”. However, like the traditions surrounding the birth of Jesus, it includes a great deal of mythology – sometimes contradictory. Spong seeks to examine that mythology, mainly from a viewpoint of Hebrew/Jewish scripture and tradition, and with a certain amount of personal speculation. It may be noted that much of the material in this book was originally published in 1980 as *The Easter Moment*, but has been completely rewritten for this publication (Spong 1992:ix; 1994: ix).

This book contains twenty-one chapters, divided into five Parts: ‘Approaching the Resurrection’, ‘Examining the Biblical Texts’, ‘Interpretive Images’, ‘Clues That Lead Us Toward Easter’, and ‘Reconstructing The Easter Moment’. The various Parts contain an examination of both New Testament and Hebrew Bible material, concluding with what Spong admits is his own speculation as to what may be the reality behind the traditions that exist today.

In pages ix–xv of the Preface, Spong traces his own discovery of the possibilities of mythology in religion. Apart from various contacts in his own culture in the USA, he says that he also has travelled widely in Africa and Asia, finding the local traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and engaging in discussions with religious scholars from those traditions. This led him to a consideration of the part that earlier mythologies may have played in the development of the Christian tradition. On page xii, Spong says “...I must also state that I today approach and understand that critical moment in the life of Jesus called Easter and the Christian

hope of life after death quite differently from the way I once did". However, he also says (personal discussion, 01 September 2007) that he is "not convinced" that those other traditions played any part in the development of the Christian story.

PART 1 – APPROACHING THE RESURRECTION

Chapter 1– 'The Method Called Midrash'

Spong begins this book by again discussing 'The Method Called Midrash' (Chapter 1, pp.3-22). This chapter looks at what Spong sees as the loss to the understanding of the Christian Gospel narratives caused by a lack of knowledge and understanding of the Hebrew/Jewish practice of 'midrash'. Only a very small part of the chapter is actually devoted to an explanation of Spong's understanding of 'midrash'; the greater part is an examination of how Spong sees the literalisation of early stories developing from the loss of the midrash tradition in developing Christianity. In the opening of Chapter 1 (p. 3), he regrets the lack of consideration given to midrash in his theological training. He goes on to express his view that no one can understand the Bible, particularly the New Testament, without understanding the method of midrash. As previously argued, Spong appears to misunderstand the tradition of *Midrash Haggadah*, which has an ongoing influence on his arguments involving that tradition.

The first section of Chapter 1 (pp. 4-7) is 'Has Christianity Been Rooted In Anti-Semitism?'. Spong puts his view that the Christian church has been engulfed throughout its history by both official and unofficial anti-Semitism. The Jewish roots of the Christian tradition were not acknowledged; Christian scholarship developed in ignorance of the midrashic content of the original stories. Christian scholars in the Western world used Greek rather than Hebrew texts, and looked at Christian tradition through Greek, rather than Jewish, eyes. Matthew's Gospel (27:25) quotes 'the Jews' as accepting sole responsibility for the execution of Jesus – "His blood be upon us and upon our children". The remainder of this section gives various

examples of what Spong regards as parallels and connections between the Hebrew Scriptures and the developing stories, practices and traditions of early Christianity. It must be recalled, in this context, that Spong is a self-confessed 'Hebrewphile', which appears to influence his thinking and views on any topic involving the Hebrew /Jewish community and tradition. He appears to ignore the point that a great part of the development of the Christian tradition, including the Pauline teachings and letters and the writing of the Gospels, took place outside the Jewish community, under some influence from Greek and Roman religious thought.

The second section is 'Centuries Of Simplistic Answers To Logical Questions' (pp. 7-8). This is a brief discussion of how details of many events in the Jesus stories could possibly have been recorded in the Gospels, seemingly verbatim. Examples of such events include the content of Joseph's dreams after Jesus' birth (Mt. 2:14, 22), or Jesus' time alone in the wilderness (Mt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:1-13), and various private conversations and comments such as Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Lk. 22:41-46). Spong says that if these inclusions had been questioned over the centuries, the enquirer would have been given a simplistic answer such as 'They must have told someone'. He goes on to say that for most of Christian history these accounts were never seriously questioned within the church, so the possibility that they were a product of the Jewish tradition of midrash simply did not arise.

The third section (pp. 8-11) is 'The Loss of Midrash to Literalism'. This section opens with Spong's brief description of three forms of 'midrash' - *Halakah*, *Haggadah* and *Pesiqta*. As noted previously, Spong says that midrash is a traditional Jewish technique by which things which are to be venerated in the present can be connected with a sacred event in the past. However, it is open to question whether that is a correct understanding of the tradition.

Spong now suggests (p. 9) that the stories transferring God's power of parting the waters, from Moses (Ex. 15:15-29) to Joshua (Josh. 3), to Elijah then Elisha (2 Kings 2:7-8, 14), is the prime example of midrash. He says that the stories of the

ability to 'part the waters' indicated to the Jewish people both that Israel's history was one continuous story through the ages and that God's power was still at work among God's people. Spong goes on to suggest that the Gospel writers used the same midrash tradition in telling the story of Jesus; he was seen as both fulfilling and expanding the symbols of the Jewish tradition by splitting not merely the waters of the Jordan River, but heaven itself. While Spong does not give biblical references for that event, Mt. 3:16-17, Mk. 1:10-11 and Lk. 3:21-22 seem to be the most appropriate. The references which Spong does give at this point, seeking to demonstrate a link between the Spirit of God and heaven and water, in both Jewish mythology (Gen 1:7) and the Gospel tradition (Jn. 7:39), seem to be somewhat tenuous. Gen. 1:1-3, 6-8 may be more appropriate, while the reference to Jn. 7:39 does not appear to be relevant in this context.

In the remainder of this section, Spong examines the differences in approach between the midrash tradition and what he sees as the 'Western mind-set'. He says that midrash seeks to explain present things in terms of earlier events, while in the Western tradition the choice lies between a narrative being either literally true or an untrue fantasy. He goes on to look at what he sees as the result of the Christian church taking a literal interpretation of narratives that were part of the midrash tradition. The section ends with the suggestion that the result of Western literalism is that the wrong question is asked of the narratives – rather than 'Did these events really happen?' the question should be 'What was there about Jesus of Nazareth that required him to be cast in the mould of earlier traditions?'

The final section in this chapter is 'From Higher Criticism Back To Midrash' (pp. 11-22). It opens with the suggestion that as knowledge of the workings of the physical world increased, from Copernicus to Einstein and others, so the concept of the literal Bible disintegrated. This led to a new way of studying the Christian bible, although still not from a Jewish perspective. The method was called "biblical higher criticism", and sought to discover the "concrete historical realities" behind the biblical story. Spong says that this has resulted in a widening gap between academic Christians (including clergy) and "the average pew-sitter", as church leaders sought to "protect the simple believers from concepts they were not trained to understand"

(p. 12). It also resulted in increasing tensions between ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’ within the wider church structure. He believes that those tensions are bringing the Christian faith to the point at which it either finds a new starting place or disappears – he further explores this theme in his books *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (1998) and *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and How a New Faith Is Being Born* (2002).

On pages 13-15, Spong traces his own realisation of the alternatives to a literal understanding of the Bible. He says that his search was inspired by reading Bishop John A.T. Robinson (*Honest to God*, 1963) and progressed through his own tentative explorations (including writing his *This Hebrew Lord* in 1974). He also read “with wide-eyed fascination” various, mainly Roman Catholic, scholars such as Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer and Hermann Hendrickx. Finally, in 1991, he was told (by Revd. Dr. Jeffrey John, then Dean of Divinity, Magdalen College Oxford) “The birth narratives are quite obviously Haggadic midrash”. He says that comment opened the door to a study of the Christian narratives from the perspective of their Jewish background. He came to believe that to fully enter the meaning of the Gospels it was necessary to enter the tradition of midrash. However, as discussed previously, despite his quoting a definition of ‘midrash’ from *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, it is open to question whether or not he fully understood the implications of the term “Haggadic midrash”. Spong also makes clear his deep conviction that the Christian narratives and tradition can only be understood properly by viewing from a Jewish base.

Spong now says (pp. 16-17) that because the Roman army destroyed the centre of the Jewish world, Jerusalem, in 70 CE, the Christian story moved into gentile territory. It is considered that this is an erroneous statement, as Paul had been preaching widely in gentile lands some twenty or more years earlier. The Gospels which Spong claims had been “deeply shaped” by the midrash tradition were now being interpreted by non-Jews who knew nothing about midrash. Christianity now “entered its gentile exile”, denying its Jewish heritage and so distorting its “deepest insights”. He suggests that the Christian church “unofficially...adopted a Marcionite attitude”, relegating the Hebrew Scriptures to near-obscurity. This in turn led to the literalist claims for historicity of the midrashic

retelling of ancient stories – claims which have been discredited by increasing scientific knowledge, leading to a loss of credibility for the church.

On pages 17 -18, Spong follows the fight between, on one hand, those who, without benefit of the midrashic perspective, sought to provide rational explanations for the Gospel stories, and, on the other hand, the literalists of “a threatened and militant evangelical fundamentalism”. On page 19 he introduces the question of the ‘literal resurrection’ of Jesus, together with the perceived fear that without a literal resurrection the whole Christian faith system would collapse. He quotes George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, as saying (*London Times*, 19 April 1992) that “the resurrection is so central to the Christian faith that without it there is no Christianity”. However, there was no answer to what Spong sees as the real question of just what constitutes ‘the resurrection’. He asks whether Christianity does in fact depend for its existence on an empty grave, a resuscitated body that can disappear into thin air, and other extraordinary events that make up the Resurrection tradition. It may be noted that this, from personal observation, is a proposition that many mainstream Christians refuse to accept, flatly rejecting even the possibility of anything other than a literal bodily resurrection.

The remainder of this section (pp. 19-22) examines Spong's views on the influence of midrash in the writing of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection. Spong says that when using midrash to read the Scriptures one must abandon linear time; midrash introduces a “dimension of timelessness”. He also says that while traditionalism is the dead faith of people who fear that any change, however small, will cause the whole enterprise to crumble, in fact traditions always change. Defining midrash as in some ways being “mythology wedded to religious traditions and universal themes”, he says that the resurrection narratives are the only way in which the Gospel writers could express the power of God seen in what has become known as Easter.

In this chapter, John Shelby Spong has established his base for a new interpretation of the Gospel narratives about the resurrection of Jesus. He ends the chapter by inviting his readers to lay aside their “religious security blankets” and to join him in exploring the Easter tradition through the lens of the midrash tradition.

Chapter 2 – ‘The Impact of Easter – A Place to Begin’

‘The Impact of Easter – A Place to Begin’ (pp.23-32), is a short chapter consisting of a preamble and three sections, acting as an introduction to Spong’s examination of the Resurrection traditions. He says that what became the Easter event had its roots in the Jewish religion, but transcended those roots to appeal to the Gentiles while, at the same time, arousing hostility among the Jews.

The first section, ‘Changed Lives – The Supreme Evidence’ (pp. 24-27), deals with Spong’s views on the historical value of the various early Christian writings, including the Epistles and Gospels. He points out that none were written by eyewitnesses to the events which form the basis of the Easter narratives, and that the material in the various books is often contradictory. However, all those letters and gospels agree on one point – Jesus of Nazareth was executed by crucifixion. Spong believes that there were events that actually happened at the ‘first Easter’, and a powerful energy that changed the lives of the ‘Jesus group’, so starting the development of the Christian tradition.

The second section, ‘The Movement’s Jewish Context’ (pp. 27-30), introduces Spong’s ideas on the Jewish traditions of absolute monotheism (p. 28) and strict observance of the Sabbath (p. 29), and how those traditions were changed by the developing Christian community. He notes that all the earliest members of the ‘Jesus group’ were Jews, and so likely to be observant of their religious customs. From that base, he then comes to the conclusion that something powerful must have happened to cause those Jewish people to abandon two fundamentals of their faith. This seems a rather tenuous argument, and probably could be used also to postulate a developing oral tradition based on various pagan religious customs – which is something Spong rejects.

The last section in this chapter is 'Tracking the Verbal Clues' (pp. 30-32). Here Spong expresses the difficulty which he experienced in "seek[ing] to illumine a reality that words cannot finally describe", through the medium of words. His writing here becomes quite flowery, as he attempts to describe the limitations created in trying to describe whatever the Easter experience may have been.

Chapter 3 – 'The Vehicle of Words – An Unsteady Ship'

The final chapter of Part One, Chapter 3, 'The Vehicle of Words – An Unsteady Ship' (pp. 33-44), again consists of a preamble and three sections. The general theme of the chapter is the difficulty in discovering the truth behind a 2 000 year old tradition, using words that have come down to the twenty-first century through the filters of numerous translations, redactions and conflicting cultures.

In the preamble (pp. 33-37), Spong discusses the concept that the use of words and the meaning of those words are subjective and personal, and so will differ between any two people, even if only subtly. He uses the word *God* as his example, briefly examining the different interpretations of the word in the religious traditions of ancient Egypt, the Sumerians, the Canaanite people, and the Hebrews. It is noted here that Spong says (p. 34) that the Sumerians were "a people who lived in a mountainous region". However, the archaeological and historical records indicate that Sumer was in the river basin – the plains – of southern Mesopotamia; there were mountains to the east, but not in Sumer. Spong then goes on to examine how religious authorities throughout history have used words to justify the claim that their particular belief system is the only true faith and their version of 'god' is the only true God. He finishes by saying that a religious system and authority based on words has never been a religious reality, but only a religious illusion.

The first section (pp. 37-40), is 'The Certainty of Experience'. This opens by introducing Paul Tillich's concept of "the new being". Spong believes that this 'new being' develops from a deep personal religious experience that demands an open mind and a willingness to question the status quo. He continues by stating his views

on how mythology develops around an actual experience – in this case the execution of the man Jesus of Nazareth – largely because of the subjective limitations imposed by the necessary use of the available human vocabulary (pp. 37-38). He then (p. 39) quotes Joseph Campbell, an American student of mythology, as saying that people generally can see the mythological elements in any religious tradition but their own. There is no specific citation for this, although Campbell appears in two entries in the bibliography. [The writer's personal experience in the local community confirm Campbell's comment]. Spong finishes this section (p. 40) by stating that he assumes that in exploring the Easter tradition he will have to explore the “mythologies, legends and symbols” connected to what he believes to be a real moment in history.

The second section (pp. 40-42), ‘The Telling of a Hero’s Story and the Premodern Perspective’, continues with the examination of the place of mythology in all religious traditions. He opens with an acknowledgement that there are parallels to the stories of both the virgin birth and the ‘return to God in a cosmic ascension’ of Jesus, citing the traditions surrounding the deaths of Buddha and Osiris as examples. It could be seen as somewhat illogical that Spong acknowledges those earlier parallels yet rejects their possible influence on the development of the Christian mythology. As an aside, it is noted that Spong cites “Buddha” as an example of a “return to God in a cosmic ascension” (p. 40). It could be considered to be grasping at straws to compare the story of the *parinirvana* of the Gautama Buddha with the story of the bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus, as they are quite different concepts – is this another case of Spong being slovenly in his use of Asian religious traditions as examples? Spong then says that while the Christian tradition is based in a specific period in history, the actual historicity of the tradition is indeed fragile. He revisits his themes of Jewish origins, midrash, the subjectivity of words, and mythology, and briefly examines the first-century concepts of the nature of the universe and of God. This leads him to the conclusion that the Christian narratives are limited by those first-century ideas, and to the question of whether the ancient truth behind the narratives can escape those limitations and become relevant in the modern world.

The final section in this chapter is 'Eyewitness Experiences and the Filter of Words' (pp.42-44). It briefly examines what Spong sees as being the path taken by what are now the Christian Scriptures, from the earliest eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus through the subsequent numerous translations, migrations and cultural changes, to become the modern traditions. This topic is also addressed by authors such as Judith Herrin (1989), Fredrick Grant (1961), and Bart Ehrman (2005c). Spong suggests that the original Easter happening created a power that affected those who experienced it, so that they re-created the story from their memory. That story floated through history, being refined and re-defined by new languages and concepts.

This chapter, and Part 1, conclude by proposing to examine, probe and demythologise the stories and to seek the truth that those stories originally sought to define. Within the limitations of human words, John Shelby Spong seeks to explore "the exploding power experience we call the resurrection", firstly by examining the Bible texts. Spong has laid out his case for the Christian tradition, and specifically the resurrection narratives, being based on factual events but later subsumed by a developing mythology. He now moves on to Part 2 of this book: the examination and analysis of the available evidence found in the writings of Paul and the four Gospels.

PART 2 – EXAMINING THE BIBLICAL TEXTS

The title for Part 2 of *Resurrection, Myth or Reality* is 'Examining the Biblical Texts'. It begins with Chapter 4, 'The Witness of Paul' (pp. 47-56), examines each of the Gospel writers in turn, and finishes in Chapter 9 with a critical comparison of these five writers.

Chapter 4 – 'The Witness of Paul'

The preamble to Chapter 4 opens with Paul's question in 1 Cor. 9:1 – "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (p. 47). Spong says that this first-person question was

put in about 55 CE, some twenty-five to thirty years after the traditionally accepted date of the death of Jesus of Nazareth, in c. 30 CE. He also says that such a “straight-forward, first-person claim” of having seen the risen Jesus is not made anywhere else in the Christian Scripture. Paul makes no claim to having known Jesus during his lifetime, nor is there any other evidence to indicate that the two may have met. Spong says that Paul also claims that he “received from the Lord” the stories of the Last Supper and of “Jesus... inaugurating the common meal”, which is the basis of the Eucharist ritual in the Christian church; Brown, Fitzmeyer and Murphy (1990: 1386-1387, 82:16-20) appear to confirm this view. Later in the same letter (1 Cor. 15:3-8) Paul says that he had received (Spong says “from others”, Paul does not specify from whom) the story that now forms the core of the Christian creeds: that Christ had died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day, all “in accordance with the scriptures”. Spong suggests (p. 47) that this appears to have been a standardised creedal or liturgical statement even at that early stage of the Christian tradition (mid-50s CE). Paul then goes on to speak of various appearances of the risen Jesus to different individuals and groups, and last of all to Paul himself. Spong says (p. 48) that this statement by Paul is the first narrative in the Bible to mention the resurrection of Jesus; he also notes that the story has few details of the event.

The first section of Chapter 4 is ‘The Tradition Paul Knew’ (pp. 48-50). Spong begins here by making the often-overlooked point that Paul’s letters pre-dated the Gospels, by periods of at least ten to fifteen years in the case of Mark through to thirty-five to forty years for John. This means that Paul cannot be read in the light of the various Gospel writers. He then goes on to examine the various parts of that creedal statement, “Christ died for our sins...”, noting that they are generally simple statements through which various future concepts entered the Christian story, to be developed over time. He also notes that “Paul knew nothing” of the various figures now associated with the burial of Jesus, such as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Spong does not consider that Paul may have known those traditions, but did not think them relevant to his letters. Spong’s concept of ‘midrash’ reappears through the phrase ‘according to the scriptures’; he demonstrates that many expressions in the Christian liturgies are taken directly from various Psalms. He

finishes this section by noting that for Paul the power of resurrection lay in the hands of God; 'Jesus was raised by God', rather than 'Jesus rose' (p. 50). Comment in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:1395, 82:59) supports this view.

It may be noted that Spong, in his *Born of a Woman* (1992:25), referring to Paul's view of Jesus being raised from the dead, also says that the ideas of the Trinity, Incarnation and bodily resurrection would have been quite foreign to Paul. Marcus Borg, in his 1995 *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, says that these concepts were not developed until about the fourth century CE. Professor Benedict Viviano, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:674, 42:168), says that the idea of 'Trinity' may have Old Testament roots in "the apocalyptic triad" found in Dan. 7 and Ezek. 1.

The second section is 'From the Grave to God's Right Hand' (pp. 50-53). Here Spong points out that Paul displays no concept of a bodily resurrection of Jesus from the grave, to return to life on earth. Spong says that for Paul, Jesus was raised by God from death and the grave to heaven and God's right hand. The traditions of physical resurrection and a later ascension to heaven are concepts that gradually made their appearance through the four Gospels. Spong says that Paul specifically denied the resuscitation of a deceased body that would have to undergo some other process in order to leave the earth; he cites 1 Cor. 15:50, Rom. 6:9, 10 and Col. 3:1 as evidence of Paul's views on this point. However, it could be argued that 1 Cor. 15:35-58 does not refer to the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but instead is an explanation of the concepts of bodily versus spiritual resurrection for the benefit of the followers in Corinth. The section ends with an examination of the various appearances of the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15:3-7) culminating with Paul's own revelation (1 Cor. 15:8). Here Spong notes that Paul mentions an appearance to more than five hundred brethren at once (1 Cor. 15:6), but that this story does not appear in any of the Gospels. There is some detailed discussion, quoting Reginald Fuller's views (*The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, 1971), on the difference between "Cephas and the twelve" and "James and all the apostles", suggesting that the two appearances mark, first, the founding of the 'church' in Aramaic-speaking Palestine, and second, the inaugurating of the mission into the wider, Greek-

speaking communities. It could be argued here that Spong and/or Fuller are incorrect in their linking of ‘Cephas *and* the twelve’ and ‘James *and* all the apostles’ – in both cases the Greek text says *εἶτα*, ‘*then*’ (Comfort & Barrett 2001:277; Bible 1990:615) which is also the rendition in the NRSV (Bible 2006:1952). However, the core argument of ‘church-founding’ *vis-à-vis* ‘mission-inaugurating’ still holds. It is noted that Spong himself, on p. 48, does refer to ‘Cephas, *then* the twelve’ and ‘James, *then* all the apostles’.

The final section of Chapter 4 (pp. 53-56), is ‘A Vision of the Ultimately Real’. This opens with a lengthy discussion about Paul’s claims to having ‘seen the Lord’, comparing them with various other theophanies in both the Old and New Testaments (pp. 53-55). The discussion begins with a passage from Gal. 1:15-16: “He ... was pleased to reveal his Son to me ...” and continues with comparisons to theophanies to Abraham and Moses. Spong claims that the Greek word *ὠφθη* (*ὠφθη* – Spong does not render it in the Koine script) is used in both the letter to the Galatians and in the Septuagint versions of Gen. 12:7, Ex. 3:2 and Ex. 6:2 [this should be 6:3], as well as in other New Testament texts, so giving some sort of continuity in thought between the different concepts. However, while *ὠφθη* is indeed used in the Septuagint, the word actually used in the Galatians passage (1:16) is *ἀποκαλύψαι* – ‘apokalypsaí’ – (Bible 1990:657; Comfort & Barrett 2001:313) which does give the meaning of ‘reveal’ as opposed to ‘appear’ in the other passages. It may be noted that the Greek in Gal 1:16, in both modern and ancient texts, says “...ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐμοὶ...” – ‘...apokalypsaí ton huion autou en emoi ...’. Although the English text in the NRSV and RSV translates that as “...to reveal his Son *to* me...”, the note to ‘*to*’ says “Greek ‘*in*’”; the KJV (Bible 1943) and the NIV (Bible 1986) say ‘*in*’, as does the Greek Interlinear New Testament (Bible 1990). Arguably, ‘reveal... *to* me’ is a quite different concept from ‘reveal...*in* me’; Spong does not consider this point. It is noted that Joseph Fitzmeyer, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:783, 49:16), gives an explanation of the two possible translations, while in p.1333, 79:20, he merely uses the alternatives, “to/in”, without further comment.

The section, and Chapter 4, ends with a reiteration of the idea that Paul, read independently of the later Gospel narratives, shows no concept of a bodily

resurrection of Jesus. Instead, according to Spong, for Paul the resurrection and later 'appearances' were all purely spiritual experiences. It can be argued that Spong, in saying that Paul "knew nothing" of various traditions associated with the burial of Jesus, appears not to have considered the alternative, that Paul did know but did not think it relevant to the subject matter of his letters. Again, this appears to be an example of Spong dogmatically presenting his personal view as the only correct version.

However, as there is no extant autograph version of Paul's writings, it can only be a matter of speculation as to precisely what he may or may not have written, and even more so, what was in his mind at the time.

Chapter 5 – 'Mark: The Kerygma is Joined to the Sepulcher'

Spong opens Chapter 5, 'Mark: the Kerygma is Joined to the Sepulcher' [sic], (pp.57-64) with a statement that raises the suspicion that he uses Koine terms rather loosely, probably with a view to impressing the lay reader. He says "...the first Gospel, known (in Greek) as *Kata Marcon...*"; However, he does not explain that this merely translates as 'according to Mark', and that it is joined by '*Kata Maththaion*', '*Kata Loukan*' and '*Kata Iōannēn*'.

The theme of the opening to this chapter is that some fifteen to twenty years elapsed between Paul's writing his letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians and Mark's writing of the first Gospel. In that time, an oral tradition about Jesus had begun to develop, as stories about the 'Easter' events were circulated around the community. Spong says "some" (he does not specify whom) have suggested that the outlines of the passion stories had been integrated into a liturgy at some earlier point, and so had acquired a set form. He also says that Paul showed little interest in Jesus as a human being, and that his apparent lack of interest "surely lay" in the notion among "primitive Christians" that they were living in the end days, with the coming of God's kingdom an imminent prospect. However, as people realised that the world was not about to end, questions began to be asked about both that "postponement" and the life of Jesus. Spong finishes this introduction by suggesting

that the Gospels were written in an attempt to answer the questions that were being raised about Jesus the man.

The first section of Chapter 5 is 'The Raw Material' (pp. 58-59). Here, Spong says that by the time the Gospels came to be written, there were only 'scanty details' remaining about the life of Jesus as a person. Paul had very little in his writings, and the major eyewitnesses were dead. It was 'known' that Jesus came from Galilee, had been connected with the movement of John the Baptist, had been crucified in Jerusalem, and that his disciples had had some powerful spiritual experience about his having been raised from the dead. Spong believes that the blanks in the story of Jesus' life were filled in by searching the Hebrew Scriptures for material that would insert Jesus into the line of Jewish history. He says "...Mark ...was Christian midrash at its best...", and that it became the model for the remaining Gospels. Jesus was cast as the new Abraham, new Moses, new David, and so on through the list of major Hebrew kings and prophets; Spong says that no greater tribute could be paid to Jesus in the contemporary Jewish frame of reference. This developing oral narrative became the *kerygma*, the earliest teachings of the Primitive Christians, and so, in the 70s CE, the basis of the early understanding of the Easter story, and hence the basis of the Gospel of Mark.

It could be suggested that an active oral tradition would have preserved stories and details of the life and activities of Jesus of Nazareth, which in turn would have been available to the Gospel writers in compiling their stories. However, it may also be argued that the four Gospels were written by different authors, for different communities in different parts of the Roman empire (none in either Galilee or Judea), and at different times over a period of some thirty to forty years. Furthermore, history shows that this was a period of turbulence in both Palestine and Rome, including the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the expulsion and dispersal of the Jews. Personal experience indicates that oral traditions can change as social conditions demand; under the circumstances given above, it is unlikely that details contained in oral traditions about Jesus of Nazareth would necessarily have been either detailed or consistent.

The second section, and end, of Chapter 5 is 'Mark's Invitation to Believe' (pp. 59-64). Spong begins this section by saying that Mark's description of the Easter moment (the discovery of the empty tomb, Mk. 16:1-8) is remarkably brief, given its later effect on the world – he notes that the description is just eight verses long. In his Note 1, he says that "Scholars universally dismiss any claims that vv. 9-20 of Mk. 16 were originally part of the Gospel"; this is confirmed by notes in the NIV (Bible, 1986:722), the NRSV (Bible, 2006:1757) and the Greek Interlinear (Bible, 1990:190), and by Brown, Fitzmyer and Murphy (1990:629, 41:109). Spong also says that Mark was the only Gospel available to the developing Christian community for some fifteen to twenty years, so cannot be read in the light of the other Gospels. It may be argued here that Spong again seems to demonstrate a narrow, even closed, view, ignoring the possibility that other people may have been writing at the same time or earlier. Just because the four Gospels are the only ones to have been included in the accepted Canon does not necessarily mean that there were no others available to the early Christians. This statement by Spong is followed by a careful dissection of Mk. 16:1-8 (pp. 60-61). The result of that analysis is the conclusion that, for Mark, there were no guards at the tomb, no rolled-up burial clothes and so on, and most importantly, no risen Jesus. In addition, the only disciples to visit the tomb were the women – the men had all fled. A young man dressed in a white robe told them that Jesus had been raised and that they should tell the men that he would meet them in Galilee. The women then fled in fear, rather than faith. Spong now says that the original version of Mark, ending at verse 8, "issued an invitation to the reader to do what the women did not do...to believe that Jesus had been raised and not to flee...", although this appears to be Spong's personal speculation.

Spong now suggests (p. 61) that, at the time of Mark's writing, the message about the future appearance of Jesus in Galilee did not mean a bodily appearance, as at that time there were no physical connotations connected to the resurrection. He then says that Mark had made an addition to the developing tradition – the idea of an empty tomb located in Jerusalem (p. 62). However, the question is whether Mark invented that story, as Spong suggests, or was he merely recording the oral tradition of his time? Spong goes on to say that Mark made a second addition to the tradition – "that the power to rise dwelt in Jesus himself. 'He has been raised' had

become 'He has risen.'". Again, however, is that so? The Koine text for Mk. 16:6 (Bible, 1990:190) uses *ἠγέρθη* – 'ēgerthē' ; according to the Greek Lexicon (Danker, 2000:271-272, *ἐγείρω*) that should indicate that Jesus 'was raised' rather than 'rose'; *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:629, 41:108) agrees with this reading. The NRSV translation says "...he has been raised...", the KJV says "...is risen..." (which could be taken to mean 'has been raised'), while the NIV and RSV both say "...has risen...". Furthermore, Spong appears to be contradicting himself; on page 61 he says that the women at the tomb were told that "Jesus had been raised", while on page 62 he is suggesting that Mark changed the tradition to have Jesus raising himself from the grave. More importantly, Spong suggests that the events of Easter [the Resurrection] actually took place in Galilee rather than in Jerusalem, and that the memory that it was in Galilee remained even some forty years after the crucifixion. He sees Mark's tomb narrative as the first stage of transferring the traditional locale from Galilee to Jerusalem.

The remainder of Chapter 5 (pp. 62-64) is devoted to a discussion of Edward Schillebeeckx' analysis of Mark's text on the tomb scene (*Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, 1979). Having accepted Schillebeeckx' view that parts of Mk. 14 are largely 'Marcan redaction', Spong looks at his suggestion that Mark's narrative reflected a developing "cultic liturgical celebration". In Spong's view, Mark recorded the beginning of the process of transferring the Easter locale from Galilee to Jerusalem; the cultic celebration was to become the "mother of the legends" which appeared in the later Gospels.

Chapter 6 – 'Matthew: Polemics Enter the Tradition'

In Chapter 6 (pp. 65-73), 'Matthew: Polemics Enter the Tradition', Spong deals with the developing split between the Jews and the Jewish Christians. In the preamble, Spong says that Matthew's Gospel is dated to the 80s CE, over ten years after the Romans had seized Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Many Jews had been dispersed into the Greek-speaking regions, and Jewish culture and religious

traditions were in danger of being lost. Jewish Christians, with their increasing rejection of the Law of Moses, were seen as a further threat by conservative Jews trying to preserve their traditions. As friction increased, Jewish conservatives began to attack the various Christian claims about Jesus; in defence, the Jewish Christian groups developed a polemic against the Jews. In time, those polemics entered the Christian tradition and were written into the Gospels.

The first section of this chapter is 'Borrowing and Expanding to Prove a Point' (pp. 66-72). Following Michael Goulder (*Midrash and Lektion in Matthew*, 1974), Spong says that the author of the Gospel of Matthew was a Jewish Christian scribe who used midrash to rewrite Mark in a form more useful as polemic against the Jewish conservatives. Spong believes that with the destruction of the temple, the liturgical traditions which form the basis of Mark's Easter narrative had faded in the minds of the increasingly Hellenised Christian community. With the passage of time, those traditions were increasingly misunderstood and finally ignored.

In Spong's view (p. 67), Matthew did not see the tomb narrative as a liturgical re-enactment of the Easter founding moment, but as the actual dawning of "the reality of the resurrection". However, the story had to be rewritten to heighten the sense of miracle, by introducing an angel, an earthquake, guards on the tomb, and so on. Spong says that at most points where Matthew changed Mark, there is "a midrashic detail and a midrashic rewriting", which he later indicates (p. 68) was drawn largely from the Books of Joshua and Daniel in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, the examples given from Joshua (no citation by Spong, but Josh. 10:17-18 seems appropriate) and Daniel (Dan. 6:17) seem tenuous as reasons for Matthew to introduce a stone sealing the tomb and a guard set to watch over it. He then goes on to suggest (p. 69) that Matthew, in developing his polemic themes, further demonstrates his insensitivity to Jewish religious traditions by having the chief priests going to Pilate on the Sabbath to obtain guards for Jesus' tomb, which was a "clear violation of the rules of the Sabbath".

Spong now examines Matthew's version of the story of the women's visit to the tomb (p. 69). First, he argues that the change from Mark's "He has risen, he is not here" to Matthew's "He is not here for he has risen" is an indication that

“literalizing influences had taken hold”. Once again, he claims that Matthew has changed the story to have Jesus as the agent raising himself. However, as with Mark (discussed above), the Greek text (in both Mt. 28:6 and 28:7) is ἡγέρθη (ēgerthē) (Bible 1990:116; 2003:87) which NRSV gives as ‘he was raised’, KJV saying ‘he is risen’, and RSV and NIV saying ‘he has risen’. Following on from that, Spong also says that the raising of Jesus “had now become Jesus’ action in fulfilment of his own prediction about himself”. However, an examination of the text in Mt. 16:21 – the Greek ἐγερθῆναι (egerthēnai) (Bible 1990:63; 2003:56), KJV, RSV, NIV and NRSV – shows that Jesus did not say that he would rise of his own volition, but that he would “be raised” (Danker 2000:271-272 n.7). It appears that Spong could be accused of adjusting the reading to suit his own purpose of showing a developing mythology. It could also be suggested that he need not have resorted to what looks like subterfuge, as there is quite enough material available to demonstrate that development.

The second part of the story of the women’s visit concerns the meeting with the risen Jesus. Spong states that this is the first time in Christian literature that a meeting with the risen Christ is described. He appears to find great significance in the point that Matthew (28:9) has Jesus use the same greeting to the women (χαίρετε, ‘Hello’, or ‘Hail’) as he has Judas use to Jesus (χαῖρε) when betraying him (Mt. 26:49). However, it is difficult to understand this, as ‘hello’ or ‘hail’ is a standard kind of greeting; Spong does not note that Matthew also has χαῖρε used by the soldiers when they ridiculed Jesus (Mt. 27:29).

Spong also tries to find some ‘midrashic’ significance in the women grasping Jesus’ feet in the same way as the Shunnamite woman grasped the feet of Elisha in 2 Kings 4:27. However, prostration at, or grasping or touching the feet of a person seen as being superior, or worthy of honour, was a long-standing cultural practice in the region, as evidenced by various carvings and friezes held in the British Museum and other collections, including those of the Assyrian kings Shalmaneser III and Tiglath-pileser III receiving obeisance (British Museum ME 118885, WA 118933, in University College London Webpages 2012, 2013). The practice also appears in the pre-Christian Buddhist mythology (buddhistpage.com, 2014), and still appears today among some traditional classes of Eastern culture, for example, Indian *nameskara* or

pranama (Webpages *Veda Kalpataru*, 2007; *I Love India.com*, undated). It also appears in fiction – for example, in Rudyard Kipling's late-19th century story *Kim*, in several various instances the boy Kim is depicted as showing honour and gratitude by patting the feet of his patrons, the Tibetan monk Teshoo Lama and the Pathan horse-dealer Mahbub Ali (Kipling, 1946, *passim*). Returning to the Christian Gospels, the actions of Mary in the story of the raising of Lazarus (“...fell at his feet...” Jn.11:32) are also relevant in this context.

Spong also finds significance in the change from Mark’s “...tell my disciples and Peter...” to Matthew’s “...tell my brethren...”; he sees this as a summons to a select few (Mark), as opposed to calling the whole community of Jesus’ followers (Matthew). Again it could be seen as labouring a semantic point in order to make a rather tenuous case. However, Spong does make the valid point that in both instances the direction is for Jesus’ followers to go to Galilee in order to meet with him there, rather than in Jerusalem.

On page 70, Spong draws attention to the developing polemic between the Jews and the Christians as related in Mt. 27:62-66 and 28:11-15. He says that this is written from the Christian point of view; the implication is that this is the version accepted by the Christian community, and so does not necessarily reflect accurately either the Jewish version or the true record of events. He also continues to make a case for what he regards as the gradual transfer of the locale of the resurrection from Galilee to Jerusalem, and for the literalisation of the “late-developing Jerusalem tradition”. In again attempting to show that the writer of Matthew “once again employed the method of midrash” (p. 71), Spong says that he drew on the book of Daniel, specifically Dan. 12, for his description of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus. However, if Daniel were the source, the appropriate passages would appear to be scattered between Dan. 7:9-14, 27, 10:5-6, and 12:5-8 – possibly another instance of Spong being glib in his references.

Spong ends this section by looking at the final verses of Matthew, in particular the reported words of Jesus. He says that the formula of the baptism liturgy “...in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Mt. 28:19) could not have come from Jesus, as the concept of the Trinity did not develop until well after Jesus death, although it was known at the time of the writing of

Matthew (p. 71-72); *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:674, 992-993, 42:168, 62:31) generally agrees with that view. Spong concludes the section by saying that with the words of Mt. 28:20, “the Jewish Messiah of Matthew had become the Cosmic Christ of the whole world” (p.72).

The conclusion to Chapter 6 is ‘What Matthew’s Changes Have Wrought’ (pp.72-73). Here Spong says that the Easter story was developing to become both more miraculous, and, at the same time, more ‘real’. He then goes on to say that while this enhanced story would not have created any credibility problems at the time, in later ages these literalised details would repel some, and for others (those whom he terms “fundamentalist Christians”) would become the “litmus test for true believers”. Quoting an early 1990s British Broadcasting Corporation television programme, he says that many of the interviewees believed that Easter could only be real if there had been an actual bodily resurrection and an empty tomb. Spong, however, believes that Easter has to be “more than the narrative about a body that walked out of a tomb...”. He finishes by saying that while Matthew had made a dramatic expansion of the Easter story, the later Gospel writers would push the limits even further.

Chapter 7 – ‘Luke: The Turn Toward Gentile Understandings’

The opening to Chapter 7, ‘Luke: The Turn Toward Gentile Understandings’ (pp. 74-86), is a statement that Luke’s Gospel was written some twenty years after Mark. It was also about thirty years after Paul, in 1 Corinthians, had described the original tradition of Easter (Spong does not give a specific reference, but 1 Cor. 11:23-26 describes the events known as ‘the Institution of the Lord’s Supper’). It was up to forty years after Paul’s claim, in his letter to the Galatians, to have “seen Jesus”. In that time, the developing Christianity had moved away from its origins in Palestine, via the Jews of the Diaspora, into the world, and control, of the Gentiles. Spong states the generally accepted position, that the same author wrote both the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles; the full story, as told by Luke, began with the story of the birth of Jesus and ended with the movement of the Gospel story

from Jewish Jerusalem to Gentile Rome, the capital of the world. Spong suggests that this movement in the location of Christianity affected the way in which Luke related the Easter story.

The first part of Chapter 7 is 'Bridging the Gentile and Jewish Worlds' (pp. 75-77). Spong begins by speculating on the identity of Luke, with the alternatives of either a Gentile with a deep interest in, and familiarity with, Judaism, or a thoroughly Hellenized Jew. He concludes that 'Luke' was probably "...a gentile proselyte, one of those people who frequented Jewish synagogues looking for something that would fill the empty places where once the gods of the Olympus had dwelt". He notes that Michael Goulder agreed with this conclusion in 1992 (Spong, 1994:75, n. 1). He goes on to say that it seems to have been to this group that Paul had his greatest appeal, and that it was through the gentile proselytes that Christianity moved out of the Jewish fold to become a Western institution. After the first one or two generations of Jewish-influenced gentile Christians, the non-Jewish gentile influence became dominant. In the view of John Shelby Spong, although Luke was familiar with the stories of the Jewish tradition, he now wrote with a distinct gentile bias, flavoured by the religious traditions of Rome in particular.

The second section of this chapter is 'How Luke Changed the Story' (pp. 77-84). Spong begins by looking at the changes in the resurrection narrative in Luke (24:1-12), as opposed to the accounts in Mark and Matthew. Some of his points seem to be minor, rather than having the dramatic implications that Spong draws. Is there any real significance in whether or not the women entered the tomb, or whether there were one or two angelic figures, or the precise words that were spoken? After all, this passage was written about 60 years after the event, and the detail would have passed through a number of versions before Luke wrote. However, it is significant to the development of the mythology that the locale for Jesus' resurrection is shifted from Galilee to Jerusalem, and that the disciples are in Jerusalem and visit the tomb in response to the message relayed by the women (Lk. 24:1-12). Spong also sees an introduction of "divine necessity" in the angelic reminder that Jesus had said that "the Son of Man *must*...be crucified, and on the

third day rise again.” (Lk 24:7). Although Spong does not mention it, the Greek *ἀναστῆναι* (anastēnai) here (Comfort & Barrett, 2001:564; Bible, 1990:312) does seem to indicate that Jesus now rose by his own power, rather than being raised by God. However, he also does not mention that in the speech to which the angelic messenger refers (Lk. 9:22), the word used is *ἐγερθῆναι* (egerthēnai) (Comfort & Barrett, 2001:525; Bible, 1990:241) which appears to indicate that Jesus said that he (the Son of Man) was to ‘be raised’; the distinction is clear in the KJV, NIV, RSV and NRSV. Spong also notes that the size of the group seems to have grown from the original eleven to some larger number – “...the eleven and all the rest”; he suggests that Luke may have had a vision of a wider, more inclusive church than “eleven Jewish males” would indicate. It may be noted here that Spong’s text (p.78) says “...the journey to the tomb by Peter *and John*” but Luke 24:12, in the KJV, NIV, NRSV and the Greek texts, does not mention John. The RSV omits verse 12, but shows it as a note that does not include John. However, that verse does connect Peter to the tomb, and so helps to establish his primacy among the disciple band. Elaine Pagels expands on this point in *The Gnostic Gospels* (Pagels 2006:38), saying that this doctrine has been used to validate the apostolic succession of bishops, in particular the position of Pope. Spong also suggests that the empty tomb and the discarded grave-clothes had now become ‘proof’ of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Spong now discusses the story, in Lk. 24:13-35, of the encounter between the risen Jesus and the two travellers on the road to Emmaus (pp. 79-81). He points out that this story does not appear anywhere else in the Bible, and that it appears to be introduced by Luke to “enhance the physicality of the resurrection”. He also says that no name similar to ‘Cleopas’ had appeared in any Gospel yet written (the name ‘Clopas’ appears later in Jn. 19:25 – “...Mary the wife of Clopas”). Spong says that this story is of the same genre as other biblical accounts of people encountering supernatural or divine beings, such as the Genesis stories of Abraham and, later, Lot. He suggests that unwittingly entertaining a supernatural being was a popular theme in folklore and storytelling. However, he also says that some elements of the story have a ring of authenticity or of being grounded in a memory of the life of Jesus. He particularly cites the Eucharist as an example, suggesting that by the time

of Luke's writing the common meal and breaking of bread had become an established part of the Christian life; this point will be discussed in more detail later. Spong believes that Luke used this narrative to assert the primacy of Peter, while at the same time admitting that the first appearance of the risen Christ came to those who had fled Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion. It is also the first instance of the risen Jesus 'opening the Scriptures' to the disciples, explaining how "Moses and all the Prophets" had pointed to the recent events concerning himself.

According to Spong, Luke now has the disciples and the Emmaus pair assembled in Jerusalem (as opposed to Galilee in Mark and Matthew). Spong sees Luke as now giving his version of those appearances described much earlier by Paul in 1 Cor. 15:5 – "...to Cephas then to the twelve" (Spong, p. 81, says "...Cephas...then...to the disciples"). He also observes that Luke increases the drama from Matthew's description of the appearance of a glorified Christ on a Galilean mountain-top, to the sudden materialization of "a resuscitated physical but not-yet-ascended Jesus" among the group in Jerusalem. In order to prove the physicality of his being, Jesus invited the group to touch him and to give him food to eat.

As Spong mentions on page 84, in order to follow fully his next discussion it is necessary to refer to Acts, the second book attributed to the author Luke. The exaltation of Jesus from the tomb to heaven, as described in the earlier Gospels, has been developed by Luke into a two-stage event – first the resurrection from the tomb as a physical being, followed forty days later by the ascension to heaven. He notes that only Luke makes this distinction between resurrection and ascension. Luke's Gospel (Lk. 24:1-7, 13-32, 36-47) describes various appearances of the resurrected Jesus, including his teaching from the Hebrew Scriptures. In Lk. 24:49, the disciples are instructed to remain in Jerusalem until they were "clothed with power from on high". Spong sees Luke as using Jesus as a mouthpiece to express his own theological understanding of the life of Jesus as the fulfilment of scripture. In Spong's view, Luke equated the eternal presence of Jesus with the Holy Spirit, as an entity distinct from the spirit of Jesus. The Gospel concludes with verses 24:50-53, with Jesus being "taken up into heaven" while the disciples remain in Jerusalem. However, in Acts 1:3, Luke says that Jesus appeared to the group "over a period of

forty days” before being taken up, after which the group remained in Jerusalem awaiting the event now known as Pentecost.

On page 82, Spong argues that by splitting the resurrection and ascension into two separate events, Luke had “changed the language of resurrection for all time”. He says that Jesus was now raised from the tomb by his own action, rather than by the power of God, and that the empty tomb was a sign that the deceased body had been resuscitated as a living, breathing person. Luke now had to invent the ascension story in order to have God raise Jesus to heaven, thereby clearing the stage for the later pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Spong also claims that Luke’s account of the ascension still hints that Jesus himself was the source of the raising power. However, this is difficult to sustain as only the RSV says “...he parted from them”, while all other versions use the passive voice “...was parted from them [or ‘raised’, or ‘taken up’]” (Lk. 24:51); the Greek word used is *ἀνεφέρετο* (anephereto) (Comfort & Barrett 2001:567; Bible 1990:316), which is 'passive' (Danker 2000:75, *ανεφερω*, n. 1).

The final part of this section of Chapter 7 is Spong’s speculating on possible sources for Luke’s version of events (pp. 83-84). He suggests that as Luke begins his narrative of Jesus with the stories of Zechariah being unable to speak, and hence to give the blessing, before Jesus’ birth, so he closes his tale with Jesus giving the blessing “of the high priest”. However, his reasoning appears to be convoluted and clutching at straws in order to make a point. Spong again turns to midrash and the story of Elijah being carried up to God in a fiery chariot as the source of Luke’s description of Jesus’ ascension to heaven. However, he ends with the valid comment that by the time of Luke’s writing, the early expectation of the imminent second coming of Jesus had begun to fade; the believers were to wait for the coming of the Spirit, and then carry the message to the whole world.

Chapter 7 ends with ‘What Luke Made of the Spirit and Pentecost’ (pp. 84-86). Here Spong speculates on Luke’s sources for the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit, and on what was Luke’s understanding of the major Jewish religious festivals. He sees echoes of Ezekiel, with the dry bones and the breath of God (Ezek. 37:1 ff.), and the fire that Elijah would call down from heaven (for example, 1

Kings 18:36-39). He also sees images of the story of the Tower of Babel, but in reverse with a multitude of languages being mutually understood, and of the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles with all the nations of the world coming to Jerusalem at the end of time. (This reference to the feast of Tabernacles is, at the least, questionable. The *Sukkoth* feast was established as a harvest festival. Spong appears to base this remark on the oracle in Zech. 14:16-17. This will be discussed later.) Spong notes that Luke seems to have been aware that there were two separate events: first the crucifixion, associated with the Jewish Passover, then the later proclamation in Jerusalem of the resurrection of Jesus. He suggests that this may be the basis for Luke's placing the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit some fifty days after his resurrection story.

Spong now appears to contradict himself. He suggests that, as a Gentile, Luke was not familiar with the differences between the Jewish festivals (specifically *Pesach* – Passover, *Shavuot* – Pentecost, and *Sukkoth* – Tabernacles). This seems to be at variance with Spong's earlier conclusion that Luke was either a Hellenised Jew, or a Gentile proselyte "drawn deeply into the orbit of Judaism". However, irrespective of Luke's background, it remains that his narratives changed the Christian view of the time and events between the crucifixion and proclamation of Jesus' mission to the world. They also changed the nature of the feast of Pentecost from a Jewish agricultural festival to a celebration of the birth of the Christian church.

Finally Spong speculates on what may have been the 'real' sequence of events surrounding the first Easter. He proposes that after the crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples had a "Galilean experience", which caused them to return to Jerusalem "to proclaim Christ resurrected, ascended, and at God's right hand". He then suggests that it was the power of the disciples' testimony that caused people to see them as being grasped by the Spirit of God, and that this inaugurated the mission of Christ to all the nations.

In this chapter, Spong has suggested that the author of Luke's Gospel changed the tradition from that propounded by Mark and Matthew. However, Luke wrote some sixty to seventy years after the crucifixion, and he begins his Gospel by saying (Lk. 1:1-4) that he is writing "an orderly account" of the events of the life of

Jesus as he has heard them [emphasis added]. Spong does not seem to consider the probability that the stories themselves had changed with both the passage of time and the spread of early Christianity from Jewish Jerusalem and Galilee into the wider Gentile community.

Chapter 8 – ‘John: Sometimes Primitive, Sometimes Highly Developed’

Spong now turns to an examination of John’s Gospel, in Chapter 8, ‘John: Sometimes Primitive, Sometimes Highly Developed’ (pp. 87-96). The title of this chapter gives an indication of its theme that John’s Gospel appears to contain a mixture of traditions from several sources. Spong believes that much of John’s theological argument shows a well-developed level of sophistication, while other passages appear to be the detailed memory of an eyewitness, differing from the accounts in the three synoptic gospels.

The first point made is that John, as opposed to Luke, does not separate the resurrection from the pouring out of the Holy Spirit onto the disciples. Rather than having an interval of fifty days, John has the risen Jesus breathing the Spirit onto the disciples at the first resurrected-and-ascended appearance on Easter Day. Spong notes that the appearance at the tomb, in John, was only to Mary Magdalene, as opposed to two, three or more women in the other gospel accounts. He also notes that the resurrected Jesus tells Mary Magdalene, in the garden, to tell the disciples that he is about to ascend “to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God”. John has the three events of resurrection, ascension, and coming of the Holy Spirit united in what Spong believes to be a more original and primitive tradition than that reflected in Luke’s narrative.

Spong now (pp. 88-89) enters upon what appears to be a rather tenuous argument on the identification of Jesus with “God”. Using the unreferenced and vague term “Most biblical scholars agree...”, he says that in the primitive New Testament tradition the figures of ‘God’ and ‘Jesus’ were quite separate identities. He goes on to say that it was John who first introduced the unity of the two, in the opening verses of his Gospel. Spong then says that John has Jesus reinforcing this relationship throughout this text, “by using the holy name of God, “I am”...” when

speaking about himself. Furthermore, in making his case, Spong is accepting that these words were actually used by Jesus of Nazareth. That means that Spong is again selectively reading a passage and accepting the words of the Bible text as literal truth, which is what he claims to oppose. He cites as specific examples the expressions, *inter alia*, “I am the resurrection”, “I am the bread of life”, and “I am the vine”. However, it is difficult to know how Jesus could have made those statements without using ‘I am’. The Greek (Bible 1990:353; Comfort & Barrett, 2001:418, 591) says *ἐγὼ εἶμι* (egō eimi), which could be read as ‘I am’, the same Greek expression is used in most, if not all, of the ‘I am’ instances; the Greek Lexicon (Danker 2000:275) indicates that it is a stronger form than the simple *ἐγὼ*. Francis J. Moloney, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:1423-1424, 83:41-49), presents a detailed discussion of these sayings, including the use of the *ego eimi* expression in various contexts; he includes (83:43) an interesting quote from C. K. Barrett (*Essays on John*, 1982) on the meaning of that term. However, none of those explanations change the above comments about Spong's approach.

Spong completes this argument by stating his view that John's Gospel has a “primitive strand of resurrection material” woven together with other “late-developing theological and legendary material”; he cites as an example John's introduction of the story of Thomas as the unbelieving disciple (Jn. 20:24-29).

The next section of this chapter is ‘How John's Easter Story Differs (pp. 89-90). Here Spong again attempts to demonstrate that John's Gospel is a further development in the mythology of the resurrection, differing in various aspects from the synoptic Gospels. However, an examination of the relevant New Testament texts again makes much of his argument difficult to sustain. He begins by saying that John, like Luke, located both the resurrection and the post-resurrection appearances in Jerusalem, with no mention of Galilee. He next says that “A major part of [the] Jerusalem tradition was centered on the tomb, again agreeing with Luke”; however, the only difference from Mark and Matthew appears to be the inclusion of Peter and ‘the beloved disciple’ visiting the empty tomb. He also says that “The burial of Jesus was treated in a far more elaborate form in the Gospel of John...which means that the tomb was clearly important”; however, the only real

difference between John and the Synoptics is the inclusion of Nicodemus bringing spices.

Spong's next assertion is difficult to understand. He says "John also located the resurrection on the first day of the week. That location was denied in Mark, debated in Matthew, but established in Luke". It is assumed that 'located/location' refers to the time of the resurrection and the discovery of the empty tomb by the various women. It is not clear what point Spong is trying to make, as all four Gospels (in the ancient Greek, and the KJV, RSV, NIV, and NRSV) say that the women visited the tomb early in the morning of the first day of the week, and in each case found an empty tomb. Spong notes that in John only Mary Magdalene visits the tomb, as opposed to the synoptic Gospels, which all have Mary Magdalene plus various other women. He also observes that Mary assumes that the tomb has been robbed and reports this to Peter and 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'; Spong sees this as a device "...allowing the fourth Gospel to include yet another story about the one it regarded as mentor and hero".

At this point, Spong notes the possible linking, first by Luke and then by John, of two earlier resurrection narratives, one involving Mary Magdalene and the other involving Peter "and John". Three points arise from this statement: first, Spong says "...many scholars note the conflation...", then cites only two (Reginald Fuller and Raymond Brown); second, Luke mentions only Peter as going to the tomb, and third, neither Luke nor John mentions 'John', *per se*, in this story, and only John's Gospel includes 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' in the narrative. However, those points aside, it is not improbable that such a conflation did happen, with (as Spong suggests) Mary Magdalene's telling the others what she had seen as the later link between the earlier stories.

This section finishes with a commentary on John's continuing and expanding of Luke's story linking Peter and 'John' to the tomb, and the consequent "physical nature of the resurrection". Spong observes that the two saw the grave-clothes remaining in the tomb and says that "The direct contrast to the details of Lazarus are obvious" [sic]. [There appears to be an error in the bible citation here – '2 John' is given, but the story of the resurrection of Lazarus is in the Gospel of John 11:1-44.] He then goes on to say that "The 'other' disciple (i.e. John)...was given credit by this

author for being the first to see and to believe.” Spong is firm in his view that the ‘beloved disciple’ was ‘John’; he says that the individuals from the Johannine community who wrote John’s Gospel, John’s Epistles, and The Revelation to John “gave their beloved mentor the honor of being first in faith...”. However, Prof. PHEME PERKINS, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:946-947, 61:12) emphatically dismisses the linking of ‘John’ with either John Zebedee or the figure ‘the Beloved Disciple’. Spong finishes by commenting that the faith does not seem to have moved on from the beloved disciple to anyone else “as the rest of the Gospel makes clear” (p. 90); however, it is not clear how Spong comes to that conclusion from the remainder of this Gospel.

‘The Johannine Community’s Unique Assertions’ (pp. 90-93) is an examination of what Spong sees as the great differences between the gospel story according to John and the narratives of Mark, Matthew and Luke. Again Spong shows his conviction that ‘the beloved disciple’ mentioned “in place after place [in] the fourth Gospel” was John Zebedee, suggesting that it was only by that association that this Gospel “...was...able to achieve authority so quickly”. However, he does not indicate by what time-frame he defines ‘so quickly’. He goes on to say that the Gospel of Mark and the subsequent Matthew and Luke all took their authority from the early tradition of Mark’s association with Peter, recognised as the leader of the early Christian community. However, Spong believes that in the 90s CE, John’s Gospel “came out of the shadows” to challenge that Petrine authority of the synoptic tradition.

Spong notes several major differences between John and the other three Gospels. First is John’s declaration that Jesus was the pre-existent Logos of God enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth the son of Joseph; the other writers had Jesus becoming the Son of God, first at baptism for Mark, and later at conception by the Holy Spirit for Matthew and Luke. Spong notes here that John apparently did not find having a natural birth and at the same time being the “enfleshed Word of God” as being incompatible. He also says, on the basis of John 1:46, that John “denied the Bethlehem birth tradition in favour of Nazareth”; however, that verse is Nathanael asking “can anything good come from Nazareth?”; verse 1:45 refers to “Jesus of Nazareth...”, but neither verse mentions Nazareth as Jesus’ *birthplace*. John also

says, by his account of the Passovers in Jn.2:13-25, 6:1-4, and 13:1, that Jesus' ministry extended over three years; in Spong's view, this opposes a time of one year in the Synoptics. Spong also says that "John maintained that the Last Supper was not the Passover but rather a "Kibburah" [*Chaburah*] meal on the day before the Passover...". He cites, as evidence for this view, Jn.19:14, "Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover..." when Jesus was before Pilate immediately before crucifixion. However, he gives no explanation of the significance of a *Chaburah* meal *vis-à-vis* a Passover meal. While it could be argued that this is only one possible interpretation of the timing of the events related in Jn.13:1-19:16, the case for Jesus and his disciples being a *Chaburah* group is strongly supported by Dom Gregory Dix in his *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Dix, 2009:50-60). [It may be noted that although Dix was first published in 1945, it is still regarded as a significant reference]. The question of the timing of the meal, the *Chaburah* group, and the beginning of the 'meal' ritual is also discussed by Bargil Pixner O.S.B. in J.H.Charlesworth (2006:318-320). It is also noted that Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz (1998:413, 426-427) quote an opinion of Hartmut Gese ('Ps. 22 and the New Testament', 1968) that the meal was a *toda* sacrificial meal; they also present their own criticism of the concept of the Last Supper as a Passover meal. It may be noted that there are a number of other differences between John and the Synoptics – Spong only notes those he sees as being either major or relevant to his discussion at this point.

Returning to John's resurrection story, Spong now examines the role of Mary Magdalene in the unfolding drama. He observes (pp. 91-92) that Mary moves from being the only woman at the tomb (Jn. 20:1) to being the chief mourner (v. 10 ff.), and is then portrayed as laying claim to the body of Jesus (v. 15). Spong is particularly interested in the changing language, from "the Lord" (Jn. 20:2) to "my Lord" (v. 13) and "we do not know where they have laid him" (v.2) to "I do not know..." (v.13). His greatest interest is in Mary's claiming of the body, saying that in Jewish custom that role was reserved for the next-of-kin; he asks whether John was portraying Mary as Jesus' wife and now widow. This is again an example of Spong following another agenda in his writing – in this case the place of Mary Magdalene in the early Christian community, her subsequent denigration by the Church, and its

effect on the Church's attitude toward women in general. This is examined more fully in his *Born of a Woman* (Spong, 1992). However, Spong does not explore the possibility that Mary Magdalene appears to have been the first person to be 'sent' with the message of the risen Jesus (Jn. 20:17-18), which could make her the first 'apostle' as opposed to a 'disciple'. The resurrection narratives in the three Synoptics also have Mary being 'sent' to the other disciples; *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:673, 166:8), referring to Matt. 28:5-10, says "the women became apostles to the apostles". Although in the Synoptic accounts she is at the tomb in the company of various other women, Mary Magdalene is always the first named.

This section finishes with a brief description of the events described in Jn.20:19-23, when Jesus appeared to the disciples in a locked room, breathed the Holy Spirit on them, and commissioned them as apostles. Spong has noted earlier that this is the most immediate commissioning in the four Gospels, occurring on the evening of the first day, in Jerusalem. The Synoptics have time gaps of up to fifty days, and in two cases the disciples are called to Galilee rather than remaining in Jerusalem

Chapter 8 finishes with 'Covering the Distance of the Years' (pp. 93-96). In this section, Spong examines the effects of time on the writing of the fourth Gospel. He points out that some seventy years had elapsed between the events of the first Easter and that writing; many converts had entered the Christian community in that time and so did not have first-hand experience of the events of the first Easter. In those seventy years, the stories about Jesus had moved out from Jerusalem, Judea and Galilee into the distant Graeco-Roman communities where no one had ever actually seen Jesus during his life. Spong suggests that the story of Thomas refusing to believe without proof is directed at those communities "...who have not seen and yet believe" (Jn. 20:29). He says that over that gap "the word of mouth of a faithful witness was the tenuous and only link". Spong appears to be convinced that the writer of John's Gospel, the 'beloved disciple' and John Zebedee were all the one person, and so 'the faithful witness' (but see PHEME PERKINS' remarks above). However, it may be argued that that is not necessarily the most logical interpretation of the events in Jn.21:20-24.

Spong now says that Chapter 21 of John's Gospel is an appendix to the original narrative, Johannine in character, apparently authentic, but "...clearly not part of the original text". Using a story very similar to one in Luke (Lk. 5:1-11), this is to do with the 'rehabilitation' of Peter after his denial of Jesus before the crucifixion. However, Spong also notes some apparent inconsistencies: if Peter had seen the risen Jesus on the evening of the first day (Jn. 20:19-23), why did he not recognise him at the lake (Jn. 21:4-7), and why did Peter's three-fold reconciliation not take place at the first post-resurrection encounter rather than several meetings later? It could be argued that it would not be unreasonable for Peter not to have recognised the figure of Jesus: he was hard at work on a boat offshore, and the day was just breaking, so the light would have been poor (Jn.21:3-4). However, Spong's second point appears to be a valid comment.

Finally, Spong says that by the time of the writing of the Gospel of John at the end of the first century CE, the initial expectations of an imminent return of the ascended Lord were fading. Christianity was evolving into an "institutional force in history", with a mission to proclaim Jesus and forgiveness to the world. He ends this part of his examination of the Resurrection traditions with some philosophical questions about truth and reality, and whether something can be real and yet not have occurred in time and history.

In Chapter 8, Spong has presented the Gospel according to John as a complex mixture of primitive, authentic tradition and a later, more developed and sophisticated, theology. He believes that this is particularly apparent in the Johannine view of the resurrection of Jesus. Spong attempts to draw out what he sees as critical differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels; however, many of his examples appear to be weak, or in some cases inaccurate. He does make the valid point that by the time of the writing of this Gospel the Christian community had grown and expanded far beyond its roots in Galilee and Jerusalem. He sees John's Gospel as an account written by an eyewitness who was a long-standing and close associate of Jesus in his ministry, death and resurrection. It is noted that PHEME PERKINS appears to reject this idea (*The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*,

1990:946-947, 1046, 61:12, 63:61). Of course, it is quite possible that the Johannine Community wrote the Gospel account *based on* stories told by an eye-witness.

Chapter 9 – ‘A New Starting Point’

The last chapter of Part 2 of this book is ‘A New Starting Point’ (Chapter 9, pp. 97-107). Here Spong questions the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, myth and reality, certainty, and rational truth. He accepts that there are inconsistencies and contradictions between the four Gospels, and at the same time reaffirms his refusal to literalise the Christian faith story. This lays the foundation for the next part of his examination of the traditions surrounding the Resurrection of Jesus. However, it may be questioned whether or not John Shelby Spong does allow himself to take the bible texts literally, when it suits his argument.

PART 3 – INTERPRETIVE IMAGES

Up to this point, Spong has been examining the biblical texts of Paul and the four Gospels. He has demonstrated that many inconsistencies and contradictions occurred over the forty to fifty years that elapsed between Paul’s letters and the writing of John’s Gospel, as the Christian faith spread out from Palestine and the Christian mythology developed. In Part 3 of *Resurrection, Myth or Reality*, (‘Interpretive Images’), he goes back to the Hebrew/Jewish scriptures and traditions to find sources for the Christian concepts of resurrection and life after death, as well as the various appellations given to Jesus, particularly ‘Son of Man’ and ‘suffering servant’. This is the final piece in the basis for Spong’s conjectures, in Parts 4 and 5 of *Resurrection*, on the events that he believes gave rise to the stories that now form the Resurrection narratives in the four Gospels.

This Part will look at Spong’s examination of what he regards as the 'source traditions', which forms the basis for his later speculations and reconstruction of the

post-crucifixion events. That reconstruction forms the crux of his argument on the de-literalising of the stories that are the basis of the Resurrection traditions.

Chapter 10 – ‘The Primitive Interpretive Images’

Spong opens his examination of the sources in Chapter 10, ‘The Primitive Interpretive Images’, with a reminder that there is no written account of the events at the ‘first Easter’. There are only stories, symbols and folklore to describe the way in which a group of people in the first century CE experienced the life of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth, and how they interacted with that life (p. 111).

The opening section of this chapter is ‘The Jewish View of Life after Death’, (pp. 112-115). Spong says that the concept of ‘life after death’ did not become popular in Jewish thought until 350 BCE -50 CE. He believes that the concept was still a matter of dispute in the first century CE, with the parameters being defined, on one hand, by the Pharisees who believed in life after death, and, on the other hand, the Sadducees who did not believe in that concept. He also says that the weight of contemporary biblical evidence favoured the Sadducees; he turns to the creation story in Genesis, where God’s *nephesh*, ‘breath’, had vitalized the first man and by ancient Hebrew tradition was assumed to return to God at death, while the body returned to the dust.

Spong now says that the first mention of some form of life after death in the Hebrew texts is the story of King Saul asking the witch of Endor to call up the dead prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 28:3-25). Samuel is portrayed in that passage as being able to return from the dead in a recognisable and rational form. Spong says that dating the appearance of that concept is not easy, given that Saul’s reign is dated to around the end of the eleventh century BCE, but the book 1 Samuel was probably not written until some fifty to one hundred years later. He goes on to say that archaeological evidence of Hebrew funerary practices from the ninth and eighth centuries BCE shows that the dead were buried with grave goods such as plates, jewellery and weapons, suggesting that there was at least some concept of an afterlife at that time. However, he says (p. 113) that it appears that this “cultic

practice” came from the “primitive Hebrew world” and so was opposed by “the more progressive [Mosaic] Yahwist tradition”.

By the seventh century BCE, according to Spong, the concept of a region called *Sheol* began to appear. It was “a place of shadows, dust and darkness”, a common place of the dead, and “beyond the scope of the God Yahweh”. Spong suggests that *Sheol* served no real purpose other than to “give some personification to death itself”. The entry *Sheol* in the *Jewish Encyclopedia (online)* generally agrees with this view. John L. McKenzie, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:1313, 77:168-170) suggests that the Israelite view of the afterlife may have been closer to the Mesopotamian view rather than the Egyptian.

The Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE changed the Hebrews’ ideas about both God and *Sheol*. It should be noted here that Spong does not appear to acknowledge any Babylonian cultural influence in this change; rather, he appears to believe that it was a purely internal Hebrew evolution. However, irrespective of the source, he believes that the Hebrew concept of God’s influence changed from a localized and territorial deity, which was the ancient general view of ‘gods’, to an omnipresent God whose sphere included even *Sheol*. He also suggests that the concept of ‘individualism’ did not become fully developed until after the exile, as opposed to ‘tribalism’ in which God’s judgement, reward or punishment fell on the whole community rather than one member of the nation.

Spong finishes this section on the Jewish concept of life after death with two general references. The first is to the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of God’s *ruach* (wind) reviving the dry bones to become a new nation of Israel (Ezek. 37). Spong sees this as helping to “solidify the link between the breath of a person and the *ruach* of God”, and at the same time providing the basis for the later development of the concept of bodily resurrection. The second reference is to three significant figures in the Hebrew Scriptures: Enoch (Gen. 5:24), Moses (Deut.34.6) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11). Each of those was said to have been so pleasing to God that they were taken into the realm of God without going through the normal process of death. Moses and Elijah were later portrayed in the synoptic Gospels as being able to appear out of heaven to converse with Jesus (the Transfiguration narratives), which Spong believes shaped “the later Christian narratives of Jesus’ post-Easter appearances”.

The second section of this Chapter in *Resurrection* is 'The Concept of Justice Enters the Idea of Life after Death' (pp. 115–116). Here Spong briefly discusses his views on how the concept of God's justice in an afterlife entered Jewish thinking in the period between the return from Babylon and the beginning of the Christian era. He says that after the return, the Jews never really regained any independent status as a nation for any great length of time. They were dominated by the Persians, Medes, Macedonians and Romans, with only a relatively short period of independence under the Maccabee/Hasmonian leadership. Various attempts to suppress the Jewish religion gave rise to concepts of martyrs in the name of God, which developed into apocalyptic writings about the end of the world and justification for the righteous. Spong also suggests that this was the basis for the messianic expectations that in the Gospels became attached to Jesus of Nazareth.

The final section of Chapter 10 is 'The Image of Prophet/Martyr' (pp. 117–120). Here Spong again turns to Edward Schillebeeckx (*Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, 1979) for his argument. According to Spong, Schillebeeckx looks for the first post-Easter image of Jesus of Nazareth as prophet/martyr, finding it in the traditions of the Aramaic-speaking primitive Jewish Christians. He believes that those early groups saw Jesus as having been killed by the Sadducee element of the temple priesthood, in keeping with the tradition that saw 'Jerusalem' – synonymous with the religious establishment – as the historical 'killer of prophets'. There were ancient tensions between the priesthood and the prophets; Jesus was cast in the prophetic mould and so had to be killed in Jerusalem. However, God raised Jesus from the dead, thus validating Jesus' message and rejecting the stance of the priesthood. Spong says that Schillebeeckx does not find any "salvific element" in this primitive view; Jesus was raised by God, not as a bodily resurrection from the dead, but as an exaltation of Jesus to God's presence purely to "right the scales of justice".

However, Spong says that Schillebeeckx goes on to argue that the prophet/martyr theme was soon expanded and given a theological explanation. At the same time, a 'teaching catechism' was developing. The theological explanation

involved other themes, such as eschatology, apocalypticism and salvation, each of which affected the way in which Jesus was proclaimed.

Spong now moves on to look at other images from the Jewish tradition that he believes helped to shape the prophet/martyr concept into the story of the Resurrection.

Chapter 11 – ‘The Atoning Sacrifice –The Image of the Book of Hebrews’

Continuing with the theme of ‘Interpretive Images’, Chapter 11 is called ‘The Atoning Sacrifice – the Image of the Book of Hebrews’ (pp. 121-130). In this chapter, Spong examines what the King James Bible calls ‘The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews’. Although ‘Hebrews’ occurs in the New Testament, its themes are drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures. He opens the chapter (pp.121-123) by saying that it was not written by Paul, nor is it an ‘epistle’; *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:920-921, 60:2-3, 5) agrees with this view. . Instead, he suggests that it is a sermon, composed in Greek and addressed to a group probably made up of Greek-speaking Hebrews who had become Christians. Spong is strongly of the view that ‘Hebrews’ reflects an early form of ‘Primitive’ Christianity, possibly pre-Pauline, and certainly written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. However, it is noted here that Prof. Harold Atteridge (Yale University Divinity School), in introductory notes to *Hebrews* in the NRSV (Bible, 2006:2035), posits a date after 60 CE and before 95 CE; Myles M. Bourke, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:921, 60:5), generally agrees with that dating. The intended audience were still awaiting the imminent return of the exalted Jesus, while the “elaborate theological systems” of the Gospels, such as the tradition of the bodily resurrection, had not yet been worked out. Spong also believes that the ‘Book of Hebrews’ is “one more prime example in the Christian Scriptures of the style of Jewish writing called midrash”. He sees ‘Hebrews’ as being written by a Jewish Christian, using Psalm 110 as a basis, in order to show Jesus to other Jewish Christians “within the traditional Jewish frame of reference”. He also sees the Book of Hebrews as providing the present-day reader with an insight to the way in which Jesus was seen by the earliest Christians.

The remainder of Chapter 11 is titled 'What Jesus Meant to the Writer of Hebrews' (pp. 123-130). Here Spong sets out his view of how the writer of 'Hebrews' perceived Jesus in the light of established Jewish tradition. He sees that writer as being a devout Jew, well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures and religious traditions, not having known Jesus but familiar with the stories and claims about Jesus' life, death and resurrection

Spong believes that the first-century Jews sought to understand Jesus in terms of the traditions of the Day of Atonement. In that ritual, a ceremonially purified priest offered a demonstrably perfect animal as a sacrifice to God as expiation for the sins of the whole community. Spong suggests that by using the Day of Atonement analogy, Jesus was seen as both the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice, bringing both atonement and redemption to the people. However, Jesus was not of the authentic priestly line, so another valid basis for his priesthood had to be found. Again, Spong sees this as 'midrash'; sources were found in the Hebrew scriptural story of the priest Melchizedek, in Gen. 14:18-20 and the later reference in Ps. 110:4. Those passages enabled the writer of 'Hebrews' to depict Jesus as a priest appointed by God "after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb.5:5-6), eternal, answerable only to God, and therefore superior to the traditional Levitical priesthood. Spong further develops the 'sacrifice' theme by suggesting that Jesus was perceived as rising to the heavenly place in the same way as the 'smoke and fragrance' of the sacrificial fire rose to God's presence.

Spong now sums up his view of the writer of the book 'Hebrews' as a Jew who had become Christian trying to make sense of his experience of Jesus within the terms of reference available to him. Spong also notes that 'Hebrews', like Paul's letters and Mark's Gospel, carries no concept of a resurrected Jesus appearing in bodily form to various individuals and groups. He sees the book as conveying a powerful story of Jesus' life, death and exaltation to the right hand of God, using Jewish symbols and a first-century pre-Copernican understanding of the place of heaven. In Spong's view, the story cannot be literalised without losing its intrinsic message. He sees the author as having "a sense of Jesus as exalted, ever present, perfected, and freeing all who called on him from the bondage of sin".

The final examination of 'Hebrews' is on the references to 'rest' (pp. 128-129). Spong says that the author borrowed "one final midrashic detail from the Old Testament" to demonstrate that Jesus offered the 'rest' promised to the people as they wandered in the wilderness, but later denied them because of their disobedience (Ps. 95:11). Spong also suggests that this concept, which he says is developed in Heb. 4:1-11, was the basis for the later passages in Mt. 11:28, 29, in which Jesus promises to 'give rest'.

Spong now gives an unsourced passage that he says is a paraphrase of a very early Christian description of how Jesus was understood:

*Jesus lives.
Death cannot contain him.
God loves.
Death cannot limit this love.
We are not alone.
In the vastness of this universe
we have been valued and embraced.*

He appears to see this passage as containing a more unvarnished, less mythological concept of what Jesus meant to the members of the primitive church. He suggests that it is "more primitive, more symbolic, less miraculous, less supernatural, maybe even more original, but...equally real" by comparison with the familiar Easter narratives found in the Gospels.

Spong finishes the chapter by inviting his readers "to look at Jesus through the lens of the Book of Hebrews", which he believes will enable them to go beyond mere belief into "living the resurrection". He says that only then can his readers "know the experience of resurrection", rather than seeing simply "the explaining image". Spong believes that it was that 'experience' which "drove the earliest Christians to search for an explanation", which he believes was found in the ancient Scriptures.

Chapter 12 – 'The Suffering Servant – The Image of 2 Isaiah'

The second chapter, and 'interpretive image', in Part 3 of *Resurrection* is 'The Suffering Servant – The Image of 2 Isaiah' (Chapter 12, pp. 131-143). It must be

noted here that this is not a specific examination of Isaiah 40-55. Rather, it is Spong's analysis of how he believes the Gospel writers interpreted Jesus in the light of the passages that he refers to as 'Second Isaiah'.

Spong opens by suggesting that the appellation "Christ", applied to Jesus of Nazareth by Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Mk. 8:29, Mt. 16:16, Lk. 9:20), could not properly have come until after the events of Easter. Arguably, that is not so, as Peter could quite properly have used the term, or its Aramaic equivalent, in the sense of 'Messiah', 'the Anointed One'. Spong believes that the use of that title indicates that the disciples did not understand the implications of suffering which 'the Christ' must endure. However, each of the Synoptic Gospels has Jesus expounding on the eventual fate of 'the Son of Man', and his words being rejected by the disciples. Spong suggests that this sequence was a "postresurrection [sic] memory" later "read back into the life of the historical Jesus". He also notes, in passing, Luke's seemingly anachronistic use of the phrase "take up his cross daily" in a pre-crucifixion context (Lk. 9:23). Spong now begins to build his case for seeing Jesus as the 'Suffering Servant' in the image of Second Isaiah.

The first section is 'Connecting Christ with Suffering' (pp. 133-138). Spong begins by saying that the different ways in which the Gospel writers present Peter's 'Christ-confession' shows that the Gospels are not biographies intended to be read as linear histories. Rather, in Spong's view, they are "midrashic interpretations" of older texts from Jewish mythology, used in an attempt to counter attacks based on the shame of Jesus having been executed. Spong suggests that the use of the title 'Christ' connected Jesus with suffering, and goes on to explain his reasoning for reaching that conclusion.

First, Spong explains his view of the origins of the term *Christ*, saying that it is the English version of the Greek *Christos*, which in turn is the interpretation of the Hebrew *mashiach* – 'God's anointed one'. He does not mention any other Greek connotations for *christos*. It is noted also that Spong does not mention that the Greek in John (1:41, 4:25) does use the word 'Messias' (Messiah) which is immediately explained as 'Christos' (the Christ). According to Spong, in early Hebrew practice only the king was God's anointed one, and so the king came to be thought of as "the Son of God". However, that did not carry any implications of moral

perfection, as the Hebrew literature clearly shows. Spong says that the kings of Judah were not dehumanised or regarded as being semi-divine; they were anointed, and so were *mashiach*. During and after the Babylonian exile, the *mashiach* came to be seen in popular Judaism as an anticipated political and military leader who would right the wrongs of history and restore the Jewish people to their kingdom, free from foreign domination.

However, Spong says, there was a minority group among the Jews who did not believe that Israel could return to a position of power, and so began to cast the *mashiach* – the messiah - as a 'righteous victim'. That view was strengthened when the people were allowed to return to Jerusalem, where they found destruction and waste rather than a glorious past. Spong says that it was at that point that Second Isaiah was written, by an author who realised that the vision of the messiah as a conquering military leader would have to be re-cast. The 'new messiah' would bring God's love to the whole world, Gentiles as well as Jews, through weakness rather than military power. The messiah was to be seen as meek, rejected, even put to death, to achieve God's purpose for Israel and the world. The image of the messiah – the *mashiach* – as the 'suffering servant' was now in place; however, the image was not popular with the majority of the Jewish people.

It may be possible to critique this view of Spong's on the grounds of later scholarship. However, it must be recalled that the material contained in this book, *Resurrection, Myth or Reality*, was first collected as a lecture series in 1957, to be published later, in 1980, as *The Easter Moment*. It was revised, in the light of Spong's later travels, further experience and study, and the writing of several books, to be published as *Resurrection* in 1994 (Spong 1994:ix-xv). The extent of those revisions is not known. Spong does not cite any sources for his views, but simply presents his opinions as accepted fact. It may be recalled also that Spong says, in numerous places, that he is not writing for the biblical scholars and theologians but for the laity – his 'believers in exile' and 'church alumni', and, of course, for his 'average pew sitters' whom he says (1991:10) are "biblically illiterate". His stated aim is to 'deliteralise' the Bible, in particular the New Testament, with a view to making the meaning of the Scriptures more easily accessible to the Christian community.

In the centuries after the writing of Second Isaiah, the Jewish people continued to be dominated, first by the Persians, then by the Greeks. The brief window of the Maccabean rule restored the hopes of grandeur, but the arrival of the Romans in 63 BCE dashed those hopes. Spong suggests that the time had now come to revisit the concept of the messiah in terms of weakness and suffering; those terms were recalled as people tried to make sense of their experience of Jesus of Nazareth.

The second section of Chapter 12 is 'How Jesus Was Made to Fit the Role' (pp. 138-143). Here Spong demonstrates his ideas of how the early Christians, particularly the Gospel writers, used the text of Second Isaiah to show Jesus as the meek and suffering messiah. He begins by pointing out that in terms of ancient Jewish law, as laid out in Deuteronomy 21:22-23, "...a hanged man is accursed by God..."; having been crucified, which equated to 'hanging', Jesus could be seen as 'accursed'. However, in Spong's view, the disciples could not equate that condemnation with the character of the Jesus they had known; "...like all devout Jews, some of them began to search the Scriptures in order to understand". In the book known as 'Isaiah' they found "the portrait of a suffering mashiach" and began to transfer those images to their experience of Jesus of Nazareth.

In pages 140-141, Spong quotes various verses from Second Isaiah and the Gospels to show the parallels that he believes underpin the early Christian understanding and explanation of their Jesus experience. Some of the comparisons are rather tenuous and could be dismissed as chances of literary expression, but in the main do appear to support Spong's view.

This section, and chapter 12, conclude with Spong's own interpretation of the meaning of the Gospel stories as seen in the light of Second Isaiah (pp. 141-143). He says that the Gospels are not a history, but rather a "midrashic interpretation" of Jesus' life and death based on an ancient Jewish tradition, written with hindsight to give meaning to the Jesus experience. Beginning with the premise that Jesus did actually die by crucifixion, Spong builds up a case for an interpretation of Jesus as the Christ, the suffering victim, whose death allowed the disciples to "see into the heart of God". He suggests that 'Christ' is a symbol of how God was met in Jesus.

It is possible, even probable, that in these few pages Spong approaches the core of his own beliefs on the meaning of the Gospels.

Chapter 13 – ‘The Son of Man – The Image of the Book of Daniel’

Part 3 of Spong’s *Resurrection* ends with Chapter 13, ‘The Son of Man – The Image of the Book of Daniel’ (pp. 144-157). In this chapter, Spong examines the influence of apocalyptic writings and traditions on the early development of the Christian mythology. In particular, he explores the interpretation of Jesus in the light of the ancient Jewish tradition of the ‘Son of man’ [sic. The RSV, which Spong uses, does not capitalise ‘man’]. This is the last of the ‘Interpretive Images’ that Spong believes shaped the development of the Gospel narratives about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and his metamorphosis into the risen Christ. He says that the development followed a five-part sequence: the experience of Easter, which brought forth ‘an ecstatic cry or proclamation’, which was given affirmation in creedal form, then an explanation, and finally the narrative. This meant that the narratives were five steps removed from the original event, and were written in a post-Easter context.

The first section of chapter 13 is ‘The Origins of the Son of Man Symbol’ ((146-155). Spong opens the discussion by saying that the term ‘son of man’ was a long established Jewish image, which became “a dominant concept in apocalyptic writing”. He says that the expression occurs more than seventy-five times in the New Testament, at times, in the Gospels, appearing to be merely a name used by Jesus when talking about himself (for example Mt. 8:20, Mk.9:31, Lk.18:31). However, Spong also suggests that in many other instances the term appears to carry a deeper meaning, linked with earlier prophetic writings, possibly with supernatural or heavenly origins, and carrying overtones of the last days and final judgement. Again, he quotes a number of Jesus’ sayings as examples. He believes that these passages show that the term ‘son of man’ carried implications that were clearly understood by both the Gospel writers and their intended audiences, and so needed no further explanation.

Spong now returns briefly to the overall theme of his writings, the combating of literalism in Christianity (p. 148). He says that any attempt to read and understand those passages as part of literal biographies will produce "...incomprehensible questions and nonsensical observations". He believes that the Gospels were written with hindsight in the light of the Easter experience, as proclamations of the interpretation of Jesus in terms of Jewish religious history. At some point in that interpretation, the early Christians came to believe that Jesus was somehow to be seen in the light of the tradition of 'the son of man'.

According to Spong, the term 'son of man' first appears in the Hebrew writings in the early sixth century BCE, in the book of the prophet Ezekiel. However, the phrase, in the context of 'a human' appears earlier in the book Numbers (23:19); it is noted that the NRSV renders this as 'a mortal'. Numerous passages indicate that for the writer of Ezekiel, 'son of man' was a form of address used by God when speaking to the prophet. It also appears in four instances in the Psalms; Spong says (p. 149) that in three of those (Pss.8:4; 146:3; he does not cite Ps. 144:3) it appears to be a general reference, but in the fourth (Ps. 80:14-17) it seems to refer to an individual "in intimate relationship with God".

In pages 150-155, Spong traces what he believes to be the history of Jewish religious thinking, from the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE to the Roman occupation in the first century CE. He begins by saying that exile destroyed the old Hebrew religious traditions, causing the Hebrew people to find new ways of seeing their relationship with God. In particular, Moses increased in importance as having an intimate relationship with God. Also, the Bible said that his burial place was unknown; it began to be believed that in fact Moses had been taken up bodily to heaven. In time, the figures of Elijah and Enoch also began to be seen in the same light, as being taken up by the power of God. The three figures of Moses, Elijah and Enoch were now seen in the post-exilic Hebrew folklore as living in God's presence; the anticipated messiah began to be seen in terms of those figures, in particular Moses and Elijah.

Spong now examines the events that took place in Palestine in the period between 200 BCE and 135 CE. That was the period in which Greek language and culture increasingly dominated the region, reaching an apogee with various

persecutions of the Jews about 170 BCE, during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. It was as a result of the Jewish struggle to preserve their religious traditions in the face of Hellenisation that the apocalyptic writings began to appear. Spong says that the two major apocalyptic works to appear about the time of Antiochus IV were the Book of Daniel and the Book of Enoch; Daniel is included in the Christian canon, but Enoch is not. The figure of the 'son of man' appears in both those works.

Here Spong notes that 'son of man' may not be the best expression of the original Aramaic, which he says was *bar enas*, 'one in human likeness'. He says that this became the Hebrew *ben adam*, 'a man' or 'a human being', and both *bar enas* and *ben adam* were translated into the Greek as *ho huios* [sic. 'huios'] *tou anthropou*, which became the English 'son of man' (pp. 152-153).

Now follows a discussion of how Spong sees the image of the 'son of man' being developed in the visions of Daniel (p. 153). Although Spong does not give a bible reference, it is clear that he is looking at Daniel's first vision as described in Daniel 7. In that vision, "there came one like a son of man", carried on the clouds of heaven into the presence of the Ancient of Days, to be given dominion and kingdom over all people and nations (Dan. 7:13-14). According to Spong, the son of man image represented the faithful remnant of Israel and was another metaphor for the suffering servant of Second Isaiah.

As with the 'servant' of Isaiah, Spong believes that 'son of man' became a personal title popularly given to the anticipated messiah, thereby adding an element of heavenly exaltation to the messianic image. He goes on to suggest that by the time of writing of the book of Enoch, which he believes came after Daniel, the son of man had become a pre-existent being, similar to the later Prologue to John's Gospel "In the beginning was the Word...and the Word became flesh...". Finally, in Spong's view, the images of the 'suffering servant' and the 'son of man' were brought together in the Wisdom of Solomon, in the late first century BCE (pp. 153-154).

It is noted that the numerous passages in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990) referring to 'son of man' (in the Old Testament books *Daniel*, *Ezekiel*, and the Apocryphal *1 Enoch*), and to 'Son of Man' specifically referring to Jesus in the New Testament, all agree overall with Spong's comments on the biblical

use of these terms. Again, Spong is not becoming involved in scholarly speculation, but is attempting to give what he regards as a simple explanation for a lay readership.

Spong ends this section with some speculation on the further development of the messianic expectation in the image of a new Moses, Elijah and Solomon (pp. 154-155). The Jewish people increasingly looked to the time of the second coming of a messiah who would repeat the miracles of the Exodus. Spong believes that those images first entered the Jewish literature in the second century BCE; they developed through times of repression of the Jewish traditions until the Maccabean revolt and Hasmonean reign appeared to provide the sought-for relief. But then came the Romans, and repression returned; the Jewish people again were looking for their messiah.

Having drawn out what he regards as the Scriptural bases for the Gospel narratives, Spong finishes Chapter 13, and Part 3 of *Resurrection*, with 'The Christian Application of Many Images' (pp. 155-157). In this short section he briefly examines the way in which he believes those earlier 'images' were transferred to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This also serves to introduce Part 4 of *Resurrection*, in which Spong speculates on the way in what he calls "a new consciousness" developed out of the events at the time of the first Easter.

Spong begins this section with a reminder that it was in the Roman period that Jesus of Nazareth lived and died. It was in Jesus' death, in particular, that his followers found an experience that they could interpret only in terms of the images from their Jewish traditions and expectations. Those images included the concept of the messiah who would relieve the sufferings of the Jewish people and restore the glory of Israel. Spong also says that those images "shaped the content of their memory", an implied reminder that the Gospels were not written until many years after Jesus' death.

In John Shelby Spong's view, there are a number of possible ways in which the Easter experience may have been interpreted. He believes that there was a 'first Easter', and that it cannot be denied that, as a result, the lives of a community of

people were changed dramatically. He says that those people “became convinced that Jesus was alive in a new way and that the grave of death could not contain the meaning of his life”. It may be suggested here that the kernel of Spong’s view of the Resurrection tradition lies in that short passage: it should not be seen as a literal account of events, but as a ‘best interpretation of the events’.

It is difficult to know how much of this material is Spong’s original thought and how much is drawn from other, unacknowledged sources. Several of these concepts may be found in various places in the literature; however, as they generally have no acknowledgement of source, Spong may consider them to be common knowledge in the Christian community.

In Part 3 of his *Resurrection*, Spong seeks to discover in the Hebrew Scriptures the bases for the Christian narratives about the death and resurrection of Jesus. He believes that those bases can be found in various ‘images’, such as the ‘suffering servant’ and the ‘son of man’. Those images in turn may be found in the early Hebrew tradition; Spong believes they developed over time until eventually being applied to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. In Part 4 of ‘*Resurrection*’, Spong uses his concepts of the ‘images’ to build his case for a non-literal interpretation of the Easter narratives as found in the Christian Gospels.

PART 4 – CLUES THAT LEAD US TOWARD EASTER

In this part of his examination of the traditions surrounding the Resurrection of Jesus, Spong searches for “clues that will carry us back toward the Easter moment”. He says that this requires a probing into the texts, looking for hidden hints as to how the ideas developed. In Spong’s view, there are five major ‘clues’ which he believes can shed light on what actually happened at the first Easter; they address the questions of “where, who, how, when, and why” as related to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Those clues, he says, may be discovered by an in-depth study of the biblical tradition and the history of the time. Again, however, Spong limits his

investigations to the Jewish traditions, not looking beyond the history of Judea and Galilee for other possible influences.

Chapter 14 – ‘The First Clue: It Occurred in Galilee, Not in Jerusalem’

The first chapter in this Part is Chapter 14, ‘The First Clue: It Occurred in Galilee, Not in Jerusalem’ (pp. 161-180). Here Spong looks at what he says is a question that should be addressed at all times when the story of Jesus is being told – *where* did the events actually take place? In the specific context of this chapter, he is referring, of course, to the location of the events of the Resurrection. He believes that in order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand the ancient tensions that he says existed between Jerusalem and Galilee. He says that those tensions underlie the debate that can be seen “raging in the pages of the Gospels themselves”.

The first section of Chapter 14 is ‘Rivalry between North and South’ (pp.162-170). In this section, Spong examines what he sees as the long and difficult history which, he says, in the first century CE made the city of Jerusalem (in Judah/Judea) and the region of Galilee to the north appear in the minds of the Jewish people as two separate, well-defined entities. He does not mention that the two regions of Judea and Galilee were geographically separated by the region of Samaria, although under the Roman rule Judea and Samaria were administratively one (Bible, 2006, Map 13). Spong begins by examining the status that Jerusalem enjoyed as ‘the city of David’ (pp. 162-166). He points out that David, in fact, did not reign from Jerusalem for his entire kingship, being first crowned at Hebron in about 1000 BCE. At that time, Spong says, the land of Canaan was still largely under the control of the Canaanite people; Jerusalem itself was the stronghold of the Jebusites, who, according to the book Genesis (ch. 10), were a Canaanite tribe descended from Noah's son Ham.

As a fortress, Jerusalem was considered to be virtually impregnable, being built on dominant high ground and having an internal water supply. Spong suggests that the impregnability of Jerusalem had become part of the mythology of the people

of the area. However, the text he uses in support of that argument, Mic. 3:11, is instead part of the prophet's declamation against the false piety and religious arrogance of the rulers of Jerusalem in the late eighth century BCE; in fact, verse 3:12 says "...Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins..." – hardly a suggestion of indestructibility. Furthermore, Spong says that Jerusalem surrendered to David about 993 BCE (see below); however, according to Prof. Leo Laberge, in Brown, Fitzmeyer & Murphy (1990:249, 16:2), and notes to *Micah* by Prof. Philip J. King in the NRSV (Bible 2006:1238), Micah was not active until about the last quarter of the eighth century BCE, some 250 years after David. It is difficult, therefore, to see the relevance of Micah as an example of a pre-Davidic mythology about the status of Jerusalem.

In Spong's view, the developing traditions of Jerusalem as 'God's city', coupled with its value as a fortress, made it a very desirable prize for the Hebrew people. In addition, as a 'foreign' city it was also neutral ground in the tensions between the northern Hebrews in Israel and the southern group in Judah. Spong enlarges on those tensions in pages 164-166. It was politically as well as militarily expedient for David to attempt to take Jerusalem and make it the capital of his unified Hebrew kingdom. According to tradition, as recounted in 2 Sam. 5:6-10, David achieved the conquest of the city by entering through the water-shafts – the internal water-supply system. Jerusalem, the 'City of God', now became the 'City of David', the capital of a united Jewish kingdom. However, the tensions remained and the union failed about eighty years later, after the deaths of David and his son and successor Solomon. The two regions of Israel in the north and Judah in the south were once again separate, mutually jealous and competing states.

Spong now says (p. 167) that despite all efforts, the northern region failed to match the south in any respect. Samaria, the capital of Israel, could not compete with Jerusalem in either grandeur or mythology, and the religious centres of the north continued to be seen as inferior to the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. Finally, in 721 BCE, Israel was overrun by the Assyrians; most of its people were exiled and the land was largely repopulated by non-Hebrews. In time, inter-marriage between the newcomers and the remaining Israelites produced a new people who became known as 'Samaritans'. However, Spong says that the people of Judah regarded the

Samaritans as “half-breeds and heretics” and “neither ethnically pure nor religiously orthodox”. Gradually, the Jews reclaimed the north and the Samaritans were squeezed into an increasingly small area; finally, that area divided into two small provinces. On the death of Herod the Great in 4 CE, those provinces were officially divided and named Samaria and Galilee.

Galilee was surrounded by gentile nations – Spong says that its name is derived from “[an ancient] Hebrew colloquial phrase...*galil hagoyim*... ‘circle of Gentiles’”. He says (p. 168) that in the time of Joshua the region had been assigned to the tribes of Zebulun, Naphtali and Asher. However, Spong says that each one of those figures had a question mark against their birth, and so they were not considered by the Jews of Judah to be racially pure. According to the story in Gen. 30:1-13, Naphtali and Asher were sons of Jacob from Zilpah and Bilhah, the slave women of his wives Leah and Rachel, and so were unarguably of mixed race. The case of Zebulun is another matter, in both the Genesis narrative and Spong’s use of that account. According to Spong (p. 168), “...Leah had conceived Zebulun when she lured Jacob away from his favourite wife, Rachel, for the night for the price of some mandrakes...”. However, even a superficial reading of Gen. 30:14-20 shows a quite different story. Firstly, it appears to have been a straightforward bargain between Rachel and Leah – “Rachel said, ‘Then he may lie with you tonight for your son’s mandrakes’” (Gen. 30:15), and when Jacob came home that evening, Leah said “You must sleep with me, I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes” (Gen. 30:16) - no ‘luring’ of Jacob. Secondly, the son conceived that night was Issachar, Leah’s fifth son with Jacob (Gen. 30:17-18); Zebulun was her sixth son, and the text (Gen. 30:19-20) makes no mention of either luring or bargaining leading up to his conception. So it appears that Spong again has adjusted the record to suit his own purpose, in this case to demonstrate that the Judeans regarded the population of Galilee as being racially suspect and having “a relatively weak Jewish identity”. It is noted that there are some suggestions that the names of ‘Naphtali’ and ‘Issachar’ may have been transposed in the biblical text at some time. However, even if that is so, it does not change the position of Zebulun as Leah’s sixth son and not the offspring of the ‘hiring’ of Jacob, and so does not excuse Spong’s apparent error.

This idea is not mentioned by Spong, nor is it supported by any of the Bible versions referenced for this thesis, or by the Hebrew Tanakh. .

By the beginning of the first century CE, Spong believes, Galilee had evolved into a vibrant region of fiercely independent people who had managed to maintain freedom from total Roman domination longer than any other part of the Jewish state. Despite being labelled by the Jerusalem-dominated southern region as being inferior, without class or tradition and speaking in an uncouth accent, the people of Galilee remained as the “identifiably Jewish” remnant of the northern kingdom. However, Spong does not explain how Galilee came to remain ‘identifiably Jewish’ while the people of Samaria – arguably a ‘sister-province’ - were seen as “half-breeds and heretics”. He does note (p.168), citing Isa. 9:1 ff., that in the eighth century BCE “the prophet Isaiah had predicted a new greatness for the region that he called Galilee of the nations”. However, according to the note in the NRSV (Bible 2006:925), the passage cited “served originally as an oracle for the coronation of a Judean king, probably Hezekiah”, which occurred about 715 BCE; *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:236, 15:22-23) indicates the same view. Spong does not mention that point, leaving the implication that the passage predicted events that happened some seven centuries later; he does not even suggest that the passage may have been adapted or referred to by the early Christians in the development of their mythology.

That history of the northern region is now compared with that of the southern region after the breakup of the united Hebrew monarchy into Judah and Israel, following the death of Solomon in about 920 BCE (pp. 169–170). Spong skips the first two hundred years, beginning his examination with the Assyrian conquest of the north in 721 BCE. He says that Judah escaped being similarly overrun by becoming a vassal state, thereby gaining “an additional 130 years of identifiable national history”. In that extra time Judah also managed to retain both the Davidic royal line and the tradition of central worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Spong also notes that in that same period Jerusalem “successfully resisted several [unspecified] would-be invaders”, thereby enhancing the mythology of the city’s invincibility. Significantly, about 621 BCE, the kingdom of Judah underwent a massive religious reform, led by a group who became known as the Deuteronomists and whom the

reigning king, Josiah, supported. Those reforms included the destruction of all religious shrines outside Jerusalem and the banning of all other religious practices, thereby further centralising Jewish worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. It also further strengthened Jerusalem's domination of the region.

It must be noted that Spong makes no mention of the several periods, in that some three hundred years of history, when the kings and people of Judah embraced various 'foreign' religious beliefs and practices, including setting up altars and idols within the temple itself. Those episodes are clearly and extensively recorded in both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles in the Old Testament.

The legend of impregnability came to an end for Jerusalem when, first in 598 BCE and finally in 586 BCE, the Babylonian armies overran the city. In the second conquest, the temple was destroyed and many of the people of Judah were deported to Babylon. It is noted here that Spong refers to Nebuchadnezzar as a Babylonian "general" (p. 169), despite his being unequivocally identified as "King" in the biblical texts (2 Kings 24:1, 10,11; 25:1, 8, 22; 2 Chr. 36:6, 10, 13) and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [as 'Nebuchadrezzar']. The four hundred years of Davidic dynasty had ended; "the two major props of Jewish identity, the royal family and the temple, disappeared". Spong says that none of those who were deported lived long enough to return to Jerusalem, but that their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren did.

According to Spong (p. 170), the concepts of both king and temple entered more deeply into the realm of mythology during the exile in Babylon. Ideas of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple, and the re-establishing of the line of Davidic kings, became entwined with messianic and eschatological expectations of the 'end days'. Visions grew of a messiah who would come in glory to establish a New Jerusalem and the Kingdom of God in a new age. Both Jerusalem and the temple were eventually rebuilt, but Spong says that they achieved neither the legendary grandeur of the past nor the dreams and expectations for the future. However, they provided the basis for the "nuances and ...images" which were in place at the end of the first century BCE.

Spong finishes this section by saying that Galilee and Jerusalem provided the setting for the drama of the life of Jesus. He believes that those two locations are

crucial to an understanding of Jesus' life, with their ongoing history of "jealousy, competition, derision and distrust".

The second, and last, section of Chapter 14 is 'Locating the Action in Galilee' (pp. 170-180). Spong begins by making a clear statement of his views: "In my opinion, the crucial events of Jesus' life occurred in Galilee, including both his birth and the experience of his risen presence." He does not go so far as to include the crucifixion in that statement. He goes on to say that, over the years, the legendary power of Jerusalem caused both stories to be "drawn into the holy city's orbit", but that the Galilean origins of both birth and resurrection traditions may still be discovered in the Gospels. Spong believes that, eventually, Jerusalem was forced to "take over" both birth and resurrection, and to "redefine their meaning in its own terms".

Spong says (p. 171) that "Jesus certainly went to Jerusalem to die". He believes that it is clearly stated in John's Gospel, and hinted at in Luke, that Jesus had visited Jerusalem on several previous occasions and was quite familiar with its facilities. He cites, as one example, the point that Jesus apparently was aware of the availability of a large upper room, suitable as a venue for a Passover meal for the disciple band. It may be noted here that Bargil Pixner argues that Jesus and his *Chaburah* of the Twelve were connected with the Essenes in Jerusalem, and that the 'Upper Room' was in an Essene 'guesthouse' (in Charlesworth, 2006:318-322). He also believes that Jesus demonstrates an awareness of the mythology surrounding the city; he cites Lk. 13:33 where Jesus says that it is not right for a prophet to die away from Jerusalem. Spong suggests that Jesus was drawn strongly to Jerusalem, and that the events that were to be the climax of his life had to take place in that city. However, in Spong's view the post-passion events took place in Galilee; he now sets out to demonstrate that belief.

Spong opens his argument by looking at the traditions surrounding the birth of Jesus (pp. 171-173). He states categorically that Jesus was born in Galilee, and that the Galilean origins are clear in the biblical texts. He believes that the Bethlehem/Jerusalem birth tradition was "an obvious attempt to interpret and to demonstrate the meaning of his [Jesus'] life" (p. 171). Spong goes on to cite

passages in the Gospels of Matthew and John (Mt. 2:21 ff.; Jn. 7:40 ff.), and to refer to, but not cite, Luke's birth narrative, which he believes indicate that Jesus was seen by his contemporaries and later biographers as a native of Galilee, born in Nazareth. He also sees other elements in Luke's "travelogue to Bethlehem" which he says should lead the reader to "dismiss the literalness" of the story of Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem for a census. Adding the other supernatural events that Luke relates, Spong believes that "the dramatic, nonliteral midrashic nature of the birth stories becomes apparent".

Looking for the reasons for the development of "the Bethlehem and Judaic tradition of Jesus' birth", Spong turns to the ancient connotations of the Jerusalem region (p.173). According to Jewish tradition, King David was born in Bethlehem; Spong says that Jewish yearnings for a new royal figure therefore would associate his birth with Bethlehem. He also says that Micah, some two hundred years after David's death, named Bethlehem as the place from which a new king-messiah would come. [It is noted here that the citation of 'Mic. 5:21ff.' in p.173 of this edition of *Resurrection* is incorrect and should be 5:2 ff. There is no verse 5:21.] However, it is not likely that Micah was referring to events some seven hundred years in the future; notes to this passage in the NRSV (Bible 2006:1245) suggest that the prophet was referring to contemporary conflict with the Assyrians; *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:253, 16:23-24) appears to agree with that view. [However, this passage from Micah is regularly read as part of the Christmas liturgy, supposedly referring to the future birth of Jesus]. Spong makes the suggestion, based on the premise of the Bethlehem-David nexus, that when the disciples in the first century CE began to associate Jesus with the concept of the expected messiah, they incorporated the tradition of a Bethlehem birth. He goes on to say that "the facts of history lead us to dismiss the fanciful claims of a Bethlehem origin..." in favour of Nazareth as the probable birthplace of Jesus.

In building his case for Nazareth in Galilee as Jesus' birthplace, rather than Bethlehem in Judea, Spong appears not to have considered the suggestion made by Bruce Chilton (Chilton, 2006:94-96) that the archaeology of first-century Galilee indicates that there was, in fact, a 'Bethlehem' about eleven kilometres from Nazareth. Chilton says that he first found the information in 1975, when studying a

Talmudic geography from 1868. That Bethlehem (in Galilee) is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, in Josh. 19:15, as being part of the territory assigned to the tribe of Zebulun, so the possibility that Jesus could have been born in both Bethlehem and Galilee was freely available for consideration by Spong at the time of his writing this book.

Turning to the location of the origins of the resurrection tradition, Spong says that the available facts can only give rise to a deeper level of speculation. Again he makes an unreferenced sweeping assertion: "...the conclusion of the vast majority of scholars..." is that Galilee was the primary location of those events that caused the disciples to believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead. Spong says he shares that conclusion, in view of "the weight of evidence".

In pursuit of that evidence, Spong turns first to Paul (pp. 173-174). He observes that Paul does not give a specific location for any witness in connection with appearances of the risen Jesus. He also points out that in the time of Paul "the Christian movement was certainly centered in Jerusalem", and that "the word *Galilee*" does not appear in any of the epistles attributed to Paul, either genuine or pseudonymous. Spong now looks for references to 'Galilee' in the Book of Acts, finding only four, none of which gives specific proof of a Galilean origin for the resurrection tradition. He again appears to grasp at straws by commenting that having the angels address the disciples as "men of Galilee" (Acts 1:11) when they were in fact in Jerusalem was "a strange phrase to use". It could be argued that it was a very appropriate phrase, as the disciples were, in fact, generally Galileans, irrespective of where they were located at any particular time. However, Spong believes that neither Paul nor Acts provides clear evidence for a Galilean origin of the Easter tradition. He does suggest, for later consideration, that there may be evidence in the Gospels for a post-resurrection journey by the disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Spong now turns to the Gospels in an attempt to discover evidence for "the location of the resurrection experience" (pp. 175-180). He says that new insights emerge from that examination. Spong, indirectly, also makes the point that the Gospels were written with hindsight, some decades after the Easter events, making

it possible that there was some blurring of various stories that had developed over the years.

According to Spong, the writer of Mark's Gospel "quite obviously believed" that Galilee was the location of the manifestation of the risen Jesus to the disciples. He begins by saying that Mark locates the story of the empty tomb in Jerusalem, "but without any manifestation of the risen Lord in the narrative". Instead the messenger at the tomb gives a direction for the disciples to return to Galilee where they would see Jesus "as he told you"; Spong links this to the earlier statement attributed to Jesus in Mk. 14:27-28 – "...But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee". However, Spong's attempts to link other events and statements of Jesus to a Galilean resurrection appear to be rather tenuous. He cites Mk. 6:34, 6:50, and more particularly verses 9:9, 9:30 and 10:34, as evidence favouring Galilee, but while it may be argued that each of the events or sayings may have happened in Galilee, none actually mentions the region in connection with a future resurrection.

Addressing the accounts given in the Gospel according to Matthew, Spong says that the author "came down on the side of the originality of the Galilean tradition in regard to the resurrection", despite having "blurred this location issue a bit". The remainder of Spong's analysis of Matthew's resurrection narrative (p.176) appears to be little more than padding for his speculation. In particular, his comments on Mt. 28:9-10 are questionable. The bible text makes it clear that the appearance of the angel in 28:2-7 and the appearance of the risen Jesus in 28:9 are two separate events; however, Spong says that "The angel seems to have dissolved into Jesus as if in a scene in a film". He goes on to say that this part of the narrative is "dismissed by most scholars as an inauthentic part of the tradition"; however, it is noted that *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990) makes no such comment. Spong's conclusion is that despite the various differences between the accounts in Matthew and Mark, the Gospel of Matthew "[leaves] the Galilean setting still intact as the original site of the first Easter...". He does note that other references to Galilee in Matthew are simply in connection with Jesus' origins and early ministry and make no mention of his death or resurrection.

Spong's final note on Matthew is a suggestion, to be followed up in a later chapter, regarding the actual nature and origin of the 'Palm Sunday' entry

procession. Was it one pre-crucifixion event, or a post-resurrection return to Jerusalem by the disciples, or a merging of two separate events? He asks his readers to file the possibility for later discussion.

Continuing his search for a Galilean resurrection, Spong now examines the writings of Luke; although his major focus is on Luke's Gospel, he also refers to Acts in order to make his case. He begins by saying that Luke effectively denies any Galilean connection, restricting the "resurrection appearances" to the Jerusalem area; however, Spong also says that Luke "bears a strange witness to the authenticity and originality of the Galilean tradition..." (p. 177). He refers first to Acts 1:4, in which Jesus charged the disciples "not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father...". He then says that Luke "had to skew Mark's words" (in Mk.16:7) so that instead of directing the disciples to go to Galilee, the messenger in Lk. 24:6-7 gives a reminder of a statement made by Jesus "while he was still in Galilee...". Those two passages appear to be Spong's 'denial of the Galilean tradition'. However, in seeking clues to a Galilean resurrection, Spong now turns to his 'strange witness', saying that Luke "dropped one more hint that screamed for an original setting in Galilee" (p. 178). In Lk. 24:36-43 (Spong does not give a citation) is the story of the risen Jesus appearing among the disciple group in Jerusalem. When Jesus asks for something to eat, he is given "a piece of broiled fish". According to Spong, for fish to be 'broiled' it must be fresh; as Jerusalem is not near any body of water, fresh fish would not be available. Hence, Spong believes that Luke inadvertently suggests a tradition of Galilee as the location of the resurrection. It is noted that the Greek Lexicon (Danker 2000:717, *όπτός*) and Strong (3702) both suggest 'cooked by fire, roasted, broiled' as meanings for the Greek *optou* (*όπτοϋ*), but appear to favour 'broiled' – which is also the meaning given in all New Testament versions consulted.

Spong now presents an argument which he admits is "highly speculative", but which he says is based on the only other Lucan text that could help build a case for a Galilean resurrection (pp.178-179). The passage is Lk. 4:14-15: "And Jesus returned...into Galilee...And he taught in all their synagogues, being glorified by all.", which comes immediately after the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Spong believes that the text of those two verses does not fit into the context of the

temptation and Jesus' return from the wilderness. He suggests that the passage would be more appropriate in a post-resurrection context.

While admitting that Luke "specifically den[ies]" that Galilee was the site of the first Easter experience, Spong insists that the corpus of Luke's Gospel and Acts contains "a trail of clues" which point to a Galilean tradition (p. 179).

The last part of Spong's examination of the texts of the four Gospel writers is a brief look at John, which he describes as containing "a confused and mixed message" (p. 179). First, in Jn. 20, the Easter events are firmly placed in Jerusalem with Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and later to the disciples. There is no mention of Galilee in any context. However, as Spong says, "...along comes chapter 21...". This chapter is regarded as a later epilogue to John's Gospel (Bible 2006:1853, note) and the events take place, post-resurrection, on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius (Sea of Galilee). At this point Spong makes no further comment on Jn. 21, reserving it for a later discussion.

Searching for other Galilean connections in John (pp. 179-180), Spong finds the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee (Jn. 2:1-11). In particular, he looks at verse 11, "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did in Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him", noting that Jn. 12:16 later refers to Jesus' glorification in a post-Easter context. He also notes "...and his disciples believed in him", comparing it with Jn. 20:8 which says, in a post-crucifixion context, "Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed". Spong sees this as inferring that it was that disciple (the 'beloved disciple') who was "the first disciple to believe" after entering the empty tomb, thus contradicting v. 2:11. However, it could be argued that this is an incorrect reading of v. 20:8. Jn. 20:9 says "for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead"; reading verses 8 and 9 together, as they are written, suggests that what the disciple believed was Mary Magdalene's fear that someone had removed Jesus' body from the tomb. If that were so, it would negate Spong's argument, leaving the stories of both Cana and the tomb intact and separate. It also may be another example of Spong taking a passage out of context to suit his own argument.

Finally in this examination of John's Gospel (p.180), Spong refers to four other episodes (Jn. 2:13; 5:1; 7:1; 10) which, he says, have "language that is not comfortable in its context". However, he reserves those passages for later discussion. He concludes by expressing his belief that John contains a "strong tradition" that supports Galilee as the original setting for the resurrection experience.

Spong ends Chapter 14 by stating his belief that Galilee, "where there is no tomb and no burial", was the setting for the first resurrection experience, and that the story must have been carried to Jerusalem and "planted there". He says that, for him, this must mean that the tradition of the empty tomb in a Jerusalem setting can be no more than "a later legendary addition to the faith story". Again, he reserves that conclusion for later discussion.

Having demonstrated to his own satisfaction that Galilee was the setting for the resurrection experience, Spong now continues his search for 'clues' to who was present and what happened to make them believe that they had seen Jesus .

Chapter 15 – 'The Second Clue: The Primacy of Peter'

The second chapter of Part 4 of *Resurrection* is Chapter 15, 'The Second Clue: The Primacy of Peter' (pp. 181-197). In this chapter, Spong seeks to discover what role was played by Peter in the resurrection story, and how he became the undisputed central character in the developing Christian tradition. He begins by asserting that both Paul and John are firm in acknowledging Peter's position, despite both having reason to oppose his pre-eminence in the developing Christian community. In reading this chapter, it must be remembered that Spong is writing with the conviction that it was in Galilee that the 'resurrection experience' took place.

The first section of Chapter 15 is 'Surmounting the First Obstacle: Literalism' (pp. 182-184). In order to make his case, Spong again turns to his concept of 'midrash', saying that the Gospel writers used events from the Hebrew scriptures to

create their narratives about the life of Jesus. He argues that the Gospels cannot be read as literal, linear biographies, representing a chronological sequence of events. In pursuit of that argument, he demonstrates that the same stories occur in more than one of the Gospels, but not always in the same context or time frame.

Spong believes that imposing a “linear dimension” onto the Gospel narratives detracts from the understanding of the central message about Jesus. He makes the point that nothing in the Gospels was written before the resurrection (in fact, not until some decades later). All the words and events recorded as taking place in Galilee in the early phases of Jesus’ ministry came from the memories of his followers and were ‘read back’ into the narratives. He also says that the members of the Christian community who produced the Gospels were writing about the resurrected Lord, so that ‘resurrection’ stories may well appear in a pre-crucifixion context. Such stories only appear ‘out of place’ if the Gospels are read as linear histories.

Looking specifically at the character “Simon called Peter”, Spong believes that reading the Gospels as non-chronological narratives opens many new possibilities as to Peter’s place in the Easter events. He also believes that to understand that ‘place’ fully, it is necessary to read every passage about Peter in the Gospels. Spong gives a number of examples of questions which may be raised by a non-chronological understanding: for example, why should Simon be named ‘Peter’, the ‘rock upon which the church would be built’, in a pre-Easter context before there was any notion of a ‘church’? He gives several instances of stories which appear more logical in a post-resurrection context, rather than as occurrences in Jesus’ early ministry. With those thoughts in mind, Spong now begins a closer examination of ‘Simon called Peter’, in order to discover him as the “rock of faith” apparently underpinning the developing Christian church.

‘Seeking Peter’s Identity’ is the first part of the search (pp.184-186).

According to the various Gospels, Simon bar Jonah was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee (Sea of Tiberius), living in Capernaum in his mother-in-law’s house (although he may have been born in Bethsaida), and having a brother called Andrew. In short, he was a Galilean working man who, incidentally, lived about thirty-five kilometres from Nazareth.

Spong says that the name 'Simon' appears to have been a common one, appearing twice among the twelve apostles, five other figures in the Gospels and two in Acts. He cites, but says he is not persuaded by, an argument by Dale [and Patricia] Miller (1990, *The Gospel of Mark as Midrash on Earlier Jewish and New Testament Literature*) that all those 'Simons' portrayed various aspects of the character of Simon Peter. He also says that the name appears in the Old Testament in the forms 'Simeon', 'Shimei', and 'Shammah'; however, he concludes that the name did not have any positive connotations in biblical history. Following on from that, Spong suggests that Simon the apostle also was not a positive figure until he did something to bring about the name-change from Simon to Cephas, and "from the one who cursed the Lord's anointed to the one who became the rock of faith..."; the search is now to discover why that change took place.

Spong says that 'Simon called Peter' is named first in every listing of Jesus' disciples. Looking first at the 'calling' of the disciples, both Matthew and Mark have Simon and Andrew his brother called first, followed immediately by James and John the sons of Zebedee. In each of those Gospels, Jesus uses the formula "follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Mk. 1:14-20; Mt. 4:18-22). Luke, however, has a quite different version, with no specific 'call' and no mention of Andrew (Lk.4:38-39; 5:1-11). In his discussion of this episode (p. 185), Spong again appears to put an unwarranted interpretation on the bible text, presumably in order to heighten the sense of drama: the text (Lk.4:38) says "And he arose and left the synagogue, and entered Simon's house", which Spong reads as Simon being "a friend with whom Jesus was staying in Capernaum". It is noted that while this story, together with the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, appears in all three of the synoptic Gospels, none of them suggests that Simon/Peter is specifically a 'friend'. Pursuing the theme of 'post-resurrection' narratives appearing in an 'early ministry' context, Spong points out that Lk. 5:1-11 is very similar to the story in Jn. 21:1-8, with large hauls of fish being caught at the behest of Jesus. However, Spong suggests that while the subsequent actions and words of Simon Peter may seem logical in a post-resurrection setting (Jn.21), they make little or no sense in an early ministry context (Lk. 5), and that this may be another case of a combining of confused memories (p.186)

In closing this section, Spong notes that John (Jn. 1:35-40) differs from the synoptic Gospels in that Andrew is the first disciple named, together with another unidentified figure; the two were disciples of John the Baptist. Andrew then calls his brother Simon to meet Jesus, which results in the renaming of Simon as 'Cephas' (Peter) (Jn. 1:41-42); Spong believes that this name-change in a first conversation with Jesus "does not ring with authenticity", but does not enlarge on his view. He also speculates that this passage may point to a forgotten role played by Andrew in "bringing Peter into the resurrection faith".

However, the greater part of this closing discussion is taken up with Spong's speculation, which does not appear to be supported by the biblical text (p. 186). His "presumption" is that the unnamed figure in Jn. 1:35-40 was 'John the son of Zebedee', although there is nothing in the passage to indicate that such is the case. He then says that John Zebedee is "extolled constantly in the fourth Gospel as the beloved disciple but frequently portrayed as the nameless one". However, there are only five references to the 'beloved disciple' in John; all occur in the later chapters (Jn.13:23-26; 19:26-27; 20:2-10; 21:7, 20-23), and none makes any reference to John son of Zebedee (or any other name) as the 'disciple whom Jesus loved'. Spong also suggests, based on his identification of Andrew's companion as John, that this passage may be a "subtle attempt by the disciples of John Zebedee to lift up their hero" by having him become a follower of Jesus before Simon Peter. Nevertheless, the fact remains that this appears to be pure Spong speculation, with no basis in the biblical text. According to Bart D. Ehrman (2008:182), the tradition that John the son of Zebedee was both the 'beloved disciple' and the author of John's Gospel dates from the second century CE. However, Spong does not mention that point, thus leaving the impression that it is all his own idea.

The second section of Chapter 15 is 'The Centrality of Peter' (pp. 186-193). In this section, Spong examines the place of Peter in the developing Christian community as related in the four Gospels. He begins by observing that, in each of the Gospels, Peter, James and John make up the "inner core" of the disciple band, with Andrew always in the background; however, in every instance Peter is named first. He also suggests throughout this section that a number of the speeches

attributed to Jesus during his ministry make more sense if placed in a post-resurrection context.

It must be said here that this is a difficult section to follow clearly. There appear to be several different threads of thought, not necessarily clearly connected, and at times seemingly not entirely relevant to the theme of Peter as a central figure in the Jesus narratives.

The first of those threads is the apparent leadership of Peter in the 'inner core'. As already mentioned, Peter appears as the main speaker among the disciple band, particularly at Caesarea Philippi and prior to the crucifixion. The second thread is Spong's analysis of the various versions of the exchanges between Jesus and Peter, with or without other disciples. The third major thread is an examination of the context in which speeches are made by various characters – mainly Jesus and Peter – in the four Gospel narratives. The last thread is a return to the question of the actual location of the 'resurrection experience'; was it in Jerusalem or in Galilee? In addition to those four, there are a number of other minor diversions from the central theme. Each of those major threads will now be followed in turn.

The first thread is Peter's apparent leadership among the disciples. The first event noted by Spong as being "shared with Jesus" by the trio of Peter, James and John is the raising of the daughter of Jairus (p.187). This episode appears, with slight differences, in all three of the Synoptic Gospels; however, no particular emphasis is given to Peter (Mt. 9:18-19, 23-26; Mk. 5:21-24, 35-43; Lk. 8:40-42, 49-56). It may be noted that Spong does not mention that all three Synoptic Gospels intercalate the separate, and seemingly irrelevant, story of the healing of the woman 'with a flow of blood' into the middle of the Jairus narrative (Mt. 9:20-22; Mk. 5:25-34; Lk. 8:43-48). However, the healing of the woman does serve to delay Jesus sufficiently long for the sick child to die. This may be compared with the story, only in John's Gospel, of the raising of Lazarus, where Jesus chooses to delay his journey in order to give Lazarus time to die (Jn. 11:1-44). Of course, it is acknowledged that neither the sick woman nor Lazarus has anything to do with Peter's position in the disciple band.

Spong now observes that Peter, James and John figure in the stories of the Transfiguration and, later, the Garden of Gethsemane (p.187). He says that Peter is

“clearly the central figure” in each case; however, Luke names no disciple other than Judas in the Gethsemane story. Looking for other examples of Peter’s primacy, Spong mentions, but does not cite, the “Christ-confession” at Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:13-20; Mk. 8:27-38; Lk. 9:18-22). (It may be noted here that Luke gives no location for the Confession. Spong deals later with a similar statement by Peter as related in Jn. 6:67-69, apparently made at Capernaum.) He quotes (pp. 188-189), again without citation, the prediction and actuality of Peter’s three-fold denial of Jesus (Mt. 26:30-35, 69-75; Mk. 14:26-31, 66-72; Lk. 22:31-34, 54-62; Jn. 13:36-38, 18:15-18, 25-27) and the post-resurrection story in Jn. 21 (citation given). He also notes that Peter is not mentioned by name as being at either of the post-resurrection gatherings of the disciples related in Jn. 20 (p.191).

In following his second thread, Spong examines various exchanges between Jesus and Peter, as well as other of Jesus’ words, as recorded in the Gospels. [In this section, only those speeches that do not form part of the third ‘context’ thread will be discussed.] His first note is that after the raising of the daughter of Jairus, Jesus directed that she should be given something to eat (Lk. 8:55); he draws a parallel with Lk. 24:41, where the resurrected Jesus “asked his astonished disciples for food”. Although not stated, the implication seems to be that there is a connection between resurrection and eating, possibly to prove that the resurrected one is indeed alive again and not an illusion. The next exchange is found in Mk. 13:3-37, which Spong says is called “the little apocalypse” (p. 188). As usual, it is Peter who Mark names first in listing the ‘core group’, who provoke this discourse by asking about signs of the end days. Spong does not note that the same material appears in Mt. 24:3-25:13 and Lk. 21:7-36, without any disciples being named. He says that the words in this passage “were hardly spoken by the Jesus of history”, but instead “reflect the events of the Galilean war of 66 CE” leading up to the 70 CE destruction of Jerusalem. However, he does not give any justification for that view.

The last exchange quoted (p. 189) appears only in Jn. 13, as central to the story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. Spong suggests that this vignette (Jn. 13:5-11) demonstrates an ambivalence on the part of Peter, reflecting his pledge of loyalty followed by denial and later recommitment. The remainder of the exchanges

discussed in this section relate closely to Spong's third thread, the context in which various words were spoken.

The third thread attempts, in particular, to discover whether various exchanges appear to make more sense in a pre- or post-resurrection context. Spong suggests that, logically, many of the speeches attributed to Jesus or his disciples could not have been made before the crucifixion and resurrection experiences. In a number of cases, Spong merely asks a question, such as 'do Jesus words... make any sense in this context', or 'what did it mean for Jesus to say...'; he appears, at this point, to be leaving it to the reader to answer the questions.

Spong's first question (p.187) is whether Jesus' words to Peter, as related in Mt. 16:13-20, "make any sense except as a postresurrection [sic] affirmation into which Peter had brought the Christian community". Spong asks whether the title '*Christ*' was applied to Jesus "except after his exaltation", and what it meant when Jesus said "...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...". He implies that those words are out of place except in a post-resurrection context. However, it is considered to be arguable that this exchange between Jesus and Peter could have taken place during Jesus' ministry period. As will be discussed later, Spong himself points out that the English word 'Christ' merely comes from the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew '*masiach*' – 'God's anointed'. It may be considered that the term could have been applied to Jesus by enthusiastic followers at any time in his ministry. It should be remembered that at this point in the 'Jesus story' there was no concept or context of 'Christian' or 'Christianity'.

Turning to Mark (p.187), Spong again appears to adjust and interpret the Gospel reading to suit his own purpose, in this case of showing the exchange with Peter, the 'Christ-confession', to be post-resurrection. He says that Jesus "[began] to urge Peter to take up the cross"; he makes the point that Jesus had not yet been hung on a cross, declaring that the words "Take up your cross" came from the Christian community, rather than from Jesus. However, Mk. 8:34 actually says that the call was to "the multitude with his disciples", rather than only to Peter; in fact, Peter is not specifically mentioned here. The same story appears in both Matthew (16:24-28) and Luke (9:23-27), again without specific mention of Peter.

Furthermore, although this passage appears together with the Confession in all three Synoptics, it is as a separate teaching on the meaning of discipleship and a prediction of Jesus' death.

Continuing on that theme, Spong refers to "the admonition not to be ashamed of Jesus", which he says "came primarily out of the means of his death". He refers back to his section on the origins of the title 'Christ' as applied to Jesus (pp. 131-138), noting the statute in Deut. 21:22-23 in which 'a man hanged on a tree' is accursed. Spong says (p.188) "We are not ashamed of a crucified Lord' could only be stated in the power of the Easter experience", and that this statement "was placed...into the middle of a confession of the messianic nature of Jesus by none other than Peter". However, the only references to being 'ashamed' appear to come from Jesus as part of that separate teaching, rather than as part of Peter's confession (Mk. 8:38, Lk.9:26).

Spong also makes a passing reference (p. 188) to "that strange Marcan story about Jesus cursing the fig tree (Mk. 11:12-26)", promising to return to it later (which he does in pages 263-266). He suggests that there is a hidden note, with Mark making a somewhat defensive statement that it was the tree that was cursed, rather than the body that was hung upon it. It is difficult at this point to see how Spong arrives at that conclusion. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:619-620, 41:71) suggests that Mark saw the cursing as an 'act of power' on the part of Jesus, or possibly the transformation of a parable told by Jesus into a story about Jesus; a symbolic parallel is drawn with Israel's rejection of Jesus and his teachings. The same source also relates the fig tree story to a number of Old Testament passages about fruit trees, including Jer.8:13; a note in the NRSV relates the story to Jer. 8:13, in which the image of a fruitless fig tree is used to indict the leaders of the day (Bible 2006:1746). Spong also notes that in Mk. 11:21 it is Peter who remembers Jesus cursing the fig tree; he says that Peter was then "made to listen" to a short homily from Jesus; however, verse 22 says "And Jesus answered *them*..." [emphasis added], rather than specifically Peter. Spong fails to mention that this story also appears in Matthew's Gospel (21:18-22) without any involvement of Peter. It could be suggested here that Spong is being selective, even deceptive, in his use of biblical texts, in order to strengthen his case for the primacy of Peter in the disciple

band. It also could be said that it is an unnecessary ploy, as Peter's position of leadership among the disciples may be regarded as being generally accepted in the Christian tradition.

Spong believes that the whole of the Gospel according to John is permeated by the story of Peter's denial of Jesus (p. 189). He suggests that the story of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus' teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood (Jn.6:5-14, 28-51) is related to the Last Supper. Spong then looks at the passage Jn. 6:66-69, noting that it was Peter who held the disciple group together at this point. He suggests that Peter's words in Jn. 6:68-69 could not have been spoken in the early phase of Jesus' ministry, and so clearly belong in a post-Easter context. He appears to believe that it is an anachronism to have those words spoken by Peter before he had denied knowing Jesus; however, it is arguable that it is possible for the two events to be quite separate. In Spong's view, this is another instance in which "linear time is challenged".

The last piece of text to be examined in this search for context is Jn. 16 (p. 190). Spong says that a number of "postcrucifixion nuances" occur in this chapter, specifically in verses 14-28 with Jesus' words to the disciples at the Last Supper. He suggests that those words are a reflection of "how the author of the fourth gospel understood the resurrection".

The fourth (and last) thread is a return to the question of the location of the 'resurrection event' – Jerusalem or Galilee. It has been established that Spong firmly believes that it was Galilee; however, this section introduces the figure of Peter as part of the 'proof' of Spong's view. All the evidence comes from John's Gospel.

The first note (p. 190) is about Jn. 16:31-32, in which Jesus tells the disciples that they "...will be scattered, every man to his home...". Spong makes the point that if Peter had 'scattered to his home' he would have returned to the region of Galilee; however, that same comment would have applied to a number of the disciple band. He notes that after the denial of Jesus (Jn. 18:15-27) and "a cameo appearance at the tomb" (Jn. 20:1-10) Peter disappears from the scene in Jerusalem. However,

Spong says that John's Gospel provides a climax to the story of Peter in Chapter 21, the Johannine epilogue, set in Galilee.

In examining Jn. 21 (pp. 192-193), Spong notes the centrality of Peter in the narrative. He also notes the presence of six other disciples, of whom at least one (Thomas) had been named as being present at a Jerusalem appearance (Jn. 20:26-29), and that the location is beside the Sea of Galilee. The suggestion is that Peter and the others "had finally recognized that the Jesus adventure was over", and that the time had come to go back to their old lives. However, there is no mention here of the 'three-fold reinstatement' of Peter – that is left to the next section.

Spong acknowledges the difficulty that he says may be felt in relating the events in Jn. 21 to the post-crucifixion appearance stories in Jn. 20:19-31 (p.191). He notes in particular the behaviour of the disciples in Galilee in Jn. 21, saying that they "were strangely unmoved" in view of Jesus' appearances to many of them in Jerusalem, as related in Jn. 20. Despite those apparent contradictions, he believes that chapter 21 was written by the same author, and has been part of the fourth Gospel from very early times; he suggests that it may reflect a memory of an authentic early tradition.

However, Spong does not suggest, although it is arguably so, that it might also be considered that chapter 21 is a logical follow-on from chapter 20, and that there was no reason for the disciples to be particularly moved by an appearance of a risen Jesus. Jn. 21:1 says "After these things Jesus showed himself *again* to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberius...", and verse 21:14 says "This was now the *third time* that Jesus that Jesus had appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead"; the disciples would have been becoming used to sudden appearances of the risen Lord. Furthermore, John 20 does not indicate that there was any specific 'commissioning for mission' of the disciples during the Jerusalem appearances, unless verses Jn. 20:21-23 are seen as such. Even so, it could be considered to be not unreasonable that some of them may have returned to their homes in Galilee. If that is a correct reading of the Gospel text, it could be seen as undermining Spong's interpretation of the text as indicating that Galilee was the location of the resurrection events.

Although this section is supposed to address Peter's centrality in the disciple band, it also examines several other points relating to various speeches and the location of the resurrection events. It is convoluted in its structure, requiring a lengthy dissection. However, three main points emerge:

- Peter is seen in all four canonical Gospels as having primacy among the disciple band;
- Spong believes that many of the speeches attributed to either Jesus or the disciples during the ministry period are more logically placed in a post-resurrection context; and
- Spong is convinced that the location of the 'resurrection event' was Galilee.

Spong finishes this section by noting the two similar stories of a fishing trip on Lake Galilee, with one (Lk. 5:1-11) set in Jesus' early ministry and the other (Jn. 21:2-6) set in a post-resurrection context. Spong says that in Luke's story Peter gave "an ecstatic cry that sounds very much like a postresurrection [sic] confession" (p. 192). He makes the quite reasonable suggestion that those stories could have a common origin in the oral period, but have undergone change in the tradition before being written down in the Gospels. He now sets out to search the Gospels for other similar stories, particularly those that involve Peter.

The final section in Chapter 15 is 'A Possible Meaning for the Lake Stories' (pp. 193-197). Spong gathers together the various Gospel stories that are set by a lake, which, he says, establishes the location as Galilee. His aim in this section appears to be to discover some common thread that firmly ties Jesus and Peter to Galilee for all the major events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. In this examination, Spong regards the stories as having appeared first in Mark, then Matthew and Luke, with John as a separate entity.

The first event noted (p.193) is the story of Jesus calming the great storm which threatened the boat in which he and the disciples were travelling (Mk. 4:35-41, Mt. 8:23-28, Lk. 8:22-25). Next is the story of Jesus walking on the water, which appears in Mark (6:45-52), Matthew (14:22-33) and John (6:16-21); Spong notes that

Matthew introduces the extra dimension of Peter attempting to join Jesus on the water. Spong also observes (p. 193) that Mark, Matthew and John connect this story with the story of the feeding of the five thousand; he says it is "inject[ed] into" the feeding story, whereas in fact it simply follows on from that passage. Luke does not have a 'walking on water' narrative; his feeding of the five thousand is followed by the stories of Peter's 'Christ-Confession' and the Transfiguration (Lk. 9:10-36).

It may be noted here that in his consideration of John's version of the walking on water story, Spong observes that there was a "protracted conversation" with people who wondered how Jesus had crossed the lake (Jn. 6:22-40). He then says that is "a question that surely has to be read in terms of the resurrection"; however, again he gives no justification for that view. He does observe that Jesus ends the conversation with the assertion "I am the bread of life".

Spong now says (p. 194) that apart from the lakeside setting there are other, similar themes in all of these narratives. He does not mention the point that, reasonably, the versions in the three *synoptic* Gospels could be expected to be similar. He says that all the stories reflect "a traditional messianic symbol of mastery over water"; he also says that there seems to be some connection with food in the stories, and that Peter appears in "either a cryptic or overt role" in each. It may be noted here that in the stories of the calming of the storm in Mark, Matthew, and Luke there is no mention of food before, during or after the event. Spong turns first to an examination of "that peculiarly Jewish tradition...that the messiah would have mastery over water".

The Old Testament book Job ((9:8) refers to God "who alone...trampled the waves of the sea". Spong says (pp. 194-195) that '2 Isaiah' (Isa. 40-55) picked up that theme, quoting verses 43:2 and 43:16; however, it is difficult to see how Spong relates those passages to the concept of a messiah, as they are all descriptive of God and God's power. He notes that the 'servant figure' was introduced in Isaiah 42 – that concept has been discussed earlier in his Chapter 12. He then quotes Isa. 51:10-15, and suggests that this passage was likely to have been used by early Christians searching for a scriptural explanation for the figure and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, although again the connection seems somewhat tenuous. Several phrases are noted, such as 'mastery over the sea' and 'bread that does not fail', with

the suggestion that these are symbolic phrases which occur too often in the Christ stories to be coincidental.

Spong now draws on the Book of Psalms for further illustrations of the expected messiah figure having control over the waters (pp.195-196). He says, without citing a source, that "...a storm on the sea was a metaphor for evil forces at work", and that salvation was seen in God's power over those evil forces to make them obey the divine will. Spong quotes, out of context, several single verses from various psalms in support of his views. First are Ps. 18:16 and Ps. 69:1-3, which he gives as illustrations of God's control over the waters. However, read in context, both refer to God plucking someone from the 'waters' of overwhelming troubles; a modern analogy would be a helicopter rescue from a flood. He suggests here ("It is not inconceivable to me...") that those two passages may have given rise to the story of Peter attempting to walk on the water, placing the story in a post-crucifixion context with Peter back at his home in Galilee. Spong says his next examples from the Psalms "confirm the expectation that the messiah, God's representative, might have power over the sea" (Ps. 77:16, 19; Ps. 89:9; Ps. 93:4). However, when read in context, those verses come from hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God, and have no connection with a future 'messiah'. In these two pages, most of Spong's examples seem tenuous at best, and in one case, pure speculation. He says that "most of [Psalms] came from the period after the Babylonian exile...". However, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:523, 34:2) merely says "The standard Hebr. text of the OT...dates in its present form from about the 10th cent. AD."; that is the compilation dating, not the time of writing. Emeritus Prof. Patrick D. Miller, Princeton Theological Seminary, in introductory notes to *The Psalms* in the NRSV (Bible 2006:734), says that while many of the psalms *may* have been composed after the exile, in most cases the date of composition of individual Psalms is impossible to determine. These pages (194-196) could be seen as another example of Spong interpreting the bible text to suit his own ends.

Spong believes that there is a common theme behind the various Gospel 'lake stories', and that the theme comes together in the final chapter of John's Gospel. Spong has already noted (p.192) that the tale of the catch of fish in Jn. 21, in a resurrection context, is very similar to the story in Lk. 5:4-7 which takes place

early in Jesus' ministry period; furthermore, Peter is the central figure in both narratives. However, in Jn. 21 the disciples recognise the figure on the shore as their risen Lord.

John's story culminates in the three-fold reinstatement of Peter as the shepherd of the flock. Spong believes that some time after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, and some forty to seventy years before the writing of the Gospels, an event occurred which gave rise to the Christian movement. He admits that the details of that event are sketchy, but says that the heart of the message was "The crucified one lives".

However, the aim of this chapter of *Resurrection* is to establish the primacy of Peter, not only in the disciple band but also in the later developing Christian movement. To that end, Spong states what he believes to be the probability: that it was in Galilee that the event occurred which brought home to the disciples that truth of the risen Lord, and that Simon was the primary figure in that moment of realisation. It was because of that primacy that Simon acquired his various by-names, including 'Peter', all meaning 'Rock', and became seen as the foundation upon which the Christian community grew.

Spong believes that this chapter establishes Peter as the primary figure in the story of the early Christian movement, and that the second 'clue' in the reconstruction of the Easter moment has been found. He now moves on to his third clue, the background to 'the common meal'.

Chapter 16 – 'The Third Clue – The Common Meal'

Chapter 16 of *Resurrection* is 'The Third Clue: The Common Meal' (pp. 198-209). In this chapter, Spong looks at the ways in which a meal or eating, in particular 'bread', is depicted in the Scriptures as part of the relationship between humans and the divine. He also examines the development of the Christian liturgies of the Eucharist in the light of the tradition of the Last Supper.

The chapter opens by looking at the story of the two disciples, Cleopas and an unnamed companion. Walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a distance of about eleven kilometres ("seven miles"), they were joined by Jesus,

although they did not recognise him. (Lk. 24:13-32). Spong calls this vignette “a narrative strangely cast and deeply disturbing to those who want to literalize the empty tomb and the flesh-and-blood body of the risen Lord”; however, he does not elaborate on that statement. Although Spong does not mention it here, it may be noted that Luke is the only one of the Gospels to carry this story.

In examining this text, Spong concludes that in order to walk and talk with the two, Jesus must have had a fully functioning physical form; the implication is that the disciples were not seeing an illusion. He does not mention the words in verse 16, “But their eyes were kept from recognising him”; however he does say that there is no indication that either of the disciples was blind or that they had their eyes closed throughout this adventure. Neither does Spong discuss the deep conversation about the meaning of the scriptures concerning Jesus (Lk. 24:17-27), although that could be considered to have some bearing on later events (Lk. 24:32). On arrival at their destination house, the two companions invited ‘the stranger’ to stay for the evening meal; at that meal, the guest appears to have taken over the role of host by offering the ceremonial blessing. Spong says that the words recorded in the text (Lk.24:30) are “the highly developed technical words of the early Christian liturgies”: “he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them”. At that point, the eyes of Cleopas and his companion “were opened”, allowing them to recognise their guest as Jesus, at which point Jesus vanished.

Spong says that the ‘opening’ of the disciple’s eyes was clearly not a physical happening, but rather a gaining of an insight or ‘second sight’. With that in mind, he searches the Scriptures for other instances in which people who are not physically blind have had their eyes ‘opened’.

The first section of this chapter is ‘Other Moments of Insight When Eyes Are Opened’ (pp.199-203). Spong begins with the Old Testament story of Adam and Eve and the eating of the fruit in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2, 3). He notes that there were in fact two trees in the Garden – the ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ and the ‘tree of life’ (Gen. 2:9); however, he also says, incorrectly, that the “second tree”, the tree of life, does not appear in the story until verse 3:22 – it appears earlier in v. 2:9. It was the ‘tree of knowledge’ from which Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat

(Gen. 2:16-17); however, they did eat, “and the eyes of both were opened...” (Gen. 3:6-7). Spong also says (p. 200), “So presumably in this myth Adam and Eve possessed the gift of eternal life before they ate of that tree [of knowledge]”. He seems to base that presumption on God’s words in Gen. 2:17, “...for in the day that you eat of it you shall die”. However, Gen. 3:22-23 shows clearly that it was not the eating from the tree of knowledge that caused the couple to be banished from the Garden, but rather the *prospect* of them eating from the *tree of life* and so living forever, which seems to indicate that Spong is wrong in his presumption. Also, although Spong does not mention it, the words of Gen. 3:22, “...the man has become *like one of us...*” [emphasis added] may be an echo of an earlier Mesopotamian polytheistic mythology and tradition.

Pursuing his theme of ‘their eyes were opened’, Spong speculates on the possibility of a connection between the concepts of the bread “taken, blessed, broken, and given” in Luke’s resurrection narrative (Lk. 24:30) and the forbidden fruit eaten in the Garden of Eden (p. 200). His idea is that the bread was thought of as the fruit that “opened the eyes of those who lived east of Eden, to enable them to see their way back into the kingdom of God as understood under the symbol of the Garden of Eden”. However, he neither expands on nor justifies that speculation. Furthermore, he again demonstrates a careless approach to the bible text, saying that it was “the fruit of the tree of life which opened the eyes...”, when in fact the text in Gen. 2:16-17, 3:1-12 clearly says that it was the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Returning to Luke’s Emmaus story (p. 200), Spong reiterates his point that it was “the breaking of the bread” which allowed a new kind of ‘sight’, beyond physical limits into the “the deeper meanings of God”. Cleopas and his companion were allowed to ‘see’ with newly ‘opened’ eyes, and so were able to recognise their guest as the risen Jesus, whom they thought to be dead and buried. Spong now diverges into speculation as to where Jesus went to when he “vanished out of their sight” at the moment of recognition (Lk. 24:31). He notes that the text is noncommittal, but, without further comment, draws from it the implication that “heaven and the abode of God are all about us but our eyes cannot or do not see”. He also returns to his earlier speculation about the nature of the body of the risen Christ; he suggests that

the text implies that it was a body that could appear and disappear, and be recognised in the breaking of bread. Spong finishes his discussion of this episode by noting that when Cleopas and the other disciple returned to Jerusalem, they made it clear that they had recognised the risen Jesus “in the breaking of the bread” (Lk. 24:33-35).

It is of interest to note here that Spong does not mention the point that in Lk. 24:33-34 the ‘eleven and those who were with them’ apparently are saying that the risen Lord “has appeared to Simon”, but that such an appearance is not mentioned previously in Luke. In fact, in Lk. 24:10-11, when Mary Magdalene and the other women told ‘the eleven and all the rest’ that Jesus had risen from the tomb, the disciples dismissed the report as nonsense. It is, however, mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor.15:5: “and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve”. Spong may believe that Luke’s apparent contradiction in some way undermines the case for the primacy of Peter.

Spong now searches for other episodes in which the risen Jesus appears in conjunction with food or eating (pp. 200-201). He notes, first, Mk. 16:14 (in the ‘secondary ending’ to Mark), where Jesus “appeared to the eleven...as they sat at table”. The second instance is in Lk. 24:42-43, where Jesus, having appeared among the disciples and been recognised, asked for food; he was given “a piece of broiled fish”, which he “took...and ate before them”, apparently to prove that he was not a spirit but flesh and blood. The next two Jesus-food connections are purely speculative and rather tenuous; Spong says the passages contain “just a hint, nothing more” (p. 201). The episodes are in Jn. 20:19 and 20:26; in both cases Jesus appears to the disciples when they are gathered in a closed room. In the first instance, Jn. 20:19, the text specifically says “On the evening of...the first day of the week”, while the second, Jn. 20:26, says “Eight days later...”. Spong says that ‘eight days later’ would be the first day of the second week, at the same evening hour. He interprets ‘evening’ as meaning the time of the evening meal, and so adds the two episodes to his list of ‘food events’.

Turning to the epilogue to John’s Gospel, Jn. 21, Spong says that the connection between food and the resurrection is quite clearly stated. Jesus invited the disciples to join him in breakfast on the lakeside; when they gathered, “Jesus

came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish” (Jn. 21:13). However, Spong again appears to twist the bible text to suit his case: he says that it was after Jesus had given the bread that “...none of the disciples dared ask him ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord”. The implication is that again it was in the giving of the bread that recognition occurred – ‘their eyes were opened’ (p. 201). However, the bible text clearly says that recognition happened before the disciples came to the meal and Jesus handed round the bread and fish (Jn. 21:4-8, 12-13). As previously argued, it is not improbable that the disciples would have recognised the risen Jesus at sight, as according to the earlier narrative he had already appeared among them at least twice in Jerusalem (Jn.20:19-29), However, it is noted that ‘non-recognition’ appears to be a common feature of these early ‘appearance’ stories. Spong does make the valid point that the standard liturgical formula ‘takes, blesses, breaks, and gives the bread’ is “violated” in this story; Jesus only ‘took and gave...”

Spong points out that John is the only one of the Gospels not to have an account of a ‘Last Supper’ (p. 201). There is an account of a meal, which Spong has already identified as a *Chaburah* (Spong says “Kibburah”) supper (p. 91); however there is no mention of the elements that have become the liturgy of the Eucharist – the identification of the broken bread and poured-out wine with the body and blood of Jesus. In Spong’s view, for John the only moment in which the bread of life was taken, blessed, broken and given was at the crucifixion of Jesus. That being so, there was no need for Jesus in the lakeside story to do more than ‘take and give’; the ‘blessed and broken’ bread of life was already present in the person of the risen Lord.

The last three references (pp.201-203) appear to be tenuous, although Spong admits that the first is weak, but says that the second is “so strong that it cannot be avoided”; he makes little comment about the third, but places it his text as a *fait accompli*. The first two come from Acts, while the third is from Revelation.

The first, ‘weak’, reference is to Acts 1:4, which Spong quotes as “And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem”. He then says “The Greek word translated here as ‘staying’ is *synalizomenos*”; he follows that by saying that a footnote in the RSV “makes clear” that “The more common translation

of this word is 'eating'". However, the text in the RSV, and the NRSV, says 'staying', with the RSV footnote merely saying "Or *eating*"; the KJV says "And being assembled together with them...", while the NIV does say "...eating with them..." without offering an alternative. The two Greek bibles (Bible 1990, 2003) both appear to lean toward 'eating' rather than 'staying' or 'assembling', although 'assemble' is offered in a footnote; however, the Greek lexicon (Danker, 2000:964) gives both alternatives, with a seeming preference for 'assembling' or 'staying with'. However, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:727, 15:4) appears to favour 'eating'. In this context, 'eating' appears to be a customarily implied meaning, with Spong choosing the alternative which best suits his purpose.

The second reference, which Spong regards as very strong (p. 202), is Acts 10:39-41, in which Peter says, *inter alia*, that the risen Jesus appeared "...not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (v. 10:41). Spong notes in passing that verse 10:40 affirms that it was God who raised Jesus from the dead; Jesus did not do the 'rising' himself. Returning to the theme of 'eating' as being necessary to the 'seeing' of the risen Jesus, Spong says first that Jesus was only seen by "those chosen as witnesses", so the bible text does not appear to suggest that Jesus was a physical presence. Rather, in Spong's view, the suggestion is that the risen Christ could only be seen by "...eyes that...had been divinely opened". He now comes to his point, which is that seeing the risen Lord was restricted to those who "ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead"; he says "Once again the connection is clear", that 'sight' was associated with sharing a common meal and the 'broken bread'. However, it may also be argued that this is a convenient interpretation to further Spong's case, and that the ability to see the risen Jesus came, rather, from being 'chosen by God as witnesses'; the clause 'who ate and drank with him...' merely makes clear who the chosen ones were.

The last of the three references (pp. 202-203) is from Rev. 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me". Spong says that this passage is "the final connector of food with the specifically risen Jesus"; however, it may be argued that the point of that passage is hearing the voice and opening the door to

the risen Jesus. The eating is merely an expression of the cultural mores of offering and accepting hospitality. The relevance of this passage to Spong's argument is considered to be somewhat dubious.

In this section, Spong attempts to demonstrate a connection between the eating of a specific food and the opening of the eyes of certain people to some particular piece of knowledge. He gives a number of instances from bible texts; however, in only two cases – Adam and Eve, and the Emmaus pair – does the text specifically say “their eyes were opened”. The remainder of his examples appear to be tenuous at best, or, in some instances, possibly quite wrong.

The second, and final, section of this chapter is ‘The Fourfold Formula: Take, Bless, Break, and Give’ (pp. 203-209). In this section, Spong seeks to discover how that formula came to be central to Christian belief. In order to build his case, he returns to an examination of the Gospels to find “other food-resurrection connections”.

Spong makes his position quite clear in the opening of this section: “From the earliest moment there appears to have been an indelible connection between the experience of Jesus alive after Good Friday and the experience of gathering in the Lord's name to break bread and eat together”. He reminds his readers of his view that the Gospels cannot be read as linear, chronological accounts of the life of Jesus, and that every Gospel was written “in the light of Easter”; in that context, he proceeds with his search for other ‘food-resurrection connections’.

In Spong's opinion, the Last Supper is the first and most obvious of such events. He says that Paul gives the first written account of this supper about 56 CE, in 1 Cor. 11:23-26. In that passage, Paul passes on what he says he “received from the Lord” – that Jesus ‘took, blessed, broke, and gave the bread’ and later “...in the same way also the cup...”. At this point, Spong diverges into a discussion of the significance of Paul's words in verse 11:23, “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...”. He suggests that Paul was saying that those words reflected “the authentic, sacred tradition of the primitive Christian community”, “received”, and “delivered” as received, and so should be treated with a special respect. He also

notes that Paul later (1 Cor. 15:3) uses the same formula of 'receiving and delivering' to introduce his story of the resurrection of Jesus. Returning to his main theme, Spong says that by the time Paul wrote this epistle, "the four liturgical verbs were already clearly in place". He also observes that the broken bread was identified with the body of Christ, and the wine with Christ's blood (1 Cor. 11:24-25); although Spong does not mention it, the verse 1 Cor. 11:26 appears to be Paul's comment for the instruction of the community in Corinth.

In Spong's view here, this liturgy was not intended as a celebration of Jesus, but rather to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). At the time of Paul's writing, Christ's return in glory was thought to be imminent; Paul had no concept of a physical, bodily resurrection and an empty tomb (p. 204).

Going back to the examination of the traditions about the life of Jesus that appear in the Gospels in a pre-resurrection context, Spong says that his 'four liturgical verbs' provide clues to deeper meanings about a "unique meal". He believes that the 'unique meal' "...is somehow a signal to understanding the original meaning of the resurrection". The examination begins with the synoptic Gospels, specifically Mark (pp. 204-205).

The relevant passage in Mark is Mk. 14:22-25. In verse 22, Mark uses the 'four verbs'; however, Spong's particular interest here appears to be in verse 25, in which Jesus says "I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until *that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God*" [emphasis added]. Asking to what 'that day' referred, Spong suggests that it could be either the day of the resurrection or the day of the anticipated second coming. He believes that those two days soon became confused in the developing Christian history.

Spong makes only one comment on Matthew's version (Mt. 26:26-29): that he (Matthew) only made one significant change to Mark. In the closing statement (Mt. 26:29), Matthew has Jesus say that he would not drink again until "that day when I drink it new *with you in my Father's kingdom*" [emphasis added]. It could be argued that the change is semantic rather than significant, but Spong's point is made.

Luke's version of the Last Supper narrative is the only one to have Jesus use two cups (Lk. 22:17, 20). It may be noted here that the RSV only gives as a footnote

“Other ancient authorities add...” the last part of verse 19, “...which is given for you”, and verse 20, “And likewise the cup after supper...”; however, the KJV, NRSV and NIV all give it as part of the text. It also appears in the second century Greek Papyrus 75 (Comfort & Barrett, 2001:557). Spong’s only comment here is a minor one, suggesting that Luke was a Gentile who did not properly understand the various Jewish festivals and rites and so confused various aspects; he does not mention that the Jewish liturgy for the Passover meal actually calls for four separate cups of wine. He then goes on to examine Luke’s “unique twist” in Jesus’ words in Lk. 22:30 (Spong’s text says 22:28; the whole passage is 22:28-30). Luke has Jesus say “...[so] that you may *eat and drink at my table* in my kingdom...” [emphasis added]. In Spong’s view, Luke was saying that a significant part of the meaning of being in the ‘kingdom of God’ was eating and drinking at the Lord’s Table. From that idea, Spong goes on to suggest that by eating and drinking “in the name of the Lord”, presumably in the rite of the Eucharist, “we are sharing a foretaste of that kingdom”, and that “our eyes might well ‘be opened’”.

Passing on from the various Last Supper narratives, Spong says that the Gospels contain other feeding or eating stories that “cry out for explanation”. This is the last part of this section, and of Chapter 16, and deals mainly with the various mass feeding narratives as related in all four Gospels (pp.205-209).

Spong begins his examination with Mark, saying that there are two stories of Jesus feeding a multitude (p. 205). In the first (Mk. 6:30-44) there are five thousand “men” fed with five loaves and two fish, with twelve baskets of fragments gathered up afterwards. The second story (Mk. 8:1-10) has four thousand “people”, with seven loaves and a few small fish, and seven baskets of fragments gathered up. Spong does not explain why he emphasises “men” and “people”; however, gender equality is one of Spong’s acknowledged platforms. In all likelihood, the difference is a literary choice on the part of the Gospel writer, rather than a specific comment on the gender make-up of the two crowds. Spong notes that in both narratives Jesus is reported as using “the liturgical formula” of ‘taking, blessing, breaking, and giving’.

Continuing his discussion of the two Marcan narratives, Spong says that there are two other notes that suggest a post-resurrection understanding being read back into an earlier episode. First (p. 205-206) is the passage in Mk.6:34, where Jesus is

said to have compassion on the crowd because they were “like sheep without a shepherd”. Comparing that with Jesus’ words in Mk. 14:27, “...I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered”, Spong speculates that “Surely that duplication of almost identical words as part of two distinct episodes, in each of which Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave, is not coincidental”. However, it is considered that this is not a valid comparison, and that Spong is making a somewhat flimsy case. The words in the first instance were not spoken by Jesus, or any other character in the story, and can be seen as a normal comment by an observer about a crowd of people. In the second instance Jesus, speaking to his disciples about their future conduct, says “For it is written...”, apparently referring to Zech. 13:7 in the Hebrew Scriptures. Furthermore, the second episode, in Mk. 14:27, actually takes place *after* Jesus and the disciples have finished their meal, have sung a hymn, and have gone out to the Mount of Olives (Mk. 14:26); therefore, strictly speaking, it cannot be seen as being associated with the ‘liturgical formula’ as Spong suggests. It may also be noted that ‘like sheep without a shepherd’ is a common simile in the Hebrew Scriptures (for example, Num. 27:15-17; 1 Kings 22:17; 2 Chr. 18:16; Ezek. 34:1-31; and Jdt. 11:19).

Spong’s second note (p. 206) is Mk 8:2, where Jesus says “I have compassion on the crowd, for they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat...”. Spong says that by the time of the writing of Mark’s Gospel, the phrase “three days” had become part of the language of the resurrection tradition. He says that its use in this passage was not accidental, and so must be seen in the context of the resurrection. The implication is that this story is again a post-resurrection tradition read back into an earlier setting. It may be argued that terms such as ‘three days’ are commonly used in the bible narratives to indicate a vague short period, and so may not have any particular significance here; however, Spong’s proposition is not considered to be unreasonable. Spong explores in detail the implications of ‘three days’ in Chapter 17 of *Resurrection* (pp. 210-220). However, his next suggestion can only be seen as pure speculation on his part.

The proposition that Spong states (p. 206) is that these ‘feeding stories’ in Mark were not meant to be understood “either literally or as stories about a supernatural miracle”. He comes to that conclusion by ‘adding up’ the “strange

symbols” – five loaves, seven loaves, five thousand men, four thousand people, twelve baskets and seven baskets, sheep without a shepherd, and three days. The final conclusion drawn is that those two stories had some connection with both the Last Supper and the resurrection. However, Spong does not enlarge further on either his reasoning or his ‘adding up’.

Leaving Mark (p. 206), Spong observes that Matthew included both feeding-of-the-multitude narratives (Mt. 14:15-21, 15:32-38). Although he emphasised Mark’s differentiating between ‘men’ and ‘people’ in his versions, he does not note that Matthew in both cases says “...men, besides women and children”. Luke has only the feeding of the five thousand, omitting the second story (Lk. 9:12-17). Spong makes the point that in all three narratives Jesus uses the “four-fold liturgical code...took, blessed, broke, gave” (Mt. 14:19, 15:36; Lk. 9:16). (It is noted here that the citation in *Resurrection* is given incorrectly as “Matt. 14:10”, which is the beheading of John the Baptist).

John’s Gospel also has only one feeding story - the five thousand (Jn. 6:1-14). According to Spong (p. 206), in John’s version of that story “...he confirmed every suspicion that the feeding of the multitude by Jesus with bread in the wilderness was a sign of the resurrection, a symbol of the heavenly banquet”. In the absence of any other references, it must be assumed that the commentary that follows that statement is solely Spong’s view.

Spong begins his discussion by saying that although John’s Gospel does not have a Last Supper story, at the place where the Last Supper “would normally be included” there appears a “midrashic connection with food...”. Given that there are only three other Last Supper narratives in the Gospels, the use of “normally” could be seen as something of an exaggeration. Spong continues by saying that the “midrashic connection” is an indication that the writer of John used “the common meal” as the actual setting for his words in this pericope. However, the reasoning behind that statement appears convoluted and difficult to follow.

According to Spong, Jesus’ words in Jn. 13:18, “...it is that the scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me’” come from Ps. 41:9, which appears probable. He goes on to suggest, again leaning on his concept of ‘midrash’, that the next verse of that psalm, “But do thou, O Lord, be gracious to

me *and raise me up*, that I may requite them” (the emphasis is Spong’s) would “most assuredly...be taken as a resurrection reference”. However, taken in the context of the whole psalm, the purpose of the plea to be ‘raised up’ is in order to take vengeance on those who wanted the writer to die, which is a matter quite different from the resurrection of Jesus and so makes Spong’s suggestion difficult to sustain.

The arguments presented by Spong in the remainder of the chapter appear to be weak, once more depending on a reading of the texts which is difficult to follow or support. He begins by saying that in John’s Gospel, without a ‘Last Supper’ story, “all of the teaching” which Paul and the Synoptics place around the Last Supper is attached to the story of the feeding of the multitude (Jn. 6:5-14). He does not make clear exactly what ‘teaching’ he is referring to; in fact there is no specific teaching at the ‘feeding’, and Jn.6:15 says that immediately afterwards Jesus “withdrew again to the hills by himself”. That evening Jesus moved to the other side of the lake, to Capernaum (the walking on water vignette, Jn. 6:16-21); a new sequence of teaching, certainly associated with various concepts on the topic of ‘bread’, began when the people caught up with Jesus the next day – this is Spong’s “protracted conversation” from Chapter 15 (p. 194) . However, Spong believes that for the author of John, the story of the feeding of the five thousand clearly showed an intimate relationship between the concepts of resurrection and a common meal.

Spong’s next statement could be regarded as misrepresentation by omission. He says, correctly, that John has the feeding of the five thousand occurring at the time of the Passover, which the other three Gospels have as the setting for the Last Supper. However, he does not make it clear that John apparently has the two events occurring some twelve months apart; the ‘feeding’ takes place at John’s ‘second Passover’ while the crucifixion (and so the Last Supper) is at the ‘third Passover’. This can give the impression that the two events occurred at the same time, and so were far more closely related than John has them. In fact, it could be argued that there is no particular significance in the statement “Now the Passover...was at hand” in John’s lead-up to the feeding story (Jn. 6:4), although in the overall light of the Gospel narrative it more probably is significant. Spong also says that John and the Synoptics are at variance on the subject of on exactly which day Jesus was crucified; that question will be discussed later.

In John's version of the feeding of the five thousand, Spong says that Jesus takes, blesses ("gave thanks") and gives, but does not break the five loaves. He sees that omission as an indication that for the author of John the bread of life could only be broken once, and that occurred at the crucifixion. Hence, although John includes this pericope as an event in the early part of Jesus ministry and not as a post-resurrection story, Jesus does not 'break the bread'. However, the Greek word used here is *διέδωκεν* (*diedōken*), which appears in the earliest papyrus manuscripts (Comfort & Barrett, 2001:408, 582) and translates as 'distribute' (Danker, 2000:227, *διαδίδομι*). The KJV, NIV, RSV and NRSV all say that Jesus "distributed" the loaves; it is difficult to see how five loaves could be distributed among five thousand people without first breaking them. While as a matter of strict liturgical ritual it is an omission, it is also possible that it was a ritual so familiar in Jewish and Christian culture that the author of John did not see any need to spell it out in detail.

Spong finishes this chapter by attempting to demonstrate a connection between John's narrative of feeding the multitude in the wilderness and the Exodus story of the people of Israel receiving manna in the wilderness (Ex. 16:13-36) (pp.207-209). He says that John makes that correlation in verse 6:14, "When the people saw the sign which he had done, they said, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world'"; he sees a 'midrashic' connection between the Exodus pericope and the 'feeding of the multitude' stories in the four Gospels. It is noted that Spong says "...the Exodus story of Moses giving manna in the wilderness..."; however, in Ex. 16 Moses makes it very clear to the Israelites that it is *the Lord* who is providing the manna and the quail – the 'bread' and the 'meat'. From that misconception, Spong develops a theory that the ability to provide such heavenly bread became part of the expectation of a messiah to be raised up by God in the form of a prophet like Moses. In making that case, he quotes, again out of context, Ps. 78:18-20; he implies that it is connected with the coming of a future prophet, whereas the psalmist is merely quoting the people of Israel in a psalmodic retelling of the Exodus story, leading to God's choosing David from the tribe of Judah.

In developing that theory, Spong says that the 'meat' of the wilderness "in time... came to be referred to...as flesh..." (p. 208), which appears to be a rather

tenuous playing with words. From that base, he suggests that John's Gospel uses all the themes that he has found: Jesus as Messiah giving bread, but at the same time able to give his flesh for the life of the world. He says that John wanted to drive home his belief that Jesus was the 'bread of life' and the way to eternal life was to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus; this teaching is to be found in Jn. 6:27 ff. However, quoting the exchange between Jesus and Peter in Jn. 6:68-69, Spong reverts to his central theme – that this passage could not have occurred in a pre-resurrection context, irrespective of where John placed it in his text.

Finally, Spong says that according to John, the elements of "resurrection, bread, ascension, spirit and the confession of Peter" came together in Galilee "at the dawn of the Christian story". For Spong, bread, in the form of a sacramentally broken loaf, became "the means through which eyes were opened" to see Jesus as the bread of life, "taken, blessed, broken, and given" upon the cross. He says that this is the third clue to the real resurrection story.

In this chapter, Spong has sought to show that the common meal, symbolised by the 'liturgical formula' of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving of bread, is the means by which eyes are opened to see the resurrected Jesus as the bread of life. He also returns to his contention that the resurrection events happened in Galilee and strengthened the position of Peter in the Christian community. However, he does not mention that 'taking, blessing, breaking, and giving' of bread is the normal duty of the host, or head of the household, at a Jewish meal. It is also an integral part of the Jewish ritual for the evening meal on a number of 'holy days' as well as Shabbat. He did allude to this custom in passing when looking at the Emmaus appearance, in the introduction to this chapter (p. 199). It would have been a familiar, natural act for Jesus and his disciples, without any peculiarly 'Christian' meaning. This is discussed in detail by Dom Gregory Dix in his *Shape of the Liturgy* (Dix, 2009:48-58).

Chapter 17 – ‘The Fourth Clue: The Third Day – An Eschatological Symbol’

Spong now moves to his Fourth Clue, in Chapter 17, in which he investigates the significance of ‘The Third Day’ as a symbol in the story of the Resurrection of Jesus. Chapter 17, ‘The Fourth Clue: The Third Day – An Eschatological Symbol’ (pp.210-220), is a short chapter in which Spong examines the implications of ‘*after three days*’ and ‘*on the third day*’. The references to ‘three days’ are found not only in the Resurrection narratives in the Gospels, but also in many places in the Old Testament. As will be seen, ‘three days’ was a familiar concept in the Jewish tradition which Spong regards as the basis for the developing Christian narrative.

The chapter opens with a quotation from Mk. 8:31 “...the Son of man must...be killed, and after three days rise again”. Spong notes that Mark has Jesus using the same formula “...after three days he will rise” in Mk. 9:31; later, he observes the same words appearing again in Mk. 10:34. He points out that if those words are taken literally, it means that the resurrection of Jesus had to take place on the second day of the week, rather than the first day as related in the Gospels. In modern terms, it means Monday, not Sunday. He also comments that few people seem to realise that point (pp. 210-211).

Spong also notes (p. 210) that Mt. 12:40 has Jesus saying that the “Son of man” will be “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”; he says that if taken literally, that would have the resurrection at sundown on Monday, not dawn on Sunday. He also says that even for that timing to happen, the order would have to be reversed to “three nights and three days”.

Maurice Goguel (*The Life of Jesus*, 1933) is quoted by Spong as arguing that in Mark the term “after three days” meant “after a brief delay”, rather than a period of seventy-two hours (p. 211). While accepting Goguel’s argument, Spong contends that the time of ‘three days’ became literalised very early in the development of the Christian mythology; the tradition of ‘the first day of the week’ then had to be brought together with “the symbol of three days”. He believes that this blending took place “rather early in the Christian movement”. Spong says that although ‘after three days’ does not mean the same as ‘on the third day’, they sound similar, so “most people”

do not notice the difference. The two expressions became understood as 'on the third day', which was passed on in the written tradition. Spong also points out that for the resurrection to have taken place on the first day of the week – Sunday - it would be necessary to count Friday – the traditional day of the crucifixion – as the first day. He says that to count Friday as the first day “severely presses the definition”, as “the sun went down ending that day near the moment of Jesus death”. However, the Gospel narratives say that Jesus died about ‘the ninth hour’, which would leave about three hours until the end of the day. Given that Jesus’ death on the cross was the climax of the whole drama of the day, it may not be as unreasonable as Spong suggests to count Friday as the first day of three.

Spong now attempts to determine which of the time traditions is the earliest: ‘after three days’, ‘on the third day’, or ‘the first day’ (pp. 211-213). He begins by referring to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, which he says was written in about 56 CE and which refers to ‘the third day’ (1 Cor. 15:4). Spong concludes from that verse that “at least in the hellenized [sic] and gentile communities the harmonizing of the first day and three days had already occurred”. However, that conclusion is difficult to sustain, because Paul does not mention ‘the first day’ in that passage, and when he does in a later passage (1 Cor. 16:2), it is in an entirely different context having nothing to do with the resurrection of Jesus.

Turning from Paul to the Gospels, Spong says that although Mark’s Gospel was written later than Paul’s letter, Mark “reflected the more primitive Palestinian tradition”. He believes that Matthew and Luke deliberately and specifically changed the “after three days” in Mark into “on the third day”; he cites Mt. 16:21, 17:23, 20:19, and Lk. 9:22, 18:33, 24:7, 24:46 as evidence of that change, saying that both Matthew and Luke “had the text of Mark in front of them as they wrote”. He also believes that Matthew “gave evidence” that Mark’s version was the more primitive, by having Jesus quote the story of Jonah spending “three days and three nights in the belly of the whale” (Mt. 12:40). Spong suggests that both Matthew and Luke recognised the earlier tradition of three full days, citing Mt. 27:63 and Lk. 2:41-51 that both include the phrase “after three days”. He also says (p. 212) that Mark, Matthew and John “include Jesus’ reference to rebuilding the temple in three (presumably full) days”. However, of his three citations, Mk. 14:58 and Mt. 26:61 are witnesses giving

evidence at Jesus' trial, while Jn. 2:20 is 'the Jews' querying Jesus' statement about rebuilding the temple. Spong does not cite Jn. 2:19, the only passage in which Jesus is actually quoted as saying "destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up". This appears to be another instance of John Shelby Spong misquoting the biblical texts to suit his own ends.

In Spong's view, the Gospel narratives show that the time between the crucifixion on Friday and the discovery of the empty tomb at dawn on Sunday was "barely thirty-six hours, one and a half days at most". From that, he suggests that for the early Christian community the phrases "the first day of the week", "after three days", and "on the third day" were "competing time references" that took some time to reconcile. He says that a reading of the Easter narratives clearly show that the phrase "on the first day of the week" became a part of the Easter tradition at the same time as the story of the empty tomb. As has been shown previously, Spong believes that the empty tomb was "a Jerusalem story and was part of the Jerusalem tradition". Furthermore, he says that the Jerusalem tradition was later in time than "the more primitive Galilean tradition". His conclusion from that understanding is that 'on the third day' was a later attempt at reconciling the ancient tradition of 'after three days' with the secondary, more recent, tradition of "the first day of the week'.

Spong now notes the argument by Reginald Fuller (*The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, 1971) that the concept of the first day of the week as 'the Lord's day' was in fact a Hellenistic Christian institution; it was unknown to the Palestinian Christian community, but was familiar to Paul who moved in gentile circles. Spong observes that Paul directs the Corinthians to put aside their offerings on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2); he suggests that from that instruction it could be inferred that the 'first day' was also the day on which the Christians gathered for worship. He notes that this reference occurs in a letter in which Paul has already mentioned receiving the tradition of 'on the third day' (1 Cor. 15:4); however, as has already been noted above, the two instances occur in totally different contexts and have no reference to one another.

Spong finishes this portion of Chapter 17 by suggesting that if 'after three days' was a Palestinian tradition, it could reasonably be expected that it came before

the Christian tradition of 'the first day of the week'. He believes that the two traditions were "uneasily" grafted together by "the subtle shift" to 'on the third day'.

It could be argued here that Spong is labouring a semantic point in order to construct a case. However, he says that in order to discover the original meaning of 'three days' it is necessary to look beyond liturgical practices and "search deep into the heart of Jewish thinking".

After this lengthy opening to Chapter 17, Spong moves on to 'The Jewish Meaning of Three Days' (pp. 213-218). He begins by stating his argument that in Hebrew thought the phrase 'three days' did not refer to calendar time. In support of that argument he refers to the ancient Jewish Talmudic texts, which, he says, talk about the general resurrection at the end of the world. He says that according to those texts (which he does not cite), the resurrection would take place at dawn following the third day after the end of the world, which is "three days beyond the cessation of time". He acknowledges that it is "nonsensical" to use a word such as 'day', which has a specific, time-defined meaning, in the context of a dimension beyond time. He says that this is the problem with using "earthbound words" to describe transcendent moments. However, having said that, he states that the symbol of 'three days' was an "eschatological symbol for the Jews", couched in the "bizarre" language of the "Jewish apocalyptic tradition which dealt with the end of the world" and, therefore, with the cessation of time. In those terms, 'the morning after the third day' was, in Jewish mythology, the critical moment in the events marking the final things.

Because of the significance of 'three days' in Jewish mythology, Spong believes that for Jewish Christians it would have had a symbolic, rather than chronological, meaning. He argues that it would have been "a dogmatic assertion that Jesus was the one who brought the dawn of the kingdom of God". However, there was no dawning of the kingdom, nor descent of the New Jerusalem from the sky, at the time of Jesus' death and resurrection. Spong says that leaves the question of what it was that the early Christians meant by the 'three days' formula. He answers that question by saying, *inter alia*, that the crucified Jesus had been vindicated and his teachings affirmed; the 'true God' was not the God of the Jewish

religious establishment, but rather the God defined by Jesus. Most specifically, it meant that Jesus, an individual, had been resurrected in the manner expected for the general resurrection at the end of the world; he had become “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20).

As has been pointed out earlier, the symbol of ‘three days’ occurs in many places in the Hebrew Scriptures. Spong cites many of those instances (pp. 214-216); he notes the story of ‘the plague of darkness’, brought by Moses upon the Egyptians to be felt for three days (Ex. 10:21-23), suggesting that Mark, Matthew and Luke “surely harked back to this” for their stories of darkness covering the land when Jesus was crucified. It must be noted that in this search Spong is only looking for the symbolic ‘three days’; his examples range from a three day journey to escape danger, to various periods of three days, events happening *after* three days, and two periods of three days and three nights. He also notes that in some of those instances, the decisive action took place *on* the third day, rather than at the dawn *after* the third day. However, he comments, almost in passing, that the early Christians could have used those various texts as “midrashic justification” when speaking of the resurrection occurring ‘on the third day’, in order to bring together the themes of ‘after three days’ and the first day of the week’ (pp. 215-216).

Spong concludes this section with a discussion of his views on how the ‘third day’ came to be identified in Jewish mythology as “the prelude to the day of the Lord”, and how that concept developed in the Christian resurrection tradition (pp. 216-218). He believes that the early Christians employed many symbols from the Jewish past – “three days, the day of the Lord, exaltation, Son of man, and second coming” – in their attempts to interpret the meaning of the life and death of Jesus. He says, however, that to literalise those symbols would be to miss their meaning, while to accept their past allows entry into another world-view.

The final section to Chapter 17 is ‘A Symbol that Confirmed the Reality of the New Age’ (pp. 218-220). Spong begins by proposing that if there had been no reality to Jesus and “whatever the Easter experience was”, those symbols mentioned above would not have gathered around the story. He believes that analysing those symbols does not detract from that reality, but rather separates reality from myth. In

Spong's view, reality is found not by literalising the ancient mythical symbols, but by discovering the original meanings of those symbols.

Spong reiterates his earlier statement that in Jewish apocalyptic tradition, 'after three days' and 'on the third day' were not regarded as specific measures of time. He suggests that in the developing Christian tradition, those phrases "represented an affirmation of faith about who this Jesus of Nazareth was believed to be". It said that from the time of the death of Jesus, life had "a radical newness" and that the day of salvation and of the Lord had begun. Spong repeats his assertion that the Easter experience was real, but at the same time was a reality that the early Christian community could only describe in mythological terms.

Returning to a discussion of the Jewish concept of death, Spong points out that the deceased's *nephesh*, the life force, was believed to hover over the grave for three days before finally departing, so that on the fourth day the person was considered to be truly dead. It was also believed that after three days the process of decomposition would be so advanced as to make resuscitation impossible, except by divine intervention. Spong uses the story of the raising of Lazarus (Jn. 11) to illustrate this custom (p.219). He also draws parallels between the story of Lazarus and the resurrection of Jesus, saying that in both narratives there are bandages, including a face covering, a stone to be rolled away, and a weeping woman called Mary. However, he does not mention that bandages and a face covering were standard Jewish funerary practice of the time, and that a stone was a common method of closing a tomb. It may be noted, in passing, that Spong again appears to draw an unwarranted inference from the bible text, possibly in order to heighten the sense of drama. He says, referring to, but not citing, Jn. 11:7–10, that when going to Bethany in Judea, Jesus "...traveled [sic.] only by night for fear of arrest...". However, it is difficult to determine from the bible text how Spong arrives at that conclusion. Spong now quotes instances in which material from the Psalms unquestionably appears in the New Testament. The first is from Ps.16:9–11, which is quoted twice in Acts: first by Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:25–28), and later by Paul in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:35). He says that those verses from the Psalm were clearly incorporated into the 'three day' symbol and interpreted as referring to Jesus of Nazareth. The second instance is from Ps. 34:19–22,

specifically v.20 “He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken”, which Spong believes was incorporated into Jn. 19:33–37, where Jesus’ legs were not broken during the crucifixion. From those passages, Spong draws the conclusion that the tradition of ‘the third day’ was crucially linked to “the theme of physical wholeness”.

In Spong’s view, when Jesus said that he would be raised ‘after three days’, he did not mean a physical resurrection but “an eschatological exaltation into the presence of God”. The Jesus of the post-crucifixion appearances was a heavenly figure that the disciples were convinced that they had seen. Over time, the symbols of both ‘three days’ and the appearances were literalised, and finally the details of the two were adjusted and merged. Spong says that in that adjustment ‘after three days’ became ‘on the third day’, and then ‘the day of the Lord’ became ‘the first day of the week’.

Spong concludes Chapter 17 by reviewing his ‘clues’ so far: ‘Easter’ occurred in Galilee; the primacy of Peter; the ‘common meal’; and now, the lifting from Jewish mythology of the symbols of both ‘three days’ and ‘the day of the Lord’.

In this chapter, Spong has attempted to explain and reconcile the various concepts of ‘three days’ and ‘the first day’. He has made the valid point that ‘three days’ appears in many instances and different contexts throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and was not necessarily meant as indicating a literal period of seventy-two hours. He also draws attention to the place of ‘three days’ in the Jewish eschatological mythology. However, in his discussion of ‘three days’ in the resurrection tradition, he does not consider the possibility that the Gospel writers may have been thinking of a ‘working day’ from sunrise to sunset, rather than the Jewish ‘liturgical day’ from sunset to sunset. Of course, that possibility makes little or no difference to the difficulty of reconciling the various concepts of ‘after three days’, ‘on the third day’, and ‘the first day’, unless, as previously suggested, the Friday was counted as the first full day.

In Chapter 18, which is the final chapter of Part 4, Spong examines the traditions surrounding Jesus’ burial.

Chapter 18 – ‘The Fifth Clue – The Burial Tradition as Mythology’

Chapter 18, ‘The Fifth Clue: The Burial Tradition as Mythology’ (pp. 221–229) is an investigation of the various elements and traditions which are in any way attached to the burial of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. This is another short chapter, but covering a wide variety of what Spong regards as generally related topics.

The chapter opens with a quotation from Paul, writing to the Christian community in Corinth in about 56 CE: “he was buried” (1 Cor. 15:4). Spong says that according to Jewish custom, the dead were not exposed to the elements and predators, nor were they cremated or disposed of in the sea. Instead, he says, “the dead were simply to be buried in the earth”. It is difficult to determine whether or not Spong is inferring here that the body of Jesus was buried rather than being placed in a tomb. He does say that Paul makes no mention at all of a tomb, let alone one that was in any way unusual or noteworthy. However, although it does not, at this point, negate Spong’s comment, it must be noted that the archaeological record shows that hundreds of tombs were hewn into the hills surrounding Jerusalem during the Second Temple period (second century BCE-first century CE). Many of those tombs have the opening sealed with a square stone. Furthermore, the *archosolium* bench, as opposed to the *kokh* niche, corresponds with the description given in Jn. 20:3–7, where the disciples were able to see that the tomb was empty simply by bending down, as well as being able to see the grave-cloths, including the head-cloth (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998; von Wahlde, 2006:581).

Spong now examines the part played by the character ‘Joseph of Arimathea’. In Spong’s view, this Joseph was a “legendary accretion” on the developing tradition surrounding the burial of Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea first appears in Mark’s Gospel, written about 70 CE; he is described as “a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God” (Mk. 15:43). Spong later observes (p. 223) that Matthew and Luke both add to the tradition of Joseph. Matthew (27:57), says that he was “also a disciple of Jesus” while Luke (23:50) says that Arimathea was “a Jewish town” and that Joseph was “a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their purpose and deed, and he was looking for the kingdom of God”.

Spong infers from those changes that “both the stature and legend of Joseph were growing” (p. 223). He has already (p. 222) dismissed Joseph of Arimathea as making “a brief cameo appearance as a bit player in the critical week of Jesus’ life” who immediately entered the developing Christian mythology. However, Spong does not provide any justification for that view; there appears to be no logical reason for such a character not having existed, any more than any other non-historical character in the biblical narratives. He notes (p. 223) that having placed Jesus’ body in the tomb, Joseph disappears from the Gospels “as quickly as he had appeared”; however, that should not be considered remarkable, as Joseph was not an active member of the disciple group. Spong also says that the mythology of Joseph “reached its apex in the fanciful tale of his having planted Christianity in what is now the British Isles before the first century was complete”. Again, however, he does not give any justification for that comment. Given that the Romans were well established in Britain by the mid-first century CE, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that a wealthy man could have travelled there from Judea - especially if he were a merchant. It is noted, however, that the legend of Joseph’s visit to Glastonbury, in Somerset, U.K., appears to date from about the mid-thirteenth century CE (Encyclopedia Britannica 2008, 'Glastonbury'); Spong does not make that point.

Spong makes some comparisons between the embalming practices of the Jews as opposed to those of the ancient Egyptians (pp.222–223). He says that the Jewish tradition, using spices and fragrances, was to “mute the odors [sic] of decay” rather than to prevent decomposition of the body. It is noted that he does not mention the practice of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ burial, where the flesh was allowed to decay then the bones later collected to be placed in an ossuary (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998). Turning to the traditions as to the nature of the tomb, Spong again appears to find great significance in differences in the descriptions given in the three Synoptic Gospels. He says that according to Mark, Joseph of Arimathea laid Jesus “in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb” (Mk. 15:46). In Matthew, it is “his own new tomb, which Joseph had hewn out of the rock”, and the entrance is closed with “a great stone” (Mt. 27:60); Luke has the tomb as one “where no one had ever yet been laid” (Lk. 23:53). Although Spong does not mention it anywhere, John also refers to “...a new

tomb where no one had ever been laid” (Jn. 19:41). Spong sees those differences as indicating that the legend of Jesus’ burial was growing with the passage of time; he does not appear to entertain the possibility that the changes may have been due to the differing literary styles of the authors.

The burial narrative in the Gospel according to John has Joseph of Arimathea being joined by Nicodemus, who first appears in Jn. 3:1-21 as “a man of the Pharisees...and a ruler of the Jews” who came to Jesus by night to hold a lengthy discussion on Jesus’ teachings. In Jn. 19:39, Nicodemus comes to the tomb carrying “about a hundred pounds’ weight” of mixed spices; Spong here makes the comment that “This burial was going to be excessively proper” – which could be regarded as an attempt to trivialise the Gospel account. It may be noted that ‘one hundred [Roman] pounds’ is the equivalent of thirty-four kilograms (Bible 2006:1851 n. 19.39), which may help to put this matter in better perspective.

Spong now says that the writer of the fourth Gospel used “the method of midrash” in order to build his story (p. 223). He notes first the story of the burial of King Asa of Judah (2 Chr. 16:14), in which the king was laid on a bier “filled with various kinds of spices prepared by the perfumer’s art”, and buried in a tomb “hewn out”; he suggests that those details may have helped shape the Nicodemus story. He makes no comment on the additional incidental point that Asa also was buried “in the city of David”. Spong appears to find great significance in the point that the term ‘hewn’ is used in the English language texts of both the Hebrew Bible Asa story and the New Testament Mark and Matthew burial narratives, in the RSV and NRSV, despite the fact that this is a normal English language term for digging a chamber into rock. He does not mention that other translations use other terms, such as ‘cut’ or ‘made’, or that the one English word ‘hewn’ can equate to a number of similar but not identical Greek words. He also finds significance in the use of spices in the burials of both Asa and Jesus, although he has previously said that this was common Jewish mortuary practice. Extending his search for ‘midrash’, Spong notes Ps. 45:7–8, in which the psalmist addresses the king as being “anointed...above your fellows with the oil of gladness’ and “your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes...”; it is noted that Spong omits the final words “and cassia”, presumably because that spice does not appear in the Nicodemus vignette. He attempts to

connect this psalm with John's account of the burial of Jesus by saying that the psalmist refers to "the king whom God has anointed (i.e., made *masiach* or Christ)" (p. 223). This suggestion could be seen as straining the bounds of credibility, and so is difficult to support, in that a Hebrew king of Judea would not be made a 'Christ', other than that he has had oil poured over him. It may also be noted that a similar combination of spices, sometimes using the term 'cinnamon' rather than 'cassia', occurs in a number of other instances in the Hebrew scriptures, always in a non-funerary context.

In his last attempt to find biblical texts that may have influenced the writing of John's Gospel, Spong turns to the New Testament. He first notes Eph. 5:2, where Christ is referred to as "a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"; however, he does not mention that those terms were commonly used to refer to the smoke rising from a burnt sacrifice, rather than the perfume of spices. His second note is 2 Cor. 2:14–16, in which Paul speaks of "the aroma of Christ", and "a fragrance" to various people; however, those passages appear to be metaphors, rather than references to any actual perfumes or odours. It must be noted that Spong does say only that those passages "could be related to the burial tradition", rather than making a definite connection.

Spong now says (p.224) that there is "yet a third burial tradition" in the New Testament, in one of Paul's sermons in Acts. Although Spong only cites Acts 13:29–30, his quotation actually begins with v. 28. He calls this "a bizarre tradition", because it appears to contradict the burial account in Luke's Gospel, which traditionally is regarded as having been written by the same author as Acts. As Spong points out, those verses say "Though *they* could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet *they* asked Pilate to have him killed. And when *they* had fulfilled all that was written of him, *they* took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead..." [emphasis added], where 'they' appears to refer to the general populace rather than Joseph of Arimathea. Spong says he is "completely persuaded" by the arguments of Reginald Fuller (*The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, 1971) that "the burial of Jesus was the last act of the crime, the final insult done to him by his enemies". According to Spong, Fuller argues that this tradition, presented by Paul in his sermon in Antioch of Pisidia, is more primitive

than the tradition recorded in Mark, even though Acts was written later than Mark (or, for that matter, later than any of the Synoptic Gospels). Apparently Fuller suggests that it is easier to change a hostile and painful tradition into a more positive, less painful, one, than it is to move a tradition in the opposite direction.

Developing on Fuller's arguments, Spong suggests strongly that "it was a scandal in the life of the early church" that at the time of Jesus' arrest the disciples had forsaken him and fled; he says that Mk. 14:50 is most specific in stating that event. He acknowledges that Mk. 14:54 says that Peter followed "at a distance", but suggests that Mark included that merely to provide a vehicle for the account of Peter's three-fold denial, weeping, and disappearance from that Gospel. Again, Spong appears to dismiss any possibility that Mark's account is correct; he also ignores the fact that all four Gospels have Peter following Jesus after his arrest – John (18:15) has Peter and another disciple. Spong is convinced that Jesus was utterly abandoned by the disciples at the time of his arrest; he believes that the later accounts of the disciples' attempts to resist Jesus' arrest, in Lk. 22:49–50 and Jn. 18:10–11, are simply an indication that "the reputation of the disciples improved with the passage of time" (pp. 224–225). Spong does not mention that both Mark (14:47) and Matthew (26:51) also have one of Jesus' followers 'striking with the sword'.

Returning to the burial narratives, Spong reiterates his doubts about the historicity of either the tomb or Joseph of Arimathea. He repeats his view that the tomb was not "part of the primitive kerygma", and was attached to the 'Jerusalem tradition' that was secondary to the 'Galilean tradition'. He suggests that Jesus' body was probably dumped into a common grave, in an unknown location; this question of the disposal of Jesus' body appears to be a matter of some controversy among scholars. For example, John P. Meier (in Brown, Fitzmyer & Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1990:1328, 78:56), acknowledges the common grave as a possibility, however, Geza Vermes, in his *The Resurrection* (2008), makes no mention of such a practice. In Spong's view, the story of Joseph of Arimathea was developed to cover the disciples' pain both at the death of Jesus as a common criminal and at there having been no one to claim his body from the cross. Spong believes that Paul's version of events "thus rings with startling accuracy".

The differences between the four narratives of the women visiting the tomb are used as a lead-in to an examination of what Spong sees as origins in the Hebrew Scriptures of the traditions surrounding the death and burial of Jesus (pp. 225–226). He believes that those differences – “the difficulty the Gospel writers had in deciding why the women went to the tomb...” – present yet another problem for seekers of history. Again he appears to expect that the various versions, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels, should be exactly the same, and so finds significance in the differences between ‘go and anoint him’ (Mk. 16:1), ‘to see the sepulchre’ (Mt. 28:1), and ‘taking the spices’ (Lk. 24:1). John gives no explanation for Mary Magdalene’s visit, alone, to the tomb; Spong suggests that John may have wanted to indicate that Mary “occupied a special role in the Jesus movement”. That idea is developed further in Spong’s *Born of a Woman* (Spong, 1992:188–198, 206–207).

Spong also introduces a note that appears to demonstrate again that he is careless in his off-hand comments. Having quoted Mark’s “...anoint him”, he says “Given the heat of the Middle East, it is hard to imagine that a body put to death on Friday would be fit for anointing (or anything else) on Sunday”. However, it could be suggested that in making that comment Spong is conveniently ignoring several factors: the location of Jerusalem, the season and so the ambient temperatures, the nature of the tomb, and the actual elapsed time. Jerusalem lies 31° 48’ North – about the same latitude as Port Macquarie, on the New South Wales coast, is south of the Equator. It is about 60 kilometres inland, at about 750 metres above sea level in the southern Judean Mountains – snow falls in the depth of winter, in January. The Passover feast falls in the month Nisan, March-April in the Gregorian calendar, which is early spring; the average ambient temperature range is about 10–18 degrees Celsius. A hewn-out rock tomb should be naturally cooler than the outside environment. While the total elapsed time between Jesus’ death late on Friday afternoon and the arrival of the women at the tomb at dawn on Sunday is about thirty-nine hours, at least twenty-four of those hours are night-time, and so the temperatures are lower. Overall, it could be suggested that the body would have been in almost the equivalent of a cool-room, and that Spong has made a superficial comment which has little basis in fact – although the facts are readily available.

Having examined the various versions of the burial story, Spong concludes that all the events and characters can only be seen as legendary. He says, without any supporting references, that “Contemporary scholarship points in exactly that direction” (p. 226). He states his opinion that “the Joseph of Arimathea legend” was simply an attempt to give “a narrative form to a midrash tradition” which he believes provided much of the detail for the story of Jesus’ Passion. He goes on to detail those passages from the Hebrew Scriptures that, again in his opinion, influenced the story of the crucifixion.

In Spong’s view (p. 226), the crucifixion narratives “were actually written with Hebrew scriptures open”, and in particular were influenced by Ps. 22 and Isa. 53. As he points out, the opening lines of the Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”, appear in both Mark (15:34) and Matthew (27:46). The words of Ps. 22:7–8 appear in Mk. 15:29, 31 and Mt. 27:39–40, 42. John also used this Psalm in his crucifixion story: vv. 14–18 appear to be the source for Jn. 19:23–24, 28. Spong says that John “actually quoted this psalm” in his telling of the story of Jesus’ legs not being broken during the crucifixion (Jn. 19:32–36), however there is no reference in Ps. 22 to legs, or bones, being broken – only ‘out of joint’ (v. 14) or ‘counted’ (v. 17). Spong does note, correctly, that there is mention in Ps. 34:20 of bones not being broken. He does not mention that Luke (Lk. 23:34–35) also appears to draw on Ps. 22 for detail.

Turning to Isaiah 53 (p. 227), Spong says that “most people, even today” believe that words quoted from that book (Isa. 53:3, 5; ‘He was despised and rejected by men...he was wounded for our transgressions...’) were, instead, written to describe Jesus on the cross. He is also sure that the story in “Mark 14:51” about Jesus remaining silent before both the Sanhedrin and Pilate is founded on Isa. 53:7 “...he opened not his mouth...”. [There is an error in Spong’s citation from Mark – his text says “Mark 14:51”, however that is the story of the young man fleeing naked at the time of Jesus’ arrest in Gethsemane. The correct citation could be Mk. 14:61; other similar verses are found at Mk. 15:5, Mt. 27:14 and Lk. 23:9]. Similarly, the stories in Mark (15:27) and Luke (23:32–33, 39–43) about the two crucified with Jesus appear to be based on Isa. 53:12; “[he] was numbered with the

transgressors...and [yet] made intercession for the transgressors". Spong comments that Luke again has "expanded the legend" and "those crucified with Jesus had become two in number...one penitent, the other not." However, Mark (15:27) says "...two robbers, one on his right and one on his left"; although Spong does not mention it, Matthew (27:38, 43) and John (19:18) also tell of the other two.

Returning to the story of Joseph of Arimathea and the burial of Jesus, Spong expresses his opinion that this was an invention to "give narrative content" to the words in Isa. 53:9, "they made his grave...with a rich man in his death". He says that according to the tradition, Joseph was a member of the council, and so one of the rulers of Israel; *ipso facto*, Joseph was 'a rich man', thus fulfilling the scriptures. However, it could be argued that Jesus was not buried *with* a rich man, but *by* a rich man, so negating Spong's view. Also, a note to Isa 53:9 in the Tanakh translation (Tanakh, 2000:971, n. 'd-d') suggests that rather than 'and with a rich man in his death', the line should read 'and his tomb with evildoers', which does seem to be a more logical continuation of the previous line "And they made his grave with the wicked".

Spong concludes this section of Chapter 18 by saying that he is certain that Jesus' crucifixion is an historical fact. However, he also believes that the details of the crucifixion story that have entered into history are "the creation of the midrash tradition that fed the developing legends about this Jesus". He states, apparently as fact, that Jesus' tomb was unknown, because there probably was no tomb, and that Jesus was buried in a common grave as a common criminal. Spong believes that this is "the hint of truth" found in the Book of Acts in a sermon attributed to Paul (pp. 227–228) – he does not give a citation here, but has previously cited Acts 13:29–30 in this context (p 224).

Chapter 18 concludes with a brief examination of 'The Women at the Tomb' (pp. 228–229). In this section, Spong looks at the different versions of the story of the visit to Jesus' tomb by his female followers. He also speculates briefly on what may actually have happened.

The section opens with Spong's first point, a statement of his opinion that while there probably is a germ of truth in the story, the women's visit had nothing to do with the first Easter. He bases that conviction on the premise that the discovery of an empty tomb would not have resulted in the development of an Easter faith. Rather, it would have convinced Jesus' followers that a final insult and degradation had been delivered to Jesus' body. At this point, Spong does not indicate what he thinks that insult may have been, although he probably means a common burial. This premise appears to be reasonable, given the circumstances which tradition says surrounded the death of Jesus of Nazareth. However, Spong's next two points appear to be based entirely on his own views, rather than any firm evidence.

The second point made is that the women's visit to the tomb "was related to the literalised tradition of the third day", which Spong dismisses as "a chronological measure of time". From that, he argues, as he has previously suggested, that if the various traditions of the burial, the empty tomb, and the third day were not "originally part of the Easter experience", then there can be little support for the story of the women's visit. He bases that argument on his view that the visit story relies on the other three traditions "to be more than just another facet in a developing legend".

Spong's third point is a reiteration of his view that the Jerusalem resurrection tradition was a "later, secondary development" to which the 'visit story' became attached. He then poses the question of what the original germ of truth may have been which brought the visit of the women into the Easter tradition.

As Spong points out, the one consistent figure in the four Gospel accounts of the visit is Mary Magdalene. Mark, Matthew and Luke all have her accompanied by various others – the three accounts are all different. John, however, has Mary Magdalene at the tomb alone; Spong suspects that this is the detail that reveals the origins of the story. He repeats his view, argued earlier in his Chapter 8, that Mary Magdalene held a significant position among the followers of Jesus – a point also made at length in his *Born of a Woman* (Spong, 1992:188–198).

Spong now makes a statement that appears to be a blatant distortion of the biblical texts. He says (p. 229): "Since the Gospels make it clear that following Jesus' arrest the disciples forsook him, no one was around to know what transpired in either his death or his burial." However, only Matthew and Mark say '...forsook

him...’, while all four Gospels say that the disciples actually offered some armed resistance to Jesus’ arrest. All four Gospels have a variety of Jesus’ followers as observers at the crucifixion: Mark (15:40-41) and Matthew (27:55-56) have some specific women plus many other women who had followed him from Galilee; Luke (23:49) adds “all his acquaintances...”; while John (19:25-27) adds ‘...the disciple whom he loved...’. Furthermore, Mark (15:47), Matthew (27:61) and Luke (23:55) all say that the burial in the tomb was observed by the women. Given Spong’s interest in the person and position of Mary Magdalene in the Christian tradition, it may be considered as remarkable that he also omits to mention that Mark, Matthew, and John all specify her as being present at the crucifixion, or that Mark and Matthew both name her as watching the burial in the tomb. It is made even more remarkable by the fact that he quotes all those instances, in full, when making a case for the special status of Mary Magdalene in his *Born of a Woman* (Spong, 1992:190–191). Spong ignores the possibility that although the disciples may have fled from the scene of Jesus’ arrest, they probably regrouped later in the day. Also, it must be asked why Spong accepts as literal fact that the disciples ‘all forsook him and fled’, while at the same time dismissing the Gospel accounts of the witnesses at the crucifixion as mere legend.

Based on his statement that no one from the disciple band had witnessed either the crucifixion or burial of Jesus, Spong now suggests that in fact Mary Magdalene went, on the morning after the Sabbath, not to visit Jesus’ tomb, but to search for the place where his body had been dumped. He says that what Mary discovered was not an empty tomb, but “the reality of his common grave” which he says was unidentifiable. Spong believes that it was that ‘reality’ which was the origin of the words in Jn. 20:13 “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him”. He says that those words have the ring of authenticity, and that they provide an historical base for the tradition of the women at the tomb. He suggests that after Peter regrouped the disciples in Galilee, they returned to Jerusalem. There, Mary’s story of not being able to find Jesus’ burial place was, in time, incorporated into the developing tradition of the resurrection; how Spong believes that came about is discussed in a later chapter of his book. However, it can be argued that the omissions noted above completely negate Spong’s case. Spong

says that a similar story had developed around the unknown burial place of Moses (Deut. 34:6).

Spong concludes this chapter, and Part 4 of *Resurrection*, with a resume of his 'clues': Galilee, Peter, the 'common meal', the symbolism of 'the third day', and finally the story of Jesus' burial in the tomb. He dismisses that burial story as a "midrashic attempt" to cover "the embarrassment of both apostolic desertion and Jesus' burial in a common grave" (p. 229). However, as has been argued, in order to make that dismissal, Spong appears to have ignored a significant part of the Passion story from all four Gospels. It has also been demonstrated in this chapter that Spong is careless and superficial in his passing remarks.

PART 5 – RECONSTRUCTING THE EASTER MOMENT

Part 5 of John Shelby Spong's *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?* is titled 'Reconstructing the Easter Moment'. As the title implies, it contains Spong's speculations on what may have happened some two thousand years ago to give rise to the traditions and mythology that are now central to the Christian faith. It appears to be based entirely on Spong's personal reading and interpretation of the biblical texts as presented in the English language *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.

Chapter 19 – 'But What Did Happen? A Speculative Reconstruction'

The opening chapter to Part 5 is Chapter 19, 'But What Did Happen? A Speculative Reconstruction' (pp. 233–260). Here Spong builds his case for the events that have become known as 'The Resurrection' having happened in Galilee rather than Jerusalem, after which the disciples returned to Jerusalem to share their faith. He says (p. 260) that he found the hints that led him to this conclusion in his 'discovery of the feast of Tabernacles' in the Jewish liturgy.

Pages 233–237 contain a résumé of the matter covered in *Resurrection* up to this point. Spong notes (p.234) that the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE led to the Jesus story moving away from its Jewish roots into a mainly gentile world. He suggests that because the new gentile Christians did not understand the Jewish traditional background to the story, it was misunderstood and so became distorted and embellished. This occurred particularly in the period between 30 CE and 70 CE, for which there are no extant written records (Spong says “...the period between 30 CE and 70 CE *when there were no written records*” [emphasis added]; however, it can be argued that this point is not proven). He also says (p. 235) that the biblical texts “proved to be quite untrustworthy” in the matter of “objective facts and consistent details”. However, in Spong’s view, despite “this confusion of detail” – the various distortions and discrepancies in the biblical texts – “there remains a powerful witness to a certain reality...‘Death cannot contain him, we have seen the Lord’”.

Looking again at his ‘clues’ to “the tunnel of darkness between 30 CE and the written texts of Easter”, Spong says that there are implications which must be drawn. From his ‘first clue’, the primacy of Galilee as the setting for the birth of the Easter tradition, he suggests that all the parts of the tradition set in Jerusalem must be dismissed as later-developed myths and legends. In Spong’s view, that includes the entire burial tradition, the female visitors to the tomb and their different sightings of angelic figures, and all the various appearance narratives about the physical manifestation of a resurrected Jesus in Jerusalem. He says (p. 236) that the idea of Galilee as the primary locale for the experience of Easter “is a step that the Bible itself seems to acknowledge”; however, he does not amplify or justify that statement.

From his ‘second clue’, the primacy of Peter at the heart of the Easter experience, Spong draws the implication that it is probable that “many of the things said to and about Peter...were post-Easter, not pre-Easter, stories”. He draws a similar implication from his ‘third clue’, “the strange and enigmatic connection of the resurrection with food”, suggesting that in that light, “every meal, every feeding story in the New Testament might well be a post-Easter, not a pre-Easter, story”. The ‘fourth clue’ leads to the dismissal of the phrase ‘the third day’ as a literal time reference; again Spong sees this as part of “a later developing Jerusalem tradition”.

Finally, in the 'fifth clue', Spong dismisses the stories of the involvement of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in the burial of Jesus, again as legends out of the developing Jerusalem tradition. He repeats his view that the truth lies in Paul's words "He was buried", and that Jesus was tossed into a common grave as a convicted and executed criminal. He also reiterates his view that it would have been so because "all his disciples had forsaken him and fled". However, it must be recalled that in order to reach that conclusion, Spong appears to have ignored significant parts of the Passion story narrated in all four Gospels, which say that there were a number of Jesus' followers who witnessed both the crucifixion and the subsequent burial.

In Spong's view, those five clues lead back to the moment of Jesus' death, which seemed to be connected with the celebration of the Passover. He says, without explanation, that the exact nature of that connection is a matter of conflict within the Gospels. His intention is to try to recreate that moment and to "seek the reality...which changed the face of human history". Spong then asks (p. 237) what could be regarded as a somewhat presumptuous question: "What *in fact* did happen?" [emphasis added].

The next section of Chapter 19 is 'The Ultimacy of Conviction' (pp.237–239). Spong opens this section by stating his position: "Let me first state the obvious: No one can finally do anything other than speculate!", which could be seen as being at odds with his question in the previous line suggesting that he is about to reveal 'the facts'. He also seems to revert to his basic position as a Bishop in the Episcopal Church, saying: "Ultimately one comes to a point in this search where one must say either yes or no to Jesus, and yes or no to the ultimate significance of his life". It may be suggested that Spong is clearly showing himself as not being an objective critic of the Christian mythology, and that he is writing 'within the walls of the church'.

Continuing on his theme, Spong says that "speculation...cannot replace the conviction that something real transpired". He offers a "proposed reconstruction", in the hope that he might encourage others into "the possibility of a meeting with the risen Christ". Claiming to have "an abiding sense of inquiry", he seeks to find some

rational form and procedure through which he can “approach...the ultimate place of mystery”.

Spong now sets out his position regarding the biblical narratives about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (pp. 237–239). He says that he “cannot say my yes to legends that have been clearly and fancifully created”, and that he could not “say yes to Easter” without being able to “move my search beyond angelic messengers, empty tombs, and ghostlike apparitions”. Following on from those statements, he says “I will not allow my twentieth-century mind [this book was written in 1994] to be compromised by the literalism of another era that is not capable of being believed in a literal way today”. In Spong’s opinion, a view of the resurrection of Jesus which is based upon the “fantastic descriptions included in the Gospels” simply cannot be believed. Furthermore, if belief in the resurrection of Jesus depends upon accepting those Gospel stories as literal fact, “then Christianity is doomed” (p.238). In support of his view, Spong names seventeen “ranking New Testament scholar[s]” such as Rudolf Bultmann, Reginald Fuller, Joseph Fitzmyer, Raymond Brown, Hans Kung, Edward Schillebeeckx, “and countless others”, saying that “They do not literalize the Easter narratives, but they also do not abandon the worship of Jesus as their Lord. Neither do I”. He does acknowledge, in a note, that Michael Goulder did resign his Anglican priesthood, as his scholarship no longer supported his faith commitment.

Including himself in that group of scholars, Spong says that they are “convinced that the reality of Easter is not captured in the words of the developing Christian legends”. He believes that it is possible to reject the literal narratives without rejecting “the truth and power of the resurrection event itself”, and that the legends would not have developed unless there had been “a moment so indescribable” that it was beyond the power of “earthbound words” to capture it.

In Spong’s view, the Gospel stories are not 'the truth', but rather “pointers to the truth”. He likens his working backwards, from the Gospel accounts to the moment of the “birth of Christianity”, to the theoretical work of physicists and astrophysicists working backwards to the moment of the creation of the universe. He says that no one doubts the reality of the universe, even if they cannot explain it; similarly, he does not doubt the reality of the resurrection, even though there have

been various explanations offered over the course of Christian history. He says that while those explanations are not sacred, the moment that gave rise to them is. He states his opinion that “that moment was...not in time or history”, likening it to the moment of the “big bang” at the creation of the universe, and declining to “bind...the reality of the resurrection inside the categories of time and space” (p. 239).

Having clearly set out his basis for argument, Spong now moves on to present “my best guess, my educated speculation” as to what happened to cause the Christian movement to “explode in time”, and to enable it to continue in history for two thousand years.

In the next section, ‘The Crucifixion As It May Have Happened’ (pp. 239–242), Spong theorises on the course of events from the time of the arrest of Jesus until his burial. He begins with a summary of the events that led to the arrest of Jesus: briefly, by opposing the power of the established Jewish religious authorities, Jesus had made himself seen as an intolerable threat to national religious stability and so, by extension, a possible threat to the law and order of the Roman province. The Jewish religious powers had established a working relationship with the occupying Romans: the positions of the High Priest and the religious hierarchy would be protected as long as they maintained religious control. That enabled the Jewish religious leadership to persuade the Roman authorities that Jesus, seen as a religious rebel, should die.

Spong now says that the details in the story of the execution of Jesus may not be literally historically accurate. However, the first example given to back up that comment is in itself questionable: suggesting that the story of the release of the prisoner Barabbas is a legend, Spong says “...Barabbas, which means Son of God (Bar = son, Abba = God as Father)...”. However, he gives no scholarly backing for that translation of ‘*abba*’, particularly in this context – certainly ‘father’, but not ‘God as Father’; it is possible that such a meaning grew up in the developing Christian tradition. The entry in the *Greek-English Lexicon* (Danker 2000:1) says “...rarely used in ref. to God...taken over by Greek-speaking Christians as a liturgical formula”. Spong accepts as fact that Jesus was executed, and says that with his death “it was clear his movement was crushed, for ‘they all forsook him and fled’”. He says that

the story of “Simon’s denial” almost certainly contains some threads of truth, because a movement usually does not create hostile stories about its leaders; however, he warns against literalising those threads. Spong dismisses the story in Jn. 19:26–27 of the beloved disciple and Jesus’ mother at the foot of the cross as “the very stuff of self-serving legend”, saying that it was created by the Johannine community “to enhance yet again the reputation of their mentor”.

Spong now returns for a reprise of his theme that “they all forsook him and fled”, and that Jesus was disposed of in an unmarked grave as a publicly executed criminal (p. 241), using emotive terms such as “overwhelming probability” and “uncompromising truth”. He says that the body would have decayed rapidly to become “some unmarked bones”, followed by another glib and unsubstantiated remark: “Even the bones were gone before too long. Nature rather efficiently reclaims its own resources”. However, even a superficial acquaintance with archaeology shows that skeletal remains can survive in good condition for millennia, given the right soils and conditions.

Accepting that all four Gospels place the crucifixion of Jesus at about the time of the Passover, Spong notes the differences between the Synoptic Gospels and John in establishing the exact day. He believes that there is “too much agenda” in all four accounts for him to be able to take any as a literal account. He then says that no one knows for how long Jesus was on the cross before he died, dismissing all the various crucifixion details in the Gospel accounts, and the burial by Joseph of Arimathea, as “elements of the developing legend”. On that basis, he repeats his view that because there was no tomb, and no one knew the location of Jesus’ grave (again, “for they all forsook him and fled”), there could not have been a “first-day-of-the-week visit to the tomb” by the women.

However, Spong does believe that it is possible that Mary Magdalene did go to search for the grave, but unsuccessfully, because it was not marked. He casts Mary in the role of chief mourner, because he believes that Mary Magdalene was the same Mary that lived with her sister Martha in Bethany, where Jesus was a frequent visitor (p. 241). As noted earlier, he argues his case for the status of Mary Magdalene in his *Born of a Woman* (Spong 1992:190–197).

Having dismissed as legend all of the traditions surrounding the death and burial of Jesus, Spong now turns to speculation on the activities of the disciples after they 'fled'.

The next section of Chapter 19 is 'The Disciples' Response to Calamity' (pp. 242–257). Spong appears to build his case on the basis of the words of Jn. 16:32: "You will all be scattered, every man to his own home". He says that for the majority, if not all, of the disciples, and certainly for Simon (Peter), 'home' was Galilee. That is not an unreasonable assumption, as the Gospel narratives appear to indicate. However, Spong now begins to theorise, giving his own views on the possible course of events after the crucifixion.

He begins by saying that the biblical texts appear to indicate that Jesus and the disciples had travelled from Galilee to Judea by a route east of the Jordan River "to avoid the dangers of Samaria"; however, he does not cite any references to support that idea. He then says, on the basis of that assumption, that "my hunch would be" that the disciples returned home to Galilee by the same route, after the crucifixion. He notes that Bethany lies on that route, and that "according to the biblical texts" – again uncited – they had stayed there in the week before the arrest of Jesus. He suggests that it would therefore be natural for the disciple party to pause in Bethany on their return journey to Galilee.

The central figure in Spong's reconstruction is Simon Peter. However, he looks briefly at the figures of, first, Judas Iscariot, and second, Mary Magdalene (pp. 242–243). He wonders about the historicity of Judas, suggesting that he is a creation of midrash, noting Zech. 11:12 (thirty pieces of silver) and Ps. 41:9 (my bosom friend who ate my bread). He also notes the contradictory accounts of Judas' death found in Mt. 27:5 (hanged himself) and Acts 1:18 (fell over, and his bowels spilled out), and unspecified controversy over the origins of the name 'Iscariot'. Spong suggests that there was really no need for Jesus to be 'betrayed', as he would not have been hard to find, and queries whether the betrayal scenario was invented to make the other disciples (who "all forsook him and fled") appear comparatively less shocking. Turning to Mary Magdalene, Spong says that she is portrayed in the Gospels, particularly John, as having "a close and trusting

relationship with both Simon and the beloved disciple”, and that they knew one another “intimately”. He appears to base that “insight” on the single verse Jn. 20:3 where Mary reports finding the empty tomb [this appears to be another poor citation – Jn. 20:2 seems more appropriate]. He also notes that Mary Magdalene is always placed first in listings of women in the Gospels; he finds that to be a significant detail, neither “accidental [n]or coincidental”, saying that “Women in the first century took their status from the status of the male to whom they were related.” He makes no further comment on the implications of “related”.

Spong begins his speculation on the post-crucifixion activities of the disciples by saying that while he has no idea how many of them journeyed via Bethany, he is sure that Simon did (p. 242). He places Simon, “on the night of the crucifixion... in the home in Bethany of Mary called Magdalene and her sister Martha” (p. 243). He suspects that on that night Simon confessed to his denial of Jesus and in return received the grief and anger of the household, particularly of “one who was the woman closest to and most esteemed by Jesus”. He suggests that such a person would not be likely to spare Simon’s feelings if she felt that he had any kind of responsibility in the matter of Jesus’ death.

In Spong’s tale, Simon left the home in Bethany as soon as possible, to continue his journey home to Galilee by the long route east of the Jordan. It would take seven to ten days before Simon arrived, and even longer before he recovered sufficiently from “the trauma” to begin to put his life in order. Spong speculates at length on what impact Jesus may have had on Simon during the time of their association – he says no one is sure how long that time was. (p. 244).

The qualities which Spong believes that Simon would have seen in Jesus include “a rare personal integrity”, “how to be present to others”, knowing God as *Abba* – ‘Father’ – a powerful reality, and as being “a man who had a mission”. Spong also believes that later writers saw Jesus as “one who had a rendezvous with destiny”, including an ‘hour’. He says that it “was certain that the city of Jerusalem was involved in that ‘hour’”. He also states that he is “all but persuaded” that despite the biblical stories of the Palm Sunday procession welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem, the ‘Jesus movement’s’ most important journey to Jerusalem was *after* the crucifixion, rather than before it. He gives no justification for that view at this point,

but holds it over for later discussion. However, he says that “Simon saw mission, mystique, destiny – all somehow associated with the meaning of Jesus”; he believes that those qualities “made an indelible impression on this fisherman”.

Spong “suspect[s]” that Simon was not alone in his grief and recollection. He says that “there is every reason to believe” that Simon was joined and supported by his old friends James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and his brother “the colorless person of Andrew” (pp. 247-248). He does not say whether he thinks that the four made the homeward journey as a group, or only came together again in Galilee. However, he does believe that after a period of time, as a matter of economic necessity, the group returned to their old livelihood as fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. Spong notes the exchange in Jn. 21:3, where Simon Peter said “I am going fishing” and the others replied “We will go with you”. He says that this has “the ring of historical authenticity”; however, he does not mention that Jn.21:2 also names, along with Simon Peter and the sons of Zebedee, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and two other of his disciples – Andrew is not named. It may be noted here that Spong believes that this grieving period could have lasted “for days, weeks, even months” (p.247).

Pages 248–249 contain a lengthy discussion on the nature of fishing on the Sea of Galilee in the first century. Amongst other things, there would have been long periods of inactivity and boredom that allowed for recollection and discussion about Jesus, particularly as the whole region held many memories of his presence. Spong continues his speculation with the fishermen returning to the shore and joining in an early morning meal of fish and bread, while still talking about Jesus. He then suggests that early morning mist rising over the lake “looked like apparitions”, which grieving people could see as figures connected with their grief. At this point Spong recalls the ‘walking on water’ stories from the Gospels, but changes the setting from a boat on the lake at night to having Simon thinking that he saw a “ghost-like figure walking on the sea” and hence walking into the water from the shore “to get a better view”.

Spong continues his reconstruction of events with a discussion (pp. 249–250) of how he sees the Jewish practice of pronouncing a blessing at the beginning of a meal – even a lakeside breakfast of fish and bread – continually reminding this group

of the last meal that they had shared with Jesus of Nazareth before his death. In Spong's view, this grew into a specific connection between 'taking, breaking, blessing, and sharing' bread at a meal, and the 'taking, blessing, breaking, and giving' of the life of Jesus on the cross. He also notes that the lakeside breakfasts of this group of disciples consisted of bread and fish, and that bread and fish were "the provisions of the feeding-of-the-multitude stories".

The next point raised by John Shelby Spong (pp. 250–252) is that there would have been considerable tensions in the minds of the disciples between what they had experienced with Jesus and the tradition in which they had been raised. That is probably a reasonable assumption. Jesus had taught them a new understanding of God, but Jesus had been accused of blasphemy and executed on a cross at the instigation of the highest religious authorities in the land, which equated to rejection by God. According to the generally accepted English translation of the Torah (Deut. 21:23), "a hanged man is accursed by God"; however, another modern translation is "an impaled body is an affront to God" (Tanakh, 2000:421). It may be noted that the whole passage of Deut. 21:22–23 could be read as relating to the requirement not to leave a hanged/impaled corpse hanging overnight, rather than implying a curse on the victim, as it finishes "...you shall not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you...". However, the Greek in the Septuagint appears to say that it is the hanged man that is cursed. The question was how could "unlearned fisherfolk" challenge tradition, the religious hierarchy, and the Torah. If Jesus was indeed the messiah, how could he have been killed? The tradition did not have an executed messiah, so Jesus must have been wrong and not of God – the disciples had been misled and were themselves guilty. In Spong's view, Simon in particular would have been preoccupied with those conflicting thoughts and values.

In pp.252–254, Spong returns to his interest in "the feast of Tabernacles, or Booths" (*Sukkoth*), which he says rivalled or even surpassed Passover in popularity. It occurs in autumn, in the month Tishri – September-October in the Gregorian calendar – and was a joyous harvest festival which also recalled the time of wandering in the wilderness. According to Spong, the liturgy for Tabernacles was built around Zech. 9–14 and Ps. 118, and also focussed on symbols of light and water. He argues that as the time for the festival approached, the content of the

liturgy would have come to Simon's mind and he would have begun to associate it with his struggle "to make sense out of Jesus' death". He notes in particular words from Ps. 118 [vv. 17–24], saying that psalm was "completely identified with...Tabernacles", and the prophetic text of Zechariah, which he says was the reading for the Tabernacles liturgy each year and which refers, *inter alia*, to "living waters" flowing out of Jerusalem. Spong speculates that those familiar words would have been in Simon's mind as he contemplated returning to Jerusalem for the celebration of Sukkoth. He also suggests that Simon would have "wanted to re-establish contact with those to whom he had once been so close...Mary Magdalene in particular". It is considered that Spong displays some confusion in his terminology in this part of his discussion, referring to "the Sukkoth feast of Tabernacles" rather than either 'Sukkoth' or 'The Feast of Tabernacles'. Also, he has previously said (p. 252), referring to "the feast of the Tabernacles, or Booths", that "Among the Jewish people this festival was also known as Sukkoth or Sukkot", whereas the festival *is* 'Sukkoth' or 'Sukkot', which *in English* is 'Tabernacles' or 'Booths'.

On pp. 254–255, Spong continues to speculate on Simon's thought process as he wrestled with the tensions between tradition and his more recent experiences. He now turns again to Jn. 21 (without actually acknowledging it), only setting the scene on the night before Simon's proposed trip to Jerusalem for the Sukkoth festival. In Spong's version, after a large catch of fish resulted from changing the cast of the net from one side of the boat to the other, Simon and the others returned to shore to cook breakfast. Simon, "as the oldest member of the group", gave the blessing over the bread and fish. "Suddenly it all came together for Simon": the crucifixion "was not punitive, it was intentional...Jesus' ultimate parable...to open the eyes ...". In short, "Simon saw Jesus alive".

The remainder of this section (pp. 256–257) is devoted to a discussion of 'reality' versus 'objectivity', of accepting Jesus as the risen Christ and the essence of God, and how to demonstrate that acceptance of the 'new incarnation'. Spong abandons his speculation for a moment and delivers a sermon, finishing by saying that Simon indeed saw Jesus "alive in the heart of God".

Chapter 19 finishes with ‘The Vision of Christ that Started the Church’ (pp. 257–260). Spong returns to his theorising, now centred on his belief that the Christian Easter narratives developed out of the Jewish tradition and liturgy of the festival of Sukkoth or Tabernacles. However, he begins by imagining some further thoughts and activities for Simon and his companions by the Sea of Galilee, before their departure for Jerusalem and the festival.

Spong begins by saying that he does not know how Simon ‘saw’ Jesus. He harks back to his discussion of the use of the Greek word “ōphthē” (ὤφθη) in his chapter on Paul (p. 54), only now relating it to Isaiah’s story of when he ‘saw’ God (Isa. 6:1), [the Septuagint actually says εἶδον - ‘eidon’ – but both words are related to ὁράω, ‘to see’] and to Paul when he wrote “Have I not seen Jesus...” (1 Cor. 9:1). Again, Paul’s letter, in either ancient or modern texts, does not actually use ὤφθη, but ἐόρακα; however, again both are derived from the same word ὁράω, the difference being grammatical. He asks what is meant by that ‘seeing’, and what Luke meant in Acts when he has Peter say “God made Jesus manifest...” (the citation given, ‘Acts 11:41’, is incorrect; the passage quoted by Spong is in Acts 10:40–41).

Irrespective of exactly ‘how’, Spong believes that Simon really ‘saw’ and understood “that Jesus made God real and that God had taken Jesus into the divine nature”; that ‘seeing’ “had nothing to do with empty tombs or feeling wounds”. Spong now argues that Simon tried to share his vision with “his breakfast mates”, trying to “open their eyes”. He says “The bread in his hand was broken over and over until light dawned in on James, John, and Andrew”, invoking the themes from the feeding-of-the-multitude narratives to symbolise the bounty of “the gift of the Christ”. In Spong’s view, it was Simon to whom the understanding of Jesus’ death first dawned, who “opened the eyes of others to see”, and who was the ‘rock’ upon which the Christian community was founded. He also believes that it was that community which later gave Simon the name of ‘Petros’ – ‘Rock’ (p. 257-258).

“So Simon rallied his mates with his vision” and they all set off on the journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (p. 258). Spong believes that it was only the group of four who journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem; “Peter would reassemble the Jerusalem disciples” and share his vision with them at a later time.

In Spong's stated opinion, this journey would become "The Triumphal Journey", the model for the Palm Sunday procession later read back into the pre-crucifixion chronology. He believes that "the resurrection of Jesus was proclaimed in Jerusalem during the feast of Tabernacles in the fall of the year some six months after the crucifixion", and that the Jerusalem Easter legends grew out of the details of that feast.

Spong now sets out to demonstrate how he believes the Jewish Sukkoth traditions became the Christian Easter legend. He begins by stating what he sees as the three main reasons for this not to have been realised earlier (p. 258). First, "we have... been Gentiles trying to read a Jewish book with no real concept of midrash". Second, "we have...been ignorant of the content of the festival of Tabernacles". Finally, "we have been prisoners of a mind-set that read the Gospels as biographies inside the framework of linear time".

However, he says that by overcoming those hurdles it can be seen that, in the developing Christian tradition, every journey from Galilee to Judea became intertwined with every other similar journey. Based on that view, Spong believes that the journey of Simon and his friends from Galilee to Jerusalem "to proclaim the living Christ...during the festival of Tabernacles" became overlaid with the story of an earlier, similar, journey by Jesus and his disciples at the time of Passover, when Jesus was arrested and crucified. He also questions, in passing, how that Passover journey could come to be called 'triumphant', as it ended in disaster.

There are a number of apparently logical reasons given by Spong for his concluding that the Gospel stories about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and the later 'tomb' legends, all rose out of the traditions and season of Tabernacles rather than Passover (p. 259). First, the strewing of greenery, including palm fronds, is a feature of the Tabernacles celebration, as is the shouting of "Hosanna to the one who comes in the name of the Lord". Then there is the "strange story of the fig tree", said to have been cursed by Jesus for not having fruit in a season, spring, when there is generally no fruit; Tabernacles, on the other hand, falls in autumn, the harvest season, when fruit can be expected. Turning to "the legend of the tomb", Spong notes (p. 259) that as part of the liturgy of the feast of Tabernacles, temporary "tomb-like structure[s]" were erected, and that the worshippers carried to those

booths “boxes of sweet-smelling leaves and fruit of the citron tree”. Finally, Spong observes that Tabernacles was a seven-day festival in its earlier forms, and became eight days at some later time. He suggests that on those bases the Christian community created a holy week of eight days, beginning with the procession of the palms and ending with the first day of the week; that final day became the day to which the liturgy of Easter was attached.

Spong finishes this chapter by drawing together his theories on the actual events that later shaped the Christian Easter tradition (pp.259–260). He suggests that it could have been “as much as six months” after Jesus’ death that Simon had his “vision of Jesus alive”. He believes that Simon then “opened the eyes of his fellow Galilean disciples” so that they could share his vision; they all then journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Tabernacles and at the same time share their faith with the other disciples there. He reiterates his belief that the Easter story unfolded “inside the liturgy of the celebration of Tabernacles”; the traditions of that feast became the basis for the Easter narrative. Finally he says that if his re-creation has any validity, rather than mere speculation, then it should be possible to find supporting hints in the biblical texts; however, those ‘hints’ did not become plain to him until he “discovered the feast of Tabernacles”. Spong moves on to explain his ‘discovery’ in the next chapter.

It may be noted that in the matter of the possibility of survival of victims of crucifixion, there is the account given by Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities*, quoted by various authors such as John Dominic Crossan (Crossan, 1994:153). Josephus tells of finding three of his acquaintances crucified but still alive; he begged the Roman general Titus for their release – two died from their ordeal, but one recovered. However, Spong ignores this possibility

This chapter is, in the main, made up of Spong’s personal views on the origins of the Easter traditions, in particular the Resurrection narratives. There appear to be valid grounds for some of his opinions. However, it could be suggested that, overall, this chapter amounts to a serious rejection and re-writing of most of the Gospel narratives concerning Easter, going beyond the simply ‘de- literalising’ which is Spong’s purported aim. He attempts to justify his opinions in the next chapter.

It is noted that James D. Tabor devotes a chapter in his recent book, *Paul and Jesus: How the Apostle Transformed Christianity* (2012), to a clear explanation of the Jewish and Greek attitudes to the question of resurrection from the dead and life after death (ch. 2, pp. 48-67). He says that the Greeks believed that the physical, mortal body was merely a 'container' for the immortal soul; the soul would never die, but would be reincarnated in another body. It may be noted here that this is similar to the beliefs found in Eastern religions such as Buddhism. The Jewish belief, on the other hand, was that the dead descended to *Sheol*, the 'Underworld' similar to the Greek '*Hades*', where they remained until the 'End Days'. It should be remembered that the Sadducees – the Jewish 'aristocrats' – generally did not believe in resurrection of the body, while the Pharisees, generally associated with the general populace, did so believe. Tabor makes the point that Paul, although raised as a Jew and a Pharisee, lived among a Greek culture and would, therefore, have been familiar with both traditions. Tabor also reminds his readers that Paul is the earliest extant Christian author, writing some decades before the first Gospel was written – the Christian mythology would have developed considerably over those intervening years. Given that Spong places a considerable weight upon Paul's apparent ignorance of various stories about the resurrection of Jesus, it is considered that his text could have benefited from such an explanation, rather than his personal, 'Hebrewphile', speculations.

Chapter 20 – 'Grounding the Speculation in Scripture'

Chapter 20 is titled 'Grounding the Speculation in Scripture' (pp. 261–282). In this chapter, John Spong seeks to justify his various opinions, theories and beliefs about the origins of the traditions surrounding the Christian festival of Easter. In order to build that justification, he draws mainly on the traditions and liturgies of the Jewish festival *Sukkoth*, or Tabernacles.

Spong opens by saying that in the first century CE the festival of Tabernacles was one of the three great pilgrim feasts for the Jewish people. The other two

festivals, not named by Spong, are *Pesach* – Passover – and *Shavuot* – Pentecost. He claims that “most Jews of that era” saw this celebration as being “the greatest, the most welcome, and the most fun”. It was a harvest festival to give thanks, a time to pray for rain, to acknowledge the light of God, and also to recall the Jewish history of wandering in the wilderness. Tabernacles – *Sukkoth* – fell in the same month as, but later than, the “more somber [sic] liturgical traditions” of *Rosh Hashanah* – Trumpets – and *Yom Kippur* – the Day of Atonement – and provided a contrast in atmosphere to those occasions. However, Spong says that despite its importance in the Jewish liturgical year, the festival of Tabernacles is not mentioned at all in the three synoptic Gospels and only actually named once in John (he simply cites Jn. 7. The feast is named only in Jn. 7:2, but the whole of Jn. 7 deals with the story of Jesus’ attendance). He wonders how it came to be so overlooked or avoided in the New Testament narratives. It should be noted that Ex. 23:14–16 names three feasts to the Lord: Unleavened Bread, Harvest, and Ingathering at the end of the year, while Ex. 23:17 says that all Jewish males should “appear before the Lord God” at those feasts, two of which are associated with harvests – no mention of booths. Lev. 23:2 says “These are the appointed festivals of the Lord...”, followed by Lev. 23:3–44 listing and describing the festivals of the Sabbath, Passover, Unleavened Bread, Offering of First Fruits, Weeks, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Booths, but without mandating any as ‘pilgrim’ feasts. Deut 16:1–17 lists Passover, Weeks and Booths as the major feasts that all Jewish males should attend. The feasts of Weeks (*Shavuot*) and Booths (*Sukkoth*) are still associated with the harvests – Deut.16:13 speaks of the “ingathering from your threshing floor and your wine press” at *Sukkoth*. It may be noted here that ‘Passover’ is designated in Lev. 23:5 as “an offering to the Lord” occurring “In the first month [Abib/Nisan], on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight”. Lev 23:6 then says “and on the fifteenth day of that month the Lord’s Feast of Unleavened Bread. You shall eat unleavened bread for seven days” (Tanakh 2000); so in fact ‘Passover’, while an important liturgical event in itself, is one evening at the beginning of the seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread.

In pp. 262–265 of *Resurrection*, Spong examines what he calls “The Confusing Chronology of the Gospels’ Holy Week”. He begins by saying that the

Gospel records of the life of Jesus of Nazareth “concentrate very intently on the week during which Jesus’ betrayal, Last Supper [this is out of chronological order], trial, crucifixion, and resurrection were assumed to have taken place”. He believes that in the telling of this Christian story, the Jewish celebration of the Passover was a “primary obsession”. All the Gospels agree that Jesus was executed at the time of the festival of the Passover; Spong believes that Jesus became linked with the image of the paschal lamb quite early in the development of the Christian story. The ‘blood of the lamb’ is a significant element in the Jewish Exodus story, providing protection for the Hebrew firstborn (Ex. 12:21–42); Spong says that the story of the death of Jesus, who “was known as God’s firstborn”, came to be told “in terms of the liturgy of the Passover”. He repeats his point that no other Jewish festival is mentioned in the synoptic tradition.

According to what Spong terms “the Deuteronomic reforms of the early years of the seventh century B.C.E.”, Jesus “obviously had to go up to Jerusalem” for the Passover celebration. All Jewish males were required to take part in the three major religious festivals each year: Passover and Unleavened Bread (*Peshach*), Weeks/Pentecost (*Shavuot*) and Booths/Tabernacles (*Sukkoth*). As has been shown above, this pilgrimage was first commanded in the book Exodus, in the Hebrew Torah. It must be noted that the command in Deut. 16:6 does not specify ‘in Jerusalem’, but actually says “...shall appear before the Lord your God *in the place which he shall choose*” [emphasis added]; however, after David made Jerusalem his capital and Solomon later built the temple there, Jerusalem became the location for the major religious observances. Spong also says that the Gospel writers placed Jesus’ journey into the narrative at a point just one week before Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection “so the drama could build”. In Spong’s view, that ‘drama’ began with the ‘triumphal entry’, now celebrated by Christians as Palm Sunday, and ended on the first day of the following week – a total of eight days now called ‘Holy Week’, ending with the celebration of Easter and the Resurrection.

As noted previously, Spong sees a number of problems in associating the Palm Sunday procession with the Passover celebration in spring, and therefore as a fore-runner to the crucifixion (p. 262). He observes that Mark appears to relate the Holy Week story in two parts that, in his opinion, do not relate well to each other. He

says that the first part of Mark's narrative begins with the procession and ends with the apocalyptic teaching in Mk. 13; a distinct second part is introduced with the words "It was now two days before the Passover..." (Mk. 14:1).

Spong also notes that Mark separates the 'triumphal procession' from the 'cleansing of the temple' vignette so that they occur on two separate days. He then says that the device used by Mark to separate the two episodes "was a bizarre one, to say the least" (p. 263). That device is what Spong has previously called "the strange story" of the fig tree (pp. 188, 259). However, in his discussion of this episode, Spong appears to get the chronology of events somewhat confused.

In Spong's version of the events, on the first day (Palm Sunday), Jesus entered Jerusalem, went to the temple, and then returned to Bethany with the twelve (Mk. 11:1–11). On the second day, Jesus and the disciples went back to Jerusalem; on the way, Jesus cursed the fig tree because it had no fruit [Spong cites Mk. 11:12–26; however, Mk. 11:12–14 appears to be more appropriate for this part of the story]. The party carried on into Jerusalem, where Jesus 'cleansed the temple' before returning to Bethany in the evening. However, Spong says that "Mark used that journey [back to Bethany] to narrate the conclusion of his fig tree story"; he says that as they walked, Peter drew Jesus' attention to the fig tree, which had now withered down to its roots, receiving in return a teaching from Jesus. He next says that Jesus returned to the temple "the next day", which is now the third day. However, the actual sequence of events for the second and third days in Mark's text is somewhat different. On the morning of Day 2, Jesus and party return from Bethany to Jerusalem, cursing the fig tree on the way (Mk. 11:12–14); then comes the 'cleansing' episode (Mk. 11:15–18), after which "when evening came they went out of the city" (Mk. 11:19; no mention of returning to Bethany, but could be assumed). The next morning, that is Day 3, they again passed by the fig tree on the way back to Jerusalem and Peter commented on its having withered away (Mk. 11:20–21), which drew the teaching from Jesus (Mk. 11:22–26). This is Mark's conclusion to the story of the fig tree, delivered some twelve hours later than in Spong's version of events. Jesus then went again to the temple.

Spong dismisses Mk. 11:27–12:40 as Jesus "artfully dodging the question...put to him by the chief priests and scribes" (p. 263). He says that this 'first

section' of Mark's narrative ends with Jesus sitting opposite the treasury, where he watches the poor widow making her offering of two small coins (Mk. 12:41–44). Spong remarks that "It appears that the treasury was back in business after its dislocating experience of the day before". He has the conclusion to this section as "the long, apocalyptic Chapter 13", in which Jesus speaks to the disciples about the signs foretelling the end of the age. However, he does not note that before that teaching, the party moved out of the temple to the Mount of Olives (Mk. 13:3. In fact, this could be read as being an entirely separate occasion).

According to Spong's reading (p. 264), Mark's next unit begins with the "time marker" in Mk. 14:1: "It was now two days before the Passover"; he does not note that the sentence continues "and the feast of Unleavened Bread". Spong then examines Mark's time frame for the period now known in Christian tradition as running from Palm Sunday to Easter Day. He says that Mark's first 'unit' was of three days; he then adds the "two days before the Passover", making a total of five days. At this point, Spong makes a comment which he does not explain and which is difficult to follow: he appears to believe that "it was *now* two days..." implies that his 'time marker' was set on the third day, and that placing it at that point in the story would make some vital difference to his calculations. However, he does not enlarge on this point; without any further explanation it appears that he may be taking a very literal period of exactly forty-eight hours, rather than a general 'two days'.

Spong does not remind his readers that the Jewish liturgical day began at sunset, so that the day of preparation was the fourteenth day of Nisan, ending at sunset, and the Passover *seder* meal would take place in the evening *at the beginning of the fifteenth day*; the Feast of Unleavened Bread would begin following the *seder*. Whatever his interpretation of that 'time marker' passage may be, Spong says that the Passover meal, Mark's 'Last Supper', would have taken place on the fifth day and the crucifixion on the sixth day in Mark's scheme, so making Easter Day the eighth day and also the first day of the week [Sunday]. He then says that Mark had a period – a 'week' – of eight days, broken into two 'units' which in Spong's view, noted previously, do not seem to be entirely related to one another. Spong then notes that "an eight-day celebration is the time frame associated most often with the feast of Tabernacles"; however, both Lev. 23:39 and Deut. 16:13 specify a period of

seven days for the festival of Booths, with Leviticus adding “and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest”. In modern practice, the eighth day may be celebrated as *Simchat Torah* – Rejoicing of the Torah – or *Shemini Atzeret* – Eighth Day of the Solemn Assembly.

Continuing his review of the various accounts of the first three days (p. 264), Spong says that both Matthew and Luke “refused to separate” the triumphal entry to Jerusalem from the cleansing of the temple, placing the two events on the same day (Mt. 21:6–17; Lk. 19:39–46 – Spong only cites “Matt.21:12ff.; Luke 19:45ff.”). He says that by doing so, Matthew and Luke “[ruin] Mark’s arrangement of timing” and so “the mystery thickens”. Spong then says that John’s Gospel “make[s] things even stranger” by placing the ‘cleansing of the temple’ event in an early phase of Jesus’ ministry, when Jesus went up to Jerusalem at another Passover some two years earlier (Jn. 2:13–16). Overall, in Spong’s view, the time references relating to both Palm Sunday and the cleansing of the temple “appear to be confused”. However, it may be considered that in making that comment Spong is attempting to read the Gospel stories as literal accounts, which is the very thing he purports to reject.

There is an obvious point that Spong does not mention in all his analyses of the timing of Jesus’ ‘triumphal entry’ and subsequent events. None of the four Gospels actually specifies a day of the week for the entry. Jn. 12:1 does say that Jesus came to Bethany “six days before the Passover”, followed by Jn. 12:12 saying that the ‘triumphal entry’ took place “the next day”. It appears, therefore, that all further timings are purely speculation based on the Christian tradition of Holy Week. Furthermore, Spong says that Mark’s story appears to be presented in two ‘units’, marked by the words “It was now two days before the Passover...” (Mk. 14:1); he does not mention that all the other three Gospels have a similar break in the narrative flow (Mt. 26:17; Lk. 22:1; Jn. 13:1). As noted above, Spong says, first, that the story of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem was inserted into the Gospel stories at this point for dramatic reasons, and, second, that the two units of Mark’s story do not relate well to each other. It is therefore quite possible that the two elements should not be read as being contiguous, and there is not necessarily any immediate connection between the ‘triumphal entry-fig tree-temple cleansing’ stories and the

'Passover-arrest-trial-crucifixion-resurrection' pericope. If that is a correct reading of the texts, then the tradition of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to the Resurrection, would appear to be a construct of the developing Christian mythology. As Charles W.F. Smith points out, Mark does not say anywhere that Jesus has journeyed to Jerusalem specifically for the Passover feast (Smith 1960:316). In addition, unlike the Christian Good Friday, *Pesach* is celebrated on a *date*, 15 Nisan, as opposed to a specific day of the week. Bart Ehrman (Ehrman, 2009:27) says that an indication that Jesus was crucified on a Friday is found in Mk. 15:42, where Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for Jesus' body "since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath". However, Lk. 23:50–56 gives a similar indication, while Jn. 19:42 also hints at the day. Spong does not pursue these points to what would appear to be their logical conclusion.

Spong now returns briefly to the story of the fig tree, saying that while Mark used it to separate the 'entry' and 'cleansing' events, Matthew had those two events on the same day, with the 'fig tree' episode the next morning. Luke does not have a cursing of a fig tree at all; however, he does have the parable of the fig tree at an earlier point in his Gospel (Lk. 13:6–9). In that parable, the owner commands that a non-bearing fig tree be cut out, but the vinedresser intervenes and suggests that it should be tended and manured for a further year. Spong suggests that the story in Mark and Matthew and the parable in Luke may all have a common origin in the oral tradition, but developed in different directions. He also says that the story of the cursing of the fig tree is "an expositor's nightmare", raising "embarrassing questions" about what kind of man would Jesus be to curse a tree for not having fruit when, as Mk. 11:13 says, "it was not the season for fruit". Spong thinks that it was that 'embarrassment' which prompted Matthew to combine the 'cursing' and 'withering' into one event.

The fig tree story continues in the next section of this chapter – 'Clues that Point to Tabernacles' (pp.265–273). Spong says that he wants to look at "this strange fig tree episode" from another point of view. His aim appears to be to demonstrate that the story was inserted into the Gospel narratives as a marker that

the 'triumphal entry' and 'cleansing of the temple' events described in those narratives did not take place at the time of Passover, but at some other time. Spong suggests that while Passover, in early spring, may not be the season for figs, it may also not be the season for the greenery mentioned in connection with the triumphal entry. It may be noted here that fig trees in Jerusalem may carry well-formed fruit at the time of Passover, in the month Nisan (March-April); however, that fruit is not ripe for harvest and eating. Spong says that fig trees in Judea bore fruit in the month Tishri (September-October), in autumn; it can be assumed that he means *ripe* fruit, ready for harvest.

Spong now begins to construct his case (pp.264– 265). He begins by postulating that the fig tree story originated as one in which a tree did not bear fruit at a time when it reasonably could be expected to do so, and was therefore marked for destruction. He suggests that it can be inferred, therefore, that the original setting for the story was in the autumn, and if that is correct, then Jesus' actions (in cursing the tree for not having [ripe] fruit) are made "less startling and more in character".

In Spong's view (p. 266), the fig tree vignette is more easily understood if put into a proper context, "disconnect[ed] from the strange idea" of the 'cursing'. He suggest that Mark makes an overt connection between the fig tree and the temple, with each having a proper function to fulfil, which each fails to do. That failure – the tree to produce fruit and the temple to promote proper worship – leads to punishment; the connection is made between the story of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple. The cursing of the tree is a parable about the temple. However, Spong then says that "all parabolic meanings" are destroyed by the [unreferenced] line in Mk. 11:13, "...for it was not the season for figs" (*ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς οὐκ ἦν σύκων*).

Spong now says that the line from Mark "appears to be so out of place" and could be taken to be a gloss inserted by an editor. However, he refers to Charles Smith who says that he knows of no textual evidence to prove that those words are a gloss (Smith 1960:317). Spong does not mention that Smith, in a note to that comment, says "the passage does not appear in P. 45". Smith (but not Spong) also notes that Matthew omits the words, suggesting that "they may not have been in his copy of Mark", although he also says that Matthew may have deliberately omitted

them as irrelevant or unnecessary. However, he does point out that Matthew gives no proof that the words were always in Mark – the implication being that they are a later addition. On the assumption that the line may not be a gloss, Spong suggests that “this line is a hint...that the time had originally been in the fall rather than the spring”, that is, it was originally associated with the feast of Tabernacles rather than Passover. He further suggests that “this explanatory line was added” when the original setting was changed. Spong sets out to demonstrate the clues that he believes point to such a change occurring.

It may be noted at this point that a note to Mk. 11:13 in the NRSV (Bible 2006:1746) compares this passage with Jer. 8:13 in the Hebrew Bible as an indictment on the leaders of the people of Jerusalem. The note also suggests that, in the context of Mark’s story, the fault of the leaders may lie in their failure to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem; *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:619-620, 41:71) makes similar comment. It is noted that Spong does not find that parallel, in contrast to his usual penchant for seeking out sources in the Hebrew texts.

The first ‘clue’ that Spong finds lies in the liturgical practices associated with the feast of Tabernacles (pp. 266-267), which he says “almost surely suggested” that the origins of both the Palm Sunday procession and the cleansing of the temple can be found in those liturgies. He notes in particular the use of the word “Hosanna” in the Christian Palm Sunday celebrations, saying that it comes from Ps. 118, which is the Psalm most closely associated with the Jewish celebration of Tabernacles [part of the *Hallel* prayer]. He also notes Ps. 118:26, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”, saying “which is, of course, almost a direct quotation from the cry of the crowd given in the synoptic account of Palm Sunday”. It appears that Spong has reversed the order of events, and that the synoptic accounts are, actually, a direct quotation from the Psalm. Spong finds a further clue in Ps. 118:27 “...Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar”, which he sees reflected in the Tabernacles practice of carrying the *lulab* – bunches of palm, myrtle and willow – in procession around the temple; he expands on this custom later. He comments that “It is apparent, the more one learns of the liturgy of Tabernacles, that the content of Palm Sunday was originally shaped in almost every detail by this fall festival”.

Spong quotes a number of other elements of the Tabernacles celebration that are found in Ps. 118 (pp. 267-268). He also draws particular attention to v. 22, “The stone which the builder rejected has become the head of the corner” (RSV – other versions have “chief cornerstone”, or “capstone”), which became incorporated into the Christian tradition in Mt. 21:42, Acts 4:11, and 1 Pet. 2:7. The words of Ps.118:24, “This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it”, also became part of the Christian tradition attached to the holy day, the first day of the week. Spong believes that the early Christians used Psalm 118 as a regular part of their worship. He says that in that light we need to be aware of the close connections between that psalm and the feast of Tabernacles. Spong does not point out that it cannot be known which came first – the liturgy of *Sukkoth* or Ps. 118 – or whether they in fact developed contemporaneously.

In looking at two other Tabernacles ‘customs’ (p. 268), Spong could be accused of being less than rigorous in his approach. First, he says that while the marchers in the festival processions held the *lulab* in their right hand, in their left hand they carried “a box, called the ethrog”. However, the *etrog* or *ethrog* – *אֶתְרוֹג* – is the fruit of the citron, *Citrus medica*, and is the object traditionally carried (Smith 1960:319), although ornate boxes certainly may be used to contain the fruit. It may also be noted, in passing, that the original Hebrew tradition does not specify the *etrog* as the object to be carried; Lev. 23:40 says *peri ets hadar* – ‘the product of *hadar* trees’ (Tanakh); *καρπὸν ξύλου ὠραῖον* – ‘goodly fruit of trees’ (Septuagint); ‘boughs of goodly trees’ (KJV); ‘the fruit of goodly trees’ (RSV); ‘choice fruit from the trees’ (NIV); ‘the fruit of majestic trees’ (NRSV). A note to the English translation of this passage in the Tanakh (2002:263) says “...*exact meaning of Heb. hadar uncertain. Traditionally the product is understood as ‘citron’*”. Secondly, in a lengthy discussion about the booths or shelters which the people were required to erect as part of the festival observations, Spong continually refers to a booth, or *the* booth, as ‘sukkoth’; however, the singular is *sukkah* - *סֻכָּה* - while ‘sukkoth’ – *סֻכּוֹת* or *סֻכֹּת* – is the plural form.

It might also be argued that, strictly speaking, those two practices were not ‘customs’ *per se*. Both are specifically described in Lev. 23:33-43 as part of the

Lord's word spoken to the Israelite people through Moses, and so may be regarded as requirements of the Law.

As an extension of Spong's Tishri/Booths theory, it could be hypothesised that the whole of the Passion took place at the time of Sukkoth and was later moved back to Passover to fit in with the Pascal Lamb connection. Spong does not seem to have considered that possibility.

Spong now turns to an examination of the Book of the Prophet Zechariah from the Hebrew Scriptures (pp. 269–272), saying that it, like Ps.118, was closely associated with the feast of Tabernacles. However, this segment appears to contain a great deal of further speculation by Spong, despite the purported aim of this chapter being to 'ground the speculation'. He begins by saying that although Zechariah appears to have been written in two segments (chapters 1-8 – the prophecies – and chapters 9-14), "First-century Jews, however, probably read it as a single book".

According to Spong's reading of the first eight chapters of Zechariah, the prophet makes reference to two men "who were 'anointed' by God, 'who stand by the Lord of the whole earth'" (Zech. 4:14). He says that the word 'anointed' came to carry with it, in the later Jewish world, the concept of 'messiah'. Spong now enters into a somewhat involved piece of speculation on personal names and their possible significance in later Christian mythology. He begins by saying that Zechariah names the 'anointed ones' as Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the priest, earlier named in Ezra 3:2 as the leaders of the second return from the Babylonian exile. It must be noted that none of the biblical texts referring to those two persons actually says that they were 'anointed', although it is probably reasonable to assume that they were. It also may be noted that Spong does not explain how 'Jeshua' (יֵשׁוּעַ) in the book Ezra becomes 'Joshua' (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ) in Zechariah (it is necessary to read the prophets Nehemiah and Haggai to find the change). However, he does say that both are rendered as 'Jesus' (*Ἰησοῦ*) in the Greek of the Septuagint. He then says that Jeshua is named in Ezra as both a priest and the son of Jehozadak; moving to Zechariah 6:11 (Spong's text cites Zech. 7:11, which is not relevant to this context) he suggests that 'Jehozadak' is "a name too close to Joseph to be ignored by Jewish

Christians trained in the method of midrash” (p. 269). It is considered that this is a very tenuous suggestion, given that the two names have different origins in the Hebrew; Spong appears to be straining the bounds of credibility in order to make his case. He also complicates the transliterations of ‘Jeshua’ and ‘Joshua’ by introducing the form ‘Yeshua’ for both; however, it could be suggested that while ‘Jeshua’ can be rendered as ‘Yeshua’, to be consistent ‘Joshua’ should be rendered as ‘Yehoshua’.

Spong now appears to misquote the biblical text of Zech. 3:9. He says that in speaking about “this Joshua (Jesus)” the verse says that “...God would set before him a single stone with this inscription upon it: ‘I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day’”. However, the verse in the RSV (and, with slight differences in words, the Tanakh, Septuagint, KJV, NIV, and NRSV) says:

“For behold, upon the stone which I have set before Joshua, upon a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day”.

‘Engraving the inscription’ and ‘removing the guilt’ appear to be two quite separate concepts, which is not what Spong suggests.

Having quoted those words from Zech. 3:9, Spong says that they are “associated with the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement” (p. 270); he does not enlarge on the association. He speculates that with that association, and being “now related by the prophet to one called Joshua (Jesus)”, the words “would almost surely have been seen as a midrash brought to new fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth” – presumably by the Jewish Christians mentioned earlier.

Spong’s examination of the first section of Zechariah (chs.1–8) ends by quoting Zech. 8:3 and 8:23, in which the Lord of hosts says that he will return to Zion and Jerusalem, and that people of all nations will come to Jerusalem seeking God (p. 270). Spong says that he has “little doubt” that the passage influenced Luke’s Pentecost story; however, he also believes that the passage “dramatically ...set the stage for the feast of Tabernacles”. In justification of that belief, Spong again turns to Charles Smith’s paper *No Time for Figs* (Smith 1960:321); however, he does not

note that Smith is discussing Zech. 14, not Zech. 8. It could be questioned how a passage written in the sixth century BCE can be seen as ‘setting the stage’ for a more ancient feast; although cited by neither Spong nor Smith, the ritual quoted by Spong (following Smith) is detailed in Num. 29:12-39. Furthermore, Spong states as fact that the seventy bullocks sacrificed during Tabernacles were “on behalf of the seventy nations of the world”, and the last, on the eighth day, for “the ‘unique nation’ of Israel”; however, Smith, from whom he draws his information, merely says that “these holocausts have been explained as...”.

In beginning his examination of the second section of Zechariah (Zech. 9–14), Spong notes that Zerubbabel and Joshua are no longer the leaders in Jerusalem; he says that the time frame has shifted from the Persian to the Greek period of the fourth and third centuries BCE. He draws on G.F. Moore (*Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 1930) in saying that this segment became “the primary passage of Scripture read during Tabernacles”, although Smith (p. 320) only notes Zech. 14 as “the chapter read as haphtarah on the first day of Sukkoth”. *Haphtarah* is the Hebrew equivalent of ‘Conclusion’, and is a portion from the *Nevi'im* read after the Torah reading on the Sabbath and on festival and fast days (Farlex, Inc. 2014, thefreedictionary.com). Spong suggests that this [Moore’s view] may be because “this segment was climaxed in its closing chapter by a narrative of this feast itself”. However, far from being ‘a narrative of this feast’, Zech. 14 only mentions “the feast of booths” as an occasion to which the survivors of the nations “shall go up year after year” (v. 16), and in the context of the punishment which will befall those who do not attend (vv. 18, 19).

Spong now says that this second segment of Zechariah was familiar to the early Christians, as it is frequently quoted in the Gospels, either directly or by implication. The first passage noted is Zech 9:9–11, which, as Spong says, is quoted in both Mt. 21:5 and Jn. 12:14–15, and alluded to in Mk.11 and Lk. 19, although it is only v. 9 which is actually quoted or referred to. He also says that the coming king is portrayed by Zechariah as “the prince of peace”, although the whole text of the ‘oracle’ or ‘pronouncement’ that makes up Zech. 9 does not actually say that, and in fact, overall, contains very little mention of ‘peace’. Spong observes that the passage is incorporated into the Gospels as part of the preparation for the Palm

Sunday entry to Jerusalem. He then says that “in the Hebrew Scriptures it was a story associated with Tabernacles, not with Passover”, and that its inclusion as part of the Christian crucifixion narratives “indicates that it was moved from its original setting”. However, apart from the three verses mentioned previously, there is no mention of this feast in Zechariah, so it is difficult to see how Spong finds such an association in the Scriptures.

The second part of Zechariah that Spong notes (p. 271) is Zech. 11:7ff. He says that this is “the story of Israel paying thirty pieces of silver to rid itself of the good shepherd God had appointed...”, and that this shepherd “was said to be doomed to be slain by those who trafficked in sheep...”. However, it appears that this is a misreading of the text. Firstly, in the RSV, and NRSV, both Zech. 11:4 and 11:7 say ‘shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter/to be slain’. However, the Tanakh translation renders it as ‘tend the sheep meant for slaughter’, and the NIV says ‘pasture the flock marked for slaughter’; clearly, the understanding should be that it is the sheep which are doomed to be slain, not the shepherd. Secondly, Zech. 11:8-12, in all versions, says that it was the shepherd who became impatient, annulled the covenant and requested his wages, which were paid as thirty shekels of silver. From his understanding of the text, that the shepherd was to be slain by those buying and selling animals, Spong now says “Suddenly we see the story of the cleansing of the temple coming into focus”; he strongly suggests that “it was also originally a part of the fall festival of Tabernacles”. However, he gives no justification for that belief; it appears to be pure speculation on his part. Finally he looks at Zech. 11:13, where the thirty shekels of silver were thrown into the temple treasury, saying that this passage clearly shaped Matthew’s story of Judas throwing his thirty pieces of silver into the temple (Mt. 27:5). While that may be a reasonable assumption, it is considered that Spong’s statement that this is “still another element of the passion [sic] story that originated in Tabernacles but was transferred to Passover” is at best a tenuous proposition, as the connection to the feast of Tabernacles is not made clear. It may be noted in passing that ‘thirty shekels of silver’ was a sum long established in the Hebrew Bible. It appears in Ex. 21:32 as the price to be paid to the master of a slave gored by an ox, and in Lev. 27:4 as the valuation, for purposes of a vow, of a female person aged from twenty to sixty years.

Moving on to Zech.12, Spong quotes vv. 10–11, 14, ‘mourning for him whom they have pierced’, saying that “surely” was a picture of the earliest post-resurrection reality. He then goes to Mk. 13, quoting the “now-familiar words” from v.7 “Strike the shepherd that the sheep might be scattered”; he says that those words are “put into the mouth of Jesus” in both Mt. 26:31 and Mk. 14:27, but does not draw out any further implications. It may be recalled that Spong has noted Mk. 14:27 previously, in his discussion of the stories of the feeding of the multitudes (pp. 205–206), attempting to establish a connection to the liturgical formula of ‘taking, blessing, breaking, giving’.

The final section of Zechariah to be examined is Chapter 14, which Spong says is “a picture of the day of the Lord coming in the midst of the celebration of Tabernacles”. It is not clear how Spong comes to that conclusion; as noted above, the only mention of ‘the feast of booths’ in Zech. 14 (vv. 16, 18–19) is in the context of a visit “year after year” by the survivors of the nations “that have come against Jerusalem”. However, it could be suggested that Spong’s view is based on a misreading of comments by Charles Smith (Smith 1960:321). Spong now notes v. 7, which speaks of “continuous day” and “at evening time there shall be light”; he passes on to v.8, which he says carries “the perennial hope of ‘living waters that shall flow out from Jerusalem’ in an unending stream”. He believes that those two verses influenced John, who is the only Gospel writer to mention the feast of Tabernacles, when he has Jesus referring to himself as “living water” during the feast (Jn. 7:38), and as “the light of the world” immediately after the feast. Spong cites Jn. 8:1 for the latter example; however, it actually appears at v. 12, after the pericope of the woman taken in adultery. It may be noted that the RSV only includes that story – Jn. 7:53-8:11 – as a note, but still begins Jn. 8 at v. 12, while the NRSV includes it in the text but notes that ‘*the most ancient authorities lack 7:53-8:11...*’. Comfort and Barrett (2001:306, 501) show Papyri 66 and 75, respectively dated ‘middle second century’ and ‘late second or possibly early third century’, saying that they are the earliest and second-earliest witnesses not to include this pericope.

In Spong’s view, the “climax of the celebration” comes in Zech. 14:16, “when the people of the world came to Jerusalem ‘to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of booths’”. However, as has been pointed out above, Zech.

14 is not a narrative about the feast of Tabernacles or Booths, but is, rather, part of an oracle about the saving of Jerusalem from all the nations that have gathered against her. Spong's final point is the closing words of Zech. 14:21, "And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day", which he says is further emphasised in "the next book in the Bible, Malachi (3:1 ff)". He interprets those verses as saying that "On the day after the king came to the city, he would come to his temple and cleanse it by making way for the nations to come and worship". However, it is not clear how Spong reaches that interpretation: Zech. 14 does not mention either 'the king coming to the city' or 'cleansing of the temple', and the 'cleansing' ("purifying") in Mal. 3 (v.3) is not of the temple but of the levitical priests, "the sons of Levi". A note to 'traders' (Zech. 14:21) in the translation of the Tanakh says "to sell ritually pure vessels"; the Hebrew word is כְּנַעֲנִי – *K^ena^ani*, a *Canaanite* or *trader*. Read in the whole context of Zech. 14:20–21, the meaning would appear to be that "on that day" all vessels in Jerusalem would be made sacred, so that there would no longer be a need for sellers of ritually clean vessels in the temple precinct. It appears that John Shelby Spong is again interpreting the biblical texts to suit his own case.

These criticisms of Spong's interpretations of Zech. 14 and Mal. 3 are supported by comment in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:359, 361; 22:50, 59).

Spong concludes this section of Chapter 20 of *Resurrection* by listing a number of "themes that early Christians associated with the story of Palm Sunday and the cleansing of the temple.". He says that those themes are drawn from "the Book of Zechariah...combined with Psalm 118 and augmented by the Book of Malachi", and provide the outline of the Passion narrative "from Palm Sunday to Pentecost". He also says, again, that Zechariah "is set in the context of the festival of Tabernacles"; however, as argued previously, Zechariah, together with Psalm 118, forms part of the Hallel for *Sukkoth*, rather than being 'set in the context' of the feast. Spong reiterates his belief that, somehow, all those themes associated in the Jewish tradition with the feast of Tabernacles were transferred, in the Christian writings, to the feast of Passover. He says that he suspects that Christians continue with "that mistaken association" because they are 'bound tightly by linear time' (pp.

272-273). At this point, Spong acknowledges “the presence of scholarly research” by Professor Charles W.F. Smith which “demonstrates the obvious connections with Tabernacles” – however, apart from two notes, he does not acknowledge the extent to which he has drawn – not always accurately – on Smith’s 1960 paper *No Time for Figs*.

Spong closes Chapter 20 of *Resurrection* with a section titled ‘The Gospels’ Conflation of Two Trips to Jerusalem’ (pp. 273-282). As the name implies, this deals with Spong’s belief that Jesus’ disciples must have made at least two journeys to Jerusalem, both with and without Jesus, but that the stories of those journeys have been combined to form the narratives that are the basis of the Christian Easter tradition. He suggests that one of those journeys was the one recorded in the Gospels, which ended with Jesus’ death; the other is not recorded, but Spong believes that it must have taken place at the feast of Tabernacles and “was associated with his [Jesus’] triumph over death”. He notes that John’s Gospel does, in fact, record a Jerusalem visit at the time of the Tabernacles celebration, however it appears at an early point in Jesus’ ministry rather than at the end (in Jn. 7) and so is not Spong’s ‘second journey’. Given that this story appears in John after the second Passover (Jn. 6), it must be the feast of Tabernacles some five or six months before Jesus’ death. It may also be noted that even if the verses Jn. 7:53 (“They went each to his own house...”) and Jn. 8:1-11 (the pericope of the woman taken in adultery) are included, the narrative of Jesus’ activities and teachings at that feast appears to go on as far as Jn. 10:21, with a story set at the feast of the Dedication (*Hanukkah*), about three months after Tabernacles, beginning at Jn. 10:22.

Spong now begins an exploration of John’s account of the Tabernacles journey (p. 273). He first quotes what he says is “one Haggadic principle used by the rabbis for studying the Jewish sacred story. ‘There is no before and after in Scripture, for chronological arrangement was only one of many possibilities.’”. He then quotes R.H. Lightfoot (*St John’s Gospel, A Commentary*, 1956), who said, in paraphrase, that the feast of Tabernacles was a “foreshadowing of the day of the Lord”, connected by popular sentiment both with the current harvest and vintage and with a future final ingathering of the nations in the days of the Messiah.

In Spong's view, John's narrative of Jesus' visit to Jerusalem for the feast of Tabernacles "is filled with strange words and enigmatic symbols", and the portrayal of Jesus is "both historical and mythical". He suggests that while John has Jesus making the journey in physical time and space, the narrative also has Jesus taking the place of the temple, and becoming the source of living water for all the world. Spong says that in John's story of this journey, "History and nonhistory, limited time and timelessness, humanity and divinity flow together in strange ways". Spong now begins a lengthy series of speculations on this matter, much of which appears to be based on tenuous semantic argument (p. 274).

Spong opens the discussion by questioning whether 'his brothers' [in Jn. 7:3, 5] refers to the blood brothers of Jesus or to his disciples; he notes that later, in Jn:20:17, Jesus is reported as using 'brethren' to refer to his disciples. However, that distinction is found only in the English language, and only in the RSV; the Greek uses the same word – *ἀδελφοί, ἀδελφούς* (*adelphoi, adelphous*) – in both cases, while the KJV uses 'brethren' for both, and the NRSV and NIV both use 'brothers' in each instance. It suits Spong's case to see this reference (Jn. 7:3, 5) as referring to the disciples, as 7:5 says "for even his brothers did not believe in him"; Spong has previously suggested that this 'unbelief' was the situation with the disciples after the crucifixion. However, it is equally logical to read those verses as referring to Jesus' siblings, as they (his brothers) suggest that he go into Judea "that your disciples may see the works you are doing' (Jn. 7:3). Saying that "Tabernacles was a prelude to the day of the Lord, when the messiah would suddenly come out of the heavens to his temple", Spong notes that Jesus told his 'brothers' to go to the feast without him because "my time has not yet fully come" (Jn. 7:8), although he later went up alone to the feast. Spong suggests that this was again "a glimpse into the postcrucifixion [sic] reality".

John Shelby Spong now posits another debatable semantic argument, apparently in support of his 'postcrucifixion reality' theory (p. 274). He says that the words 'going up' and 'went up' used in this vignette (Jn. 7:10, 14) are the same as the words used later by John when describing Jesus' ascension in 20:17. Spong refers to the Greek words *anēbesan* (*ἀνέβησαν*) (Jn. 7:10), *anēbē* (*ἀνέβη*) (Jn. 7:14), and *anabēbēka* (*ἀναβέβηκα*) (Jn. 20:17) [Spong's text spells this as 'anebēbēka'],

saying that “In Greek the phrase carries a double entendre that is not capable of being captured in the English translation”. However, it is strongly considered that Spong’s argument cannot be sustained; all three of those words are grammatical variations of the word ‘*anabaino*’ (*ἀναβαίνω*), which actually occurs itself in Jn. 7:8 and 20:17 (Danker 2000:58). The same word, in several grammatical variations, also appears some twenty-seven times in the New Testament, from the Gospels to Revelation, in different contexts of either ‘go up’ or ‘ascend’. The ‘double entendre’ remark can be rejected on the grounds that such cases are common in translations between languages.

Continuing the examination of the text of John’s Gospel, Spong looks at various speeches reported from the Tabernacles narrative in Jn. 7. He sees all these words as having a double meaning, a “hidden, enigmatic reference” to other events. He says that the debate surrounding Jesus at the feast centred on the questions “Where is he?” and “Who is he”, suggesting that these are both more properly located in a post-resurrection context, but were read back into this earlier setting. In Spong’s view, these were the questions that most troubled the Galilean disciples in the time following the crucifixion of Jesus. Next, he refers to Jn. 7:14, when “Jesus went up into the temple”. At this point Spong appears to attempt some semantic sleight-of-hand to strengthen his ‘word-use’ theory, saying that “*Once again* [emphasis added] *anēbē* is the word used”, although he has already drawn attention to this verse. He suggests that this could be a hidden reference to Jesus exaltation into heaven, although, as discussed above, this appears to be a normal usage for the actions of ‘going up’ or ‘ascending’. Spong also believes that it is possible that the reference in Jn. 7:14 to Jesus’ appearance at “the middle of the feast” caused the seven to eight-day period for the Tabernacles celebration “to be squeezed down into the popular resurrection symbol of three days”. This appears to be purely personal speculation, as no other justification is given.

Spong goes on (p. 275) to find other instances in which he says there are “two levels apparent in almost every word – one in time and history and one beyond time and history”. It appears that he is attempting to justify his hypothesis that these various vignettes are from a post-crucifixion context, but read back into a pre-crucifixion setting. He again attempts to draw semantic significance, and a ‘dual

meaning', from the point that the [Greek] word translated as 'stood up' in Jn.7:37 [*εἰστήκει* – *heistēkei*] is related to a verb used later in Jn. 20:19 in the resurrection narrative [*ἔστη* – *estē*]. Spong also cites Lk. 24:8 as another instance, but this is not correct as that verse only reads "And they remembered his words", although Lk. 24:36 does use *ἔστη*. However, this appears to be another laboured and tenuous argument.

Two other segments in which Spong finds 'dual meanings' are Jn. 7:37, "On the last day of the feast, the great day...", and Jn. 7:52, "...no prophet is to rise from Galilee". In the first instance, the gospel text appears to indicate clearly that the 'great day' refers to the last day of the feast of Tabernacles, rather than having a hidden reference to the day of resurrection. However, he may have a case in the second instance, as the word used in the Greek text is *ἐγείρεται* (*egeiretai*), related to *ἐγείρω* (*egeirō*) which can have connotations of 'rise from the dead' (Danker, 2000:271-272, nn. 6, 7). Spong questions whether the statement refers to 'originating' in Galilee or to being "resurrected for seeing' by those who were in Galilee". Spong states his belief that there are "far too many double meanings... and... powerful symbols..." in Jn. 7 to be ignored (p. 276).

Spong now reiterates his contention that the feast of Tabernacles was related, "in some now lost way", to the story of Easter (p. 277). He says that while only John makes direct reference to the feast, there are signs of the feast of Tabernacles "all over the synoptic accounts of the passion". He believes that the connections overwhelmingly reveal that, originally, Tabernacles was "the primary context for the proclamation of the risen Christ", but that over time the events related to Jesus' resurrection were pushed out of the orbit of Tabernacles and into the orbit of Passover. He now suggests an alternative scenario for the resurrection story (pp. 277-279).

It has been proposed previously by Spong (pp. 247-252) that after Jesus' execution Simon and others returned to their homes and occupations in Galilee. There, in time, Simon in particular became convinced that Jesus was in some way still amongst them – he 'was risen'. Enlarging on that theme, Spong now says that Peter (Simon) and the Galilean group felt compelled to go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Tabernacles. He says that John told the story of that journey

as part of “the historic life of Jesus” while at the same time preserving “the original, nonhistorical, context” by writing a story that could be read on two levels. The synoptic writers, on the other hand, simply wrote the story of Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem at the time of Passover, but attached to it all the symbols of the feast of Tabernacles. Spong believes that the journey to Jerusalem actually took place at the time of the feast of Tabernacles some six months after Jesus’ death, led by Peter rather than Jesus as in the synoptic narratives. He says that this Peter saw himself as taking “the undeniable message of his Lord risen and living” to those in Jerusalem “who had not yet seen the Lord risen and enthroned in heaven”.

In Spong’s scenario (pp.277-278), the sharing of the story of the resurrected Jesus with the community in Jerusalem gave them a “new and vital frame of reference”. They joined in the Tabernacles processions, waving their green branches and carrying their *etrogim* while shouting their hosannas and calling on the Lord. They built a *sukkah*, the “temporary shelter” which Spong now suggests was later incorporated into the Christian tradition as Jesus’ “temporary tomb” in the garden. It is noted here that Spong continues with his misuse of the terms *sukkoth* and *ethrog*, noted above. He now says that “they went to the sukkoth carrying the box called an ethrog, containing the fragrant citron fruit and blossom”; he is convinced that the fruit and blossom later entered the tradition as the spices which the women carried to the tomb “for a purpose that never was really clear”. While the carrying of an ‘ethrog box’ is certainly modern practice, Spong presents no evidence to show that it was so some nineteen hundred years ago. He says that as the liturgy of Tabernacles was transformed by the developing Christian story, it came to include a procession to a “tomb-like temporary dwelling”. At that dwelling, a white-robed member of the community would announce “He is not here, behold, the place where they laid him”; in time that liturgical functionary became transformed into the angel or angels who gave to the women the message that “the tomb, which was a symbol of death, could not contain Jesus of Nazareth”. Again, Spong gives no basis for this view.

However, Spong’s primary belief in this proposal is that it was the ceremonial meal that the *Sukkoth* tradition requires to be eaten in the booth that came to symbolise the connection between the risen Lord and the breaking of bread and

pouring of wine in the re-enactment of the common meal. He says that in that sacramental act “eyes were opened” to see the body and blood of Jesus as the bread of life and the atoning sacrifice to lift human beings into the presence of God. Spong believes that those who shared that experience now saw it as their vocation to feed the world with that bread and wine.

In a summing-up of his concept of events after the crucifixion of Jesus (pp. 278-279), Spong says that the idea of the resurrection began with Peter, who “finally understood that it was the duty of those who loved Christ to feed the sheep of Christ”. In Spong’s view, Peter’s understanding was taken to Jerusalem and “found expression inside the Jewish festival of Tabernacles”. He goes on to say that the knowledge of the feast of Tabernacles was “lost...to the gentile consciousness after the fall of Jerusalem”. It was preserved in a single reference in Jn. 7:2, but became part of the Passion narratives by “moving all of the symbols of Tabernacles into the dominant celebration of Passover”. Spong now states categorically that while Passover was the time of the crucifixion, the feast of Tabernacles was the setting for the final proclamation in Jerusalem of the story of Jesus’ resurrection. He lists what he sees as the “symbols of Tabernacles” that came to be regarded as the symbols of the “Jerusalem resurrection tradition”: “a Palm Sunday procession, the cleansing of the temple, the empty booth, the sweet-smelling spices, the ceremonial meal, and the angelic messenger who announced the resurrection”. It must be noted here that Smith’s paper *No Time for Figs*, which Spong has acknowledged to have been his inspiration for this speculation, only deals with the procession, the cleansing, and the fig-tree-cursing vignette. Smith does not suggest any of the other ‘symbols’ in Spong’s list, so it may be considered that those extra ‘symbols’ come purely from Spong’s personal speculations.

Following on from that summary, Spong says that he see two stages in the Easter narrative that is the basis for the biblical accounts; he says that both stages “find expression in the confusion of the texts of the Gospel” (p. 279). He proposes that “the primary moment of Easter” occurred in Galilee, and involved Simon. Simon and his Galilean companions, with whom he had shared his experience, journeyed to Jerusalem for the feast of Tabernacles, where they explained their insights to the Jerusalem community of Jesus’ followers. Spong believes that because that sharing

took place during the Tabernacles celebrations, the biblical Easter narratives were in fact shaped “by the symbols of the Tabernacles”. So far, this is merely reiteration of his previous statements. However, he goes on to revisit an earlier hypothesis, saying that in time even the historic detail of Mary Magdalene’s “futile search for the tomb of Jesus” became part of the Easter story, so making the story of the women at the empty tomb “the focal point of that narrative” in all four of the canonical Gospels.

Spong now suggests that there are two pericopes in the synoptic Gospels which are set in a Tabernacles context. He says that these stories “add mightily to the persuasiveness of this argument”. The first of those is the “strange and difficult-to-interpret story of the transfiguration” in Mk. 9:2-8, Mt. 17:1-8, and Lk. 9:28-36; Spong notes that the fourth Gospel does not include the Transfiguration story, while being the only Gospel to mention Tabernacles (p. 279-280). He now attempts to justify his placing of the Transfiguration story in the context of the feast of Tabernacles. The first point that he notes is that both Matthew and Mark say that the Transfiguration took place “after six days”, while Luke says “about eight days after” the events narrated previously. He notes that the feast of Tabernacles was for a period of seven or eight days; from that point, he concludes that “The time references in the Gospel narratives of the transfiguration make little sense except when these narratives are placed in the context of the festival of Tabernacles, where surely they once resided”. However, that statement may also be a *non sequitur* with no basis apart from Spong’s speculation.

The second point made about the Transfiguration narrative is the suggestion by Peter, along with James and John, to erect “three booths” for Elijah, Moses, and Jesus; Spong sees that as another feature locating this story in Tabernacles. However, while ‘booths’ is the term used in the RSV, other versions say ‘dwellings’, ‘shelters’, or ‘tabernacles’ – the Greek word used in all three synoptic Gospels is *σκηνας* (*skēnas*), which can denote any temporary dwelling including a tent. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990, 615, 41:58; 660, 42:107; 700, 43:116), in relation to all three Synoptic Gospels accounts, simply sees the ‘three booths’ suggestion as being a reference to the feast of Tabernacles, due to a misunderstanding of the Transfiguration event by the disciples. Spong says that, in his opinion, the rejection of the booths proposal by a heavenly voice reflects the

primitive Christian community's growing realisation of "the uniqueness of the Jesus experience". It may be noted that a note to Mk. 9:5 in the NRSV (Bible 2006:1740) suggests that the erection of 'dwellings' may be linked to the Greek custom of building a shrine on the site of the epiphany of a deity. Spong, probably unwittingly, makes a similar implication in his next point about the building of 'booths'. Firstly, he says that "The resurrection of Jesus was thought in the primitive tradition to be similar to the mythology surrounding Elijah and Moses. Jesus, too, was taken into God". He then says that as Jesus was seen to be similar to Elijah and Moses, "a booth, therefore, should be built at Tabernacles for all three". However, no authority can be found to indicate that in the Hebrew and Jewish tradition, 'booths', *sukkoth*, were constructed for the prophets or anyone other than the living participants at the feast; in practice there was only one tabernacle, which was the Tabernacle of the Lord, *ha-mishkan*. The Gospels all relate the Transfiguration story as happening before the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, so Spong's argument can be supported only by reading this pericope as happening at the feast of Tabernacles some six months after the resurrection events – which is Spong's contention.

The second event which Spong believes sets the Transfiguration in the context of Tabernacles is Luke's story of Jesus' appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-35) (pp. 280-281). He says that this story confuses both history and context. However, there are two immediate criticisms to be made of Spong's text. First is an obvious misreading of the biblical text: citing Lk. 24:23, Spong says "They [Cleopas and his partner] appear to have been made aware that the grave had not been located". It may be noted that Spong's text says "Clopas", but Luke's character is 'Cleopas', while the name 'Clopas' appears in Jn. 19:25 – "...Mary the wife of Clopas...". However, while that verse from Luke does say "and did not find his body...", v. 22 has said "Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early this morning", and the remainder of v. 23 tells of the women reporting to the group that an angel had told them that Jesus was alive. In other words, the group not only knew where Jesus' body had been placed, but the women of the group had visited the tomb, which is the direct opposite of Spong's statement. However, there no longer was a body in the tomb. The second criticism is that Spong says "But when they arrived at Emmaus, there was some

confusion in the text about whether that was home or a temporary dwelling, perhaps a booth". However, Luke's text, in any version, makes no mention of what sort of dwelling it was; the only reference is to "the village to which they were going" (Lk. 24:28). Spong now observes that Luke says that when the Jesus figure accepted the invitation to share the evening meal, he took over the role of host and took, blessed, broke and shared the bread. In Spong's view, this "had all the markings of the ceremonial liturgical meal shared inside the sukkoth, or temporary dwelling, as part of the celebration of the festival of Tabernacles". He says that by adding the "concluding proclamation" in Lk. 24:35, that Jesus had been "known to them in the breaking of the bread", it seems that the case is "significantly made"; however, it could also be suggested that Spong is clutching at straws to make his case. Also, it may be recalled that Spong has used this vignette previously (pp. 198-200), in his examination of the 'opening of eyes' in the context of 'the common meal'.

Spong's "final clue" to validate his reconstruction of the Easter story is Luke's story of Pentecost; Spong gives no reference, but the story is found in Acts 2. He believes that this story also had "major Tabernacles themes", but that Luke had set it in the context of *Shavaut* [sic], which is "a different Jewish festival from Passover"; he says that the combination of those three festivals provides his 'final clue'.

In examining this proposal, it must be recalled that Spong, on p. 75, has previously identified Luke as being either a Gentile "who had been drawn deeply into the orbit of Judaism", or "a thoroughly Hellenized Jew". Either way, Spong now suggests (p. 281) that Luke was "not familiar with Jewish liturgical practices", which could be regarded as a contradiction of his previous view. He says that Luke seems to have been aware of an event that had occurred in Jerusalem at some point after the crucifixion; he implies that Luke did not know exactly when that event had taken place. Again Spong does not give any biblical citations, but his next conclusion appears to be based on Lk. 24:49, "And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you..." , and Acts 1:4-5, 8 which refer to the Holy Spirit coming to the group in Jerusalem. He says that Luke had placed the resurrection on "the first day of the week following Good Friday", and therefore had "decided that the second, later, Jerusalem event had to be identified with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit". Spong then hypothesises that since the first 'Jerusalem experience' was set in the context

of Passover, and the tradition set the second experience in the context of a later Jewish religious feast, Luke chose the next feast in the Jewish calendar, *Shavuot* or Pentecost, as the setting for his story of the coming of the Holy Spirit. This was the origin of “the Christian festival of Whitsunday, or Pentecost”. Because he now sees Luke as being unfamiliar with the Jewish liturgical practices, Spong suggests that the wrong feast was chosen – it should have been *Sukkoth* rather than *Shavuot*. He also suggests that “it was not a bad guess on Luke’s part”, as both are harvest festivals, and both carry symbols that would have been familiar to the Christians of Luke’s period. However, he believes that Luke’s Pentecost story employs the symbols of the feast of Tabernacles – *Sukkoth* - rather than those associated with *Shavuot*. The particular ‘symbols’ which Spong notes are “the gathering of the nations’ and “the outpouring of the Spirit in the form of living water”; he says that the use of those two elements “indicate that Luke simply chose the wrong festival” as the basis for his story. Although Spong again does not give any biblical references, it can be assumed that he has drawn the themes of ‘living water’ and ‘gathering of the nations’ from Zech. 13:8 and ch.14, and the ‘outpouring of the Spirit’ from Acts 2. However, it could be considered that this is a rather loose reading of both references, as Zechariah does not mention the Holy Spirit, and Acts has “a sound...like the rush of a mighty wind” and “tongues of fire”, but does not mention ‘living water’.

Spong now comes to the conclusion of Chapter 20, and of his examination and proposed reconstruction of the traditions surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (p. 282). He reiterates his theory that the belief in a risen Jesus originated with the disciple group in Galilee, and was taken to Jerusalem by that group at the time of the feast of Tabernacles some six months after Jesus’ crucifixion. He believes that much of the tradition now associated with Easter – for example, Palm Sunday – was originally a part of the celebration of Tabernacles, a Jewish feast now largely lost in the Christian tradition. Spong believes that “our great failing” – presumably the Christian community’s failing – is an ignorance of midrash, which led to a literalising of “narratives that were not intended to be literalized”. He says that the legends which grew up about the Jerusalem Easter

should not be dismissed as being untrue, but instead should be “probed for clues” to the reality behind the legends.

Spong finishes the chapter with a statement of his personal conviction and faith in the risen Jesus: that he has “seen the Lord”.

Chapter 20 is effectively the final chapter of John Shelby Spong’s *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?*. Given that it is titled ‘Grounding the Speculation in Scripture’, it could be expected that it would present a clear summary of the scriptural bases for Spong’s speculations on the origins of the mythology surrounding the Christian tradition of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. However, it instead introduces a lengthy further speculation, largely on whether the traditions of Easter, particularly Palm Sunday but including the ‘women at the tomb’ and ‘the road to Emmaus’ narratives, should in fact be associated with the Jewish feast of Tabernacles some six months later. Spong then casts his Tabernacles net even wider, attempting to demonstrate that the Transfiguration narratives in the synoptic Gospels, and Luke’s Pentecost story, are all based in the Jewish feast of *Sukkoth* – Tabernacles or Booths. There is very little about the Resurrection, *per se*, other than a reprise of Spong’s theory of an enlightenment coming to the Galilean disciples and a subsequent journey to Jerusalem at the time of the feast of Tabernacles. Again, it may be seen as being marred by dubious readings and misquoting of the biblical texts, as well as tenuous semantic arguments.

Chapter 21 – ‘Life After Death – This I Do Believe’

Chapter 21, ‘Life After Death – This I Do Believe’, is the final chapter of John Shelby Spong’s *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?* (pp. 283-293). It departs from the basic theme of this book – the Christian traditions surrounding the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth after his crucifixion – being instead a short and highly personal essay on the beliefs of the man John Shelby Spong about the subject of life after death. However, while it covers a wide range of topics, including political comment, business ethics, and concepts of heaven and hell, it does not present any firm

hypotheses or academic arguments; it is purely Spong's statement on his personal beliefs and convictions – his religious faith.

Spong begins the chapter with a résumé of his research into the subject of an afterlife in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. He says that 'life after death' does not appear as a concept in Hebrew texts before about the sixth century BCE, and showed little development before about the second century BCE. He also observes that every New Testament writer presents a different understanding of the afterlife. He notes as examples that for Paul there was no 'hell' *per se*, only either "the hope of life in Christ" or "the absolute annihilation of life in a timeless death", while Matthew, on the other hand, provides "most of the hellfire references in the New Testament".

On p. 284, Spong moves on to look at the influence that the idea of a life after death has had on Western history. He says that the concept of an afterlife has been a deterrent to the building of a just society, insofar as it "made the unfair world appear to be fair" by representing justice delayed rather than denied altogether. He notes Karl Marx's suggestion that a religion based on that premise "was properly recognized as nothing but an opiate of the people" (this slightly misquotes Marx, but serves Spong's purpose here). Spong then argues that 'liberal politics' came into being in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries "to fill the vacuum created by the denial of a belief in a life after death". He lists twelve examples of organisations that he believes have come into existence as "an unconscious response to the loss of a sure conviction in regard to life after death". It is an interesting list, ranging from Marx through various forms of European socialism, and the Labour Party in the United Kingdom, to the peace movement, the women's movement, and the gay movement. Spong believes that this was "the first political response...to the loss of faith in God and the loss of a hope for heaven" (p. 285).

Spong believes that the "second political response" was far less noble, as the growth of "the secular spirit" overcame "the drive to serve God by creating fairness on this earth", making 'liberalism' a bad word. He says that the drive to create fairness was replaced in the political arena by "a spirit of greed and amorality", beginning with the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Spong believes that over the subsequent presidencies of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon

and Ronald Reagan, a “self-serving greed”, a “shift in attitude from immorality to amorality”, and an inability to differentiate between right and wrong, benefited the rich to the great disadvantage of the poor and middle classes. He says that “similar phenomena of greed and legal class warfare” existed in the United Kingdom during the long prime ministership of “England’s Iron Lady of politics, Margaret Thatcher”, with the same consequences as in the USA (p. 285).

Convinced that what had been the “leading Christian nations of the West” had lost the concept of a fairness connected with life after death, and that a political system based on ‘fairness’ is not a realistic possibility, Spong began to search for “a new basis and a new value system for human life” (p. 286). He turned to other religious traditions, seeking to understand their views of life after death by examining such concepts as Nirvana, reincarnation, and the transmigration of souls. He says that all those concepts “engaged my attention, titillated my interest for a moment, but then finally lost their appeal”. Spong says that after reading widely in the field of parapsychology he found much that is unexplainable in that area, so keeps an open mind while at the same time remaining “an agnostic” on this matter.

Finally in his search, Spong sought to analyse the Judeo-Christian images of heaven and hell (pp.286-287). He says that both concepts grew out of something deep in the human psyche. Hell was seen as “a place of separation, a place of punishment, and a place of nothingness” that “speaks to each of our distorting fears”. Heaven, on the other hand, was “the ultimate symbol of [people’s] dreams”, a “land flowing with milk and honey”, a place of “no sorrow or sadness and no separation”, and “the eternal Sabbath, the heavenly rest”. His final conclusion is that both church and society have used the notions of heaven and hell as a method of behaviour control. Heaven was the ultimate reward for good behaviour, hell the ultimate punishment for doing evil, with God playing the dual role of ‘rewarding parent’ and ‘punishing judge’. It may be noted that this matter appears again later in his *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (1998:200-219) and his subsequent 'Twelve Theses' (2000:469)

The remainder of this chapter deals with ‘The Merging of Transcendence and Immanence’ (pp. 287-293). Spong begins by saying that after five years of

investigations into the subject of life after death he still had no final conclusion on the matter, and so felt unable to express clearly his convictions about it.

It is Spong's belief that death is not the end of life. He does not believe in the use of 'life after death' as a means of behaviour control; he hopes that the church in the future will give up "the behaviour control business". He says that the church should "love people into life"; to do otherwise through "some self-imposed standard of righteousness" is to misread the whole message of the Gospel. He rejects both the ideas of heaven as a place of reward and hell as a place of punishment.

The remaining five pages of this chapter, and this book, are about John Shelby Spong's personal thoughts and convictions about Jesus and his life, death and resurrection, and about God as found in Jesus. Finally, he says that in those thoughts he recognises the legends and accretions that have attached to the ancient truths, and so he goes beyond those legends to the original experience. Beyond words, feeling unable to express properly his deepest thoughts, he says a threefold "prayerful yes": yes to Jesus, yes to resurrection, and yes to life after death. Those "three yeses" are the defining experience of Spong's life. On that basis, he no longer concerns himself with questions about the nature of life after death, or about the nature or reality of heaven. He says that it is his business "to live now, to love now, and to be now", in the hope that through his example others may be called into a deeper and fuller life, love and being.

John Shelby Spong ends his personal essay with a confession of faith: that he has chosen to "serve the crucified/risen one", and that he lives in the expectant hope that he will someday be where that risen one is. It may be seen as an interesting comment on Spong's views that he chooses to end this book (and many others, including his autobiographical *Here I Stand*) with the Hebrew "Shalom".

It is not within the compass of this thesis to make comment on this chapter. Irrespective of agreement or disagreement with its content, it is John Shelby Spong's statement of his personal convictions on the subject of life after death and his relationship with God and Jesus: it must be respected in that context. It may be

noted that much of the thought expressed in this chapter can be found in Spong's later books on the future of the Christian church: *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (1998) and *A New Christianity for a New World* (2001).

This completes the examination of John Shelby Spong's *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?*. At this point, it can be said that far from simply 'de-literalising' the resurrection narratives, Spong has introduced a great deal of new, convoluted speculation on their origins. The book appears to be a farrago of that speculation, plus tenuous argument and dubious use of biblical texts. It may be considered that he has in fact re-written the story of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus – a 'Gospel according to Spong'. He appears to have approached his writing with a pre-conceived idea, which he attempts to justify by all possible means.

It also appears that there is little that is original thought by Spong himself, with much of the material being borrowed from other scholars, particularly those who agree with or support Spong's line of thinking. Unfortunately, it is necessary to read, and critically examine, most, if not all, of Spong's literary output in order to enable a reader to confirm that conclusion. There is, however, a great deal of specious speculation and argument which is more likely to confuse the lay reader than to deliteralise, and make clear, the biblical texts.

Other works by Spong, both earlier and later than *Resurrection*, will now be examined for further views on any of the topics addressed by him in this book.

CHAPTER 4 – OTHER BOOKS BY JOHN SHELBY SPONG

This chapter will examine other books by John Shelby Spong with a view to finding comment on the development of the Christian tradition, in particular relating to the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. However, Spong's 1992 book *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* will be examined first, to establish his views on the traditions surrounding the birth of Jesus. This is Spong's only book other than *Resurrection* to address a specific tradition within the overall mythology and practice of Christianity.

Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus

It is noted that the cover title of this book, *Born of a Woman*, also says *A Bishop Rethinks the Virgin Birth and the Treatment of Women by a Male-Dominated Church*. Although the book purports to be an examination of the traditions surrounding the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, it also carries an underlying agenda of Spong's views on the treatment of women by the Christian Church. His first chapter opens by accusing the Christian church of almost two thousand years of supporting, and participating in, the oppression of women.

Spong says (1992:3) that he does not believe that Mary was literally a biological virgin, or that a 'virgin mother' is a credible concept in modern times. It is noted that he refers to other 'birth' mythologies that parallel the Christian tradition, but says that he is "not convinced" that those other traditions may have influenced the development of the Christian mythology (personal discussion 01 September 2007). He also suggests that if Jesus was not divinely conceived by Mary, then there is the possibility that the conception may have been 'irregular' and that Jesus was in fact an 'illegitimate' or 'bastard' child. This option is also discussed by Bruce Chilton and James H. Charlesworth, in their suggestions that Jesus may have been a *mamzer* – the product of a union not permitted by the Torah. (Chilton, in J.H. Charlesworth 2006: 84-110) and James H. Charlesworth (Charlesworth 2006:60-63)

Spong begins his examination of the Early Christian texts with a reading of the letters of Paul, considered to be the oldest preserved Christian writing (Spong

1992:23). Quoting Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans – Paul's only references to the birth of Jesus – Spong notes that neither makes any reference to Jesus' conception and birth being anything but natural (Gal. 4:4-5; Rom. 1:3-4). In Chapter 4, 'From the Scandal of the Cross to the Scandal of the Crib' (pp. 29-42), Spong introduces the questions that he believes surround the origins of Jesus. Here he depends on Paul for his information as he seeks to investigate the development of the Christian traditions in the time between Paul and the writing of the last canonical Gospel. According to Spong, a "fascinating theological process" moved from the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith, beginning with a real man from a real family living in the real town of Nazareth. It may be noted that there is some controversy, not raised by Spong, as to whether a town of Nazareth actually existed in the 'Jesus period', generally prior to c.70 CE. This question is addressed, albeit indirectly, in various papers in James H. Charlesworth's *Jesus and Archaeology* (Charlesworth 2006); a quite specific comment regarding the lack of archaeological evidence from the 'Jesus period', by Charlesworth himself, is found on page 38 of that book. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Brown, Fitzmeyer & Murphy 1990:680, 43:20) refers to Nazareth as "...this obscure town...of some 150 people...", and a note to Matt. 2:23 in the NRSV (Bible 2006:1671) describes it as "an insignificant agricultural village".

Using various Gospel references, Spong builds a picture of Jesus in the community, and later as a gifted teacher. He also notes that after the birth narratives, the spouse of Mary fades from the scene to become "almost a nonpresence" in Christian sacred writings. John Meier (Meier 1991:317 n. 5) suggests that Joseph may already have died. However, Spong then goes on to say (pp. 29-32), drawing on Michael Goulder for support (*Luke, a New Paradigm*, 1989, vol.1), that the focus of the Gospel story is on Jesus' final days. He also states his view that these parts of the Gospels came into being to satisfy liturgical needs, saying that the early Christians reinterpreted the Jewish liturgical calendar with Christian narratives about Jesus; he again draws on Goulder (*Luke*, 1989) to support that view.

In pages 32-42, Spong examines the way in which he sees mythology and folklore developing, with specific reference to the growth of traditions about Jesus

and his relationship to and with God. He says that stories of the post-death exaltation of Jesus by God had developed, so that Jesus was no longer the messiah who had died a scandalous death, but the *Christus Rex*; the humanity of Jesus had begun to fade. However, Jesus was still “born of a woman” (p. 36), with some questions relating to his origins. Spong says (p. 42) that by the late first century CE, the issue had been addressed and the birth traditions had been developed.

In Chapter 5, ‘The Development of the Birth Tradition’ (pp. 43-60), Spong examines the way in which the stories of Jesus’ miraculous birth may have developed. There is a lengthy comparison of the accounts in Matthew and Luke, the only Gospels that have a birth narrative. On page 44, Spong states that the traditions surrounding the birth of Jesus contain so many legendary details that any claim to historicity cannot be entertained. He says that “...no recognized New Testament scholar...would today seriously defend the historicity of these narratives”, although he gives no support for his view. However, he also says (p. 45), that to regard the birth narratives as mythology is not the same as saying that they are untrue. Rather, it should force the reader not only to see how “the language of myth and poetry” was used to describe what the Gospel writers saw as a divine-human encounter, but also “to see truth in dimensions larger than literal truth”.

Spong now (p. 45) refers to Joseph Fitzmyer (*The Gospel According to Luke, I-X*, 1981) and John Drury (*Tradition and Design in Luke’s Gospel*, 1976) to demonstrate the view that, firstly, the birth accounts are not a part of the earliest Christian kerygma, and, secondly, that they may have come from two distinct and different traditions. He briefly discusses the possibility of common sources for Matthew and Luke, including introducing the theoretical ‘Q’ (Quelle) source, as a possible explanation for the similarities between the two. He notes that even assuming the existence of ‘Q’, “no birth tradition emerges from this primitive source”. Pages 47-50 contain a comparison of the accounts in Matthew and Luke, coming to the conclusion that at best both versions cannot be historically accurate, and at worst neither is historic. Spong says that he subscribes to the latter view, which he claims, again without supporting references, is “...the overwhelming consensus of biblical scholars today...an almost uncontested conclusion...”.

In pages 50-56, Spong returns to the concept of Easter as the origin of Christianity, rather than the events now celebrated as Christmas. Drawing on Edward Schillebeeckx (*Jesus*, 1981) and Paul (the letter to the Philippians), he explores the development of the mythology which changed the 'exaltation' of Jesus by God into the 'resurrection' with Jesus raising himself from the grave. He then suggests that in human terms acknowledgement of a son comes at birth rather than at death, hence it became necessary to move the 'exaltation' story back to Jesus' birth. Spong believes that this shift occurred in "at least the ninth decade of the common era" (p. 56), thus setting the stage for the emergence of the birth narratives and accounts of Jesus' divine conception.

At this point (p. 56), Spong acknowledges that there was a long-standing record in other religious traditions of notable figures being born of a virgin. He cites, among others, Horus, born of Isis c. 1550 BCE; Krishna, born of Devaki c. 1200 BCE; and Gautama Buddha, born of Maya c. 600 BCE. It is noted that Spong refers to Krishna and Gautama Buddha as being, respectively, the eighth and ninth Avatars of "the Hindu pantheon" and "India". It could be suggested that Spong does not fully understand the meaning of 'avatar' – an 'incarnation', in both these cases of the Hindu deity Vishnu (albeit not widely so in the case of Gautama Buddha). [In fairness to Spong, he says, in various of his books, that he writes his manuscripts in longhand, using a fountain-pen. It is possible that a typist, unfamiliar with the subject matter, could have read the name of the Vedic deity 'Indra' as 'India' – but, even so, Spong is no less wrong]. He also notes other similarities, such as Horus receiving gifts from three kings at his birth and the Holy Ghost [sic] descending upon Maya (the mother of Siddhartha Gautama). Addressing times closer to Early Christianity (p. 57), he observes that divine fathers were attributed to both Alexander the Great and Caesar Augustus (both of whom, particularly Augustus, would have been well known to the inhabitants of the Eastern Mediterranean region in the first century CE). However, as noted earlier, Spong is "not convinced" that these established earlier traditions would have influenced the development of the Christian mythology (personal discussion 01 September 2007); instead, he relies on the Hebrew traditions. He also notes that the Christian virgin birth stories were not written down until the end of the first century CE, and then by the two evangelists who were "self-

consciously addressing the expanding gentile presence in the church". However, having made those observations, he does not suggest that the Christian stories were merely following this long-established pattern, but instead turns to the Hebrew tradition. for 'miraculous birth' stories. Spong comments (p. 58) that if "relatively minor biblical figures" could inspire birth traditions, then "...surely the one thought of as God's 'only begotten Son' could do no less."

Spong now proceeds to a detailed examination of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, with the aim of discarding any literalism that has grown up around the original stories.

Chapter 6 – 'Matthew's Story, Part I' (pp. 61-82) – looks at what Spong says is the nature of the writer 'Matthew', as well as the background to the actual birth story. Following on from his earlier comment (p. 60) that the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke reflect the writers' overall intentions, Spong now (p. 61) says that for the writer of the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus of Nazareth was the experience of God living in human history. Matthew, in Spong's view, was well versed in the Haggadic midrash tradition, and so did not see himself as writing a factual history, but wrote to express his heartfelt belief that Jesus' life was the completion of the hopes and traditions of the Jews through the ages. As the presumed date for the Gospel of Matthew is about 85 CE, the author would have been writing after the 70 CE Roman destruction of the Temple, using Koine Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic.

Spong now suggests (pp. 64-67) that after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the only part of the Jewish tradition that remained was the Law. The 'Jesus movement', with its increasing component of Gentiles reluctant to accept the Mosaic Law, was seen increasingly as a threat to the structure of the Jewish community. Spong further suggests that Matthew wrote his Gospel as a means of reminding both Jewish and Gentile Christians of what he saw as the essential Hebrew background to the 'Jesus faith' – the traditions of Abraham and David. Spong, citing B.W. Bacon (*Studies in Matthew*, 1930), also says that Matthew deliberately fashioned his Gospel on the lines of the Torah, divided into five 'books', to be the "Christian Pentateuch". As an introduction to those books he attached the birth story, which

was itself divided into five sections: the genealogy, the annunciation, the Magi, the flight into Egypt, and the return from Egypt. Citing Herman Hendrickx (*Infancy Narratives*, 1984), Spong says that the Gospel ended with the Passion story, again divided into five 'mini-chapters' (p. 67). It is noted that this idea does not appear to be supported by *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Brown, Fitzmeyer & Murphy 1990:630-634).

Now follows an examination of the Hebrew traditions and writings which Spong believes that Matthew used in the writing of the birth narratives; here he draws on Raymond Brown (*The Birth of the Messiah*, 1977). First (pp. 68-9) is the genealogy; again drawing on Brown, Spong notes that as well as Mary "the wife of Joseph to whom Jesus was born" (Mt. 1:16), four other women from the Hebrew tradition are included in the list. They are Tamar (Gen. 38:1ff), Rahab (Josh. 2:1ff), Ruth (Ruth 3:6ff) and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:2ff). According to their various stories, each of those four had something irregular in her sexual relationships (p. 70). Having briefly mentioned various theories put forward by Jerome and, later, Luther, Spong, following "More modern scholars, including Herman Hendrickx...", questions whether this could be Matthew preparing his readers for the idea that there may have been something irregular about Jesus' conception due to "Mary's compromised sexual status". He does say (p. 71) that "In the midrash these four women ...kept alive the royal line and therefore the messianic hope...by submission to the Holy Spirit", followed by a comparison with Mary's pregnancy.

Pages 76-82 look at the interpretation that Matthew (1:18-25) placed on Isa. 7:14 and the various implications of a misinterpretation or mistranslation of the original Hebrew text 'young woman' to the Greek 'virgin'. Spong says (p. 76) that the Hebrew word used in Isa. 7:14 is '*almah* (עַלְמָה)', but the Hebrew for 'virgin' is '*betulah* (בְּתוּלָה)'. This may be checked against the text in the Hebrew Tanakh. He goes on to say that '*almah*' appears ten times in the Hebrew scriptures, never with the meaning 'virgin'; '*betulah*', on the other hand, appears more than fifty times and always meaning 'virgin'. Spong now says that the writers of the Septuagint in the third to first centuries BCE mistranslated '*almah*' to the Greek '*parthenos* (παρθένος)', which does mean 'virgin'. That could have various implications which Spong does not raise:

(1) that although the author of Matthew was (according to Spong) a Jewish scribe, he chose to use the Greek Septuagint as his source (*The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1990:635, 42:11, mentions this option);

(2) that because there is no autograph copy of 'Matthew' extant, it is not known what the original actually said; or

(3) an honest, or deliberate, mistake was made by an early Christian copyist (q.v. Ehrman 2005c, *Misquoting Jesus*, pp. 51ff.).

However, Spong implies that Matthew was aware of the mistranslation but chose to use the 'virgin' connotation for his narrative. Spong also says that a "most cursory examination" of the Isaiah passage would have shown that use of the text to be "nothing short of absurd"; it was taken out of context and (p. 79) had nothing whatever to do with Jesus. He notes that "miraculous virgin birth" was "not...an uncommon idea in the Mediterranean world" and suggests that Matthew combined the Isaiah passage with that tradition to establish both the divinity and the Davidic lineage of Jesus. This could be seen as another example of Spong acknowledging the existence of pre-Christian traditions but refusing to accept that they may have had any influence on the development of the Christian narratives and traditions – "I'm not convinced" (personal discussion 01 September 2007). Spong further suggests that in using this virgin birth story, Matthew was also countering suggestions that Jesus was illegitimate (cf. Chilton B. 2006, 'Recovering Jesus' *Mamzarut*).

In Chapter 7, 'Matthew's Story, Part II', (pp. 83-98), Spong rejects the notion that the birth stories are, or were ever intended to be, literal historical fact. Spong then says that Matthew "created this birth tradition out of ...the interplay between his imagination and the Hebrew Bible". Again, Spong seems not to entertain the possibility of any source for the developing Christian narratives other than the Hebrew tradition. He firmly believes that the birth narrative in Matthew is an attempt to explain the adult life of Jesus solely in terms of the Hebrew Scriptures.

On pages 86-90 is an examination of the origins of the magi element of the birth narrative. First (pp. 86-7) is a suggestion from Hendrickx (*Infancy Narratives*,

1984) that the magi are drawn from various verses in Isaiah (specifically, in chapters 40-66). The second theory, from Raymond Brown (*The Birth of the Messiah*, 1977), is that Matthew's magi story is based on the Balaam and Balaam story in Num. 22-24; this seems to be a rather obscure reference, despite Spong's enthusiasm for Brown. A third suggestion (p. 89) is the story of the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-13), with the addition of a midrash incorporation of a star into the story. A parallel is drawn between the Queen testing Solomon with hard questions and the magi questioning Herod about the infant Jesus. It is noted that Spong does not mention the possibility of Matthew drawing on the Zoroastrian tradition for his 'magi'. As the Greek text says "*magoi apo anatolōn*" (μάγοι ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν) – 'magi from the east' – the implication is certainly there. He now introduces stories (from Josephus, Pliny and others) about notable visits to Herod in Caesarea and Nero in Rome which may have served as an historical basis for Matthew's story. He also speculates on the origin of other features of the tale such as the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Spong notes, as an example of how traditions develop, that Matthew does not specifically say that there were 'three' magi, or that they were 'kings' (Mt 2:1-12). The entry in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:635, 42:12) in general makes these same points.

The question of the origins of the tradition that Nazareth was the home of Jesus is discussed on pages 94-97. The stories of Jesus' adult life clearly identify him with Nazareth, but this created a problem for the early Christians because the Messiah was supposed to come from the Davidic town of Bethlehem in Judea. According to Spong, Matthew, therefore, created a story of a "...fascinating theological, not geographical, journey" from Bethlehem to Nazareth via Egypt and Ramah (Mt. 2:13-23). The question of the actual status of Nazareth in the 'Jesus period' has been noted earlier. Spong also notes (p. 96) that it is not certain where the 'shall be called a Nazarene' prophecy occurs in the Hebrew Bible; he suggests that the "best guess" is Isaiah 4:3, "...he...will be called holy.". However, it is difficult to see how Spong arrives at that conclusion, as Isa. 4:3 speaks of the survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem, rather than any individual.

In Chapter 8, 'Behind Luke – An Original Pageant?' (pp. 99-112), Spong opens with what he believes to be a brief sketch of 'Luke': probably a Greek-speaking Gentile, by his own admission not an eyewitness to the events he writes about (Lk.1:2), and probably a second-generation convert to Christianity. Spong speculates as to whether 'Luke' may be more than one writer, using a number of sources (pp. 99-101). He also says that the author believed that the Christian mission to the Gentiles was God's pre-ordained plan.

Finally in this chapter, Spong examines the proposal that the birth narrative in Luke 1 and 2 is actually based on a pre-existing early Jewish-Christian pageant. He makes the point that it is Luke's version of the birth narrative, with the addition of Matthew's Magi, which is most familiar to people today, as it is the source for all the various Christmas pageants performed each year. Although Spong does not give any authority for these views, apart from "some scholars" and a passing reference to Michael Goulder and Jeffery John, he does present an interesting argument.

Chapter 9 (pp.113-136) opens with discussion about the relationship between the characters known as 'John the Baptist' and 'Jesus of Nazareth'. Spong suggests that these two figures each became the leader of a movement proclaiming God's kingdom, but that Jesus seems to have been, at least for a short time, a member of John's group. As the Christian tradition developed, it became necessary to place John the Baptist in a position subordinate to Jesus – a 'preparation'. Amongst other stratagems, Luke crafted the story of the parallel pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary. Spong notes the probability of tensions – even hostility – developing between the 'John' and 'Jesus' followers, with John being relegated to a more and more secondary position in the proto-Christian narratives. After further discussion of the concept of a pre-Christian pageant, and various possible sources in the Hebrew Scriptures, Spong reintroduces the need to establish the predominance of Jesus over John the Baptist – a virginal conception outweighs a post-menopausal conception.

Chapter 10, 'Luke's Story, Part II' (pp. 137-159), reintroduces the idea of Jewish midrash as the source for the early Christian narratives. Looking at the 'great canticles', *Magnificat*, *Benedictus*, and *Nunc Dimittus*, Spong suggests (p. 139) that these songs of praise, traditionally attributed to Mary, Zechariah and Simeon, may well have their origins in Hebrew traditional songs of praise, similar to the psalms. This view is also found in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990:681-683, 43:22-23, 26, 32; 1340, 80:11).

Spong again examines the 'pageant' and how the author appears to have created it out of various elements of Hebrew tradition. He observes (p. 138) that the ancient Scriptures shaped the way in which the Jesus stories developed, rather than the reverse in which the events of Jesus' birth, life and death occurred "in order to fulfil the Scriptures". He comments that "the average pew-sitters of our churches" are unaware of that distinction, while such ideas are commonplace in the realm of biblical scholarship. It appears that this is one of Spong's reasons for writing his various books against the literalising of the various Jesus narratives. He also says that while there is "enormous debate" over the reasons behind the birth stories of Matthew and Luke, "...no one in scholarly circles...is willing to defend the historicity or literalness" of those stories.

On page 142, Spong examines the historical accuracy of the events related in Lk. 2:1-3, describing a Roman worldwide census requiring people to return to their ancestral homes. He notes that Quirinius was not appointed Legate in Syria until 6 CE, and also that there was a census under Quirinius in 6-7 CE, covering Galilee but not Judea. However, he is either unaware of, or chooses to ignore, the existence of a town called Bethlehem in Galilee (as opposed to Bethlehem in Judea), about 11 kilometres from Nazareth. This place is mentioned in Joshua 19:15 as being included in the land allotted to the tribe of Zebulun. According to Bruce Chilton (2006:95), that information was available at least some twenty years before Spong wrote this book; it may lend some authenticity to Luke's story.

It is interesting that Spong notes that shepherds were part of the birth narratives of both Mithra and Osiris, but again rejects the possibility that those traditions may have contributed to the development of the Christian narratives (p. 147). Instead, he says (p. 149) that Luke's angelic annunciation to the shepherds

followed the general outline of all the traditional biblical annunciation stories. It may be noted here that Spong appears to be confusing the mythologies of the Zoroastrian deity 'Mithra' (related to the Vedic 'Mitra') and the Roman 'Mithras'. The two traditions were quite different, and it was Mithras who, in some versions, had shepherds (Noss 2003:364). Similarly, on page 157, Spong notes traditions surrounding Buddha, Osiris, Cyrus the king of the Persians, Alexander the Great, and Caesar Augustus, which purport to show startling levels of knowledge in childhood, but sees a similar tradition with respect to Jesus as being the result of 'Christian midrash'.

In Chapter 11, Spong looks at 'Birth Hints from Mark and John' (pp. 161-172). Although neither of those Gospels have a birth narrative *per se*, he suggests that both have a number of "illuminating hints about Jesus' origins". Referring to the possibility that Jesus was illegitimate, he notes, following Jane Schaberg (*The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 1987), that no mention is made of Joseph in these stories, and that Jesus is referred to as 'the son of Mary' (Mk 6:3). However, all those suggestions would appear to be rather tenuous, adding little to the argument either way.

Spong uses this chapter to draw out what he sees as hints that Jesus' family was dysfunctional, with both the family and the community rejecting Jesus on the basis of a 'scandal' surrounding the circumstances of his birth. In the closing paragraphs of the chapter (p. 172), he again puts forward the proposition that the early Christians developed the legend of the virgin birth in order to cover up a 'scandal' surrounding Jesus' conception. He also repeats his theme that this was in some measure due to a patriarchal prejudice against women, which has persisted to the present day. However, he also questions whether a natural conception and birth, irrespective of the circumstances, would make Jesus "...less the Christ of God, the Son of God, the Incarnate Word...".

Spong now exams the Gospel of John, again with the theme of suspect origins for Jesus. He notes the 'backward movement' of the designation of Jesus as

'the Son of God', from resurrection in Paul, through baptism in Mark, mysterious conception and birth in both Matthew and Luke, and finally to John's designating the Christ as the pre-existent and eternal Logos. He speculates that John, attempting to counteract the literalism that was creeping into the Jesus tradition, omitted any birth story, substituting a theological view. However, he believes that in that process both Jesus and Mary became increasingly "dehumanised". Jesus became the incarnation of the pre-existent Logos, while Mary moved from virgin birth (or conception) to perpetual virgin, *theotokos* (Mother of God, or Godbearer), and finally a place in an expanded Trinity (p. 167).

In Chapter 12, 'Facing the Implications of Scripture' (pp. 173-185), Spong appears to indulge in some self-examination as to the dangers of taking the biblical narratives to be literally true. He comments that the virgin birth narratives in the Gospels are "clearly shaped by the other virgin birth traditions...in the Mediterranean world..."; this is an admission that he has not made previously. Examining the Creeds which are part of the Christian liturgies, he says that it is not possible to relate the creedal assertions with the realities of twentieth century knowledge. However, while he is opposed to the literalisation of the birth narratives – or any other biblical material – he is equally opposed to the removal of any traditional phrases from the Christian liturgies (pp. 178-181). In particular, Spong refers to the creedal sentence "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin [sic] Mary". He believes that to rewrite that statement would be to attempt to rewrite history, because Christians throughout the life of the faith have used the virgin birth narratives to interpret their experience of Jesus. Rather, he would encourage "the cracking open of the literalized symbols" in order to reveal "the truths to which the symbols point". It could be considered that Spong's views expressed here contradict his general thrust against a literal reading of the Christian Scriptures.

The remainder of Chapter 12 looks at the various references to 'father' recorded in the Gospels as being made by Jesus. In all cases these are positive statements – Spong suggests that this would be unlikely if Jesus had not had a good personal relationship with an earthly father. He goes on to suggest that the figure of Joseph may have been deliberately written out of the Christian story because it did not fit with the developing tradition of the virgin birth. Again, it may be considered

that this contradicts other statements by Spong, that 'Joseph' was a literary invention by the Gospel writers.

The last two chapters of this book are concerned with what Spong sees as being the effects of the virgin birth tradition on the status of women in the Christian world. He contends that the tradition has been used to make women subservient to men, both within the church community and in everyday life. In this analysis, he leans heavily on the views of various feminist theologians, such as Rosemary Reuther, Jane Schaberg, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Neither of these chapters deals with the possible origins of the mythology in the first century CE, but rather with what Spong believes are its ramifications over the ensuing centuries.

'Suppose Jesus Were Married'

In Chapter 13, 'Suppose Jesus Were Married' (pp. 187-199), John Shelby Spong explores the possibility of Jesus having been married, specifically to Mary Magdalene. The overall theme of this chapter is that the concept of an earthly marriage for Jesus was an anathema to the early church, as it was seen as detracting from his divinity. Spong also develops his ideas on the increasing promotion of Mary the Virgin Mother, vis-à-vis the increasing denigration of Mary Magdalene to the point of declaring her to have been a prostitute (pp. 197, 207).

'The Cost of the Virgin Myth'

Chapter 14, 'The Cost of the Virgin Myth' (pp. 201-224), the final chapter in this book, appears to be firmly grounded in 'feminist theology'. However, it has little to do with the origins of the birth narratives in the New Testament, but much to do with what Spong sees as the subjugation of women in Christianity, based on a male (often celibate) interpretation and development of those narratives. In order to make his case, Spong roams between the "patriarchal structure of the times", Gnosticism and Manichaeism, the "gentile world of the Mediterranean basin" with its "ascetic Greek tradition", and the fifth century Augustine of Hippo.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that this chapter is, in fact, the whole point of this book; the earlier examinations of the writing of the birth stories in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are merely a base for Spong's attack on what he sees as an anti-feminine Christian Church. It is noted that Spong, in fact, says, in his *Here I Stand* (2000:406), that *Born of a Woman* "was a book motivated by a deeply personal agenda", written with his daughters and step-daughter in mind. It is also noted that in the same place he refers to *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (Spong 1994) as a "companion piece" to his 1992 *Born of a Woman*.

This examination of the book *Born of a Woman – A Bishop Rethinks the Virgin Birth* is an overview of John Shelby Spong's views on the background to the traditions surrounding the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. It also introduces Spong's personal attitudes and agenda in the matter of the Christian Church's historical treatment of women in the community.

The three books which are immediately relevant to the death and resurrection traditions are: *This Hebrew Lord: a Bishop's Search for the Authentic Jesus* (1993 revision; original copyright 1974); *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: a Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (1992; original copyright 1991); and *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes* (1997; original copyright 1996). These books are more general in nature than either *Born of a Woman* or *Resurrection*, and so may not contain any matter that is significantly relevant to this thesis; they will be referred to as appropriate. The books will be considered in the order of their original publication, in order to more accurately reflect the development of Spong's thought. It must be remembered that John Shelby Spong did not write his books as a series – each is a stand-alone volume addressing a separate topic, although all are linked by a general theme of the author's personal beliefs.

This Hebrew Lord

The first book to be looked at, therefore, is *This Hebrew Lord*. Originally published in 1974, it is John Shelby Spong's second book (Spong 1993:x); his first was *Honest Prayer* (1973). This is a relatively short piece, having only one hundred and eighty-four pages of text; Spong says (1993:ix) that it originally grew out of a series of lectures which he used as instruction for people seeking confirmation in the Episcopal church. It may be noted that it was written before Spong was consecrated bishop in June 1976, but was revised after that event – hence the full title of the current version. In the period 1965-69, he began conducting a bible study class in his parish in Lynchburg, Virginia – this was also the beginning of the media interest in his views. He says that in those classes he “almost never roamed out of the Hebrew scriptures”, he admits to becoming a “Hebrewphile”, and also admits to never being quite able to address the Gospel story of Jesus (1993:11-12, 31). In 1969 he moved to a parish in Richmond, Virginia. He continued his bible study classes there, except that he was now determined to include the specifically Christian story. However, he was convinced that he had to see Jesus in a Hebrew context (1993:12-13); that view may be seen as colouring all his future writings on the development of the Christian tradition.

The first thing to be said about this book is that it is a statement of personal belief, rather than an impersonal academic argument. In fact, the first chapter (pp.3-14) is titled ‘A Necessary Personal Word’, and contains, *inter alia*, a background to Spong's religious life. The remainder of Part One (chs. 2-4, pp.15-74) deals with Spong's views on how to ‘think biblically’, the growth of the Hebrew religion, and from that base the early Christian beliefs, and, lastly, ‘sin’. Parts Three and Four, ‘Some Interpretive Words’ and ‘Return to the Center’ (chs. 9-14, pp. 119-160, and chs. 15-16, pp. 163-186) cover Spong's personal interpretations of traditional Christian teachings. Much of the material is either direct or implied criticism of the way Christianity is practiced, in both the mainstream and the evangelical ‘fundamentalist’ sectors.

Part Two of *This Hebrew Lord* is titled ‘Some Hebrew Images’ (chs. 5-8, pp. 77-115). In this part, Spong seeks to demonstrate that the Gospel writers saw Jesus as the new Moses (ch. 5), the new Elijah (ch. 6), and ‘the suffering servant’ in the

mould of Deutero-Isaiah (chs. 7, 8). It may be recalled that Moses and Elijah are the two figures from the Hebrew biblical tradition who appear talking with Jesus on the mountain in the 'Transfiguration' narratives in the Synoptic Gospels (Mk. 9:2-8, Mt. 17:1-8, Lk. 9:28-36). It is in chapter 8, 'The Suffering Servant – Part Two', that material relevant to this thesis is found (pp. 112-114). Spong says that in Luke's stories of the cleansing of the temple and the Last Supper (Lk. 19:46, 22:37), Jesus is given speeches that are direct quotes from 'Second Isaiah' (Isa. 53:12, 56:7). However, this is considered to be a tenuous line of reasoning, as in both cases it is made clear that Jesus is quoting from the Scriptures. Spong also speculates that the scriptures interpreted by the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:27) could only have come from Second Isaiah. It may be recalled that in *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?*, published some twenty years after the original *This Hebrew Lord*, Spong sees the vignettes of the temple cleansing and the road to Emmaus event as occurring in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles and Zech. 14.

This Hebrew Lord does not produce any controversial argument about the events covered in *Resurrection*, beyond the mild speculation on the origin of the scriptures 'interpreted' in the Emmaus story. However, it does establish clearly the basis for John Shelby Spong's future writings – that the Christian Gospel stories arose solely out of the Hebrew tradition, with little or no influence from any of the other, pagan, cultures which existed contemporaneously in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism

The second book for consideration is *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: a Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture*. It was published in 1991, largely as a result of a 1989 series of television debates between Spong and a television evangelist. By the time of writing this book, Spong had been a bishop for thirteen years and was an established religious author. He says that he wanted "to place the biblical and theological debates that are commonplace among scholars at the disposal of the typical churchgoer" (Spong, 1991:x). It must be recalled that this book was written before both *Born of a Woman* (1992) and *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (1994). Spong bluntly expresses his view (p. 10) that "the average pew

sitter in the average mainline church...is ...biblically illiterate”, so they have no viable alternative to biblical fundamentalism; this book is, in fact, an attack against ‘literalism’ and ‘fundamentalism’ in Christian thinking. To demonstrate that he knows what he is talking about, Spong again includes a short passage (pp.13-14) about his own fundamentalist upbringing. Again, this is, largely, a personal account rather than an academic discourse.

It must be noted that this book was published shortly before John Spong’s ‘discovery’, in 1991, of the Jewish tradition of *midrash*.

Because of its subject matter, this book covers a wide range of biblical topics. The early chapters are devoted to demonstrating the difficulties that Spong believes are experienced by an objective reader in reconciling the Old Testament narratives with both modern knowledge and other views and narratives within the Bible itself. Next, chapters 4 and 5 deal with the development of the Hebrew religious tradition and the Hebrew Bible. The remainder of the book *Rescuing the Bible* addresses the Christian tradition: chapter 6 is an introduction to the subject, chapters 7 and 8 examine Paul and his writings, 9 to 12 review the four Gospels. Chapter 13 will be dealt with below. Chapter 14 is a résumé of Spong’s arguments against a literal reading of the Bible narratives, while the Epilogue is basically a statement of his personal religious beliefs. However, Chapter 13, titled ‘Christmas and Easter: Ultimate Truth and Literal Nonsense’, does contain material that is relevant to this research. It is Spong’s attempt to identify the “striking details, mutually exclusive traditions, historic errors, and blatant exaggerations” that he believes make it impossible to take the biblical stories of Jesus’ birth and resurrection as literal narratives (p. 209).

After a short introduction (p. 209), Spong begins his Chapter 13 by examining the Christmas traditions that are based on the birth narratives in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke (pp. 210-217). He notes first that there is no account other than Matthew’s Gospel for the star which led the three magi to the house [not a stable] in Bethlehem where Jesus had been born (Mt. 2:1-12). Equally, Matthew is the only source (biblical or civil) to tell of Herod’s ‘slaughter of the innocents’ (Mt. 2:16-18). Similarly, Luke has no star or magi, but does have shepherds who find

Jesus born in a stable in Bethlehem – Spong does not mention Luke’s angelic chorus (Lk. 2:4-20). He goes on to note other contradictions between Matthew and Luke, including the genealogies of Jesus (Mt. 1, Lk. 3), which he says “can neither be reconciled nor dismissed [sic]”; while both may be wrong, both cannot be right, thereby destroying any notion of biblical inerrancy. In pages 213-215, Spong notes “deliberate attempts to retell stories in the Hebrew tradition”, citing various passages from the Hebrew Bible that could provide an origin for a number of the traditions that surround Jesus’ birth. Similarly, he dismisses the concept of the stories of the ‘virgin birth’ being literally true – he notes that Paul, Mark and John apparently knew nothing of such an occurrence. He appears not to consider the possibility of those writers being aware of the stories but not considering them to be relevant to their own writings.

The material found in this section of *Rescuing the Bible* appears at greater length in Spong’s *Born of a Woman*, published some twelve months later.

The second section of this chapter is ‘Discovering the True Easter Story’ (pp. 217-226). Again, this material is dealt with at much greater length in *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?*, although with a different emphasis. In this book, *Rescuing the Bible*, Spong’s aim is to expose what he calls the ‘contradictions and implausibilities’ in the biblical narratives about Jesus’ death and resurrection. In Spong’s view, a literal understanding of a “physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus” is essential for those whom he calls “literalistic Christians” and “fundamentalists”.

Spong’s first move is to look at the New Testament texts for indications of a ‘physical, bodily resurrection’. Citing Lk. 24:15, 31, he finds a risen Jesus who can appear and disappear at will [the Emmaus vignette], while Jn. 20:19 has Jesus suddenly appearing in a closed room; Spong asks if these can be physical appearances. He observes (p. 218), citing Jn. 20:17, 27, (appearances to first Mary, then Thomas) that the author of John’s Gospel appears to believe that “the unascended Lord was not touchable but the ascended Lord was”. Turning to Paul’s letters, he suggests that Paul coined the term “spiritual body” to cover the concept of something “real and yet not physical”. However, Spong believes that this question is not the major problem for those seeking literalism in the resurrection narratives;

rather, he believes that the major sticking point is that the details in the various narratives are simply not able to be reconciled with one another.

In pages 218-222, Spong provides a number of examples of details in the resurrection narratives in the four Gospels, and in some instances Paul, which he shows to be contradictory and generally mutually exclusive. Who visited the tomb on the first day of the week, what did they find there, and did they see the risen Lord? Where did the disciples first see the risen Lord – on a mountain in Galilee, or in Jerusalem? When did the risen Lord first appear to the disciples (as opposed to the women)? Over what period did the manifestations of the living Christ take place – Luke (Acts 1:3) says forty days, while Paul extends the period to include the appearance to himself some unspecified time later (1 Cor. 15:8). Spong says (p. 222) that the concept of textual inerrancy in the Scriptures cannot be maintained in the face of those questions.

In the remainder of this chapter (pp. 222-226), Spong argues that it does not matter that the biblical texts are contradictory, and hence not infallible. He believes that those stories grew out of an attempt to describe a powerful experience, first expressed in a simple proclamation: “Jesus lives! Death cannot contain him!” (p. 225). He finishes (p. 226) by expressing his view that “the killing straitjacket of literalism, fundamentalism, and inerrancy” is destroying Christianity today.

Although *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* does contain material concerning both the Virgin Birth and Resurrection traditions, it does not examine the origins or development of those traditions. Instead, it argues against falling into what Spong would see as the trap of reading the biblical narratives as a literal account of events, but at the same time ignoring the obvious contradictions between the narrative texts. In this book, Spong presents his arguments and ideas in a style far clearer than that found in later publications – particularly *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?*.

Liberating the Gospels

The next book to be examined at this point is *Liberating the Gospels*. It may be noted that in addition to the sub-title *Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes*, the title page contains a further note: *Freeing Jesus from 2,000 years of Misunderstanding*. It has been noted above that Spong is a self-declared 'Hebrewphile', having become so in the late 1960s – thirty years before writing this book; his convictions shape the content of this book. Containing 333 pages of text, *Liberating the Gospels* is slightly longer than *Resurrection*, and covers a much wider and more general spectrum of the Christian tradition. Spong's aim is to demonstrate his conviction that Christianity developed solely out of the Jewish religious tradition. However, in examining this book, the focus will be on those sections relating to the stories about the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Liberating the Gospels is divided into three Parts: 'Understanding the Biblical Issues', 'Examining the Gospel Texts from a Jewish Perspective', and 'Looking with Jewish Eyes at Critical Moments in the Christian Faith Story'. In the first Part (pp. 3-55), of three chapters, Spong lays out his contention that "The Bible is a Jewish book...written by people who thought as Jews, embraced the world as Jews, and understood reality as Jews" (p18). While this may be seen as a matter for argument that there were other religious and cultural influences involved, it is not the major focus of this thesis.

In Chapter 1 (pp.3-21), Spong posits that the Christian Church in the modern world is in a "crisis in faith", due to the differences between world views and knowledge today as opposed to the early centuries of Christianity. It may be noted that John Shelby Spong first approached this view in 1983, in his *Into the Whirlwind: The Future of the Church*, and developed the concept in 1998 and 2002 in *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* and *A New Christianity for a New World*. Chapter 2 (pp. 23-37) is Spong's argument that 'The Gospels are Jewish Books' – in his view, the Gospel writers, main characters, settings, and sources are all Jewish. The third chapter (pp.39-55), 'How These Jewish Books Became Gentile Captives', ranges from the Roman occupation of Judea and the later destruction of the Temple in 70 CE to the movement of the developing Christian stories from Jerusalem into the

gentile world. However, the Hebrew/Jewish scriptures were included as part of the Christian tradition. In Spong's view, the Jewish stories lost their cultural significance in that gentile setting, and Jesus and his followers lost their Jewishness. In the following chapters, Spong attempts to recover some elements of that Jewishness.

Part 2 of *Liberating the Gospels* seeks to place the events of the Gospels, and to a lesser extent Acts, in a Jewish context. The first chapter, 4, deals with the Jewish calendar and liturgical year. Chapters 5 to 9 look at the Synoptic Gospels, while chapter 10 is a brief overview of Acts and John. It must be recalled that this book was first published in 1996, two years after Spong's *Resurrection* which is the major focus of this thesis.

Chapter 4 (pp. 59-66) is a short discussion of the Jewish year and the major feasts that occurred in various months. Spong also describes the cycle of biblical readings throughout the liturgical year. In pages 63-64, he points out that as Jesus and his followers were Jews, they would have been familiar with the liturgical calendar and the feasts and readings appropriate to each season. He contends that the first of the early 'Jesus community' were also Jews, and that it was against the background of that liturgical calendar that the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke were written. His argument that forms the basis for this book is founded in that contention.

Chapter 5, 'The Story of Jesus from Rosh Hashanah to Passover' (pp.67-86), looks at Mark's Gospel, with the portion relevant to this thesis beginning on p. 69. It must be recalled that this book is Spong's attempt to interpret the Gospel stories in the context of Jewish tradition. He begins with an examination of the 'time schedule' for Mark's narrative of the Passion of Jesus (pp. 70-73), demonstrating his theory that, in the Christian story, the twenty-four hours from 6 p.m. on Maundy Thursday to 6 p.m. on Good Friday is neatly divided into the eight three-hour watches. The point of this examination becomes clear on p. 72, where Spong suggests that the early Christians took over the Jewish feast of Passover and made it into a twenty-four-

hour vigil to recall the origins of their faith. In Spong's view, Mark's text is a "liturgical re-creation of the final moments in Jesus' life", intended as a liturgy for worship rather than as an objective historical account of events. In the remainder of this chapter (pp. 73-86), he expands this theory to speculate that the whole of Mark's Gospel is not only "a midrashic retelling of the Jesus story based on the Hebrew scriptures", but is also "organized around the liturgical year of the Jews".

Of the remaining chapters of Part Two, chs. 6-7 are devoted to Matthew, chs. 8-9 to Luke, and ch.10 to Acts and John. Spong attempts to demonstrate that both Matthew and Luke were written to fit the Jesus story onto the framework of the Jewish liturgical year, largely as an extension of Mark's liturgical framework. Because both John's Gospel and Acts were written in the late first or early second century CE, Spong suggests that they were intended to provide the developing Christian congregations with lectionary readings to replace the Jewish 'second reading' from the 'Former Prophets' (Joshua-Kings). It is noted that these chapters again contain much speculation and Spong's dubious semantic arguments.

Part Three of *Liberating the Gospels* is titled 'Looking with Jewish Eyes at Critical Moments in the Christian Faith Story'. This section contains matter that is specifically relevant to this thesis. Chapters 11-13 deal with the birth traditions, while 14-19 address the events connected with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Spong says (p. 185) that he specifically chose those narratives because they are the most familiar to most Christians and so best suit his purpose of demonstrating the Jewish origins of the stories.

In Chapter 11, 'Jewish Stars in the Story of Jesus' Birth' (pp.185-199), Spong seeks to demonstrate that many of the characters in the Jesus birth narratives appear to parallel similar characters in the Hebrew biblical texts. Those Hebrew characters include Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Aaron and Elisheba, Miriam, David, Solomon, and the Queen of Sheba. He also finds similarities between many of the events in the birth narratives and events in the Hebrew tradition as related by various

prophets, particularly Zechariah, Isaiah, Daniel and Malachi. Spong appears to present his arguments as being the results of his own speculation, as he does not refer to any other biblical scholars. While much of his argument may be plausible, much appears to be tenuous conjecture. There are also a number of what appear to be misrepresentations of the biblical texts and the translations of Hebrew/Aramaic to Greek then to English – most of those have been addressed earlier in this thesis, in the examinations of *Born of a Woman* and *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* .

Chapter 12 is titled 'Joseph: the Shadowy Figure' (pp.201-218). As the title implies, this is Spong's pursuit of the character Joseph in the birth narratives according to Matthew and Luke. Most of the material in this chapter has appeared previously in *Born of a Woman*, only now the emphasis is on demonstrating Hebrew sources for both the name and actions of 'Joseph'. The general gist of Spong's argument here is that 'Joseph' was invented by Matthew to cover some question about the nature of Jesus' conception, with the character later being picked up and developed further by Luke. Spong contends that both authors drew on the Hebrew traditions for the details of their 'Joseph figure'. He notes that 'Joseph', or indeed any other reference to Jesus' birth, does not appear in the earlier writers Paul and Mark. The theme of seeking Hebrew origins for the birth stories in Matthew and Luke continues in the next chapter, 'How the Virgin Birth Tradition Began', Chapter 13 of *Liberating the Gospels* (pp. 219-232). Again, the material has been covered, with a different emphasis, in *Born of a Woman*, including the question of the 'legitimacy' of Jesus' conception.

In Chapters 14-15, 'He Died According to the Scriptures I' and '... II' (pp. 233-245, 247-255), Spong again revisits his theories from *Resurrection* but with the emphasis on finding sources in the Hebrew Scriptures and festival liturgies. In pages 241-244 he repeats his belief (based on C.W.F. Smith's 1960 paper *No Time for Figs*) that the Christian celebration of Palm Sunday is a liturgy transposed from the Jewish festival of *Sukkoth*. He reiterates his contention that details of Jesus' crucifixion cannot be literally true because Mark and Matthew say that his disciples 'all forsook him and fled' at the time of the arrest. However, this is despite all four

Gospels saying that at least one of Jesus' followers actually resisted the arrest, all four Gospels saying that at least a group of women followers watched the execution, and the three Synoptics saying that the women watched the burial. Spong continues to appear to be selective in his use of the biblical texts. He also continues in his dismissal of the stories of Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathea. He goes so far as to say (p. 254) that Matthew says, in "Matt. 27:57-59" that "Joseph had himself hewn it [the tomb]"; it is considered that this is a misreading, or at least a misinterpretation, of the biblical text, which disregards the improbability of one who was 'a rich man' and 'a member of the council' digging his own tomb. It is also another poor citation, as the reference to the hewing of the tomb is in v.60.

The next part of the Easter tradition to be examined is the character 'Judas Iscariot', in Chapter 16, 'Judas Iscariot: a Christian Invention?' (pp. 257-276). Spong looks at the various Gospel stories involving Judas Iscariot, noting the inconsistencies between the different accounts of the same events. Overall, his conclusion is that the stories of the betrayal of Jesus by the disciple Judas Iscariot are a late first century development in the Christian tradition, with the aim of exonerating the Romans and implicating the Jews in the death of Jesus. He believes that the character 'Judas' is an invention of the Gospel writers, drawing on various figures and events in the Hebrew Bible for their inspiration. He again makes liberal use of his term *midrashic*. Noting linguistic links between 'Judas' and 'Judah', 'Judea', and 'Jews', Spong postulates that the character 'Judas' represents the whole of the Jewish people as having responsibility for Jesus' death. His 'Hebrewphile' sentiments could be seen as influencing his suggestion that those Gospel stories have been responsible for nearly two thousand years of "virulent Christian prejudice" against the Jewish people – although he is probably largely right.

It must be noted that John Shelby Spong first published this material in 1996, some years before the late second century CE *Gospel of Judas* became public, about 2004 (Ehrman, 2006; Kasser, et al, 2006). It is not known how knowledge of that document might have changed Spong's views on this biblical figure.

Chapters 17 and 18, 'Raised According to the Scriptures I' and '...II' (pp. 277-292, 293-309), seek to discover the Jewish traditions which Spong believes gave rise to the Christian stories about the resurrection of Jesus. He asks what Paul meant by "in accordance with the scriptures" (2 Cor. 15:3-4), and suggests that it is difficult to answer that question through a literal reading of the biblical texts (p. 279).

Much of Chapter 17 (pp. 279-287) is devoted to demonstrating that the various resurrection stories in Paul, the Gospels and Acts, contradict one another in many details, and so cannot be reconciled as literal accounts of historical events. Spong does not introduce any new material or argument in these pages, but reiterates his dismissal of the biblical narratives as containing "fanciful details". It may be noted that in these discussions, as with other places in his writings, Spong's readers could be left with the impression that the writers of the four Gospels were contemporaries, in communication with one another, arguing their respective points of view. This impression could come from comments such as "Luke directly contradicted Mark and Matthew...", "John agreed with Luke...", and others in like vein.

In the remainder of Chapter 17 (pp. 287-292), Spong seeks to show that "some elements of the resurrection stories were developed midrashically". He believes that Mark and Matthew both drew on details from the Hebrew book Joshua, with Matthew drawing much further detail from the book Daniel. He then suggests that Luke used not only the Hebrew texts but also Mark's Gospel "as a midrashic source". The examples given by Spong appear to be rather tenuous, giving the impression that again he is clutching at straws in order to make his case.

This chapter finishes with Spong's view that beyond the claims of literal truth, the contradictions and the midrashic origins of the resurrection narratives, there remains "the question of Easter's reality". He asks whether it is possible to deliteralise the explanation without destroying that reality, suggesting that "we must somehow enter into that reality that clearly no words can finally describe".

In chapter 18, 'Raised According to the Scriptures II' (pp. 293-309), Spong revisits some of his themes from *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (Spong, 1994) In particular, he repeats his "five clues" which he says "serve to obliterate the literal reading of the Easter narratives in the Gospels" (p. 296). He also mentions (p. 293) his 'location' of many of the details of the Easter story in the Jewish festival of Tabernacles. It is noted that Spong does not acknowledge his debt to Charles W.F. Smith (Smith, 1960) in this 'discovery'; Smith, who died in 1993, does not even appear in the bibliography (he is acknowledged briefly in *Resurrection*). On the basis of that perceived connection between Tabernacles (*Sukkoth*) and Easter, Spong constructs a theory that the three Synoptic Gospels were never meant to be taken literally. He believes that they were composed by the Early Christians for a one year long liturgical cycle based on Jewish origins, expanding on an original concept of Jesus as "the paschal lamb that was sacrificed at Passover".

In Spong's view, after the execution of Jesus the shattered disciples "lived in ...spiritual darkness for a period of time" (p. 301). Then at some point "the light dawned...the scales fell from their eyes" and they saw Jesus "alive...in the very heart and life of God". However, while that 'seeing' was not literally of a resuscitated body or a ghost-like appearance, those were the only ways in which the disciples could express their conviction that "we have seen the Lord" (p. 302). The "powerful reality" which the disciples had seen in Jesus now caused them to invest him with "all of the symbols reserved in their mythology for the Messiah". Spong believes that the disciples "searched the Jewish scriptures to flesh out the portrait of the Resurrected One...". In pages 302-307 he seeks to show that much of the Easter narrative comes from those earlier traditions, in particular Isaiah and Zechariah, so enabling the early Christians to say "he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (p. 307).

Much of Spong's argument here appears rather tenuous, and he again introduces some dubious semantic examples. He builds the impression that the disciples, after the death of Jesus, spent a great deal of time poring over the Hebrew texts to develop their mythology. There certainly are passages in the Gospel Easter narratives which are obvious quotes from the Hebrew biblical texts, for example the 'cry of dereliction', "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", from Ps. 22:1,

which appears in Mk.15:34 and Mt. 27:46. However, it is difficult to escape the impression that the Hebrewphile Spong has scoured the Hebrew Scriptures for passages that appear to suit his theories. Furthermore, in putting his theories, Spong does not draw a clear distinction between the disciples who experienced the Easter events at first hand and began the oral tradition, and the later writers of the various New Testament texts who drew on that oral tradition; he leaves the impression that they were the same group.

This chapter finishes (pp. 307-309) with what appears to be Spong's own view on the origins of the resurrection traditions; his words have the ring of a deeply held personal belief. He says that the crucifixion is a fact in history; however, he sees the resurrection as not being an event inside history but "a revelation...from the heart of God". He believes that it was beyond the power of the human mind to express adequately "the essence of Easter", and so the Jesus community turned to their Jewish traditions to find a frame of reference. It was in terms of that frame of reference that they said that Jesus was raised "in accordance with the scriptures". However, Spong says that the Easter narratives are not meant to be read as literal accounts of an historical event, but as a necessarily limited human expression of a timeless experience.

Chapter 19 is John Spong's account of 'Ascension and Pentecost: How the Life of Jesus Was Shaped by the Figure of Elijah' (pp. 311-320). In Spong's view, although modern Christians see the Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost (the outpouring of the Holy Spirit) as three separate defining experiences in the Christian story, in fact, the three events are deeply intertwined. The biblical texts differ on the details of those events, with all three unequivocally happening in the versions in John and Luke/Acts while Mark and Matthew are less definite. There are also variations between the various versions of the New Testament – as noted previously, Spong says that he generally relies on the RSV.

As the title suggests, this chapter details Spong's belief that the New Testament writers used the stories of Elijah from the Jewish tradition to provide much of the detail for the stories of the ascension of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. He also notes a number of 'Elijah elements' in the figure

of John the Baptist – his dress, setting, and diet (p. 312) and the manner of his death at the hands of Herod (pp. 313-314). Spong's argument about the 'manner of death' is considered to be interesting, but weak. He suggests that Queen Jezebel's oath to behead Elijah (1 Kings 19:2) had lain unfulfilled for some nine hundred years, but now was fulfilled by the execution of John the Baptist at the behest of the first century CE Queen Herodias (Mk. 6:14-29; Mt. 14:1-12) . Spong also seeks to demonstrate a number of parallels between stories of events in the lives of Elijah and Jesus, and notes Elijah's appearance in person in the story of the Transfiguration. However, he believes that in the ascension and 'passing on of the spirit' stories, the New Testament writers, particularly Luke, sought to show Jesus as being far greater than Elijah – divine rather than merely human (pp.316-319). It is noted that much of this material is a revisiting of themes from *This Hebrew Lord* (Spong 1974/1993).

The point of this chapter – and indeed the whole book – comes in pages 319-320. Here Spong says that to properly understand Luke's Pentecost story, it must be read through "Jewish eyes", using the "midrashic principles employed by Jewish people" to find its origins not only in Elijah but also in the books of Daniel (7:24) and Genesis (10; 11:1-9) [the Daniel citation in the text is incorrect – the passage quoted by Spong is actually in Dan. 7:14, not 7:24]. He expands that thought by saying that it was only through the Jewish stories of the prophet Elijah that the Jewish 'first Christians' were able to express their 'Christ experience'. Spong suggests that it is only by reading the Gospels with Jewish eyes that modern Christians will be able to "see that truth for which [they] hunger and thirst...".

The final chapter in *Liberating the Gospels* is an Epilogue, 'Entering the God Presence of the Bible and Jesus' (pp. 321-335). While this is a summary of the matter covered in this book, it is also, again, a statement of Spong's personal beliefs: both his commitment to Jesus as his Lord and the need to approach the Jesus story from the Jewish perspective of the writers of that story.

This book is, again, John Shelby Spong's personal view on the origins of the Christian stories. However, it has the additional twist that he contends not only that

the stories are not literal accounts of events, but also that in order to understand those stories properly they must be read through Jewish eyes. Although again written in a flowery and often convoluted style which is at times difficult to follow, his proposals appear generally plausible and certainly worthy of serious consideration.

These three books, *This Hebrew Lord*, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, and *Liberating the Gospels* are simply reiterations of Spong's major themes – a solely Hebrew origin for Christian doctrine and practice, and the need to read the Christian Bible with a Jewish based, non-literal understanding. He also again states his views on the stories and traditions about the birth of Jesus, and what he sees as the effects of the Virgin Birth traditions on the status of women both inside and outside the Church. There is no new material relevant to this thesis. Spong also continues to make dogmatic statements based solely on dubious personal speculation and tenuous argument. However, if the reader is prepared not to take all of Spong's texts as being literally true, and is sufficiently well informed as to be able to recognise the 'Spongisms' for what they are, then these books do provide some interesting material.

MISCELLANEOUS OTHER JOHN SHELBY SPONG BOOKS

This section will deal with ten other books by John Shelby Spong that are more general in nature. One is his autobiography, *Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love and Equality* (.2000), Three are more philosophical thoughts on the state of the Christian Church: *Into the Whirlwind: The Future of the Church* (2003 reprint of 1983); *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (1998); and *A New Christianity for a New World* (2002). Five are recasts of material published in his earlier books relating to the history and practice of the early Christian community: *Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* (2005); *Jesus for the Non-Religious: Recovering the Divine at the Heart of the Human* (2007); *Eternal Life: A New Vision Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell* (2009); *Re-Claiming the*

Bible for the Non-Religious World (2011); and *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* (2013). The other book, *Living in Sin: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (1988), is the first in this group to be written, some twelve years before Spong's retirement.

Of the ten, three were written before Spong retired from the clergy in January 2000, while the other seven came after his retirement. Again, these books will be examined in the order of their original publication date, in order to attempt to follow the development of Spong's thinking.

Into the Whirlwind: The Future of the Church

Although the reprint of the book used here is dated 2003, *Into the Whirlwind* was first published in 1983, so making it John Shelby Spong's first exploration of the 'state of the Church' as he saw it.

In the Preface to *Into the Whirlwind* (p. x), John Spong says that the contents of this book are based on a series of independent essays. Those essays had previously been presented (by Spong) at the annual 'New Dimensions' lecture series in the Newark Diocese. Spong says that they "reflect an attempt to rethink many parts of the Christian heritage in the light of new realities". He says that he is attempting to turn the Church and its theologies from the past and toward the future. To that end, Spong has organised the book into three Sections, each dealing with a different aspect of Christian tradition and practice.

As with Spong's other writings, this is a personal account of Spong's own views on the various topics; the Introduction is subtitled 'A Personal Word – Setting the Stage'. It is noted that Spong says that "...I have...a deeply ambivalent relationship with the organized church, with the traditions, with Christian theology". (p. 19). It may be recalled that this was written in late 1982 (published 1983), when Spong had been Bishop of Newark for six years and would continue to be so for another seventeen years.

The first section is 'Moving Beyond the Facade of Certainty' (pp. 11-64). Here Spong presents his views on various aspects of Church practice, such as questions of authority in the church and the power of prayer. The second section is 'Moving Beyond Traditional Sexual Stereotypes' (pp. 65-148). This is an examination of aspects of two of Spong's 'other agenda' – the attitude of the Christian Church toward human sexuality in general and toward women in particular. It may be seen as of interest that this is the longest and most extensive of the three sections. Some of the thoughts that John Spong expresses in the section, for example those in pages 144-146 on sexual fidelity within marriage, would undoubtedly cause distress and opposition from many members of the Christian community. Many would see those views as being incompatible with Spong's position within the church hierarchy.

The third, and final, section is 'Moving Beyond Tribal Identity' (pp. 149-203). Here Spong discusses the effects of 'tribalism', not only between nations and peoples, but also, in this case, ranging down to the Christian Church. He cites the differences and tensions created within the Church by the actions of not merely the major denominational 'tribes', but also of subdivisions of those denominations fighting amongst themselves. It is considered interesting that, in pages 186-187, Spong shows an acceptance of influences from the Egyptian, Persian and Greek religious traditions on the development of both Judaism and early Christianity. In fact, on page 186, he says that "...there is the recognition that no religion grows up in a cultural vacuum". That is a concept that, as previously shown, he vehemently rejects elsewhere in his writings.

This book, *Into the Whirlwind*, is not specifically relevant to the major focus of this thesis. However, it does provide an interesting view of the thinking of John Shelby Spong when he is not writing about his speculations on interpretation of the scriptural texts. It is considered that this book could be seen as an important text for a 'believer in exile' or a member of 'the Church Alumni' looking for discussion of the Church practices and beliefs in the twenty-first century. The material in Section 2 on human sexuality is expanded in Spong's later book *Living in Sin: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (Spong, 1998).

Living in Sin: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality

This book was written in 1988, while John Shelby Spong was still an active bishop in the Episcopal Church. It addresses a topic that continues to cause dissention in the worldwide Anglican community – ‘human sexuality’. It covers the broadest possible spectrum of the subject at that time, including pre-marital sex, marriage and divorce, homosexuality, and the marginalisation of women. The book is generally based on the 1987 Report presented by a Diocese of Newark Task Force which was established in 1985 to examine those matters. John Spong says that the general release of the Report to the media in January 1987 created considerable interest, not only in the Episcopal Church in the USA, but also in the wider media and community, both in the USA and abroad (pp. 16-17) .

Living in Sin does not address any material that is relevant to the subject of this thesis. However, it is a bold and straightforward public examination by Spong of what he sees as the various misconceptions and prejudices relating to human sexuality. Spong also examines the various ways in which biblical texts are misinterpreted and misused to justify those attitudes. The various matters covered in *Living in Sin* form a large part of John Shelby Spong’s ‘other agenda’ – topics that have a large influence on his attitude to the Christian Church and its practices.

Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers In Exile

John Shelby Spong’s last book to be written before retiring in January 2000 is *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers In Exile* (1998), According to Spong’s autobiography (Spong, 2000:443 ff.), this was to be his most controversial book to date, creating difficulty for him at the 1999 Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops because of the ‘anti-establishment’ topics that it addresses. Again, this is a personal book; John Spong not only writes from a first-person viewpoint, but also uses examples from his private life to make his point. A somewhat poignant example of this is his use of the death from cancer of his first wife, Joan, in his argument against the Christian dependency on the power of prayer (pp. 140-142). Overall, however, this book does not contain any new material that is relevant to this research.

Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love and Equality

After retiring both as Bishop of Newark and as an active member of the clergy, Spong has continued to write. His first book after retiring was the autobiographical *Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love, and Equality* (Spong 2000). Because of its nature, *Here I Stand* is not relevant to this study except as background to Spong's life.

A New Christianity for a New World

The sub-title for this book is *Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How A New Faith Is Being Born*. First published in 2001, *A New Christianity for a New World* is Spong's first book written about the Christian faith after his leaving the ranks of the active clergy. It appears clear that he considers himself to be no longer restricted by "the confining boundaries of this institution called the church" (p. 237).

Overall, the theme of *A New Christianity* is an examination – and rejection – of the place of 'theism' in the modern Christian practice. Spong continues to regard himself as a 'Christian' and to revere Jesus of Nazareth as "the doorway into this God" (p.238). However, at the same time, he calls for a wider 'community of faith', looking to a 'Ground of Being' rather than an anthropomorphic 'God' figure, and including all religious faiths and traditions.

The topics of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus form part of the subject matter of *A New Christianity*. However, it appears in the context of what Spong sees as the 'capturing' of the original Christian story by the doctrines of theism. Apart from some differences in approach and style, there is little that has any significance for this thesis.

It is interesting, in view of Spong's previously strongly expressed convictions to the contrary, that on page 18 of this book he acknowledges the influence of other belief traditions on the shaping of Christianity. Similarly, at the end of this volume, p. 243, Spong denounces the efforts of missionaries to convert others to their way of viewing 'God'.

A New Christianity for a New World is, in effect, a rejection by Spong of established Christian traditions and practices. It is probable that the book could be regarded as 'dangerous' by conservative Christians, because of the anti-establishment ideas that it contains.

The Sins of Scripture

In 2005 came *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love*. In the Preface to this book, Spong says that it began as an examination of those biblical texts that have been used throughout history to justify the denigration and persecution of others under the guise and implied authority of "the Word of God". However, in its final form, it looks at both the negative "terrible texts" and the positive ideas, in an attempt to "rescue the Bible from those who...literalize...and then so badly misuse it"(Spong, 2005:xiv). Although it touches on both the Virgin Birth and Resurrection traditions, the book does not present any material that has not been addressed in Spong's earlier publications

Jesus for the Non-Religious: Recovering the Divine at the Heart of the Human

In 2007 John Shelby Spong published what, at the time, he said was his penultimate book, *Jesus for the Non-Religious: Recovering the Divine at the Heart of the Human*. Despite the implications carried in the title, it appears that this book is not directed at people without a religious faith of any sort. Rather, it is Spong's attempt to build on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of a "religionless Christianity", to find a 'God' beyond the confines of religion (Spong, 2007:xiv, 275).

The first two parts of this book (pp. 1-204) are a re-visiting of Spong's earlier books written before he retired. It is only in Part 3 (pp 205-293) that he addresses the topic of a 'non-religious' Christianity. The material in Parts 1 and 2 is presented largely as established fact; although Spong does give biblical references from both the Old and New Testaments, they are generally as supporting notes for his own statements. He is not speculating, but rather is making what appear to be

categorical expressions of his views. As Spong states on p.193, the aim of these first two Parts is to demonstrate that the stories of Jesus' life, as related in the Gospels, were shaped totally by the reading of the Hebrew Scriptures in the synagogues. Again, Spong ignores any possible influence from other religious traditions in the region.

Part 3 of *Jesus for the Non-Religious* is Spong's expression of how he believes the figure of Jesus should be seen. Again, it is a personal view of Jesus as the breaker of tribal and religious boundaries as well as the various stereotypes and prejudices that beset not only his first-century CE world, but also the world today. While it is an interesting perspective on modern Christianity, it does not contain any material that is specifically relevant to this thesis. However, on p.291, in the Epilogue 'Christpower', Spong recounts that as early as 1974 – before he became a Bishop – he found himself “bothered and ultimately repelled” by the institutions and “distorting myths” of the church to which he, nonetheless, was deeply committed. That was the beginning of his career as a writer against ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘literalism’ in Christian church practice.

Eternal Life: A New Vision. Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell

In 2009, John Shelby Spong published what he said “may well be [his] final book”, *Eternal Life: A New Vision. Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell*. It is an examination of the concepts of human life and death and the possibility of an after-life. Spong says (pp. 16-17) that it is an intensely personal view on the topic, coloured by his own religious journey – he calls the book “a ‘spiritual autobiography’”. In that context, he rejects the traditional Christian views on theism, incarnation, and a physical resurrection for Jesus of Nazareth. There are no biblical references or instances that have not appeared in Spong's earlier writings; however, those passages appear in this book for the sole purpose of refuting a literal reading of the Gospel stories. There is no material that is relevant to this thesis. While declaring his own deep spirituality, Spong rejects the concepts of traditional organized religion – specifically, the mythology and practices of the Christian church.

This book, *Eternal Life: A New Vision*, appears to be intended to effectively draw the curtain on John Shelby Spong's life as a clergyman and as a religious writer. However, it was not to be so.

Re-Claiming the Bible for the Non-Religious World

In late 2011, John Shelby Spong released another book, *Re-Claiming the Bible for the Non-Religious World*. In the Preface to this book (pp. xi-xvi), Spong says that it is a compilation of a series of fifteen-hundred-word essays written for his weekly column. The essays are sometimes expanded a little for the purposes of the book. In turn, these essays are based on a series of lectures that Spong gave at the annual retirement summer school conducted by the Highlands Institute for American Religion, Philosophy and Theology (HIARPT) in North Carolina, in the period 2003-2006.

Spong says (p. xv) that *Re-Claiming the Bible* is an introduction to the themes and messages of the various books of the Bible. He states that he examines those books in the light of the history of the times in which they were written. However, that does not prevent Spong from introducing his 'other agenda', particularly status of women, racism, and homophobia, mainly as found within Christian church practice. .

There is little, if any, new material introduced in this volume. In fact, because this is an overall study of the books that make up the Old and New Testaments in the Christian Bible, much material that appears in Spong's earlier writings does not appear here. However, the style and presentation is quite different from that of books written while John Spong was a member of the clergy. *Re-Claiming the Bible* is written in a clear, direct, almost simplistic style, with little tenuous argument or convoluted reasoning. However, it does reflect Spong's 'Hebrewphile' stance, again rejecting any non-Jewish influences on the development of Christianity. It also continues to demonstrate Spong's dogmatic, 'these are the facts' style, even when he is writing about events that can only be a matter of conjecture. As with Spong's other books, it is written in the first person and is a statement of John Shelby Spong's personal views on the Christian scriptural texts

Overall, despite its limitations, *Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World* could be seen as a useful introduction to the biblical texts of the Christian tradition.

The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic

In mid-2013, shortly before the submission of this Thesis, John Shelby Spong released another book: *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* (2013). Due to time constraints, this book will not be examined in detail; however, its content and style call for a brief overview.

The Fourth Gospel is quite different, in both content and style, from most of John Shelby Spong's other books. There are elements of thought which are similar to those in both *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (1998) and *A New Christianity for a New World* (2002). Although it is not mentioned directly, Spong generally retains his 'Hebrewphile' approach. However, he now largely rejects much of his earlier material on the Gospel according to John, such as the significance of the 'I am' sayings (p. 64)

In this book, Spong expresses his belief that the Fourth Gospel was written by a group of "mystic Jews", but was later "tragically distorted...by the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers, who used it to formulate their creeds". He opens his text by saying that for most of his professional career in the clergy he found the Fourth Gospel to be "almost repellent" (p. 3); however, in the closing stages of his time as an active priest and bishop, various events caused him to look again at that text. As a result, he became convinced that John's Gospel is the work of Jewish mysticism, written on two levels – a commonly accepted, obvious literal meaning, and a deeper level of non-literal understanding of a spiritual message. In *The Fourth Gospel*, Spong sets out to present his conclusions for the benefit of his readers, in particular his 'church alumni' and 'believers in exile'. He does make it clear that this is not intended as a commentary on John's Gospel (p. 8), but is simply a sharing of his new understanding of John.

Like all or most of Spong's books, this is written in the first person. However, although he does refer to others of his books, particularly *Born of a Woman* (1992)

and *Resurrection, Myth or Reality ?* (1994), he does not introduce his 'other agenda', for example the Church's treatment of women, to any great extent. Similarly, he does not indulge in convoluted speculation, or specious and tenuous argument. but makes his case in a clear, scholarly and generally convincing manner.

Overall, it is considered that *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* is the most successful of John Shelby Spong's books in achieving his stated aim of de-literalising the Bible texts.

The views expressed in these 'other books' by Spong are largely a reiteration of what has appeared in books examined earlier in this thesis. His themes remain constant throughout his work. The most interesting points noted at this stage, that have appeared since his retiring from the active clergy, are his change in style and his open rejection of the established Christian tradition. It should be remembered, however, that John Shelby Spong has said, in various places, that he began seriously questioning the teachings and practices of the Christian Church as early as 1974.

SPONG'S 'TWELVE THESES'

Attention must be drawn to John Shelby Spong's 'Twelve Theses', which he included as an Appendix to his autobiography *Here I Stand* (2000:468). They were developed from proposals which he originally published about eighteen months before his planned retirement in early 2000, in his *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (1998:149-167). The 'Theses' are John Shelby Spong's ideas on how the Christian Church must change its dogma and practices if it wishes to survive in the modern world. The 'Twelve Theses', as presented in *Here I Stand*, are:

"A Call for a New Reformation

1. Theism, as a way of defining God, is dead. God can no longer be understood with credibility as a Being, supernatural in power, dwelling above the sky and prepared to invade human history periodically to enforce the divine will. So, most

theological God-talk today is meaningless unless we find a new way to speak of God.

2. Since God can no longer be conceived in theistic terms, it becomes nonsensical to seek to understand Jesus as the incarnation of the theistic deity. So, the Christology of the ages is bankrupt.
3. The Biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which human beings fell into sin is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense.
4. The virgin birth, understood as literal biology, makes Christ's divinity, as traditionally understood, impossible.
5. The miracle stories of the New Testament can no longer be interpreted in a post-Newtonian world as supernatural events performed by an incarnate deity.
6. The view of the cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world is a barbarian idea based on primitive concepts of God that must be dismissed.
7. Resurrection is an action of God, who raised Jesus into the meaning of God. It therefore cannot be a physical resuscitation occurring inside human history.
8. The story of the ascension assumed a three-tiered universe and is therefore not capable of being translated into the concepts of a post-Copernican space age.
9. There is no external, objective, revealed standard writ in Scripture or on tablets of stone that will govern our ethical behaviour for all time.
10. Prayer cannot be a request made to a theistic deity to act in human history in a particular way.
11. The hope for life after death must be separated forever from the behaviour control mentality of reward and punishment.

The church must abandon, therefore, its reliance on guilt as a motivator of behaviour.

12. All human beings bear God's image and must be respected for what each person is. Therefore, no external description of one's being, whether based on race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, can properly be used as the basis for either rejection or discrimination."

These 'Points' drew strong criticism from some theologians, notably the then Bishop of Monmouth, later Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Spong says (2000:429-457) that *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, together with his stance in favour of recognising homosexuals within the Church, drew a great deal of overt hostility and criticism from his fellow Anglican bishops at the 1999 Lambeth Conference.

No comment is made here on these twelve points. It is considered that they are an indication of Spong's long-held views on the state of the Christian Church body and practices. It is also considered that they give a pointer to the direction which Spong would take in his writing style after his retirement in January 2000, when he was no longer subject to the restraints necessarily imposed by holding a senior position in the Episcopal Church and the world-wide Anglican Communion.

CHAPTER 5 – SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS ON THE WRITINGS OF JOHN SHELBY SPONG

There are many points that stand out for a critical reader of the writings of John Shelby Spong. Some are positive, but the majority are, unfortunately, negative. Some of those points may not be noticed by a casual or uninformed reader, but can provide an irritation and disappointment for a better-informed readership.

Spong's books are highly personal. This leads him into a dogmatic approach to his various topics, stating his views as 'fact', or 'what really happened'. It also causes him to allow his personal 'other agenda' – such as status of women, racism, and homophobia – to intrude into his work on other major topics. In addition, it allows him to include discussion of events in his private life, such as the long illness and subsequent death of his first wife, Joan. He says that those personal events have influenced his views on many Christian traditions and practices, such as the power of prayer. Despite Spong claiming to write for "the church alumni" and "believers in exile", this personal approach can create the impression that, in fact, he is attempting to exorcise his own demons.

A further consequence of Spong's 'personal' approach is that he is not wholly objective in his analysis of the Christian mythology and tradition. He appears to 'discover' new concepts or ideas that he likes, then refuses to abandon those ideas despite any evidence to the contrary. Two examples of this, discussed earlier, are, first, Spong's use of the term 'midrash' (or variations on the word); a second is his insistence that because Mark and Matthew say that "the disciples forsook him and fled" at Jesus' arrest, there were no witnesses to the crucifixion and subsequent entombment.

Despite Spong's declared intention to 'de-literalise' the Bible, in many instances, when it suits him, he appears to accept a literal reading of a passage of text. This, generally, is in order to build his case for the non-literal interpretation of another piece of text. The question of witnesses to the crucifixion and burial of Jesus again provides an example of this tendency. .

By declaring himself to be a “Hebrewphile”, Spong gives himself licence to reject all other religious and cultural factors which may have influenced the development of Early Christianity. He also ignores the historical political milieu in the Eastern Mediterranean region in the first century CE. It is considered that this approach leads Spong into presenting his readers with a false impression of how the Early Christian community formed and developed. After all, Paul’s missionary activities among the Gentiles of Anatolia – a Hellenised population – began only a few years after the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. The new ‘Christian’ faith had moved quickly beyond its Jewish roots.

Spong uses various Asian religious concepts and figures as examples of miraculous births and deaths that are similar to those found in the Christian tradition. However, his use of those concepts and figures also demonstrates an apparent tenuous grasp of the Asian mythologies, leading him to make statements that are at least questionable, or, at the worst, nonsense. It also seems illogical that Spong should quote those other faiths, while at the same time rejecting the idea of their having any influence on the development of Christianity.

In rejecting any influences from other cultures, Spong also ignores the known history of the Eastern Mediterranean region. Judea was part of the Achaemenid Persian Empire for some two hundred and fifty years in the 6th-4th centuries BCE. The Persian state religion of Zoroastrianism is believed to have influenced Judaism (Noss 2003:421-422). The Persians were followed by the Greeks (mainly the Seleucid kingdom) for about a further two hundred and fifty years, except for the Maccabean interlude (167-63 BCE) when the neighbouring nations were still largely Hellenised. Also, in about 250 BCE, the Mauryan Emperor Asoka in India sent Theravada Buddhist emissaries and missionaries to the Eastern Mediterranean region to spread their faith (Noss 2003:190; Smart 1995:75). The Greek influence, in the main, continued under the Roman occupation from 63 BCE onward – the region was thoroughly Hellenised, although generally under Roman law. There was also the ancient cultural presence of Egypt to the south-west, as either a close neighbour or a military occupier. Spong also ignores any cultural influences that may have been carried by traders along the Silk Route from as far away as Central Asia and China, or by sea from India and beyond. It is unlikely that those various military

occupations and cultural contacts would not have affected, in any way, the Hebrew/Jewish, and later the Early Christian, religious mythologies and practices. It is considered that Spong is unnecessarily restricting himself by those omissions, thereby diminishing his credibility as a scholar and author.

As well as rejecting any outside (non-Jewish) influences on Early Christianity, John Shelby Spong also restricts himself to those 'Christian' writers who worked in the first, or early second, century CE and whose texts became part of the accepted Christian Canon. He ignores the possibility that there were other 'gospels', letters or other texts written during the first century CE. He also ignores the probability, or possibility, of later redaction or scribal errors in the manual copying of original texts, before the introduction of the printing press (q.v. Bart D. Ehrman, 2005a, *Lost Scriptures*; 2005c, *Misquoting Jesus*)

John Shelby Spong, by various remarks and statements in his writings, appears to include himself among the leading biblical scholars of modern times. However, as has been demonstrated by close critical reading of his *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?* (1994), there are many cases in which Spong appears to be either careless or deliberately misleading in his use of the biblical texts. While carelessness may be just that, 'lack of care', adjusting of the texts in order to make a case can only be seen as deliberate deception. It must be noted here that these instances have been checked in several different English-language versions of the Bible, as well as the Koine Greek and the Jewish Tanakh where applicable. Either case, be it carelessness or mishandling, again detracts from Spong's credibility as both a scholar and an author.

Spong has said, in various places, that expression of spiritual things is limited by the need to use human language. That is true. He also says, in various places, that he prefers to use the Revised Standard Version of the English-language Bible. However, by doing so he excludes other versions that are equally valid, although expressed differently from the RSV. On the face of it, that would not normally matter. However, as has been shown above, Spong attempts to make questionable semantic arguments based on the subtle nuances of meaning of various English words in the RSV. Comparison with other English-language versions of the text

shows that those words may not be used in all versions, so negating Spong's argument. Again, this practice is seen as detracting from Spong's credibility.

To give John Shelby Spong his due, he always makes it clear that he is not writing scholarly treatises for the academic world. Rather, he claims to write for "the church alumni" and "believers in exile" – those who have left the Church because they can no longer accept the interpretation of the Christian story as it is generally presented. It is of interest that for many years he has counted himself among the believers in exile. It is noted that Spong also refers to a third group, the "average pew-sitters"; he appears to regard this group with some contempt, saying that they are "biblically illiterate". However, the fact that he is writing for the non-academic community does not absolve him from the need to be academically rigorous in his approach, particularly in his use of biblical texts and presentation of 'facts'. It may be considered that he also tends to 'preach'; rather than writing clearly and objectively, he presents his own views as 'fact'.

It is also considered that many of Spong's arguments and discussions are presented in a prolix, convoluted and almost devious style, which would be difficult for many readers to follow. This is particularly the case when his argument is weak. However, it is also possible, even probable, that it would cause many readers to abandon that particular text altogether. He also frequently uses broad-brush statements, such as "most biblical scholars", without any backup or authority. It is considered that these traits further detract from Spong's credibility as both scholar and author.

In addition, much of Spong's text is unnecessarily flowery, to the extent of being almost sycophantic when speaking about various recognised, leading biblical scholars whose views appear to support his own. Many readers would be put off by this style of writing, to the extent of missing such actual value as may be in the text.

Finally, it is difficult, at times, to escape the impression that John Shelby Spong has not entirely abandoned the strictures of his own 'fundamentalist' early religious life. No examples can be given; the impression comes from Spong's various throwaway lines and declarations of personal belief. It is of interest, in this context, that the American religious journalist Kenneth L. Woodward, in an interview with *Homiletics Online*, described "Bishop Spong of Newark" specifically, and others

like him, as "...people who were in full flight from a fundamentalist background." (*Homileticsonline.com*, undated). It might also be considered that John Shelby Spong was being hypocritical by remaining 'within the walls of the church', as not merely a clergyman but as a Bishop, while at the same time attacking the Church's traditions and practices.

On the positive side, John Shelby Spong appears to be deeply sincere in his approach to the Christian Church and his concern for its welfare. He says that he has studied widely, forming strong views on the proper way to approach the Christian Scripture and practices. He is personable and eloquent to talk with in a personal discussion, freely sharing his views. He is equally open when in a public forum, particularly when promoting his latest book. Spong also appears to be deeply committed to those sections of society whom he sees as being marginalised – mainly women, African-Americans, and the homosexual community.

It may be considered that John Shelby Spong, by his writings, has opened the door to public questioning and discussion of the Christian mythology and tradition. From personal observation of Spong's public forums, addresses and book promotions, there are many people (including members of the mainstream clergy of various denominations) who say that he has opened them to a better understanding of the Christian scriptures and traditions. While there were questioning writers before Spong, such as Bishop John A.T. Robinson and Michael Goulder, their work was generally for the academic or 'better-informed' world, rather than for the popular readership of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

CHAPTER 6 – AUTHORS OTHER THAN JOHN SHELBY

SPONG

There are many modern authors who have written on various aspects of the Christian tradition, in the same general genre as John Shelby Spong. Of course, some of those authors can be seen as being of dubious value, catering to the more fanciful ideas about early Christianity. However, as there are no contemporary records from the ‘Jesus period’ addressing the early development of the Christian tradition, there is room for some reasoned speculation about the topic. Also, there is room for speculation about the degree to which the development of early Christianity may have been influenced by other cultures and faith traditions. Such cultures and traditions existed both before and contemporaneously with Early Christianity, in both the Eastern Mediterranean and regions further to the east.

Two categories of writing which Spong largely ignores, or rejects outright, are those dealing with the archaeology and the social and political milieu of Judea and Galilee in the ‘Jesus period’. Of course, both those genres must be approached with some care, as both are open to interpretation or bias on the part of authors – or readers; archaeology in particular is susceptible to that problem.

Six authors have been chosen as representative of other approaches to the question of the development of the Christian mythology and tradition. These authors have been selected as writing in the same genre as Spong, and generally demonstrate a non-literalist approach to the New Testament texts. Also, unlike John Shelby Spong, they generally do acknowledge that there were influences other than the Hebrew Scriptures and traditions in the development of the Early Christian stories and practices. While the writers may not specifically address the topic of the death and resurrection of Jesus, they may be seen as presenting a more objective and less personal view of the overall topic of Early, or Primitive, Christianity than that adopted by Spong. Many of this group are, or have been, academic staff of various universities – generally in the field of religion; most, like Spong, are, or have been, ordained clergy.

The authors chosen are: Gerd Theissen, Bart D. Ehrman, Philip F. Esler, Geza Vermes, and two Fellows of The Jesus Seminar, Robert W. Funk and John Dominic Crossan.

These authors and books will not be examined in detail; they are presented as a comparison in style and scholarship to the work of John Shelby Spong.

Gerd Theissen

The first author to be examined is Gerd Theissen, Professor of New Testament [now Emeritus] at the University of Heidelberg, and a member of the German Protestant clergy. In 2002 he received the Burkitt Medal from the British Academy for 'Special Service to Biblical Studies', in the particular field of the application of the principles and methods of sociology to the study of the New Testament (British Academy 2010:3, 8). In general terms, his approach to the topic is to examine the development of Primitive Christianity in the light of known historical data, from the period from the late centuries B.CE to about the third century CE

Four Theissen books have been examined: *The Open Door: Variations on Biblical Themes* (Theissen, 1991), *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Theissen (trl. Linda M. Maloney), 1992), *The Historical Jesus* (Theissen, & Annett Merz (trl. John Bowden), 1998), and *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World* (Theissen (trl. John Bowden), 1999).

The first of these books, *The Open Door* (Theissen, 1991), is a collection of twenty-five sermons written in Copenhagen and [mostly] Heidelberg in the period 1979-1989. Here Theissen is pursuing his calling as a Protestant clergyman, but with the insights of a biblical scholar. He says that the sermons are 'variations on biblical themes', based on his conviction that the texts in the Bible "illuminate [various] situations in life and turn them into a 'sign language' for God" (Theissen, 1991:xi). Each is based on a specific biblical passage, mainly from the New Testament, but with a decidedly late-twentieth-century approach. Some of the material has echoes of Theissen's childhood in Germany during and after World War

II (he was born in April 1943); however, he does not shrink from the topic but uses it to illustrate various points. While these sermons do not specifically address the topics of the birth or the death and resurrection of Jesus, they are examples of Theissen's non-literalist and scholarly approach to Early Christianity.

In *The Gospels in Context* (Theissen, 1992), Theissen seeks to examine the Gospel narratives in the light of the social and political history of the Eastern Mediterranean region in the first century CE. He focuses on the situation in Galilee, Judea, and some neighbouring territories such as Syria, with a particular interest in the crises that occurred during the times of the Emperor Caligula (39-41 CE) and the Jewish War (66-74 CE). Theissen also examines the tensions that existed between various groups and communities, and the political overtones that appear in the Gospel texts. He suggests that figures such as the Roman emperors and officials may have provided the models for various characters in the stories. He also believes that the location in which the individual Gospel writers worked would have influenced the perspective of their view of their subject. This work appears to be in marked contrast to Spong, with the case being made in a clear and scholarly style and without devious speculation or supposition. Theissen does not seek to 'demythologise' the Gospels, but presents the development of Primitive Christianity in the historical context of the milieu of the times.

The Historical Jesus (Gerd Theissen & Annette Merz, 1998) was written as a textbook in conjunction with Annette Merz, who at that time was teaching Religion at Heidelberg University. It presents what the authors saw as being the current state of knowledge about 'the Historical Jesus' and the methods and sources of research in the topic. In effect, it is a review of the work of a considerable number of biblical scholars, particularly of the German school of theology. Theissen and Merz do not limit themselves to only Christian and canonical sources, but also extend their references to include both non-canonical and non-Christian works. Some of the material is similar to that found in *The Gospels in Context*, looking at the historical and social settings for the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth.

Part 4 of this book specifically addresses the subject of 'Passion and Easter' (pp. 405-567). Three chapters are considered to be of particular relevance in this research: Ch.13, 'Jesus as the Founder of a Cult: the Last Supper and the Primitive Christian Eucharist' (pp. 405-439); Ch. 14, 'Jesus as Martyr: the Passion of Jesus' (pp.440-473); and Ch. 15 'The Risen Jesus: Easter and its Interpretations' (pp. 474-511).

In Ch.13, 'Jesus as the Founder of a Cult', the various views on the origins of the tradition of the Last Supper are examined. The conclusion is that Jesus, knowing that his life was in danger, probably celebrated a simple farewell meal with his disciples, at which he spoke about the 'new covenant' with God. After Jesus' death, the Primitive Christian community built the memory of that meal into a new ritual to replace the temple cult of animal sacrifice; in effect, a new 'cult' had developed. It may be noted that this is similar to the views of Dom Gregory Dix in his proposing a *Chaburah* meal as the origin of the Last Supper tradition (Dix, 2009:50-60).

'Jesus as Martyr', Ch. 14, deals with the concept of the historical causes of the death of Jesus, particularly in view of Christian "anti-Judaism" fuelled by the charge that "the Jews' killed Jesus". Theissen and Merz investigate various scholarly views on the degree of culpability of the Roman authorities, the Jerusalem local [Temple] aristocracy, and the Jewish people. The authors observe (pp. 449-453) that while all three of those groups are either incriminated or exonerated in various ways in the sources, Jesus appears as the suffering righteous man, the model for the nascent Christian community. They also note that Jesus' innocence is established and elaborated in all the canonical Gospels, by stories of both divine miracles and human testimony (pp.453-454). The conclusion reached by Theissen and Merz is that Jesus' death was the result of various religious and political tensions which offended the two élite ruling groups – the Romans and the Jerusalem aristocracy – with elements among the 'ordinary people' playing a supporting role. They also note the "dishonourable role" played by various disciples in betraying, deserting, or denying Jesus. It may be noted that some of the material in this chapter supports a number of Spong's views on the events of the Passion; however, this point will be the subject of further comment below.

The final chapter, 'The Risen Jesus', Ch . 15, deals with the development of the traditions of the Resurrection and so of the Christian 'faith'. In particular, Theissen and Merz discuss views put forward by various theologians and religious historians on the sources of the 'Easter faith'; those views include the 'empty tomb' legend and the various post-crucifixion 'appearances' of Jesus. Arguments are presented both for and against both traditions; the conclusion is, in effect, that we cannot know. However, again the case is made in a clear and logical manner, without unsupported or unnecessary speculation or convoluted argument.

It is of interest that while *The Historical Jesus* (1996) was written after *Spong's Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (1994), there are many almost identical phrases and ideas in the two books (particularly in Ch.13 of *Historical Jesus*). However, Theissen and Merz give sources, such as Bultmann, but Spong does not, leaving the impression that they are his own ideas. Examples of this (from *Historical Jesus*) are: p. 478, "scandal of the cross", R. Bultmann 1953; pp. 479-480, concept of the Resurrection events taking place first in Galilee, H. von Campenhausen 1952; p. 480, Jesus "buried...in an unknown place", H. Grass 1962. Spong does include both Bultmann and von Campenhausen in the bibliography to *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?* but for publications other than those quoted by Theissen and Merz.

The fourth of Thiessen's books to be read is *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World* (Theissen, 1999). Theissen calls this text "an attempt to give a scholarly description and analysis of primitive Christian religion" (p. xiii) and "a theory of primitive Christian religion" (p. 1). He says (p. xiv) that the book is based on the Speaker's Lectures which he delivered at Oxford University in 1998 and 1999.

The general thrust of *Earliest Churches* is that all religious faiths, and denominations within faiths, are a "cultural sign language" by which each may be recognised as a separate identity. Theissen seeks to examine the way in which he believes that a new 'sign language' was formed to identify Primitive Christianity, particularly as being different from its Jewish origins. In doing so, he speaks of the

dangers of both “mythologization of the history” and “historicizing of the myth”, saying that “At the beginning [of Christianity] stood a unity in tension of both history and myth” (pp. 21-22). He suggests that the historical figure Jesus lived in the Jewish history and mythology, and himself promoted the mythology of an imminent ‘end time’. That ‘end time’ did not eventuate, and Jesus’ followers and their successors constructed a new mythology – a ‘sign language’ – around Jesus himself. Theissen proposes a view of primitive Christian religion as “a ‘semiotic cathedral’ ...erected...not out of stones but out of signs of various kinds” (p. 17). Again Theissen places the development of earliest Christianity in the social and political context of its times.

Although Part 3 of this book (pp.121-160) deals with the topics of baptism and the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus, Theissen’s concern is not with the texts as presented in the Gospels. Rather, he examines the way in which those events and rituals transmuted into the rituals of baptism and the Eucharist as practiced by the Christian community. He also discusses the way in which the death of Jesus came to be seen as a ‘sacrificial death’, replacing the Jewish ritual of animal sacrifice. In that context, he notes that the Gentile Christians, being ‘uncircumcised’, did not have access to the Jewish sacrificial cult in the temple, unlike the Jewish Christians (p. 149). Gradually, “the unique sacrifice of Jesus [became] the definitive replacement for all other ritual sacrifices” (p. 141), so establishing a new ‘sign’ distinguishing Christianity from other religious practices and traditions.

Gerd Theissen’s approach to the development of earliest Christianity is far broader than that of John Shelby Spong. Theissen draws on a wide range of sources: canonical and non-canonical, Christian and non-Christian, as well as the works of many theologians and biblical scholars; Spong uses a much narrower base, largely limited to the Hebrew traditions and Scriptures. Theissen’s style and presentation appears clearer and more logical than Spong’s, being aimed at a general lay readership while not adopting a populist style. Overall, Theissen, while being non-literalist, may be regarded as being more scholarly in his writing than is

Spong, but not so much so as to be inaccessible to a general reader. It is noted that he does not refer to his intended readers in terms such as “average pewsitters”, “believers-in-exile”, and “biblically illiterate”, all of which are used by Spong. It may also be noted that Gerd Theissen does not make dogmatic assertions about his views, as John Spong tends to do, but rather presents his opinions as hypotheses or possibilities open to discussion and argument.

Bart D. Ehrman

The next author to be examined is Bart D. Ehrman, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA. Ehrman’s background is in some ways similar to Spong’s: he had an Episcopal “church-going but not particularly religious” early life, followed by a “‘born-again’ experience” at high school. He went on to a ‘fundamentalist’ Bible College, then an ‘evangelical’ undergraduate college (BA in English Literature). However, when he attended Princeton Theological Seminary to take a Master of Divinity degree, followed by a PhD, he was confronted by a ‘liberal’ theological view. Unlike Spong, he had only a brief experience as an active clergyman, instead choosing to remain in academia; he now regards himself as a ‘happy agnostic’ (Ehrman, 2005c:1-15, 258). He is a prolific writer and speaker, mainly on aspects of the development and history of the New Testament texts and early Christian traditions, basing his work on textual- and historical-criticism approaches. He is non-literalist in his views. It may be noted that Ehrman is of the next generation later than Spong, being some thirty-five years younger.

Six of Ehrman’s books have been examined: *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Ehrman, 2005a), *Lost Christianities: the Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Ehrman, 2005b), *Misquoting Jesus: the Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (Ehrman, 2005c), *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Ehrman, 2006), *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Ehrman, 2008), and *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don’t Know About Them)* (Ehrman, 2009).

The first of Bart Ehrman's books in the list is *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Ehrman, 2005a). This book simply presents some forty-two non-canonical "early Christian 'Apocrypha'" or "Christian 'Pseudepigrapha'" (pp. v-vi; 4). It also gives five ancient Canonical Lists, from the *Muratorian Canon* of about the second century CE through to the *Canon of the Third Synod of Carthage* in 393 CE (pp. 331-342). Each 'book' or 'list' is prefaced by explanatory notes detailing its provenance and other relevant information. These texts come from a variety of sources and discoveries, such as Nag Hammadi, and cover some centuries of development of early Christian practices and traditions. *Lost Scriptures* does not contain anything specifically relevant to the Resurrection; however, it is noted that it addresses part of that body of material that John Shelby Spong appears to exclude from his considerations.

Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew (Ehrman, 2005b) is an examination of "the wide diversity of early Christianity and its sacred texts" (p. ix). As that implies, it is a discussion of the various non-canonical early writings of the Christian groups spread around the Roman Empire, and the various forms taken by Early Christianity before the 'orthodox' or 'Roman' form became established. Most of those writings and practices were later declared to be heretical or at least not to be included in the Canon. Obviously, being a book written for a general readership rather than for specialists in the field, it can only skim the surface of the topic.

Ehrman does not specifically discuss the Resurrection, *per se*, in this book. The event only appears in the context of a discussion of the fragmentary, non-canonical *Gospel of Peter* (pp. 17-20). While this Gospel does contain some details about Jesus' trial and crucifixion that differ from the canonical accounts, and some that support traditions such as the burial by Joseph of Arimathea, Ehrman dismisses it as a late entry to the field. He notes the strong "anti-Jewish slant" of the text, as well as "some intriguing legendary accretions" including a "giant resurrected Jesus" and a "walking cross that speaks to the skies" (p. 20). He also discusses a tradition that he says is strengthened in the *Gospel of Peter*, exonerating Pontius

Pilate from responsibility for the death of Jesus while emphasising the Jewish culpability (pp. 20-22). In his discussion of the *Gospel of Peter* in *Lost Scriptures* (Ehrman, 2005a:31-32) Ehrman concludes that it was written in the early second century CE.

The penultimate chapter of *Lost Christianities* is Ch. 11, 'The Invention of Scripture: The Formation of the Proto-orthodox New Testament' (pp. 229-246). Here Bart Ehrman discusses the development and establishment of the New Testament Canon, from the earliest first century texts to the twenty-seven-book Canon first mentioned in 367 CE by the Alexandrian Bishop Athanasius (p. 230). He uses the term 'proto-orthodox' to indicate that form of Early Christianity which later became the dominant 'Roman' tradition while condemning other forms, such as the Ebionites, as heretic. He makes the point (p.229) that "the Christian Scriptures did not descend from heaven a few years after Jesus died"; instead, the books that comprise the 'sacred canon' were written by a variety of authors over some sixty or seventy years, in different places and for different audiences. Importantly, other similar books were written in the same period, sometimes by the same authors, but were not included in the final list. This discussion includes an examination of some of those 'other' texts, such as *The Shepherd of Hermas* [sic]. Overall, this chapter gives a clear insight into how the present New Testament came into being.

The third book in this section is *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (Ehrman, 2005c), which Ehrman wrote from a 'textual criticism' perspective. This book has some autobiographical content, insofar as the Introduction (pp. 1-15) is an account of Bart Ehrman's personal religious journey, from his birth in the mid-1950s to his present position as an agnostic professor of religious studies. Specifically, he addresses the reasons for his writing this book. He explains his position further in pages 246-255, 'Q & A with Bart Ehrman' and 256-261, 'Readers' Response to *Misquoting Jesus*'.

Unlike Spong, Ehrman seeks to place the development of the Christian Scriptures into the social and religious context of the first four centuries CE. He examines both Christian and non-Christian sources in order to discover reasons for what he sees as deliberate and significant changes made to the earliest Christian

texts. He stresses that the earliest of those texts still extant are not autographs but, at the very least, copies of copies of copies of the originals.

It must be noted that in this book Bart Ehrman is not concerned with simple spelling or grammatical errors in the biblical texts. Instead, his aim is to examine instances that can be demonstrated to be changes that alter the meaning of the earlier text, and so alter the understanding of the Christian mythology.

The *Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Ehrman, 2006) is Bart Ehrman's analysis of the Coptic *Gospel of Judas*. It may be noted that Ehrman was one of a small team of scholars assembled by the National Geographic Society in 2004 to assess the probable authenticity of a newly available document – the *Gospel of Judas*. Such a Gospel was referred to (as an heretical Gnostic text) by the church father Irenaeus about 180 CE, although it is not known if it was the same as the third/fourth century text seen by Ehrman and colleagues in 2004 (Ehrman, 2006:3-8). Because this Gospel is a 'Gnostic' writing, Ehrman includes a discussion of the Gnostics and their beliefs.

Like Ehrman's other books, this is aimed at a general, 'non-specialist' readership. However, he does not 'talk down' to his readers, or present complex arguments; instead, he gives a clear discussion of the history of Judas Iscariot as presented in the traditional New Testament version on the one hand and the material in the *Gospel of Judas* on the other. In the context of this thesis, it is a further source of information about the possible events that shaped the Easter traditions, as well as presenting a contrast to Spong's work in both scholarship and writing style.

It must be noted that the Judas text did not become generally available until 2006, some years after John Spong had retired as an active member of the clergy in 2000. However, Spong does address the topic of Judas Iscariot in *The Sins of Scripture*, (Spong, 2005:199-210) in the context of his views on the development of anti-Semitism in the Christian tradition. He also examines the topic in *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (Spong, 2007:44-46) in the context of the historicity of the Judas figure; this same material is also found in his earlier *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (Spong, 1994).

Bart Ehrman wrote *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction* (Ehrman, 2008) as a undergraduate-level textbook - an introduction to the study of the New Testament in its full historical setting over several centuries. He says (p. xxiii) that his approach is “rigorously historical”, placing the New Testament in the overall context of the social, political and religious world of the Roman Empire – including Judaism and the various pagan religions.

This book does have a number of sections that cover the same topics as parts of Spong’s writings; this is not surprising as both authors are addressing the same development of early Christianity. The major differences lie in the authors’ styles and what they include: Ehrman’s clear, direct and scholarly approach that includes sources other than the Hebrew and first-century Christian traditions, against Spong’s tendency to speculation and obfuscation based on a limited range of sources. Some examples of such topics from *The New Testament* are: the timing of Jesus’ death (pp. 63-65), Jesus’ death ‘according to Scripture’ (pp. 285-287), and the oppression of women by the Church (ch. 25 – pp. 403-415). Both Ehrman and Spong discuss the question of on what day Jesus was crucified as an example of differences between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. Both authors examine the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ Passion and Resurrection, noting the use of various passages from the Hebrew Scriptures such as Ps. 22 and the prophet Isaiah. The matter of the Church’s oppression and marginalisation of women is one of Spong’s recurring themes in his writings, while Ehrman discusses the question in the context of women associated with Jesus and, later, Paul.

The last of Bart Ehrman’s books to be examined is *Jesus, Interrupted* (Ehrman, 2009), which is written from an historical-critical point of view. Ehrman emphasises (p. 2) that the views expressed in this book are not “my own idiosyncratic views of the Bible”; they are, rather, scholarly knowledge that has been available for at least two hundred years. He believes, however, that those views “have not been effectively communicated to the population at large”, or even to “the people of faith”. To that end, he says (p.271) that he is “trying to make serious scholarship on the Bible and earliest Christianity accessible and available to people

who...have never heard what scholars have long known and thought about". It is noted that this is very similar to John Shelby Spong's stated reasons behind his writings.

This book, *Jesus, Interrupted*, again addresses much of the same material as is found in the writings of John Shelby Spong; again, there are the same differences in approach and style that have been mentioned previously. A large amount of the material in this book can also be found in other Ehrman publications.

There are two sections that are specifically germane to the subject matter of this thesis. The first is a discussion of the probability of the resurrection of the executed Jesus having actually occurred, when viewed from the standpoint of the historian (pp.176-179); Ehrman concludes that while not impossible, there can be no proof either way and a resurrection miracle is most improbable. However, he does not dismiss the various stories surrounding the burial and resurrection of Jesus in the same rather cavalier manner as Spong, but cogently argues the case on the basis of historical evidence.

The second section of interest is 'A Suffering Messiah' (pp. 227-236). This is a discussion of the difference in concepts of 'the Messiah' in the Jewish and Christian traditions and why 'the Jews' cannot accept Jesus as 'the Messiah'. Again Ehrman draws on the same biblical texts from the Old and New Testaments as does Spong; again the major difference is in approach and presentation.

These books by Bart Ehrman are intended for a general readership, rather than Spong's "biblically illiterate... average pewsitters" and "believers in exile". Ehrman does not address specific topics, such as the Resurrection, in separate books in the way that Spong does. Instead, his approach is to introduce his "non-specialist" readers to the way in which Christianity developed over the early centuries of the Common Era. Ehrman does this in a clear and reasoned manner similar to that of Gerd Theissen – by placing the Christian story in the social and historical context of the age, without engaging in dubious speculation. Unlike Spong, Ehrman acknowledges that there were influences other than the Hebrew Scriptures in the development of the Christian traditions. Furthermore, he does not confine

himself to the Jewish and canonical first century Christian texts for his sources and arguments. It is particularly noticeable that Ehrman's biblical references are always correct, with no misquoting or dubious interpretation, and that he does not introduce tenuous semantic arguments in attempting to make a case. It may also be noted that these books are all relatively recent publications, being produced in the period 2003-2009.

Philip F. Esler

At the time of writing *The First Christians in their Social Worlds* (Esler, 1994), Philip F. Esler was Reader in New Testament at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, later becoming Professor of Biblical Criticism. This book is based on eight public lectures that Esler delivered at St Andrews University in late 1992, shortly after his arrival from Australia. Briefly, *The First Christians* is a discussion of Esler's views on New Testament interpretation based on a 'social-scientific' approach.

As is the case with Theissen and Ehrman, Esler does not directly discuss the events surrounding the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus. However, he does cast further light upon the social and political milieu of first century Palestine under the Romans and the effect that milieu had on the development of Early Christianity. This is a topic that, generally, is not addressed by John Shelby Spong, arguably to the detriment of his work.

In Chapter 2 of *The First Christians* (pp. 19-36), Esler examines the topic of 'Reading the Mediterranean Social Script'. His theme is that it is not possible to read and understand the New Testament stories properly if they are viewed through twenty-first century Western eyes. Of particular interest is the section on 'Honour and Shame' (pp. 25-29) in which Esler discusses the early Christians' application of those concepts to the paradox of the shameful death of Jesus being followed by his exaltation by God.

John Shelby Spong, in Chapters 6 and 13 of his *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?* (Spong, 1994), makes extensive reference to the Hebrew Bible (and Christian Old Testament) book 'Daniel' as a 'midrashic' source for some Christian concepts, particularly the 'son of man' in Dan. 7. He does not examine the historical

or social background to the writing of Daniel. However, Philip Esler devotes Chapter 6 of *The First Christians* (pp. 92-109) to what he sees as the social and historical basis for 'Millennialism and Daniel 7'. He suggests (p. 93) that images in Daniel refer to the Greeks, specifically the Seleucid kingdom of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. He also suggests (p. 95) that images of 'the beast' in Dan. 7 may have origins as ancient as the Babylonian figure of Ti'amat in the *Enuma Elish* saga, c. 18th-16th centuries BCE . Esler finds parallels to the apocalyptic concepts in Daniel in the cargo cults of the South Pacific (p.96), suggesting that such concepts may be seen as an indigenous reaction to a colonial occupation. In the case of the writer of Daniel, that would be the Roman occupation of the Jewish lands.

Because of the context in which the basic material was produced, Esler's *The First Christians* has a more academic approach than other authors such as Bart Ehrman and so may not appeal to a general readership. However, the subject matter is presented clearly and succinctly, with easily followed arguments, and again presents a contrast to the work of John Spong.

Geza Vermes

Geza Vermes is Professor Emeritus of Jewish Studies at Oxford University. He was a Roman Catholic priest for some ten years after World War II, but left the church and later reasserted his Jewish identity. He is a recognised scholar of both Judaism and Christianity and the author of, *inter alia*, the definitive *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*.

In his book *The Resurrection: History and Myth* (Vermes, 2008), Geza Vermes discusses the various concepts of afterlife and resurrection in the Jewish religious traditions. He also examines the idea of resurrection, generally of Jesus but including others such as Lazarus, as presented in the New Testament. This examination covers both the pre-crucifixion teachings of Jesus and the various post-crucifixion 'appearance' stories. Vermes observes that there is no account of the actual event of Jesus' resurrection. He also touches on the Greek traditions and

beliefs on this question, given that the apostle Paul worked in a Hellenist environment.

In his final chapter, Vermes proposes six theories to explain the origins of the resurrection traditions. He discounts a further “two extremes” – the “blind faith of the fundamentalist believer” and the “out-of-hand rejection of the inveterate sceptic” (p. 143). In the final analysis Vermes does not present any firm conclusion; his not unreasonable suggestion appears to be that ‘we cannot know’. However, his preference would appear to be for a spiritual resurrection in the hearts of Jesus’ followers, followed by the development of a mythology and tradition driven by Paul.

In *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Vermes, 2003), Geza Vermes examines the Jesus traditions in the light of the facts that Jesus was a Jew and did not found Christianity *per se*. There is little in this book relevant to the Resurrection traditions, but it does provide another contrast to Spong’s writing in its presentation of a scholarly discourse in a style easily accessible to a lay reader.

The third book by Geza Vermes to be examined here is *The Nativity: History and Legend* (Vermes, 2006). In this book, Vermes looks at the two stories of the events surrounding the nativity of Jesus as presented in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke. He makes what may be regarded as standard comment on matters such as whether or not Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, the differing genealogies of Jesus given by the two evangelists, and the question of the connection between Isaiah’s prophecy (Isa. 7:14) and the virginal conception for Mary as told in Matthew’s account. However, he also examines topics such as the Jewish and Pagan traditions concerning miraculous births, and the rabbinic laws concerning betrothal, marriage and divorce. While a great deal of the basic material in this book is the same as that found in Spong’s *Born of a Woman* (Spong, 1992), Vermes seeks to place the stories and traditions surrounding the birth of Jesus into the historical context of the Graeco-Roman and Jewish beliefs and traditions in first century CE Galilee and Judea. He clearly accepts the possibility that the birth stories in the Christian tradition were developed largely under the influence of the

Hellenic traditions, in contrast to John Shelby Spong who grounds the stories firmly in the Hebrew Scriptures. The work stands in clear contrast to John Shelby Spong's *Born of a Woman*. Vermes strongly suggests that the stories were added at some later time, as a 'prelude' to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke; he says that the Nativity stories appear to have no real connection to the matter of those Gospels and are never mentioned again by either author.

As with the other authors examined in this section, Geza Vermes is non-literalist in his approach to the Christian mythology and traditions. His examination of the various texts and practices, and his subsequent argument, is clear and concise, not biased toward the Hebrew/Jewish traditions, and again without those previously discussed faults found in Spong's work.

Authors from 'The Jesus Seminar'

As noted earlier, John Shelby Spong has been, since the 1990s, a Fellow of the Westar Institute and the Jesus Seminar, the members of which, in general terms, seek to find 'the historical Jesus' as portrayed in the New Testament – particularly in the Gospels, Acts and the Pauline writings. It is considered, therefore, that writings by some members of that organization should be included in this review, by way of comparison.

The work of two Fellows will be examined: Robert W. Funk and John Dominic Crossan, both of whom were foundation members of the Jesus Seminar (Bruce D. Chilton, quoted elsewhere, is also a Fellow). It may be noted that the Jesus Seminar and its discussions have come under much criticism, particularly from the conservative and evangelical side of the Christian community. However, even critics of the Seminar generally acknowledge that the majority of its members are well-qualified and recognised biblical scholars, while others are established authors in the field of religion.

Robert W. Funk was the driving force behind the foundation of the Westar Institute, and hence the Jesus Seminar. He was an academic, teaching in the field of religion at various seminaries and universities in the USA, however, he became disillusioned with the church's approach to Christian teaching and retired to establish the Westar Institute. Robert Funk died in September 2005.

In his book *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (Funk, 1996), Robert Funk seeks to explain what he (together with the other members of the Jesus Seminar) sees as the 'historical Jesus' as portrayed in the Gospels. As might be expected, much of the material in this book is similar to Spong's work written in the same decade. However, Funk says that he bases his views on a strictly historical analysis of the Gospel texts; he does not have Spong's speculation and specious argument. He also acknowledges that there were other Christian writings that did not become part of the Canon, as well as religions and traditions which were neither Christian nor Jewish but which may have influenced the development of early Christianity. This is particularly so in the question of the birth narratives, which he links to the well-established format of the Greek biography (pp. 281-285).

It is noted that Funk observes that "some scholars" believe that Jesus was executed at the time of the feast of Tabernacles, rather than at Passover (p. 220). This is in contrast to John Shelby Spong, who believes, as discussed earlier, that Jesus was crucified at the time of Passover, but that much of the later Christian tradition and practice surrounding the event was developed from the liturgy of the Jewish feast of Tabernacles. Funk also mentions that, in the view of the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar, it is probable that the site of Jesus' grave was never known – if in fact there was a grave at all (pp. 220-221). As discussed previously, Spong strongly agrees with this view of the probable disposal of Jesus' body.

In his examination of the resurrection traditions, Funk notes that Paul, writing to the church community in Corinth in about 54 CE, made the point that the resurrected spiritual body is different from the physical body (1 Cor. 15:35-49). This may be seen as explaining the non-recognition of the risen Jesus by various disciples who had known him well. Funk comments that as the reported appearances became more distant in time from the original Easter event, so the

appearances became more palpable and corporeal, losing their “luminous quality” and becoming more like a resuscitated corpse (p. 260).

In *Honest to Jesus*, Robert Funk presents a clear, historically based examination of the ‘Jesus story’ as it is presented in the New Testament. That examination includes the history of the development of the New Testament in the early centuries of the Christian faith. His general approach is similar to that of John Shelby Spong; overall, his conclusions are basically the same as Spong’s. However, his style is significantly different to Spong’s, in that he presents his arguments clearly, directly and accurately, without unnecessary convolution. Funk also accepts that there were other faith traditions that may have influenced the development of the Christian mythology and tradition; he does not demonstrate a ‘Hebrewphile’ bias.

An interesting example of contrast in style and content by the same author is provided by Robert Funk’s book *Parables and Presence*, (Funk,1982). In this book, Funk presents a learned discussion of the role played by language in the development of the Christian tradition. In particular, he examines how the parables of Jesus and the letters of the various itinerant apostles establish a ‘presence’ for those individuals. This book is not considered to be strictly in the same genre as Spong’s writings, as it is not in the populist, ‘easy-to-read’ style as are other of Funk’s books, and certainly is in marked contrast to Spong.

John Dominic Crossan is Emeritus Professor in Biblical Studies at DePaul University, Chicago USA. He was a member of the Roman Catholic Servite Order from 1950 and an ordained priest from 1957, but left both the Servites and the clergy in 1969 in order to follow an academic career – and to marry. As mentioned above, he was one of the founding members of the Jesus Seminar, although his views are not always fully in accord with other Fellows. However, he approaches the developing early Christianity as a non-literalist historian and, unlike John Shelby Spong, takes a broad view on the origins of the Christian mythology.

In his book *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography* (Crossan 1994), Crossan examines the various New Testament stories about Jesus – his words and actions – and to a lesser extent the actions of the disciples and apostles. His general approach is to establish a possible origin for a story, for example a tradition or an historical event, and to trace its probable development through the oral tradition to the accepted canonical texts. As an example, his examination of the term ‘son of man’ notes an apparent change from the Hebrew usage as a generic equivalent of ‘mankind’ or ‘humanity’, to become the Christian titular term for a coming agent of God’s judgement. It is of interest that Crossan (pp. 89-90) agrees with Gerd Theissen in finding political overtones in some of the Gospel stories, for example the demoniac and the Gaderene swine (Theissen, 1992:110).

Looking at the stories and traditions surrounding the Passion of Jesus, beginning with the Triumphal Entry to Jerusalem, Crossan draws the overall conclusion that the stories presented in the New Testament narratives reflect a developing apologetic based on a probable social, religious and political milieu (ch. 6, ‘The Dogs Beneath the Cross’). He makes it clear that this is generally speculation based on the best available historical information. However, he does reach some of the same conclusions as Spong. For example, he says that the ‘Last Supper’ was a standard common meal for the group; that if Jesus’ body was buried at all it was by his executioners in a shallow grave, rather than by followers in a proper tomb; and that the resurrection narratives have been developed to promote the primacy of Peter, to the detriment of other disciples such as Mary Magdalene.

In the specific matter of the resurrection traditions, Crossan suggests that the traditions of Easter Sunday developed in the light of events over a period of several years (ch.7, ‘How Many Years Was Easter Sunday?’). He discusses the role played by Paul in establishing the resurrection tradition, but suggests that it was as a spiritual, rather than bodily, event; he notes Paul’s efforts to establish himself as a legitimate Apostle. He also discusses the continuing efforts to entrench the primacy of Peter as the successor to Jesus as the leader of the developing Christian community.

Although Crossan and Spong share many ideas and conclusions, and in this context write for a similar lay popular readership, there is again a great difference in style and presentation. Crossan presents his arguments clearly and without unnecessary convoluted speculation; he also acknowledges that there were influences other than the Hebrew/Jewish tradition in the development of the Christian mythology and practice.

Summary of Chapter

In general, the authors examined in this chapter did not write for a readership of biblical scholars and researchers, although these books are based on their scholarly works. Rather, their intended readers are the interested laypersons who are informed, but still enquiring, about those events in the Early Christian period that may have influenced the development of the Christian tradition known today. To this end, their writing style is generally less formal than that found in publications that are more academic, although that should not, and generally does not, lessen the academic rigour of their approach. As noted earlier, all are academics and/or writers of recognised standing, mostly with ecclesiastical training and experience.

These scholars seek to place the origins of Christianity in the historical social and political context of the first century CE Hellenistic-Roman world. Overall, it appears that there is general agreement among the non-literalist scholars that Jesus was probably a peasant sage who operated in the rural areas of Galilee. His teachings, particularly about the 'Kingdom of God', brought him to the attention of the ruling powers, both Roman and Jewish; for political and civil order reasons, it was decided that he should be 'got rid of' – executed. After his death, over a period of some time, various of his followers, and others such as Saul/Paul, had different experiences which gave rise to stories that Jesus was still present, at least in spirit if not as an actual physical presence. From those stories and his followers' recollections of their time with him, together with some beliefs and practices from the Hellenistic (and possibly other) religious traditions, the Christian mythology and traditions developed over the early centuries of the Christian era.

From a reader's perspective, these authors present their work in a clear and uncluttered style, not making dogmatic statements but cogently arguing the case for their necessary speculations. In general, they agree that in the final analysis, 'we cannot know'. However, the major points are, first, that the Christian stories are viewed in the historical context of the Eastern Mediterranean region and, second, the writers acknowledge that there were cultural and religious influences outside the Hebrew/Jewish scriptures and traditions which played a part in the shaping of Early Christianity.

It is acknowledged that there are many other authors of similar standing who write in this genre. It is also acknowledged that many of those authors are women theologians and scholars whose views are of equal standing with those of their male colleagues. A number of those writers address the topic of the Graeco-Roman Mystery religions and their possible relationship to the developing Christian mythology and practice.

It is accepted that there are many who reject the work of John Shelby Spong and other authors writing in the non-literalist genre. Instead, they regard the Bible as the revealed and inerrant Word of God, to be taken as historically accurate in every detail. Examples of such writings are found in the book *Inerrancy*, edited by Dr. Norman L Geisler, in which fourteen evangelical academics present the case for the divine inerrancy of the Word of God as written in both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible (Geisler 1982). As it is considered that such authors are not writing in the same non-literalist genre as John Shelby Spong, their work will not be included in this thesis, beyond an acknowledgement that such work is in the public arena. Another example of such views is found in the 1995 paper 'What's Wrong with Bishop Spong?' by Michael Bott and Jonathan Safarti (Bott & Safarti, 1995).

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

Although the material in these opening pages to this chapter has appeared in more detail at the beginning of this thesis, it is believed that a résumé will be helpful at this point.

This thesis is based on a critical reading of the work of Bishop John Shelby Spong, arguably one of the more controversial and influential Christian writers, and speakers, of the late twentieth century. Although he has continued to speak and write since retiring from the clergy in January 2000, his more recent work does not appear to have aroused the same level of interest and controversy as did his earlier publications.

John Shelby Spong's earlier books, published between 1974 and 1999, address various topics relating to his views on the foundations of the Christian faith and practices, as well as other themes such as human sexuality. He also includes a number of references to his 'personal agenda', such as the Church's attitude toward the status and treatment of women, homosexuals, and African-Americans. However, it is probably his views on the 'de-literalising' of the biblical texts that have aroused the most controversy.

Spong does not write for the academic or theological communities. Instead, he purports to address those lay members of the Christian community who have become dissatisfied with the way the Church presents its message in the modern world. Spong refers to those people as 'believers in exile', or 'the Church Alumni'. He also refers to 'the average pew-sitters' who make up the congregations of the churches today; he says that they are, generally, 'biblically illiterate'. He states that his aim is to 'deliteralise' the biblical texts and stories, so making them more accessible to the laity of the modern Christian community. Spong also says that he wants to make the findings of modern scholarship more easily available to the people – his "average pew-sitters".

Because John Shelby Spong says that he writes specifically for a lay readership, no argument is presented here either for or against his personal beliefs or theology; it is Spong himself, and his approach to presenting his views and ideas to his readership, that is of interest.

Proposal

The obvious question which arises is “To what extent can Spong’s views and interpretations be taken at face value?”. That question leads to the Proposal for this thesis:

- *Is Bishop John Shelby Spong, in his writings, successful in his aim of demystifying and demythologising the Christian Scriptures for the lay reader?*
- *Should he be accorded the status of a biblical scholar or a credible author in the field of the Early Christian mythology and tradition, on the basis of his writing and speaking to the wider, non-academic community?*

BACKGROUND

John Shelby Spong is a former Bishop of the Episcopal Church of the USA, which is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. He retired from the active clergy in January 2000. Spong, born in June 1931, was raised in a strongly evangelical, Anglican-but-Calvinist home in North Carolina, in part of the American ‘Bible Belt’. He says that as a result of his upbringing, he had a literalist view of the contents of the Christian Bible – both Old and New Testaments. He also saw marginalisation of women, racism against African-Americans, and homophobia, both outside and inside the Christian Church. However, when he began tertiary studies

leading to the priesthood, he was exposed to religious thought radically different from that which he had previously known. .

John Shelby Spong was ordained to the clergy of the Episcopal Church in 1955, serving in various parishes in North Carolina and Virginia, both old 'slave states'. He had charge of racially split congregations in segregated towns, which brought him into conflict with leading members of the white community who were also his parishioners. In the 1960s, Spong became involved in the civil liberties events, such as 'freedom marches' and de-segregation of schools. These activities brought him wider attention, including from the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1965-69, while Rector of a parish in Virginia, Spong began running a study group for his parishioners, largely confining himself to the Old Testament – the Hebrew Scriptures. He became a "Hebrewphile", convinced that the Christian faith had grown solely out of the Hebrew/Jewish tradition. In 1974 he published *This Hebrew Lord*, and subsequently became involved in a series of public discussions with the Reformed Jewish Rabbi Dr. Jack D. Spiro. Spong had already acquired some notoriety for his support for causes such as race relations and the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church; he now came to the notice of the wider Anglican Communion, including outside the USA. He also attracted attention from those whom he refers to as "fundamentalists", in particular the 'TV evangelists', who challenged his views on the grounds of their view of the Bible as the infallible revealed Word of God.

John Shelby Spong also says that it was in 1974 that he began to question the accepted doctrines and practices of the modern Christian Church, seeing himself as one of the 'believers in exile'. Those views have coloured his writing and public speaking ever since. They have also made Spong the subject of criticism, verbal and physical abuse and death threats from conservative, literalist Christians throughout the world.

John Shelby Spong was consecrated as Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, USA, in June 1976. This elevation in no way curbed his speaking and writing activities. With the support of his Diocese, he extended his causes to include the position of gays and lesbians within the Church, eventually ordaining openly gay men as priests. This, along with his long-term support for the ordination of women as

priests, earned him strident opposition from the conservative elements of the worldwide Anglican Communion and their supporting Press. However, it also brought him a considerable level of support for his views from the more liberal members of the Christian community, both lay and clergy and of various denominations.

Spong retired from the clergy in January 2000. Since then he has continued his speaking, writing and teaching activities; he has written eight more books, including his autobiography *Here I Stand* (2000). However, these later publications appear to have attracted less attention than his earlier efforts. For one thing, the subject matter is far less controversial, being more philosophical and, to a great extent, a reiteration of his earlier material. The other consideration here is that as Spong is no longer a Bishop, it is possible that his views are no longer regarded by his former opponents as being of major significance.

EXAMINATION OF JOHN SHELBY SPONG'S WRITINGS

Not all of John Shelby Spong's writings are considered to be relevant to the purposes of this thesis. The major focus is on his book *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?* (1994), on the development of the traditions surrounding the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth after his crucifixion. A secondary focus is on Spong's views, presented in his *Born of a Woman* (1992), of the stories of Jesus' birth, in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke,. These two traditions are generally seen as being the central points of the Christian faith; Spong devotes a book to each as a separate topic.

Others of Spong's books that refer to the development of Early Christianity have been read closely and are referred to as appropriate. These are *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991), *This Hebrew Lord* (1993, first published 1974), and *Liberating the Gospels* (1997). Spong has also written a number of books, either of a more philosophical nature, dealing with his views on the state of the Christian Church today, or as compilations of his various series of lectures. These books are mentioned briefly, as a comparison with the five referred to above.

It is acknowledged that John Shelby Spong has written other books, such as *Honest Prayer* (1973), as well as numerous papers, however, they are not considered to be relevant to the matter of this thesis.

Midrash

Spong was made aware of the Jewish tradition of Haggadic midrash (*Midrash Haggadah*) in February 1991. However, he does not appear to properly understand the practice of that tradition. Despite having been criticised by both his publisher and his friend Rabbi Dr. Jack D. Spiro, he continues to use the term 'midrash' as indicating taking an old text and revising its reading to suit a current situation, rather than as 'an exegesis' or 'explanation and interpretation'. Consequently, he not only freely and incorrectly uses the term 'midrash' itself, but also 'Christian midrash' and 'midrashic'. A number of Spong's books published after 1991 have a section devoted to his views on the importance of the midrash tradition in the understanding of the Christian stories.

Spong's Views on the Tradition of the Resurrection of Jesus

Examination of this book forms the major focus for this thesis. The Resurrection traditions and celebrations are regarded by many as the central point of the Christian community's ecclesiastical year, and as the foundation stone of the Christian faith. For that reason, it is considered that John Shelby Spong's treatment of the topic is appropriate as a focus for an examination of his writings.

Spong's views and arguments concerning the traditions surrounding the resurrection of Jesus are set out in his book *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?* (1994). As with his other publications on the Christian texts, traditions and practices, Spong's professed aim here is to deliteralise the biblical texts in order to make them more easily accessible to a lay readership. His stated target readership, as with his other books, is the group to whom he refers as "believers in exile" and "the church alumni"

– people who have become dissatisfied with the way in which the Christian story is presented in the churches today. Spong is drawing on the standard Bible texts which are available to the general public, and presenting his own arguments as to the interpretation of those texts. However, whether or not he has succeeded in his aim can be a matter for question. It must be remembered that John Shelby Spong has for many years counted himself as one of the ‘believers in exile’.

The book *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?* is divided into five Parts, each further broken into a number of chapters. Each Part deals with a different aspect of the topic of the Resurrection tradition, although Part 1 (chapters 1-3) is only an introduction to Spong’s approach to his subject. Part 2 is an examination of the Biblical texts – Paul and the four Gospels; Part 3 is a discussion of various ‘images’ from the Hebrew scriptures that Spong believes shaped the image of Jesus. In Part 4, Spong introduces his interpretation of various elements of the biblical texts, making a case that, at times, is somewhat tenuous and difficult to accept. Part 5 goes even further, with Spong appearing to rewrite the Gospel stories of Jesus’ death and resurrection, to give what he terms “...what really happened”.

As said above, the first three chapters of *Resurrection* are an introduction to the topic. Spong re-introduces his concept of *midrash*, examines what he sees as the background to the Easter tradition, and finally addresses his ideas on the limitations imposed by having to use words to express concepts in religious thought. However, he also begins to demonstrate a tendency to be dogmatic, narrow in his views, and inaccurate in his examples and citations – he has settled his case to his own satisfaction, and will make that case by any means available.

In Part 2 of *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?*, John Shelby Spong examines the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as told by Paul and the writers of the four Gospels. However, the examination appears to be based on a series of already-formed views about the subject matter of those texts – for example, that the Gospels were based solely on the Hebrew/Jewish Scriptures and traditions. He also gives the impression that Paul was writing gospel-type stories about the life

of Jesus, rather than expository, 'teaching', epistles to newly established congregations in non-Jewish communities. Although Spong is critical of those whom he calls 'literalists', he appears to selectively read various bible passages literally, in order to build a particular case. His insistence that there were no witnesses to the crucifixion and subsequent burial of Jesus because his disciples 'had all fled', despite passages to the contrary in all four Gospels, is a case in point. Similarly, Spong is convinced that the 'beloved disciple' is John, and so writes his text accordingly, despite there being no hard evidence to support that view.

Part 3 – chapters 10-13 – of *Resurrection* is titled 'Interpretive Images'. In this Part, Spong seeks to find images from the Hebrew Scriptures that he believes were used by the developing Christian community to fashion their image of Jesus. In particular, he is looking for sources for the Christian concepts of resurrection and life after death. Each of his four chapters in Part 3 examines a different aspect of what Spong sees as the developing 'character' of the 'Jesus figure'. In each case, those 'aspects' are based on images from the Hebrew texts and traditions, particularly as found in the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel (the images in Daniel are examined through the medium of the New Testament *Letter to the Hebrews*). It is considered that here, again, Spong is allowing his 'Hebrewphile' bias to restrict his approach to the development of the Christian mythology and traditions.

In Part 4, 'Clues That Lead Us Toward Easter', John Shelby Spong explores five 'clues' that he believes reveal the truth behind the Easter story. Those 'clues' address the questions of "where, who, how, when, and why" as related to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In respect of 'where', Spong contends (ch. 14) that Jesus was born in Nazareth in Galilee, was crucified in Jerusalem in Judah, and that the 'resurrection event' actually occurred in Galilee rather than Jerusalem. That appears to negate a number of the Easter traditions such as the visit to the tomb. 'Who' is mainly concerned with the figure of Peter and his apparent leadership in the disciple band (ch.15). However, Spong also introduces his conviction that John son of Zebedee is the 'beloved disciple' and the author of the Gospel of John, John's letter, and the final book of the New Testament, 'The Revelation to John'. John is also

presented as being, in large degree, a rival to Peter for primacy among the disciples.

Spong's third clue addresses his 'how' question (ch.16). Here he expresses his conviction that 'taking, blessing, breaking and giving' of bread at a common meal symbolises the acceptance of the crucified and risen Jesus; that ritual 'opens the eyes' of seekers after the risen Lord. However, much of his argument is convoluted and in many cases tenuous or even wrong. Again, he uses biblical passages out of context. In attempting to develop his case for the significance of the fourfold ritual, Spong omits to mention that it is a standard mealtime feature in observant Jewish households, and so would have been very familiar to most, if not all, of the characters in the Gospel stories. It would not have had any peculiarly 'Christian' significance.

The fourth clue deals with 'when' (ch . 17). In this chapter, Spong examines the meanings of the various time references relating to the death and resurrection of Jesus – 'on...' and 'after...' the third day, and 'the first day...'. However, he tends to gloss over the fact that 'three days' was a common reference to a short period of time in the Jewish biblical tradition, and so is difficult to regard as a literal time of seventy-two hours. Again, some of his references from the Hebrew Bible are, at least, questionable; much of his argument, too, is weak. As with other chapters, Spong appears to accept various Biblical passages as literal fact when it suits his case.

The fifth, and final, 'clue' looks at the question of 'why' (ch. 18). In this chapter, Spong arbitrarily dismisses most of the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion, entombment and resurrection as being simply mythology. In making this case, he again appears to take various passages of the biblical texts as literal fact, while ignoring those that do not suit his argument. He also distorts or misreads passages to suit his own purposes. Again, much of his argument is a dogmatic statement of his personal views, without any supporting evidence.

Part 5 of *Resurrection* is titled 'Reconstructing the Easter Moment'. Although this Part has three chapters, only two, Chs. 19 and 20, address the matter of the

Resurrection of Jesus. The third and final chapter, 21, is John Shelby Spong's personal statement of his beliefs regarding life after death.

As may be gathered from the title, this Part 5 is Spong's speculation as to what may have been the course of events at the time of the first Easter. As has been noted for the four preceding Parts of this book, Spong bases much of his speculation on selective readings of the bible texts, misquotations, and tenuous arguments resting on dubious references. He continues to accept as literal fact those passages that suit his case, while rejecting as false those that do not suit.

Spong's speculation is largely to do with the possibility of the Passion and Resurrection traditions being based on the rituals and traditions of the Jewish feast of *Sukkoth* (Tabernacles or Booths), rather than *Pesach* (Passover). This means that, in Spong's view, the events of the Triumphal Entry, arrest and crucifixion may have occurred in September/October, rather than March/April as is the Christian practice. Spong bases his thoughts on C.W.F. Smith's proposal that the Triumphal Entry and 'cursing of the fig tree' traditions may have their roots in *Sukkoth*. However, he takes the concept much further, expanding the idea to include not only the Easter traditions from Holy Week to the Crucifixion, but also the story of the Transfiguration. Spong places the Resurrection in Galilee, with the concept being taken back to Jerusalem by Simon Peter and his companions. It is, effectively, a rewriting of the Gospel stories of Easter.

In *Resurrection, Myth or Reality?*, John Shelby Spong presents his interpretation of the biblical stories and the traditions surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Much of the text is Spong's personal speculation. However, he presents that speculation as fact – 'what really happened'. In addition, he is careless in his handling of the biblical texts, in many instances either deliberately or inadvertently presenting an incorrect reading or questionable interpretation. To be fair to Spong, it is acknowledged that some of the incorrect citations and misspellings may be the fault of his publishers, although John Shelby Spong, as the author, must take final responsibility for his work.

Spong's View of the Virgin Birth Tradition

John Shelby Spong's views on the traditions and stories surrounding the birth of Jesus of Nazareth are contained in his *Born of a Woman* (1992). However, a great deal of the content of the book is taken up with Spong's views on the status of women within the Christian community. In fact, the first sentence of his text is a statement that the Christian Church, for most of its history, has been instrumental in the oppression of women. This is one of Spong's personal 'other agenda'; the topic intrudes, in greater or lesser degrees, into most of his writings.

Spong states that he does not believe in the stories of the virgin birth as literal fact. He suggests two different scenarios: one, that Mary, Jesus' mother, may have had a pre-marital sexual encounter, or the other, that she was a victim of rape. Neither of these theories is Spong's original thought. Either way, members of the early proto-Christian community may have felt a need to lessen the impact of that concept on the outside world. Spong does acknowledge, briefly, that the concept of birth as a result of an encounter between a god and a female human was a well-established tradition in the wider pre-Christian world. However, he also states that he is "not convinced" that those 'foreign' traditions had any influence on the developing Christian stories. He prefers to follow his 'Hebrewphile' concepts of "Christian midrash" interpretations of the Hebrew scriptures such as Isaiah 7:14.

In examining the development of the Virgin Birth traditions, John Shelby Spong refers, firstly, to the letters of Paul, followed by an examination of the Gospel references. He notes that Paul does not appear to regard Jesus' birth as anything but completely normal and human. This leads Spong to the not-unreasonable conclusion that the mythology of the Virgin Birth tradition was a later development in the Christian story.

The nativity stories only appear in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke. Mark, the first Gospel written, does not mention the topic; neither does John, the last, and the non-synoptic, of the Gospels. Spong makes it clear that the versions in Matthew and Luke are different in many respects, to the extent that they

are incompatible. However, he says that the 'Christmas story' most generally accepted in the community mind is, in fact, a conflation of the two. Spong's intention in this examination is to demonstrate that there are so many inconsistencies in the Nativity stories and traditions as to make it impossible to take them literally.

The final two chapters of *Born of a Woman* are an exploration of various topics concerning what John Shelby Spong sees as the effects of the virgin birth traditions on the Christian Church's attitude to women. In this argument, Spong draws for support on the views of a number of feminist theologians. This topic is one of Spong's 'personal agenda'; it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this argument is, in fact, the *raison d'être* for this book.

Other Books by John Shelby Spong

Thirteen other books by John Shelby Spong have been examined, with a view to finding further relevant information about the foci of this thesis. This examination also provides further insight into Spong's standing as a scholar and an author.

Of the thirteen books, three are concerned with the development of the Christian texts and traditions. These three books, *This Hebrew Lord*, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, and *Liberating the Gospels*, are simply reiterations of Spong's major themes and views, being examinations of various aspects of Christian tradition and practice. All three were written while Spong was active as Bishop of Newark. Although the texts do touch on the subjects of both the Virgin Birth and Resurrection traditions, there is no new material germane to this thesis. Spong also continues to make dogmatic statements based solely on dubious personal speculation and tenuous argument.

Of the remaining ten books, one (2000) is Spong's autobiography, published shortly after he retired from the active clergy in 2000. One (1988) is an exploration of human sexuality, and so not relevant to this thesis. Three (1998, 2002, 2003/1983) are Spong's dissertations on the state of the modern Christian Church and its future. Four (2005, 2007, 2009, 2011) are, generally, a reworking of old material and were all written after Spong's retirement. The most interesting thing

about them is Spong's change in style – he no longer feels bound by the conventions of the Church [he states this openly in his public addresses].

In mid-2013, John Shelby Spong released another book, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*. As the title implies, this book examines the proposition that the Gospel according to John was written by a group of Jewish mystics, and was not intended to be read as a literal account of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In this book, Spong rejects a number of his views previously expressed in other of his books, presenting a new 'deeper level' understanding of this biblical text. It may be considered that this is the most convincing of all of John Shelby Spong's publications.

Overall, these other books by John Shelby Spong add little to the discussion of his presentation of his views on the traditions about either the birth or the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, they generally reiterate the material presented in his *Born of a Woman* and *Resurrection*. Those written after Spong's retirement from the clergy are, again, largely a reworking of old themes; the major interest is the change in his approach to the topics.

GENERAL CRITICISM

John Shelby Spong is a self-declared 'Hebrewphile', having become so while conducting a Study Group for his parishioners in 1965-69. He became convinced that the New Testament stories and the Early Christian traditions are based solely on the Hebrew/Jewish Scriptures and traditions. He states unequivocally that he is 'not convinced' that there was any influence from other religious faiths and practices in the development of the Christian mythology, practices and traditions. This is despite the historical record showing clearly that the faith developed, mainly, away from its Jewish roots, in the gentile Graeco-Roman world. His stance also ignores the possibility of influences brought to Judea and Galilee by traders and visitors from other regions and cultures, particularly Egypt and to the East – India at the least. In like vein, he limits himself to the first century, and possibly early second century CE, despite the fact that a great part of the development of the Christian tradition and

practice occurred in the ensuing two or three hundred years. This results in his examinations being limited, in the main, to the letters of Paul, the four canonical Gospels and the book Acts. Spong also appears to take little account of the social and political milieu in the region of Judea and Galilee in the first century CE. It is considered that by taking these positions, Spong unnecessarily limits the scope of his investigations, deliberations and conclusions.

John Shelby Spong, in his writings, makes frequent reference to Paul as apparently being unaware of various events, such as the burial in a private tomb, in the traditional life of Jesus. However, Spong seems does not consider that Paul was not writing 'Scripture'; his writings are expository letters to newly formed congregations, so he probably did not see things like birth stories and burials as really relevant to the matter in hand.

Spong says that he prefers to use the Revised Standard Version of the Christian Bible (RSV) for his references. That is his prerogative; however, it is considered that by doing so he again limits himself in the reading and understanding of the texts. This is in spite of his writing, in various places, of the difficulties imposed on religious understandings by the limitations in using human words to express those understandings. In addition, Spong, in various places, attempts to draw semantic argument from the nuances of meaning of an English word in the RSV text. However, reference to the same passage in other current versions of the Bible can show that the same word is not used, so rendering Spong's arguments irrelevant.

Spong tends to take a dogmatic approach in presenting his views – 'these are the facts' – even when what follows is mere speculation. He gives the impression that he does not expect anyone to check on his work, such as citations and quotations, so he can say whatever he likes in order to make his case. His 'first person' style allows him to introduce into his various books a great deal of his personal story, together with his 'other agenda' such as racism and the treatment of women in the Church community.

John Spong's writing style is decidedly populist, probably with a view to making his work more accessible to his intended lay audience. However, it is argued that this intention has led him into being superficial, didactic, and dogmatic. When subjected to objective critical reading, bearing in mind that he writes for a lay readership, Spong's writings can be shown to contain numerous errors, tenuous semantic arguments, and what appear to be deliberate distortions of the biblical texts in order to make a case, all of which gravely undermine his credibility for the critical reader. He does not compare well with other writers in the same genre, such as Bart Ehrman, Karen Armstrong, Elaine Pagels or even Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy. It is interesting to compare Spong's books written after his retirement in January 2000 with those written while he was still a serving member of the clergy. His later style may be seen as being far clearer and less convoluted, although some of his semantic arguments and use of the biblical texts are still open to question. It is easy to get the impression that previously he was writing 'within the walls of the church', but now no longer feels restricted by his former calling.

After reading most of John Shelby Spong's books on the development of the Christian mythology, there are two questions that come to mind. First, to what extent are his writings a catharsis for his personal rejection of the traditional narratives contained in the New Testament, particularly the four Gospels? Is he really writing for 'the church alumni' and his 'average pewsitters', or is he trying to exorcise his own demons? The second question is, to what extent is John Shelby Spong a creation of his 'fundamentalist' opponents and the media? If his opponents, the 'fundamentalists' and other religious conservatives, had just ignored him, would the media have become interested in his views, and would 'the Spong phenomenon' have developed?

However, despite his shortcomings, John Shelby Spong could be seen as having brought biblical criticism out of the academic cloisters and into the public arena, thereby encouraging his 'believers-in-exile' to reassess their misgivings about the Church, and his 'average pew-sitters' to examine their faith and its origins. Unfortunately, he appears to have felt the need to be less than rigorous in his

scholarship in his attempt to achieve his stated aim of making the Christian tradition more accessible to the laity. However, if approached with an open and only moderately critical mind, his ideas are generally credible, and at least provide food for thought and an introduction to the field of non-literalist religious thinking. But, the believers-in-exile and the members of the Church Alumni, and, more importantly, the average pew-sitters, should be careful not to take Spong himself too literally.

FINAL ASSESSMENT

Is John Shelby Spong successful in his stated aim of deliteralising, demythologising and demystifying the Bible stories for a lay readership? Is he indeed a 'biblical scholar'? Is he a 'credible author'? There are many who would answer "Yes" to all of those questions. But there are also many, particularly from the conservative and evangelical side of the Christian community, who would vehemently say "No, he is none of those". However, it is doubtful that either side has dispassionately examined Spong's work, not looking at *what* he says, but rather at *how* he reached his conclusions and *how* he expresses his message. It is the answers to those *how* questions that provide the answers to the questions in the proposal for this thesis.

Firstly, it must be stressed that John Shelby Spong is entitled, as an individual person, to hold whatever views he likes. The question of whether or not he is, or was, entitled, as a senior member of the mainstream Christian clergy, to publicly disseminate those views may be a matter for argument, but it is not the subject of this thesis. Neither does this thesis examine the question of whether or not Spong ought to have resigned, or been dismissed, from his Holy Orders, in light of his publicly expressed views on the Christian Church and its behaviour and teachings. Those were questions for the Episcopal Church in the USA, together with the wider Anglican Community.

The first question to be answered is whether or not John Shelby Spong can be regarded as being successful in simplifying and explaining the Bible texts. There

is no simple, straightforward answer to this – it depends on whose view is sought. There are many, including members of the mainstream clergy, who have been heard personally by the writer of this thesis publically thanking John Spong for 'opening the gospels' for them. At the other end of the scale, numerous members of the more conservative elements of the Christian community, Spong's 'fundamentalists', are known, again from personal contact, to reject Spong's views out of hand. There are, too, those who reject the writing and speaking of John Shelby Spong simply on principle, without giving him the courtesy of either reading or hearing his views.

However, a dispassionately objective critic would have regard to Spong's misuse of biblical texts, his use of unsupported and at times convoluted speculations, and his presentation of those speculations as 'the facts' to conclude that John Shelby Spong cannot be considered as being entirely successful in his aim of deliteralising and simplifying the Bible texts for the benefit of a non-specialist, lay readership.

The second of the questions is whether or not John Shelby Spong deserves to be accorded the status of a 'biblical scholar' and a 'credible author'. This will be examined in its two parts, 'scholar' and 'author'.

For the purposes of this thesis, 'biblical scholar' is defined as 'a learned person, specifically in the field of religion and biblical studies'; the question, then, is whether or not Spong fulfils that definition on the basis of his writings. John Shelby Spong has studied, and, since his retirement, has taught, at some of the English-speaking Western world's most prestigious universities. To that extent, he could be regarded as 'a learned person'. However, most of his published writing appears to depend on the work of other recognised scholars, with little original thought by Spong himself.

Spong says that he has spent time exploring the religious faiths of the East. He does not include Islam, probably because it is post-Christian in its development. However, he displays a somewhat tenuous grasp of the basic tenets of the faiths whose traditions he cites. Furthermore, he rejects any concept of influence on the development of early Christianity from any tradition other than the Hebrew/Jewish,

whether earlier than or contemporaneous with the 'Jesus period'. He takes a narrow, even biased, view of the origins of the Christian tradition, being convinced that those origins lie solely in the Hebrew/Jewish tradition – he calls himself a "Hebrewphile". It is argued that by so restricting his outlook, Spong ignores the historical religious, social and political milieus of the Eastern Mediterranean and neighbouring regions.

One of Spong's greatest aims is to 'de-literalise' the biblical texts. However, in his writings, he often takes a biblical passage literally, fixedly ignoring any contrary evidence or view, in order to make his case on a particular point. He also presents tenuous speculations and arguments, based on dubious readings and interpretations of the biblical texts. It is considered that these practices greatly detract from his credibility as a biblical scholar. Other authors writing in the same genre present their views in a clear, objective and scholarly manner, while still remaining accessible to the lay reader.

Overall, it is considered that while John Shelby Spong has spent his life in the study and practice of the Christian religion, he has approached the background to the topic from a narrow point of view. Furthermore, it is considered that Spong, in his works on the origins of the Christian tradition, gives the clear impression that he is fighting the remnants of his own 'fundamentalist' upbringing and is trying to exorcise his own demons. Both of those limitations detract severely from his claim to be a biblical scholar.

The second part of this question is whether or not John Shelby Spong should be regarded as 'a credible author' – 'a writer or speaker who is believable or worthy of belief'. He is prolific in his output, freely sharing his views and speculations with his readers. He is, clearly, deeply interested in his wider topic – the Christian Church and its history, traditions and practices, as well as its possible future. In public forums, whether in meetings or the church pulpit, he is a good communicator, expressing his views eloquently and with conviction – even convincingly, unless listened-to closely.

However, the question is whether or not John Spong presents his views clearly and accurately, without obfuscation and dubious argument, and without

limiting his argument to a narrow spectrum of information. It is considered that the answer to that question must be "No".

John Shelby Spong says that he writes to de-mythologise, de-literalise and de-mystify the Christian scriptures, traditions and practices, in order to make them more accessible to the Christian community at large. However, it is considered that he fails in that aim, by limiting the scope of his thoughts, by indulging in convoluted and often unsupported speculation, by misusing biblical texts, and by introducing devious and tenuous arguments. He also introduces a great deal of his personal life story into his books, giving the impression that he is pursuing his own demons. In addition, he includes his personal 'other agenda' in his various books – in particular, what he sees as the Christian Church's mistreatment of women over the last 2 000 years. Much of Spong's writing is superficial and dogmatic in tone, presenting the results of his personal speculations as 'fact' or 'what really happened'. When compared with other modern authors writing in the same genre, John Shelby Spong presents a very poor image.

On an initial reading, John Shelby Spong's writings appear to answer many questions for readers who are querying the Christian traditions and teachings. However, a close and critical reading raises many doubts as to Spong's credibility as an author.

Is Bishop John Shelby Spong successful in his stated aim of deliteralising and demystifying the Bible for the benefit of the laity? Does he deserve to be regarded as a biblical scholar, in the field of Early Christianity? Is he a credible author in that same field? In both his scholarship and his writing, Spong allows his personal biases and prejudices to intrude into what should be a dispassionate and objective discussion of his topics. This does not necessarily mean that his work should be rejected out-of-hand; but he should be read critically, not accepting everything he says merely because he was a Bishop.

In the question of whether or not Spong is successful in his stated purpose, there can be no definitive answer. It all depends upon who is asked and their personal experience with the Christian church and its traditions and practices.

However, in the matter of his scholarship and credibility, it is considered that, on balance, John Shelby Spong cannot be regarded as either a ranking 'biblical scholar' or a 'credible author' in the field of the Early Christian mythology and tradition.

CHAPTER 8 – AN EPILOGUE – HOW TO WRITE FOR A NON-SPECIALIST READERSHIP

This Thesis has examined the written output of John Shelby Spong, the retired Episcopal Bishop of Newark, USA, with a view to determining his credibility as a biblical scholar and religious writer, and whether he has succeeded in his aim to demystify the Christian Scriptures for the laity. The findings have been generally negative. Spong claims to write for the laity, not for the religious academia and members of the clergy; it could be expected, therefore, that his writings would be couched in a style and language that could be followed readily by those non-specialists. However, Spong does not always meet that expectation. So the question may be asked: *How should a 'specialist' write for a popular, 'non-specialist' readership?* Of course, 'non-specialist' is not confined to the field of religion or religious studies – the term can be applied to writers and readers in any field or discipline.

It may be noted here that the following views are based, in some measure, on many years experience of teaching adults in a variety of fields. Also, this writer was trained in a hard school where people's lives could depend on the clarity of a piece of written work. This same writer currently conducts classes for the U3A (University of the Third Age), where the membership of the World Religions group ranges through the spectrum from retired clergy and others with tertiary degrees in Theology, through practising church-goers and the 'unchurched-but-interested', to an 'aggressive' atheist (the World History class has a similar make-up, but appropriate to that subject). The mixture of backgrounds and experience among the class members serves to keep the tutor (this writer) very honest indeed.

As has been noted earlier, Spong is not writing a theological discourse. Instead, he says that he is attempting to explain the Christian tradition and mythology in clear language, for the benefit of non-specialists in the field of religion. However, that in no way absolves him from the need to maintain a high standard of academic honesty and accuracy in his writings, which he often fails to do. It may be

noted that, from personal observation, a significant number of his readership are members of the mainstream clergy of various denominations, so by no means 'non-specialists' in the field. Equally, there are trenchant critics of Spong, and all that they think he stands for, who, again from personal acquaintance, have never either read or heard him; their views should be approached with some level of caution.

Much of what follows may appear to be self-evident. Of course, this is a task where there is no 'one size fits all' approach available. An author who is a specialist in his/her field but proposes writing for non-specialists, particularly in a controversial field, must look for the Middle Way (with apologies to the Buddhist community), and hope not to tread on too many toes en route.

The other thing that the 'specialist' must try to remember is what it was like to be one of the 'non-specialists', all those years ago. The would-be author has probably forgotten more about the proposed topic than the prospective reader has ever known, but she/he must attempt to get back to what that state of innocence was like. Otherwise, the 'simplifying' process will fail.

PREPARATION

Choosing the Target

Who is the writing directed at? There is little point in writing a book for ten-year-olds in language suitable for an undergraduate – or, hopefully, *vice versa*. Similarly, there is little value in producing a book for a general or non-specialist readership that is couched in a style and vocabulary more suited to academia. So the writer should choose a neutral approach and stick to it; he/she should not be tempted into either condescension to, or over-estimation of, the audience.

Spong at times falls into both those traps, although not often at the same time. He will present a case in almost one syllable words, but elsewhere will argue

in convoluted speculation. At times it is difficult for a reader to persevere, simply because of the way in which Spong presents his argument.

Respect the Readers

The first essential for a writer addressing non-specialists, in any field, is to respect the intended readership. Spong does not always do that – as has been noted elsewhere, he refers to his intended readers as "the Church Alumni", "Believers in Exile", and in particular, "the average pewsitters" whom he regards as "biblically illiterate". Many readers would find those terms to be demeaning and a reflection on their intelligence and abilities.

Part of this 'respect' entails not assuming that all of a 'non-specialist' readership is necessarily totally ignorant of the subject matter in hand. In the case of John Shelby Spong, this includes the previously-referred-to "biblically illiterate" label. This leads into the next point for writers.

Don't Try to 'Flannel' the Readers

In early 1949, this writer was one of a class of 14-year-old candidates for first promotion (to corporal) in the school-based Army Cadets (then an integral part of the Australian Army). The instructor for a class in 'Instructional Techniques', a World War II veteran Warrant Officer (the War had only ceased a little over three years earlier), said "Never try to flannel [deceive] your class; there will always be someone who will catch you out". That admonition has never been forgotten, and applies to writers as much as to face-to-face speakers and teachers. A writer does have the advantage over a speaker, insofar as the readers are not there, asking questions and displaying their own knowledge of the subject; however, the caution still applies.

As has been demonstrated in the body of this thesis, Spong does not seem to have heard that particular piece of wisdom. Again, it is an aspect of showing respect for the audience, or the readership, by not underestimating their level of interest in, and possible prior knowledge of, the topic. Potential readers will look at a book, or a journal article, or a piece in a newspaper, because they have some interest in the

subject matter; it follows, then, that they probably will have at least some knowledge, or views, about the topic.

Similarly, a writer should not attempt unnecessarily to impress the readers with his/her erudition by using technical terms and jargon, unless also clearly explaining such terms. Certainly there is a time and place for such usage, because the term is the only one appropriate, but its meaning must be made clear. Again, as has been demonstrated, Spong often falls down in this area, particularly in his attempts at building semantic arguments on very tenuous grounds.

Choose the Subject

Is the proposed subject matter a topic, or an aspect of a topic, that will attract the non-specialist reader? If not, the intending writer should stop wasting his/her time. However, on the assumption that the topic is of potential interest, the next task for the would-be writer is to sort out the available information, particularly on the basis of relevancy to the intended readers.

Here we can go back to that WO2 (Warrant Officer) instructor, mentioned earlier. He also said "Imagine your subject matter as a target. The centre, the bull's-eye, is 'Must Know'. The outer circles are, first, 'Should Know', and second, 'Could Know'. Anything beyond that is generally unnecessary padding and a waste of time". Whilst he was talking about face-to-face military instructional situations with a generally restricted time-frame, the same precept applies to writing on a specialist subject for consumption by a non-specialist readership. Do not 'waffle'! Of course, that does not preclude tossing in the occasional semi-relevant little 'gem' to keep the readers awake.

Similarly, do not 'weasel-word', trying to avoid a clear statement by using convoluted and confusing arguments in the hope of concealing the writer's true thrust or intent, or trying to make the writer appear wiser.

It is considered that John Shelby Spong falls down in both these regards. The totality of his various books on the interpretation of the Christian Scriptures and traditions could probably be reduced to two or three volumes if he left out the irrelevancies and personal anecdotes. But, on the other hand, there are undoubtedly

those among his non-specialist readers who believe that those 'irrelevancies and anecdotes' give meaning to Spong's thoughts. Again, it is a matter of delicate balance for the writer.

So, what goes into 'the book' and what is put aside? This is a very important matter, but at the same time very subjective, for consideration by the would-be author; she/he is the only person who can make that final decision. If the chosen topic is at all controversial, the task becomes a little more difficult.

Use of photographs, reproductions of paintings and drawings, or maps, charts, and so on, is again a matter of choice for the writer. However, again, such material must be relevant to the topic and the intended readership and, in the case of maps and charts, or technical drawings (not often relevant in religious writings), clear and easily understood by the non-specialist.

With a controversial subject, the writer has to decide on what approach to take. This is particularly so in the case of topics such as religion, where there is little, if any, firm proof that the various traditions have any validity apart from the personal faith of believers. The discipline of Archaeology provides a similar example: scholars in the field will at times have differing views on the interpretation of finds from a particular dig. There are, basically, two possible options here. The first is to choose one side or the other of the controversy and aim to build a solid case for argument, either for or against a clear proposition. The other option is to take a neutral position, examine both sides of the argument, then at the end make a decision one way or the other on the basis of the discovered evidence. Spong appears to choose the first option – to choose a case and hope to stick to it. Whether or not he is successful is another question.

There are two other aspects of writing for the non-specialists that the specialist author should consider. The first is the question of the 'infallibility' of the writer; the second aspect is the matter of notes, whether as footnotes or end-notes.

Gautama Buddha is reported in various places as having told his followers [in paraphrase] to believe nothing that they hear or read from any source, even from the Tathagata himself, unless they have investigated the matter themselves and it satisfies their common sense (Armstrong, Karen, 2002:43). The specialist author writing for the non-specialists should give a similar warning to his/her readers. It would be helpful, particularly in the case of a controversial subject, to remind the readers that there may well be alternative views on the matter. Here again religion is a prime example of a controversial topic. Such a reminder could go into either the *Introduction* or the *Conclusion*, or even both; it is not considered that it would be wise to put it in the body of the writing, where it could be lost and overlooked. A dispassionate, objective author might even tell the readers where such other views may be found. Any 'simplified' writing of this sort is open, by its very nature, to question and criticism and, therefore, should not be accepted uncritically. That is, of course, unless the reader is merely looking for a general introduction to the subject.

As said above, 'notes' may be in the form of either footnotes or end-notes. The choice is up to the writer and may depend on the academic discipline and background of the said writer. Such notes can give the specialist writer an opportunity to include more scholarly elements in the discussion, for the benefit of readers who may have a more than superficial interest in the topic. The more casual readers may use or ignore the notes at their own discretion, or return to them on a later reading.

In the matter of warning readers about the possibility of other points of view, John Shelby Spong, in general, adopts a dogmatic, 'these are the facts' tone, even when his expressed views can only be speculation. Spong, unfortunately, manages to convey the impression that he has the answers and explanations; any one holding a contrary view is, *ipso facto*, wrong.

John Shelby Spong does use notes, although they are rarely a 'scholarly expansion' of some in-text comment. He does not use in-text referencing, so most of his end-notes are bibliographic references. When he does use notes to expand on an in-text point, it is generally to note that someone either 'agrees' or 'disagrees' with Spong's own views.

WRITING THE BOOK

Having determined the subject, assembled the information, decided on the level of the proposed work, and what is 'in' or 'out', it is time to put pen to paper, or in this modern age, fingers to keyboard.

The Writing of the Book

Firstly, it is assumed that a 'specialist' writing a book for 'non-specialists' will have some sort of academic credentials. That should mean that he/she will have command of an acceptable level of grammar, and will be able to spell without depending too much on the computer spell-checker. Apart from anything else, spell-checkers generally cannot recognise homophones, such as *break/brake*, *rain/rein/reign*, *Arian/Aryan* and so on.

Every piece of writing needs an *Introduction*. This should tell the intended readers what the subject matter is and how it is to be approached, with some background information where appropriate. If personal information about the writer is thought necessary, it should be kept as brief as possible, or better still, put in a *Preface*, unless it is an essential part of the overall story.

It is in the *Body of the Work* that the moment of truth lies. The writer should remember who the intended readership is – the Non-Specialists. But they should not be treated like ignorant fools. The case should be laid out clearly and concisely, without recourse to obfuscation and convoluted speculation. Of course there is room for speculation, particularly when the topic is in any way controversial; however, the author must make it clear that it is speculation, or a personal view or opinion, without trying to disguise personal 'thought-bubbles' as 'the facts'. Here again, Spong often falls at this particular hurdle by presenting his personal ideas as 'the facts' or 'what really happened', or (most irritatingly) "...surely...", when he has absolutely no way of knowing whether or not he is actually right in his assertions.

The author must remember the warnings – do not 'flannel', do not 'waffle' and do not 'weasel-word', and above all, maintain academic standards in accuracy and argument. And when the story is told, the arguments laid out and the final decisions made, it is time to put down the pen and go away to think about writing the *Conclusion*.

The *Conclusion* is the final burst to the top of the hill. This can either make or break a piece of written work. A strong *Conclusion* may convince a wavering reader of the validity of a controversial argument; a weak ending may leave that waverer still unsatisfied and disappointed with the whole book.

Remembering who the intended readership is, and depending on the length of the writing and the complexity of the subject, it is often a good idea to begin the *Conclusion* with a short résumé of the matter found in the *Introduction*. This helps the reader in preparing his/her mind for the task of appreciating the writer's summing up of the subject matter from the body of the book.

The point of the *Conclusion* should be a clear and concise summation of the matter presented in the body of the book. Again, it should be remembered that the intended readership is the non-specialists. If the topic is controversial, the writer has to make a decision as to his/her views, but at the same time must be able to justify that decision. The final answer does not have to be a firm choice of one side or the other – a split decision is quite allowable. If the subject is not a matter of controversy, then the writer can just tie off the loose ends and put the work aside.

CONCLUSION

A 'non-specialist' reader generally wants to learn something about a particular topic. However, he/she usually does not intend becoming a 'specialist' in the field, even though they may well do so at some later date. It is therefore the responsibility

of the 'specialist' writer to present the topic in a way that makes the subject matter easily accessible but at the same time academically accurate. The same general rules apply for a leaflet on building a mouse cage as for a book on building a space-rocket, even though the readership is probably different – but still 'non-specialist'.

The work must be clear. It must be honest, with no attempt to deceive or confuse the reader, who, after all, is placing a certain amount of trust in the writer. Academic standards must be maintained, particularly in the presentation of evidence and drawing of conclusions, although there can be some adjustment of vocabulary and avoidance of unnecessary use of technical jargon.

Finally, the writer must respect the intended readership. They are not fools and so must not be approached as such. And sometimes a 'non-specialist' reader just might know as much, or more, about an aspect of a topic than does the 'specialist' writer; any slipshod approach will destroy the writer's credibility forever.

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