

Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: the historical Jesus and the heart of contemporary faith

by Marcus Borg; notes by Doug Muder¹⁾

Marcus Borg is a member of the Jesus Seminar and a professor of religion at Oregon State University who specializes in studying Jesus from a secular historical point of view. This book appeared in 1994. *Meeting Jesus Again* makes the connection between images of Jesus and models of Christian living. Borg finds the two most popular Jesus images to be inadequate, both historically and in the model of Christian life they lead to. The Jesus-the-divine-savior image leads to a life centered on *believing*, while the Jesus-the-great-teacher image leads to a life centered on *being good*.

He presents Jesus as a man whose spiritual experiences led him to see beyond the conventional wisdom of his day and the boundaries that it created between people. The model of Christian life he associates with this image of Jesus is a continuous journey of transformation -- not arriving at a new conventional wisdom and a new set of rules, but always challenging our conventional, rule-based way of thinking.

Who the book is for

In most of my published work thus far, I have written from the scholarly place within myself. In this book, I have given myself permission to write as a Christian, even as I also write as a scholar. [viii]

For many Christians ... there came a time when their childhood image of Jesus no longer made a great deal of sense. And for many of them, no persuasive alternative has replaced it. It is for these people especially that this book is written. For them, meeting Jesus again will be -- as it has been for me -- like meeting him for the first time. It will involve a new image of Jesus. [1]

Images of Jesus

Images of Jesus matter. ... There is a strong connection between images of Jesus and images of the Christian life. ... The most common image of Jesus -- what I call the "popular image" -- sees him as the divine savior. Put most compactly, this image is a constellation of answers to the three classic questions about Jesus. Who was he? The divinely begotten Son of God. What was his mission or purpose? To die for the sins of the world. What was his message? Most centrally, it was about himself: his own identity as the Son of God, the saving purpose of his death, and the importance of believing in him.

The image of the Christian life to which this image of Jesus leads is clear: it consists primarily of *believing* -- that Jesus was who he said he was and that he died for our sins.

... Only slightly less common is an image of Jesus as *teacher*. ... The image of the Christian life that flows out of this image of Jesus consists of "being good," of seeking to live as Jesus said we should.

... Both images, it seems to me, are inadequate. Not only are they inaccurate as images of the historical Jesus, ... but they lead to incomplete images of the Christian life. That life is

¹⁾Quotations from the book are in Times New Roman, while my comments are in Arial Narrow. Quotations are followed by numbers in brackets that indicate the page number (in the 1995 paperback edition) where the quote occurs.

ultimately not about believing or about being good. Rather, as I shall claim, it is about a relationship with God that involves us in a journey of transformation. [1-3]

Chapter 1. Borg's personal journey

Borg grew up as a Lutheran in North Dakota, in a family that included several ministers. As a child he was taught and readily accepted the popular image of Jesus.

I received this image of Jesus in what I have since learned to call the state of *precritical naivete* -- that childhood state in which we take for granted that whatever the significant authority figures in our lives tell us to be true is indeed true. [6]

In my early teens I began to have doubts about the existence of God. ... I was experiencing a collision between the modern worldview and my childhood beliefs. The modern worldview, with its image of what is real as the world of matter and energy and its vision of the universe as a closed system of cause and effect, made belief in God -- a nonmaterial reality -- increasingly problematic. I had entered the stage of critical thinking, and there was no way back. [7]

At a Lutheran college he first encountered modern theology.

The experience was fascinating and liberating. ... But it didn't help me to believe. Rather, it provided a framework within which I could take my perplexity seriously. ... I had become aware that it was difficult and perhaps not necessary to take the Bible and Christian teachings literally, but I didn't know what a nonliteral approach might mean. My childhood understanding of Christianity had collapsed, but nothing had replaced it. I had become a "closet agnostic," someone who didn't know what to make of it all. [8]

In seminary -- he never does give a satisfactory explanation of what a "closet agnostic" was doing in seminary -- Borg was introduced to modern Bible scholarship and learned to make the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

Thus the gospels are the church's memories of the historical Jesus transformed by the community's experience and reflection in the decades after Easter. They therefore tell us what these early Christian communities had come to believe about Jesus by the last third of the first century. They are not, first and foremost, reports of the ministry itself. [10]

I saw [the book of] John as containing a distorted image of Jesus, an image I had spent years trying to believe in. [11]

Even as I was becoming fascinated with the study of the Christian tradition and the quest for the historical Jesus, my unbelief was deepening. The "closet agnostic" was becoming a "closet atheist," though I never acknowledged that to anybody. ... The longer I studied the Christian tradition, the more transparent its human origins became. Religions in general (including Christianity), it seemed to me, were manifestly cultural products. I could see how their readily identifiable psychological and social functions served human needs and cultural ends. The notion that we made it all up was somewhat alarming, but also increasingly compelling. [13]

Then in my mid-thirties I had a number of experiences of what I now recognize as "nature mysticism." ... The experiences were marked by what the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel called "radical amazement," moments of transformed perception in which the earth is seen as "filled with the glory of God," shining with a radiant presence. ... I realized that *God* does not refer to a supernatural being "out there" ... Rather, I began to see, the word *God* refers to the sacred at the center of existence, the holy mystery that is all around us and within us. ... Gradually, it became obvious to me that God -- the sacred, the holy, the numinous --

was "real." God was no longer a concept or an article of belief, but had become an element of experience. [14-15]

I began to see Jesus as one whose spirituality -- his experiential awareness of Spirit -- was foundational for his life. ... In addition to being deeply involved in the social world of the everyday, he was also grounded in the world of the Spirit. ... Jesus relationship to the Spirit was the source of everything that he was. [15]

Borg transforms the usual distinction between "the Jesus of history" and "the Christ of faith" -- which he finds biased in favor of the Jesus of history -- to the *pre-Easter Jesus* and the *post-Easter Jesus*. He regards the post-Easter Jesus not as a distortion of the "true" Jesus of history, but as an object of experience in its own right.

After Easter, his followers experienced him as a spiritual reality, no longer as a person of flesh and blood, limited in time and space, as Jesus of Nazareth had been. Rather, Jesus as the risen living Christ could be experienced anywhere and everywhere. ... So it has been ever since. The living risen Christ of the New Testament has been an experiential reality (and not just an article of belief) from the days of Easter to the present. Thus, in the experience, worship, and devotion of Christians throughout the centuries, the post-Easter Jesus is real. [16]

My journey from the childhood state of precritical naivete through the critical thinking of adolescence and adulthood now led to hearing John (and the Bible as a whole) in a state of postcritical naivete -- a state in which one can hear these stories as "true stories," even while knowing that they are not literally true. [17]

I no longer see the Christian life as being primarily about believing. ... Rather, the Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the risen living Christ, or the Spirit. [17]

2. The Pre-Easter Jesus

In the forty to seventy years between the ministry of Jesus and the writing of the gospels, the early Christians not only adapted the traditions about Jesus to new circumstances, but also continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death. ... The gospels contain minimally two voices -- the voice of the pre-Easter Jesus and the voice of the community in the post-Easter setting. Constructing an image of the pre-Easter Jesus involves separating out these layers. [20-21]

Jesus was deeply Jewish. [22]

We know very little about Jesus before the beginning of his public activity. In the opinion of most mainstream scholars, the stories of his birth and childhood are not historical. ... Of course, these stories also say something indirectly about the historical Jesus ... Namely, they tell us that he was such an extraordinary person that these kinds of stories were told about him.[23-24]

At some point in his life Jesus must have become a religious seeker and embarked on a religious quest. This is the most obvious explanation of one of the most certain facts we know about him: in his late twenties or around the age of thirty, he left Nazareth and became a follower of a wilderness prophet named John. ... We may further surmise that Jesus probably underwent what William James calls a "conversion experience" ... a process ... whereby religious impulses and energies become central to one's life. [27]

We have no way of knowing whether Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah or as the Son of God in some special sense. According to the earliest layers of the developing gospel

tradition, he said nothing about having such thoughts. They were not part of his own teaching. His message was not about believing in him. [29]

The pre-Easter Jesus was *noneschatological*. ... What is being denied is the notion that Jesus expected the supernatural coming of the Kingdom of God as a world-ending event in his own generation. [29]

1. The historical Jesus was a *spirit person*, one of those figures in human history with an experiential awareness of the reality of God. ...

2. Jesus was a *teacher of wisdom* who regularly used the classic forms of wisdom speech (parables, and memorable short sayings known as aphorisms) to teach a subversive and alternative wisdom. ...

3. Jesus was a *social prophet*, similar to the classical prophets of ancient Israel. As such, he criticized the elites (economic, political, and religious) of his time, was an advocate of an alternative social vision, and was often in conflict with authorities. ...

4. Jesus was a *movement founder* who brought into being a Jewish renewal or revitalization movement that challenged and shattered the social boundaries of his day, a movement that eventually became the early Christian church. [30]

Jesus verbal gifts were remarkable. ... He used dramatic public actions. ... There was a radical social and political edge to his message. ... He was a remarkable healer. ... And finally, he was young, his life was short, and his public activity was brief. [30-31]

The rest of Chapter Two discusses the meaning of *spirit person*.

Spirit persons are known cross-culturally. ... What all persons who have had such experiences share is a strong sense of there being more to reality than the tangible world of our ordinary experience. ... Spirit persons share a second feature as well: they become mediators of the sacred. ... They become funnels or conduits for the power or wisdom of God to enter into this world. ... The experience of spirit persons presupposes an understanding of reality very different from the dominant image of reality in the modern Western world ... that there is, in addition to the tangible world of our ordinary experience, a nonmaterial level of reality, actual even though nonmaterial, and charged with energy and power. ... Moreover, this other reality, it is important to emphasize, is not "somewhere else." Rather it is all around us, and we are in it. [32-34]

Imaging Jesus as a particular instance of a type of religious personality known cross-culturally undermines a widespread Christian belief that Jesus is unique. ... Even as this view subtracts from the uniqueness of Jesus and the Christian tradition, it also in my judgment adds to the credibility of both. [37]

The image of Jesus as a spirit person ... shifts the focus of the Christian life from believing in Jesus or believing in God to being in relationship to the same Spirit that Jesus knew. [39]

3. Jesus, Compassion, and Politics

Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of Luke 6:36, in which Jesus says "Be compassionate as God is compassionate." Borg reads this as Jesus' intentional commentary on the older Leviticus 9:2 "Be holy as God is holy." *Holy*, in this context, he says, means *pure* -- in other words, untainted, undefiled. He interprets the politics of first-century Israel as a "purity system," which defined boundaries between the pure and the impure. The difference was partly hereditary, partly behavioral, partly gender-based, and partly determined by bodily health and wholeness. Those of higher purity were expected to avoid contact with those of lower purity, or to have contact only in ways defined by the social code.

To sum up, the effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile. [52]

Purity was also central to two Jewish renewal groups in first-century Palestine. The Pharisees sought the extension of the more stringent priestly rules of purity into everyday life; and the Essenes ... withdrew to the desert wilderness along the Dead Sea, believing that purity could be attained only in isolation from the impure world of culture. [53]

In the message and activity of Jesus, we see an alternative social vision: a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion. ... Compassion, not holiness, is the dominant quality of God, and is therefore to be the ethos of the community that mirrors God. [53-54]

Many of Jesus' sayings indicted the purity system. He criticized a system that emphasized tithing and neglected justice. ... To call the Pharisees "unmarked graves" is stunningly ironic; they were a movement seeking the extension of purity laws, and Jesus declared them to be instead a source of impurity. ... Jesus spoke of purity as on the inside and not on the outside ... [which] is radically to subvert a purity system constituted by external boundaries. ... The critique of the purity system is the theme of one of Jesus' most familiar parables, the story of the Good Samaritan. Most often interpreted as a message about being a helpful neighbor, it in fact had a much more pointed meaning in the first-century Jewish social world. [54]

Pages 55-57 summarize the actions of Jesus that attack the purity system: touching lepers and hemorrhaging women; entering a graveyard to heal a man possessed by demons; driving the money-changers out of the Temple; eating with anyone, regardless of status; and letting women play key roles in his movement.

The same hermeneutical struggle [between purity and compassion] goes on in the church today. In parts of the church there are groups that emphasize holiness and purity as the Christian way of life, and they draw their own sharp social boundaries between the righteous and sinners. It is a sad irony that these groups, many of which are seeking very earnestly to be faithful to Scripture, end up emphasizing those parts of Scripture that Jesus himself challenged and opposed. An interpretation of Scripture faithful to Jesus and the early Christian movement sees the Bible through the lens of compassion, not purity. [59]

Compassion has become an individual rather than a political virtue. It is to be enacted by "a thousand points of light" rather than being a paradigm for public policy. In the midst of our modern culture, it is important for those of us who would be faithful to Jesus to think and speak of a politics of compassion not only within the church but as a paradigm for shaping the political order. [60]

What led Jesus to speak of God as compassionate? ... The most persuasive answer locates that conviction in Jesus' own experiences of God. ... There is an intrinsic connection between the boundary-shattering experience of Spirit and the boundary-shattering ethos of compassion. ... An image of the Christian life shaped by this image of Jesus would have the same two focal points: a relationship to the Spirit of God, and the embodiment of compassion in the world of the everyday. It is an image of the Christian life that provides both direction and growth. [60-61]

4. Jesus and Wisdom

There are two types of wisdom and two types of sages. The most common type of wisdom is conventional wisdom; its teachers are conventional sages. This is the mainstream wisdom of a culture, "what everybody knows," a culture's understandings about what is real

and how to live. ... The second type is a subversive and alternative wisdom. This wisdom questions and undermines conventional wisdom and speaks of another way. [69-70]

The forms of speech most frequently used by Jesus as an oral teacher were aphorisms and parables. ... Jesus used them to invite his hearers to see something they might not otherwise see. As evocative forms of speech, they tease the imagination into activity, suggest more than they say, and invite a transformation in perception. [70-71]

[The parables] draw the hearer into the world of the narrative. They then invite the hearer to see something else in the light of what happens in the narrational world. ... The appeal is not to the will -- not "Do this" -- but rather, "Consider seeing it this way." [74]

First, conventional wisdom provides guidance about how to live. It covers everything from highly practical matters such as etiquette to the central values and images of the good life found in a culture. ... Second, conventional wisdom is intrinsically based on upon the dynamic of rewards and punishments. You reap what you sow; follow this way and all will go well; you get what you deserve; the righteous will prosper -- these are the constant messages of conventional wisdom. ... It carries with it a hard-edged corollary, of course: if you don't succeed, or are not blessed, or do not prosper, it is because you have not followed the right path. Life becomes a matter of requirement and reward, failure and punishment. ... Third, conventional wisdom has both social and psychological consequences. Socially, it creates a world of hierarchies and boundaries. Some of these may be inherited. ... Some are more the product of performance. Psychologically, conventional wisdom becomes the basis for identity and self-esteem. [76-77]

Life in this [conventional] world can be and often is grim. ... It is a life of anxious striving, and feeling okay or not okay to the extent that we do or do not measure up. [77]

There is an image of God that goes with the world of conventional wisdom. ... God is seen as both the source and enforcer, and therefore the legitimator, of the religious form of conventional wisdom. God becomes the one whom we must satisfy, the one whose requirements must be met. [78]

Conventional wisdom is not to be identified with any particular tradition; it is pervasive in all traditions. ... The conflict between conventional wisdom and alternative wisdom is not a conflict between Judaism and Christianity, but a conflict *within* both traditions. ... To illustrate from my own experience, I grew up as a Lutheran, in a tradition that emphasized salvation by grace and not by "works of the law." ... Yet this strong emphasis on grace got transformed into a new system of conventional wisdom ... Faith insidiously became the new requirement. *Faith* (most often understood as *belief*) is what God required, and by a lack of faith/belief one risked the peril of eternal punishment. ... The requirement of faith divides the world up into those who have faith and those who don't, with the implication that God is kindly disposed toward the first group and not so kindly disposed toward the second. ... Thus Jesus' subversion of conventional wisdom is a subversion not only of the central convictions of his social world, but of many common forms of Christianity as well. [79-80]

In many of his parables and aphorisms, Jesus invited his hearers to see God not as the judge, not as the one who has requirements that must be met, not as the legitimator of conventional wisdom -- but as gracious and compassionate. [82]

The notion that our life on earth is primarily about meeting God's requirements so that we may have a blessed *next* life is, it seems to me, foreign to Jesus. ... In the few texts where he does speak of a last judgment, it is to subvert widely accepted notions about that judgment. [85] ... Each [of several listed examples] subverts or reverses what some of Jesus' contemporaries believed about the last judgment by saying that *Gentiles* will do better at the

judgment than those to whom Jesus was speaking. It's as if he had said, "You believe in a last judgment? Well, let me tell you -- it will be much different from what you think." [footnote 49]

The alternative wisdom of Jesus ... has two closely related dimensions. First, it is an invitation to see God as gracious and womblike rather than as the source and enforcer of the requirements, boundaries, and divisions of conventional wisdom (whether Jewish, Christian, or secular). Second, it is an invitation to a path that leads away from the life of conventional wisdom to a life that is more and more centered in God. The alternative wisdom of Jesus sees the religious life as a deepening relationship with the Spirit of God, not as a life of requirements and reward. [85-86]

The narrow way [of Jesus] is spoken of as the way of death. ... Death as an image for the path of transformation points to a dying to the world of conventional wisdom as the center of one's security and identity and a dying to the self as the center of one's concern. ... Death is the ultimate *letting go*, and thus the opposite of the *grasping* that marks the life of conventional wisdom. ... It results in rebirth, a resurrection to a life centered in God. [86]

It is a challenging message for both secular and Christian forms of conventional wisdom in our time. Our culture's secular wisdom does not affirm the reality of the Spirit; the only reality about which it is certain is the visible world of our ordinary experience. Accordingly, it looks to the material world for satisfaction and meaning. ... The way of Jesus also challenges many common forms of Christianity, as already noted. In particular, it invites us to move from "secondhand religion" to firsthand religion. Secondhand religion is a way of being religious based on believing what one has heard from others. It consists of thinking that the Christian life is about believing what the Bible says or what the doctrines of the church say. Firsthand religion, on the other hand, consists of a relationship to that to which the Bible and the teachings of the church point -- namely, the reality that we call God or the Spirit of God. [87-88]

5. Jesus the Wisdom of God

Chapter 5 does something rather subtle. Borg is moving toward affirming Jesus-the-Son-of-God as a meaningful metaphor, while denying it as a literal truth. In order to establish this category of meaningful-metaphor-not-literally-true, he first populates it with a metaphor that carries less emotional baggage than the Son-of-God metaphor -- namely, Jesus-the-wisdom-of-God. This Wisdom-of-God metaphor is as old and scripturally supported as the Son-of-God metaphor, but contradicts it in certain essential ways, most obviously that *wisdom* (*sophia* in Greek, *hokmah* in Hebrew) is feminine, while *son* is masculine. It's also not clear exactly what it would mean for Jesus to literally be the wisdom of God, which points out a similar problem about the Son metaphor. Holding two or more contradictory metaphors in mind simultaneously is a way to grasp that they are indeed metaphors rather than literal truths, which is the point Borg eventually wants to make.

What's more, much of the language eventually used to identify Jesus with God as the second person of the Trinity has its roots in similar statements about Sophia (the personification of wisdom) in the Jewish Bible. And yet this scriptural evidence was not used to make a fourth person of the Godhead.

The early layers of the movement's developing traditions portray Jesus not only as a teacher of wisdom, but also as intimately related to "the wisdom of God." Central voices in the New Testament -- Matthew, Luke, Paul, and John -- speak of this relationship in various ways, imaging Jesus as the emissary, child, and incarnation of the wisdom of God. [96]

What are we to make of the remarkable role of Sophia in the wisdom literature of Israel? ... In these books Sophia is closely associated with God, at times becoming indistinguishable from God in terms of the functions and qualities ascribed to her, so that one may speak of a

"functional equivalency" between Sophia and God. Thus the language about *Sophia* is not simply a personification of wisdom in female form, but personification of *God* in female form. Sophia is a female image for God, a lens through which divine reality is imaged as a woman. [102]

There are a number of passages in the synoptic gospels that associate Jesus with the figure of Sophia. [102]

Paul also spoke of Christ as "the wisdom of God." [106]

The language here used [Colossians 1:15-17] about Christ is, of course, language used about Sophia in the Jewish tradition, which had shaped Paul. It not only describes Jesus in the language of divine wisdom, but in effect identifies Jesus with wisdom. The preexistence of Christ is thus in fact the preexistence of divine Sophia. For Paul, Jesus is the embodiment of Sophia. [107]

Scholars have long noted the close relationship between what John says about the *logos* [usually translated as *word*, as in "In the beginning was the Word"] and what is said about Sophia in the Jewish tradition. Sophia was present with God from the beginning, active in creation, and is present in the created world. This functional equivalency between *logos* and Sophia suggests that it is legitimate to substitute Sophia for *logos*, "Wisdom" for "Word," in the prologue to John's gospel. Moreover, because Sophia is a feminine noun in Greek, the pronouns also become feminine. [108]

Our exploration of the role of Sophia as wisdom in the Jewish tradition and in the New Testament discloses a number of things. ... It also points to the impossibility of literalizing Christological language. The multiplicity of images for speaking of Jesus' relationship to God (as *logos*, *Sophia*, Son -- to name but a few) should make it clear that none of them is to be taken literally. ... It is not the case that Jesus is *literally* "the Son of God," though he can also be spoken of metaphorically in other ways, such as the Sophia of God. Rather, both are metaphors. What they have in common is that they point to Jesus as one whose relationship to God was so intimate and deep that he could be spoken of as the son of *Abba* [the Father] and the child of Sophia. [109]

When "Son of God" is seen instead as one metaphor among several, it opens up the possibility of a much richer understanding of the significance of Jesus as experienced and expressed in the early Christian movement. The issue is no longer believing that Jesus was literally the Son of God, but appreciating the richness of meaning suggested by the multiplicity of Christological images. He was "the Son," yes, but also the incarnation of the Word, which was also the Wisdom of God. [110-111]

6. Images of Jesus and Images of the Christian Life

My central claim [in this chapter] is that there are three "macro-stories" at the heart of Scripture that shape the Bible as a whole, and that each of these stories images the religious life in a particular way. Two of the stories are grounded in the history of ancient Israel: the story of the exodus from Egypt, and the story of the exile and return from Babylon. The third, the priestly story, is grounded not in the history of ancient Israel but in an institution -- namely, the temple, priesthood, and sacrifice. ... How does each [of these stories] image us and our lives in relation to God? [121-122]

Most basically, [the exodus] is a story of bondage, liberation, a journey, and a destination. ... As a story about God and us, what is it saying? Our problem, according to this story, is that we live in Egypt, the land of bondage. ... It invites us to ask, "To what am I in bondage?" ... The answer for most of us is "Many things." We are in bondage to cultural

messages about what we should be like and what we should pursue -- messages about success, attractiveness, gender roles, the good life. We are in bondage to voices from our own past, and to addictions of various kinds. ... As an epiphany of the human condition and the solution, the story of the exodus images the religious life as a journey from the life of bondage to life in the presence of God. Though we find ourselves in bondage to Pharaoh, it proclaims, there is a way out. [124]

In our lives, the experience of exile as estrangement or alienation can be felt as a flatness, a loss of connection with a center of vitality and meaning, when one day becomes very much like another and nothing has much zest. We yearn for something that we perhaps only vaguely remember. Life in exile thus has a profound existential meaning. It is living away from Zion, the place where God is present. ... [The story of exile] images the religious life as a journey to the place where God is present, a homecoming, a journey of return. And like the exodus story, this story speaks of God aiding and assisting those who undertake the journey. [126-127]

The priestly story leads to a quite different image of the religious life. It is not primarily a story of bondage, exile, and journey, but a story of sin, guilt, sacrifice, and forgiveness. ... Within this story, we are primarily sinners who have broken God's laws, and who therefore stand guilty before God, the lawgiver and judge. Seen through the lens of this story, the religious life becomes a story of sin, guilt, and forgiveness. [127]

All three of these stories shape the message of Jesus, the New Testament, and subsequent Christian theology. ... Yet, ... one of them -- the priestly story -- has dominated the popular understanding of Jesus and the Christian life to the present day. [128-129]

Because I am about to be very critical of the priestly story, I want first to acknowledge its power and its positive meaning. The image of Jesus as a sacrifice for our sins is a sign of God's great love for us. ... The priestly story means that our own sense of sin, impurity, and guilt need not stand between us and God. It means that new beginnings are possible; we do not need to be held in bondage by the burden of our past. [130]

What if we were to say [in every church service] "We are Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and we beseech you for liberation"? Or "We live in Babylon and we ask you for deliverance"? One can understand why the church during the many centuries when it was the official religion of Western culture emphasized the confession of sin rather than saying that the culture we live in is Egypt or Babylon. The priestly story is a politically domesticating story. The stories of bondage in Egypt and exile in Babylon are culturally subversive stories. [130-131]

Though the priestly story speaks of God as gracious, it places the grace of God within a system of requirements. ... The priestly story most often turns the subversive wisdom of Jesus into Christian conventional wisdom. [131]

Yet, when the priestly story is understood as one of three ways of imaging the Christian life, rather than the primary way, the problems with it largely disappear. [132]

The central metaphor of the [New Testament] letter to the Hebrews portrays Jesus as the great high priest who is also the sacrifice, offering up his life as "the once for all" sacrifice for the sins of the world. The effect of this, according to Hebrews, is that the system of priesthood and sacrifice has now been abolished; in short, the author of Hebrews uses the priestly story to negate the priestly story. [134]

Borg finds that Jesus' message is a combination of the exodus and exile stories with a negation of the priestly story. Finally, Borg introduces a fourth story, the journey of discipleship.

Thus we have what I would call a *transformist* understanding of the Christian life. ... It is a vision of the Christian life as a journey of transformation. ... It leads from life under the

lordship of culture to the life of companionship with God. It is an image of the Christian life not primarily as believing or being good but as a relationship with God. That relationship does not leave us unchanged, but transforms us into more and more compassionate beings, "into the likeness of Christ." [136]

Of the many recent books on the historical Jesus, none has explored what the latest biblical scholarship means for personal faith. Now, in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg addresses the yearnings of those who want a fully contemporary faith that welcomes rather than oppresses our critical intelligence and openness to the best of historical scholarship. Borg shows how a rigorous examination of historical findings can lead to a new faith in Christ, one that is critical and, at the same time, sustaining. Drawing on his own journey from a naive, unquestioning belief in Christ to Of the many recent books on the historical Jesus, none has explored what the latest biblical scholarship means for personal faith. Now, in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg addresses the yearnings of those who want a fully contemporary faith that welcomes rather than oppresses our critical intelligence and openness to the best of historical scholarship. Borg shows how a rigorous examination of historical findings can lead to a new faith in Christ, one that is critical and, at the same time, sustaining. "Believing in Jesus does not mean believing doctrines about him," *Meeting Jesus Again* is written in an affable, gracious, and unflinchingly honest voice. Borg's description of his own faith particularly exemplifies these qualities, and gives the reader a simultaneously safe and unsettling new perspective on the peasant from Galilee: "[T]he central issue of the Christian life is not believing in God or believing in the Bible," he writes. "Rather, the Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the risen, living Christ, or the Spirit. And a Christian

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