

## August Book Recommendation Summary

Reviewed by Dan Brent

### **The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions**

Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, Harper One, 1999, \$15.99

The book is now eleven years old but I found it an enlightening and easy to read overview of what the scripture scholars are thinking about the gospels recently. In 1943, Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical on scripture study, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. In it he opened for Catholics the use of “form criticism” as a tool for understanding the scriptures. Form criticism allows the scholar to examine the texts in their historical setting, which is not always the mindset that we would bring to writing history today.

This has allowed Catholic scripture theologians to join Anglicans and Protestants in searching the gospels for new insights into what happened when the early Christians began to commit their Jesus story to writing. Some of the fruits of form criticism, some of the hypotheses and judgments about gospel accounts, strike typical Catholics as offensive – even outrageous. The Marcus Borg side of the book’s two views of the gospels occasionally falls into this category. It is helpful to remember that Borg, like Wright, is an enthusiastic Christian and a man of obvious faith.

Borg writes that the gospels “are a mixture of history remembered and history metaphorized” (p.4) – that is “powerfully true but in a nonliteral sense.” (p.5) For example, he thinks the Cana miracle never really happened but the author (John) invites us to “see the story of Jesus as a whole as the story of a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out and at which the best is saved for last.” (p.6)

Bishop Wright, the other author, thinks that most of the events of the New Testament can be understood in their literal sense. “I see why some people find themselves driven to distinguish the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, but I do not think the early Christians made such a distinction.” (p.26)

The authors debate eight issues related to Jesus as he is presented by the scriptures. One of them addresses the birth of Jesus. Bishop Wright sees the nativity stories as basically historically accurate. For Matthew and Luke to have gotten the story substantially the same without support from the historical facts would have been too much to ask, he suggests. So he expects that Jesus was conceived of a virgin, Mary, and was born in Bethlehem. But “what matters is God bringing Israel’s story to its climax by doing a new thing, bringing the story of creation to its height by a new creation from the womb of the old.” (p.176)

Borg, on the other hand, says of the birth stories, “I do not think they are historically factual, but I think they are profoundly true in another and more important sense.” Paul, Mark, and John write nothing of a miraculous birth. The Matthew and Luke birth accounts differ because they are written to support the evangelists’ different reasons for

writing their gospels. Take the magi's star for example. Borg writes, "Jesus is the light who brings enlightenment; indeed he is 'the light of the world.' This is the truth of this theme of the birth stories. And it is true independent of their historical factuality." (p.183)

For both Borg and Wright, Jesus saw himself as commissioned to replace the temple domination system of centralized power and wealth with a culture of compassion and forgiveness. Wright says, "Jesus was telling his contemporaries that the kingdom was indeed breaking into history, but that it did not look like what they had expected." (p.35) Wright believes that Jesus saw himself as the promised messiah. Borg disagrees. "Jesus was a Jewish mystic; for him, God was an experiential reality." (p.64) The messiah role, Borg suggests, was an insight of post-Easter Christians.

The two authors reflect similar difference in other topics, but sometimes the differences are subtle and nuanced. "Do I think Jesus thought of himself as divine?" Borg asks. "No." (p.145) "But if we make the distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus, then my answer would be, 'Yes, the post-Easter Jesus is a divine reality—is indeed one with God.'" Wright, on the other hand, says that Jesus "believed himself called to do and be what, in the scriptures, only Israel's God did and was." (p.166)

Why was Jesus killed? Borg thinks Jesus suspected he would be killed in that last trip to Jerusalem. But he does not believe that Jesus himself saw his death as the point of his life as Paul later perceived it. He was killed because of "his role as a social prophet who challenged the domination system in the name of God." (p.91) Wright, on the other hand, judges that Jesus "believed that his messianic task would be accomplished through his own suffering and death." (p.97)

What about his resurrection? The Pharisees expected a resurrection but the details were subject to a variety of theories. Wright says simply that "the body of Jesus was neither resuscitated nor left to decay in the tomb but was rather transformed into a new mode of physicality, shocking and startling to the disciples." (p.122) Borg writes, "I see the meaning of Easter as twofold: Jesus lives, and Jesus is Lord." (p.129) Beyond that, "I see the empty tomb and whatever happened to the corpse of Jesus to be ultimately irrelevant to the truth of Easter." He sees the resurrection stories as "the product of a developing tradition and as powerfully true metaphorical narratives." (p.130)

What about the second coming of Jesus? Borg again takes the "liberal" position that this belief emerged as "a product of the community, created after Easter to express the conviction that Jesus would soon return as the Son of Man." (p.194) Again, Borg doesn't think it matters. The point of that belief is that that it "affirms what is already affirmed by Easter: Jesus is Lord – and Rome is not." (p.195) Wright's position is more traditional. "I propose that what we call the second coming, which is actually a metonym for the larger picture which includes cosmic renewal, human resurrection, the royal presence of Jesus, and the sovereign reign of God, was a very early Christian development of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, both necessitated and facilitated by the unexpected resurrection of the messiah." (p.202)

The book ends with dueling chapters on Christian spirituality. Wright says that Christians “through getting to know this person as living, active, present, loving, and grieving, are recognizing in him the human face of the one true God.” (p.210) We can wrestle with theology but sometimes “the only appropriate stance is silence before the mystery of God.” (p.223) Borg’s take dismisses the literal historicity of many of the gospel narratives. But in the end he writes, “What I am confident about is that we know enough about the historical Jesus to give substantial content to the claim that in Jesus we see what God is like and what a life full of God is like.” (p.235)

Borg concludes, “Jesus’ message was not about how to get to heaven. The vision of the Christian life that flows out of taking him seriously is about a relationship with the Spirit of God that transforms our lives in the present.” (pp.245-246)