"Takes the Bible back from the specialists and makes it available to the thoughtful reader in all its complexity and splendor: nothing short of a blessing, even a miracle!"
—Peter J. Gomes, author of *The Good Book*

TAKING THE BIBLE SERIOUSLY BUT NOT LITERALLY

READING THE BIBLE AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME

MARCUS J. BORG

author of the bestselling *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*

An Excerpt From

READING THE BIBLE AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME

Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally

MARCUS J. BORG

perfectbound

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Preface

Conflict about the Bible is the single most divisive issue among Christians in North America today. And because of the importance of Christianity in the culture of the United States, conflict about the Bible is also central to what have been called "the culture wars."

The conflict is between two very different ways of reading the Bible. In language I will use later in the book, it is a conflict between a "literal-factual" way of reading the Bible and a "historical-metaphorical" way of reading it. The former is central to Christian fundamentalists and many conservative-evangelical Christians. The latter has been taught in seminaries of mainline denominations for the better part of a century. Most clergy have known about it for a long time. In the last few decades, the historical-metaphorical way of reading the Bible has become increasingly common among lay members of mainline churches.

This book represents the historical-metaphorical side of the debate. In its pages, I describe a way of seeing and reading the Bible that flows out of my life within two communities: the academic community of biblical scholarship and the scholarly study of religion, and the religious community of the church.

For over thirty-five years, I have been studying and teaching the Bible in private and public colleges, universities, and graduate schools. From the beginning, my special area of study has been Jesus and the gospels. But I have always had an abiding interest in the Hebrew Bible and have consistently taught it as well

as the New Testament at the introductory and more advanced levels.

This book contains the most important and illuminating insights that I have learned about the Bible from this experience. It has three parts. Part One (three chapters) analyzes the present conflict and lays the foundation for a historical-metaphorical approach to the Bible. Parts Two and Three apply this approach and introduce the reader to major parts of the Bible. In Part Two, I treat portions of the Hebrew Bible in four chapters: creation stories, the Pentateuch, the prophets, and wisdom literature. In Part Three I explore major portions of the New Testament in three chapters: the gospels, Paul, and Revelation.

Because much of the book comes out of the experience of teaching at the undergraduate level, I trust that it may be of use in college and university courses. But I am also writing for a Christian audience, and I hope that this orientation will not get in the way of non-Christian readers. Readers in the latter category will sometimes find themselves listening to an intra-Christian conversation (and may perhaps find it interesting).

My desire to relate the book to Christianity flows out of the other community in which I live. For an even longer time than I have lived within the academy, I have lived in the Christian world. I was nurtured in the Lutheran church and remained Lutheran until about age thirty. Then, for almost a decade, my involvement with the institutional church was minimal. My reentry into its life was through a Presbyterian congregation in which I was a "kindred spirit" for a few years. That experience was very nourishing, but I realized that I desired a more liturgical and sacramental form of worship, and so I joined the Episcopal church, a denomination and tradition that I am very happy to call home. I describe myself as a nonliteralistic and nonexclusivistic Christian, committed to living my life with God within the Christian tradition, even as I affirm the validity of *all* the enduring religious traditions.

Thus, in addition to treating historical and literary matters, I have sought to explore the religious significance of the Bible—in

particular, its significance for Christians. One of my central purposes in this book is to address the present conflict about the Bible within the church and to provide Christians with a persuasive way of seeing and reading their sacred scriptures, a way that takes the Bible seriously without taking it literally.

As I develop a historical-metaphorical approach to reading the Bible, I also offer an interpretation of the biblical tradition. What I present here is a way of seeing and reading the Bible that flows out of my total life experience: my education as a student of the Bible, my vocation as a teacher of biblical and religious studies, my journey as a Christian, and what I have learned from the journeys of others.

To say the obvious, the book reflects my own subjectivity. There is no point in pretending objectivity, as if I (or anybody) could have a vantage point outside of one's own personal and cultural history. The test of our subjectivities—whether they are primarily provincial, individualistic, or even narcissistic—is whether they make sense to others. And so I invite you into a way of seeing and reading the Bible that has made sense to me and encourage you to use your own discerning judgment about how much makes sense to you.

I am grateful to many people for what I have learned about the Bible. I am thankful for my socialization within the church. Though it included much that I have had to unlearn, it also instilled in me a love of the Bible and an abiding sense of its importance. I am indebted to professors from my past. In my undergraduate years, Paul Sponheim and Rod Grubb (both then professors at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota) were most responsible for generating my adult interest in religion and the Bible. In my graduate education, George B. Caird, my primary professor at Oxford, was immeasurably important.

I am also indebted to authors of books on biblical scholarship from the last few centuries and contemporary colleagues within the academic guild. Some are acknowledged in footnotes, but some are not. Because this book comes out of over thirty years of teaching, I can no longer remember the source of many of the

insights that I report. In virtually every case, I learned them from somebody; a completely original insight is a rare bird. I apologize for not being able to credit each contributor by name.

I conclude with a comment about the dedication of this book to Tom Haller and the community at Ring Lake Ranch, an ecumenical retreat center near DuBois, Wyoming. There my wife, Marianne, and I co-led a retreat for two weeks in late August, during which I also finished this book. On the first day of the retreat, Tom, a United Church of Christ clergyperson from St. Louis, was gravely injured in a horse-riding accident. For a day we did not know if he would live. His accident united the community of retreatants in a remarkably intimate way, especially as we prayed together for his recovery. In particular, I want to thank the staff at Ring Lake Ranch, especially Robert Hoskins, Ann Mebane, Elly Stewart, and its director, Joan Guntzelman. I am happy to say that Tom has recovered and very pleased to dedicate this book to him and the people with whom I lived for two rich weeks in the mountains of Wyoming.

Part One

FOUNDATIONS

1

Reading Lenses: Seeing the Bible Again

The key word in the title of this book—*Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*—is "again." It points to my central claim. Over the past century an older way of reading the Bible has ceased to be persuasive for millions of people, and thus one of the most imperative needs in our time is a way of reading the Bible anew.

Reading and seeing go together. On the one hand, what we read can affect how we see. On the other hand, and more important for my immediate purpose, how we see affects how we read. What we bring to our reading of a text or document affects how we read it. All of us, whether we use reading glasses or not, read through lenses.

As we enter the twenty-first century, we need a new set of lenses through which to read the Bible. The older set, ground and polished by modernity, no longer works for millions of people. These lenses need to be replaced. The older way of seeing and reading the Bible, which I will soon describe, has made the Bible incredible and irrelevant for vast numbers of people.

This is so not only for the millions who have left the church in Europe and North America, but also for many Christians who continue to be active in the life of the church.

The need for new lenses thus exists within the church itself. The older lenses enabled Christians of earlier generations to experience the Bible as a lamp unto their feet, a source of illumination for following the Christian path. But for many Christians in our time, the older lenses have become opaque, turning the Bible into a stumbling block in the way.[1] Yet not all Christians agree about the need for new lenses. Many vigorously defend the older way of seeing the Bible. For them, what seems to be at stake is nothing less than the truth of the Bible and Christianity itself.

Conflicting Lenses

Conflict about how to see and read the Bible is the single greatest issue dividing Christians in North America today. On one side of the divide are fundamentalist and many conservative-evangelical Christians. On the other side are moderate-to-liberal Christians, mostly in mainline denominations.[2] Separating the two groups are two very different ways of seeing three foundational questions about the Bible: questions about its origin, its authority, and its interpretation.

The first group, who sometimes call themselves "Bible-believing Christians," typically see the Bible as the inerrant and infallible Word of God.[3] This conviction flows out of the way they see the Bible's origin: it comes from God, as no other book does. As a divine product, it is God's truth, and its divine origin is the basis of its authority. As a contemporary bumper sticker boldly puts it, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." The sticker may be unfair to many who hold this position, but it was created by an advocate, not by a critic.

For these Christians, the Bible is to be interpreted literally, unless the language of a particular passage is clearly metaphorical. From their point of view, allowing nonliteral interpretation

opens the door to evading the Bible's authority and making it say what we want it to say. They typically see themselves as taking the Bible with utmost seriousness and often criticize moderate-to-liberal Christians for watering it down and avoiding its authority. They also commonly see themselves as affirming "the old-time religion"—that is, Christianity as it was before the modern period. In fact, however, as we shall see, their approach is itself modern, largely the product of a particular form of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant theology. Moreover, rather than allowing the Bible its full voice, their approach actually confines the Bible within a tight theological structure.[4]

The second group of Christians, most of whom are found in mainline churches, are less clear about how they *do* see the Bible than about how they do *not*. They are strongly convinced that many parts of the Bible cannot be taken literally, either as historically factual or as expressing the will of God. Some people who reach this conclusion leave the church, of course. But many continue within the church and are seeking a way of seeing the Bible that moves beyond biblical literalism and makes persuasive and compelling sense.

Their numbers are growing;[5] never before has there been so great an appetite for modern biblical scholarship among mainline Christians. They are responding strongly and positively to a more historical and metaphorical reading of the Bible. At the grass-roots level of mainline churches, a major de-literalization of the Bible is underway.

Though these Christians know with certainty that they cannot be biblical literalists, they are less clear about how they *do* see the origin and authority of the Bible. They are often uncertain what it means to say that the Bible is "the Word of God" or "inspired by God." Though they reject grounding the Bible's authority in its infallibility, they are unsure what "biblical authority" might mean.

Thus it is not surprising that even within mainline denominations, there is conflict about how to see and read the Bible. At the national level, most of these denominations have vocal minority

movements protesting what they perceive to be the loss of biblical authority. At the local level, some congregations are sharply divided about how to see the Bible. The conflict also divides families. In many conservative Christian families, one or more members have either dropped out of church or become part of a liberal church. The reverse is also true: many liberal Christian families have seen one or more of their members become conservative Christians. Some families have been able to negotiate this conflict with grace. But in many, it has been a source of division, grief, and hand-wringing.

The conflict about the Bible is most publicly visible in discussions of three issues. First, in some Christian circles, "creation versus evolution" is the primary litmus test of loyalty to the Bible. The second issue is homosexuality: May practicing gays and lesbians be full members of the church? May the unions of gay and lesbian couples be blessed? May gays and lesbians be ordained? This debate is often cast in the form of accepting or rejecting biblical authority.

A third lightning rod for the conflict is contemporary historical Jesus scholarship. For the last decade, the quest for the historical Jesus has attracted widespread media attention and public interest, especially among mainline Christians. But it has generated a strongly negative reaction among fundamentalist and conservative-evangelical Christians. From their point of view, questioning the historical factuality of the gospels strikes at the very foundations of Christianity.

The Roots of the Conflict

The border between fundamentalist and conservative-evangelical Christians is hard to draw. A fundamentalist has been defined as "an evangelical who is angry about something."[6] But some conservative-evangelicals are not fundamentalists and have no interest in defending, for example, the literal factuality of the Bible's story of creation or the complete historical accuracy of all the words attributed to Jesus. But what they share in

common is an understanding of the authority of the Bible grounded in its origin: it is true because it comes from God.

Fundamentalism itself—whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim—is modern. It is a reaction to modern culture.[7] Christian fundamentalism as an identifiable religious movement originated early in the twentieth century in the United States, with its immediate roots in the second half of the nineteenth century.[8] It stressed the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible in every respect, especially against Darwinism and what it called "the higher criticism" (by which it meant the scholarly study of the Bible as it had developed primarily in Germany in the nineteenth century).

The roots of the evangelical understanding of the Bible are older, going back to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Reformation replaced the authority of the church and church tradition with the sole authority of scripture. John Calvin and Martin Luther, the two most important leaders of the Reformation, both had a strong sense of biblical authority. But it was in the second and third generation of the Reformation that claims for the infallible truth of the Bible were made. "Plenary inspiration"—the notion that the words of the Bible were dictated by God and are therefore free from error—was emphasized by those later Reformers.[9]

The realization that these developments are relatively recent is important. The explicit description of the Bible as inerrant and infallible by fundamentalists and some conservative-evangelicals cannot claim to be the ancient and traditional voice of the church. Yet both fundamentalism and the notion of the Bible as "God's truth" (and thus without error) have their roots in an older, conventional way of seeing the Bible widely shared by most Christians for a long time.

An Older Way of Seeing the Bible

Ordinary people did not read the Bible until relatively recently. Until about five hundred years ago, the Bible could be read only

by the very few who knew Latin, Greek, or Hebrew and who had access to handwritten manuscripts, which were expensive to produce and therefore relatively scarce. Two developments changed this. In the middle of the 1400s, the printing press was invented. Less than a hundred years later, largely because of the Protestant Reformation, the Bible was translated from ancient "sacred" languages into contemporary languages.

The accessibility of the Bible to anybody who can read has been a mixed blessing. Positively, it has resulted in a democratization of Christianity. No longer are the riches of the Bible known only to an educated elite. But it has also had negative consequences. It has made possible individualistic interpretation of the Bible; and that, coupled with the elevated status given to the Bible by the Protestant Reformation, has led to the fragmentation of Christianity into a multitude of denominations and sectarian movements, each grounded in different interpretations of the Bible.

Moreover, prior to the invention of the printing press, virtually nobody had seen the books of the Bible bound together in a single volume. Rather, the Bible was most commonly experienced as a collection of separate manuscripts. Indeed, during antiquity and the Middle Ages, the Bible was most often referred to in the plural as "scriptures"—that is, as a collection of books. Once the Bible was routinely bound as a single volume, it became easier to think of it as a single book with a single author (namely, God).

Since then and until recently, the majority of Christians (especially Protestants) shared in common a set of lenses for seeing and reading the Bible. Indeed, this way of seeing was so widespread that most Christians were not even aware of the lenses.

This older way of seeing the Bible has been called "natural literalism." In a state of natural literalism, the Bible is read and accepted literally without effort. Because someone in this state has no reason to think differently, a literal reading of the Bible poses no problems.

Natural literalism is quite different from "conscious literal-

ism," a modern form of literalism that has become aware of problems posed by a literal reading of the Bible but insists upon it nevertheless.[10] Whereas natural literalism is effortless, conscious literalism is effortful. It requires "faith," understood as believing things hard to believe. But natural literalism does not insist upon literal interpretation. Rather, it takes it for granted, and it does not require "faith" to do so.

Fundamentalists and many evangelicals are conscious literalists. But their way of seeing the Bible stands in considerable continuity with the natural literalism of past centuries. Seeing the Bible through the lenses of natural literalism leads readers to the following conclusions about the Bible's origin, authority, and interpretation—conclusions that are similar to those of conscious literalism:

1. *Origin*. The Bible is a divine product. Such is the natural or immediate meaning of how the Bible has been spoken about by Christians through the centuries. The Bible is the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit; it is sacred scripture. The Bible is thus not a human product, but comes from God in a way no other book does.

2. *Authority*. The Bible is therefore true and authoritative. The truth and authority of the Bible are grounded in its origin. As a divine product, it has a divine guarantee to be true and must be taken seriously as the ultimate authority about what to believe and how to live.

3. *Interpretation*. The Bible is historically and factually true. In a state of natural literalism, it is taken for granted that what the Bible says happened *really* happened. The only exceptions are manifestly metaphorical language, such as "mountains clapping their hands with joy." Natural literalists can recognize and appreciate metaphor. But when the Bible seems to be reporting something that happened, it happened. Moreover, believing in the factuality of the Bible takes no effort; in a state of natural literalism, there is no reason to believe otherwise.

Though most readers of this book will not see the Bible this way, the perspective is nevertheless familiar. Its familiarity flows in part from the conventional status it held until recently within Christianity. Most of our ancestors two or three generations back were natural literalists. For those of us who are older, perhaps even our parents were.

Many of us grew up immersed in this tradition. So it was for me. As a child growing up in a Lutheran church in the middle of the previous century, I heard the Bible spoken of as "the Word of God." It was thus obvious that I should take it seriously.

In Sunday school, we were expected to memorize the Ten Commandments. They were important because they were in the Bible and were thus God's laws. We sang "Jesus loves me, this I know"—and how did we know? Because "the Bible tells me so."

In common with most Protestants, we Lutherans thought of the Bible as the sole authority for faith and morals. Though I did not know the Latin phrase then, *sola scriptura*—"scripture alone"—was one of the battle cries of the Protestant Reformation. To the same melody as the great hymn of the Reformation, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," we sang:

God's Word is our great heritage,
And shall be ours forever;
To spread its light from age to age
Shall be our chief endeavor.
Through life it guides our way,
In death it is our stay;
Lord grant, while worlds endure,
We keep its teachings pure,
Throughout all generations.

My family and congregation were not fundamentalists. Rather, we were natural literalists, though we favored what we might call *"soft* literalism." We did not, for example, insist upon reading the Genesis stories of creation literally. It was fine to see the six days

of creation as six geological epochs. We did not have to deny the existence of dinosaurs or the fossil record.

But as "soft literalists," we took it for granted that the most important events in the Bible happened pretty much as they are reported. That at the time of the exodus the sea really did part to allow the ancient Hebrews to pass through. That Jesus really was born of a virgin, really did walk on the water, really did multiply loaves, and so forth. This is what I mean by "soft literalism": taking it for granted that the most central events reported in the Bible really happened.

This older way of seeing the Bible went with an older way of seeing Christianity. The reason for the connection is obvious: the Bible has been foundational for Christianity throughout the centuries. How one sees the Bible and how one sees Christianity go hand in hand.

An Older Way of Seeing Christianity

This older understanding of Christianity was conventional Christianity as recently as a century ago. It is still the common understanding among fundamentalist and many conservative Christians. I will describe it with six adjectives, explaining each briefly.

First, as already mentioned, this older way of seeing Christianity was *literalistic* (whether in harder or softer form).

Second, it was *doctrinal*. Being a Christian meant believing Christianity's central doctrinal teachings. In churches that used either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed regularly, you were a "real" Christian if you could say the creed without crossing your fingers or becoming silent during any of the phrases.

Third, it was quite *moralistic*. By this I mean two things. First, being a Christian meant trying to be good, and being good meant trying to live in accord with the ethical teachings of the Bible, understood as "God's law" (whether understood as a narrow and highly specific code of righteousness or, more broadly, as general principles such as the golden rule or loving one's neighbor as oneself).

The second aspect of moralism seen in the older way of looking at Christianity grew out of the fact that we are not very good at being good. This older way of being Christian was centered on the dynamic of sin, guilt, and forgiveness. Indeed, it is striking how central sin and forgiveness are to this older, conventional version of Christianity. Most Christian worship services include a confession of sin, and most celebrations of the eucharist (also known as the mass, the Lord's supper, or communion) have sin, sacrifice, and forgiveness at their center. Even quite liberal churches emphasize sin and forgiveness. I was struck by this at a recent week-long conference in a liberal Christian setting. Each morning's worship service began with a confession of sin. I thought to myself, "It's nine o'clock in the morning, and we've already been bad."

Fourth, this older way of seeing Christianity was *patriarchal*. It not only used predominantly masculine language for God and people, but also legitimated male-dominated hierarchies in church, society, and family.

Fifth, it was *exclusivistic*. In hard form, Christian exclusivism is the insistence that Jesus is the only way of salvation and Christianity the only true religion. There is also a softer form held by Christians who feel uncomfortable with this claim but fear that letting go of the traditional stance might be un-Christian.

Sixth and finally, this older way of seeing Christianity was *afterlife-oriented*. In the Christianity I learned as a child, the primary meaning of salvation was "going to heaven." Indeed, heaven was so central that if you had been able to convince me at age twelve or so that there was no afterlife, I would have had absolutely no idea why I should be a Christian. Heaven was what it was all about.

Cumulatively, to put this older understanding into a single sentence: "Be a Christian now for the sake of salvation later." To express the same notion in only slightly different words: "Believe in Christianity now for the sake of heaven later." And the emphasis was on "believing"—believing all of this to be true.

But this way of seeing the Bible and Christianity has come un-

done for the majority of people in Western culture. The natural literalism of my childhood could not endure, just as the natural literalism of most of our ancestors has largely disappeared. Conscious literalism, of course, remains. But for many of us, it is not an option.

It is important to note that this older vision is often seen as *traditional* Christianity by both Christians and non-Christians, and by both conservatives (who defend it) and liberals (who reject it). But this older way of seeing the Bible and Christianity is not "the Christian tradition." Rather, it is a historically conditioned way of seeing the tradition (including the Bible) that has been shaped by the circumstances of the past few centuries. Thus the issue is not whether to keep or abandon the Christian tradition, but a transition from one way of seeing it to another. The question concerns the lenses through which we see and read the Bible and the Christian tradition as a whole.

Seeing Again: Our Cultural Context

Why has this older way of seeing and reading the Bible ceased to be persuasive? Why do the older lenses no longer work? The primary reason: who we have become. By "we," I mean most of us in modern Western culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I will describe who we have become with four statements. Though not a comprehensive description of who we are, these statements name four factors that affect the way we see the Bible, Christianity, and religion more broadly.

Religious Pluralism

We are aware of religious pluralism. We are aware of the world's religions in a way that most people have not been for most of human history, even as recently as a century ago. We know about other religions to varying degrees and in a variety of ways: from college religion courses, or from our own reading, or from public television series such as those featuring Joseph Campbell and Huston Smith, or from personal acquaintance with people of

other traditions. This is simply part of our increasingly global awareness.

Thus many of us find the exclusivistic claims of the Christian tradition impossible to accept. This is so for both commonsense reasons and Christian theological reasons. Does it make sense that the creator of the whole universe would be known in only one religious tradition, which (fortunately) just happens to be our own?

Moreover, such a claim is difficult to reconcile with the centrality of grace in the Christian tradition. If one must be a Christian in order to be in right relationship with God, then there is a requirement. By definition, then, even though we may use the language of grace, we are no longer talking about grace.

Historical and Cultural Relativity

We are aware of historical and cultural relativity. In only slightly different words, we know about historical and cultural conditioning. We are aware that how people think is pervasively shaped by the time and place in which they live, as well as by social and economic class.

This applies not only to people in earlier times and other places, but also to us. Our concepts, images, language, knowledge, beliefs—even our thought processes themselves—are all profoundly shaped by culture. They are all conditioned by and relative to the time and place in which they originated. We are thus suspicious that any collection of teachings can be absolute truth or the only truth, just as we are suspicious of attempts to exempt anything from this category (such as the Bible or the religious teachings of our own tradition).

Modernity

We are modern people. By this I mean simply that we live in that period of Western cultural history known as "modernity." Modernity is the cultural mind-set that began with the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century and continues into the present. Modernity is a complex phenomenon, of course, with both

impressive achievements and important limitations. For our purposes, I will mention two of its most central features, both closely connected to each other.

First, modernity is characterized by scientific ways of knowing. Indeed, the birth of modern science is the birth of modernity. With modern science came a new epistemology (or theory of how we know): unlike people of earlier eras, we know something to be true today through experimentation and verification.

Second, modernity is marked by what is sometimes called "the modern worldview" or "the Newtonian worldview." A worldview is an image of reality—an understanding of what is real and what is possible. The modern worldview is based on scientific ways of knowing: what is real is that which can be known through the methods of science. Epistemology (how we know) has become ontology (what is real).

The modern worldview yields a material understanding of reality. What is real is the space-time world of matter and energy. Reality is made up of tiny bits and pieces of "stuff," all of them interacting with each other in accord with "natural laws." The result is a picture of the universe as a closed system of cause and effect. Although this worldview has already been superseded in theoretical physics, it continues to operate powerfully in our minds.

Modernity has produced much of great value. Its most obvious accomplishments are in the sciences, technology, and medicine. But its achievements extend beyond those realms into systems of government, human rights, the study of the past, the empathetic awareness of other cultures, and on and on. I am very appreciative of modernity, even as I now mention two of its deeply destructive effects upon religion in general and Christianity and the Bible in particular.

The first of these effects: modernity has made us skeptical about spiritual reality. Modernity's material understanding of reality has made the reality of God problematic for many of us. It is no accident that "death of God" theology emerged in the modern period. It is the logical outcome of absolutizing the modern worldview.

Second, modernity has led us to be preoccupied with factuality—with scientifically verifiable and historically reliable facts. Indeed, modern Western culture is the only culture in human history that has identified truth with factuality. We are "fact fundamentalists": if a statement isn't scientifically or historically factual, it isn't true.[11]

Within the church, both biblical fundamentalists and Christian liberals are often fact fundamentalists. For the former, the Bible must be factually true in order to be true at all (hence they emphasize the literal and historical factuality of biblical texts). The latter have tended to follow a different strategy, seeking to rescue a few facts from the fire. But fundamentalists and liberals alike have agreed: facts are what matter.

The modern preoccupation with factuality has had a pervasive and distorting effect on how we see the Bible and Christianity. During most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Christians and much of Christian theology were caught between the two sterile choices of literalism (in harder or softer form) and reductionism. The first sought to defend the factual accuracy and uniqueness of the Bible and Christianity. The second tended to reduce the Bible and Christianity to what made sense within the modern worldview. Both are thoroughly modern positions.

A further result: Christianity in the modern period became preoccupied with the dynamic of believing or not believing. For many people, believing "iffy" claims to be true became the central meaning of Christian faith. It is an odd notion—as if what God most wants from us is believing highly problematic statements to be factually true. And if one can't believe them, then one doesn't have faith and isn't a Christian.

The thoroughly modern character of this notion of faith can be seen by comparing what faith meant in the Christian Middle Ages. During those centuries, basically everybody in Christian culture thought the Bible to be true. They had no reason to think otherwise; the Bible's stories from creation through the end of the world were part of the conventional wisdom of the

time. Accepting them did not require "faith." Faith had to do with one's relationship to God, not with whether one thought the Bible to be true.[12]

Postmodernity

We live on the boundary of postmodernity. We are not simply modern people; in addition, we are living in the borderland of a new period of cultural history. The central and defining features of that new period have not yet become clear, so we do not know what to call it yet. Hence we simply call it *postmodernity:* it is what comes next.

Like modernity, postmodernity is a large and complex phenomenon. Moreover, some postmodern movements strike me as dead ends. Thus I will not attempt a comprehensive description or definition of postmodernity but will simply highlight three characteristics of primary importance for our purposes.

First, postmodernity is marked by the realization that modernity itself is a culturally conditioned, relative historical construction. The modern worldview is not the final word about reality any more than previous worldviews have been. Postmodernity knows that someday the Newtonian worldview will seem as quaint and archaic as the Ptolemaic worldview, a development that has already occurred among theoretical physicists.

Second, postmodernity is marked by a turn to experience. In a time when traditional religious teachings have become suspect, we tend to trust that which can be known in our own experience. This turn to experience is seen in the remarkable resurgence of interest in spirituality within mainline churches and beyond. Spirituality is the experiential dimension of religion.

Third, postmodernity is marked by a movement beyond fact fundamentalism to the realization that stories can be true without being literally and factually true. This development is reflected in much of contemporary theology's emphasis on metaphorical theology. An obvious point that has often been forgotten during the period of modernity: metaphors and metaphorical narratives can be profoundly true even if they are not literally or factually true.

This realization is central for the way of seeing and reading the Bible that I will be suggesting in this book.

Given who we have become, one of the imperative needs of our time is a re-visioning of the Bible and Christianity. I deliberately hyphenate the word "re-vision" in order to distinguish what I mean from a common meaning of "revision" (without a hyphen). We often use the latter word to describe the improvement of something that has been poorly done—for example, a manuscript or a term paper. But that is not what I mean.

Rather, to re-vision means "to see again." The emphasis upon "seeing again" also reminds us that the older form of Christianity is not "traditional Christianity" but was an earlier way of seeing the Bible and the Christian tradition. What is needed in our time is a way of seeing the Bible that takes seriously the important and legitimate ways in which we differ from our ancestors.

The way of seeing and reading the Bible that I describe in the rest of this book leads to a way of being Christian that has very little to do with believing. Instead, what will emerge is a relational and sacramental understanding of the Christian life. Being Christian, I will argue, is not about believing in the Bible or about believing in Christianity. Rather, it is about a deepening relationship with the God to whom the Bible points, lived within the Christian tradition as a sacrament of the sacred.

NOTES

1. The point is made in a remark I have heard attributed secondhand to Peter Gomes, author of a recent best-selling book on the Bible, *The Good Book* (New York: William Morrow, 1996). Because I am uncertain of Gomes's exact words, I do not use quotation marks, but the gist of the statement is this: Has the Bible become a hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel?
2. Mainline Protestant denominations include most of the older Protestant churches: the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (the largest Lutheran body), the Christian Church (Disciples), American Baptists, Quakers, and some others. On the Bible, the Catholic Church has more in common with mainline Protestant churches than with fundamentalist and conservative-evangelical churches.
3. For an important essay on variations within conservative attitudes toward

the Bible, see Gabriel Fackre, "Evangelical Hermeneutics: Commonality and Diversity," *Interpretation* 43 (1989), pp. 117–29.

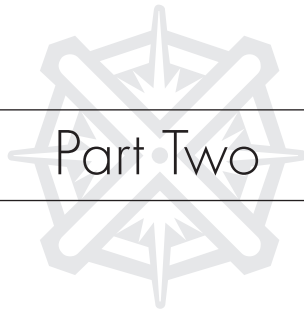
4. See L. William Countryman, *Biblical Authority or Biblical Tyranny?* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), pp. ix–x: "These Christians imagine that the nature of biblical authority is perfectly clear; they often speak of Scripture as inerrant. In fact, however, they have tacitly abandoned the authority of Scripture in favor of a conservative Protestant theology shaped largely in the nineteenth century. This fundamentalist theology they buttress with strings of quotations to give it a biblical flavor, but it predetermines their reading of Scripture so thoroughly that one cannot speak of the Bible as having any independent voice in their churches." Countryman's book as a whole is strongly recommended.
5. I do not mean that the number of mainline Christians is increasing. As virtually everybody knows, membership in mainline churches has declined sharply over the last forty years. Among the reasons: when there was a cultural expectation that everybody would belong to a church, mainline denominations did very well, for they provided a safe and culturally respectable way of being Christian. Once the cultural expectation disappeared (as it did in the final third of the twentieth century), membership in those denominations declined. But among those in mainline churches, the appetite for modern biblical scholarship is remarkable.
6. Attributed to Jerry Falwell by George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 1. Marsden himself expands the definition slightly: "[A]n American fundamentalist is an evangelical who is militant in opposition to liberal theology in the churches or to changes in cultural values and mores." Marsden affirms that "fundamentalists are a subtype of evangelicals." For American fundamentalism and its relation to evangelicalism, see also Marsden's *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980). Both books strike me as particularly illuminating and fair.
7. See the important new study of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim fundamentalism (all understood as reactions to modern culture) by Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Knopf, 2000).
8. See the books by Marsden cited in note 6. The origin of a movement explicitly known as "Fundamentalism" is usually traced to the publication between 1910 and 1915 of twelve paperback volumes known as "The Fundamentals."
9. See the very helpful and interesting article on "Scriptural Authority" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 5, pp. 1017–56. The article is written by a number of authors.

   On page 1034, Donald K. McKim notes that the second- and third-generation Reformers affirmed "plenary inspiration," the notion that the Bible was directly inspired by God, ". . . in essence a 'dictation' theory of inspiration." Roughly a hundred years after Luther, the Lutheran Johann Quenstedt (1617–88) wrote that the books of the Bible ". . . in their original text are the infallible truth and are free from every error. . . . [E]ach and

every thing presented to us in Scripture is absolutely true whether it pertains to doctrine, ethics, history, chronology, topography," and so forth.

On page 1035, Henning Graf Reventlow notes that this was a significant change from Luther: "[W]hereas for Luther the Bible becomes the living word of God in being preached and heard, in the orthodox systems Scripture in its written form is identified with revelation."

10. For natural literalism and the distinction between it and conscious literalism, see Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), chap. 3, esp. pp. 51–53.
11. I owe this very useful phrase to Huston Smith, "Jesus and the World's Religions" in *Jesus at 2000,* ed. Marcus Borg (Boulder: Westview, 1997), pp. 116–17. In his *Forgotten Truth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1976, 1992), especially the first chapter, Smith speaks of modernity as marked by scientism, which he carefully distinguishes from science. Scientism affirms that only that which can be known by science is real. To which I would add that modernity is also marked by historicism: historicism affirms that only that which is historically factual matters. Both perspectives are serious mistakes.
12. For this and other meanings of faith, see my *The God We Never Knew* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 168–71.



Part Two

THE HEBREW BIBLE

4

Reading the Creation Stories Again

We begin with the Hebrew Bible, commonly known among Christians as "the Old Testament."[1] As in most recent scholarship, I will use the term "Hebrew Bible" instead of "Old Testament," for two reasons. The first is respect for Judaism. For Jews, the Hebrew Bible is *the* Bible, not "the Old Testament."

The second reason pertains to Christians. For many Christian readers, the adjective "old" implies outmoded or superceded, as if the "New" Testament were intended to replace the "Old" Testament. Commonly accompanying this usage is the notion that the "Old" Testament speaks of a God of law and judgment, whereas the "New" Testament speaks of a God of grace and love. Though this stereotype is widespread among Christians, it is simply wrong: both visions of God appear in both testaments. The notion that the New Testament (and its God) replaces the Old Testament (and its God) was rejected by early Christianity in the second century.[2] Despite a continuing Christian tendency to relegate the "Old" Testament to second place, it is for Christians

just as much "Bible," just as sacred scripture, as is the New Testament. When Christians do not see this, we not only reject much of our heritage but impoverish our understanding of Jesus, the New Testament, and Christianity itself.

Within the Jewish tradition, the Hebrew Bible has three main divisions. In English, they are called "the Law," "the Prophets," and "the Writings." In Hebrew, they are, respectively, *Torah, Neviim, and Kethuvim.* The first letters of each of the Hebrew terms form the acronym *Tanak,* a common Jewish term for the Hebrew Bible as a whole.

The Torah is the first and foundational division of the Hebrew Bible. It consists of five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Though the books themselves do not say anything about their authorship, both the Jewish and Christian traditions have attributed them to Moses. Thus they are sometimes spoken of as "the five books of Moses." And though the most common English designation for this group of books is "the Law," the Torah contains much more than what is commonly meant by the word "law." The word "torah" itself means more; it can be translated as "instruction" or "teaching." The Torah does indeed include the laws of Israel, but it also contains the stories of her origins. It is "instruction" and "teaching" about the people's story and identity, as well as the foundation of their laws. In other words, it combines narrative and legal traditions.

The Torah is also commonly called "the Pentateuch" (as we saw earlier), a Greek word meaning "the five scrolls." In fact, this is probably the most commonly used term for these five books.

The Pentateuch begins with Israel's stories of creation, to which we now turn.

Israel's Stories of the World's Beginnings

Ancient Israel's stories of the world's beginnings in the first eleven chapters of Genesis are among the best-known parts of the Bible. Almost everybody in Western culture has heard of them:

- The creation of the world in six days
- Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, their temptation by a talking serpent, and their expulsion from Eden
- Their sons Cain and Abel, and Cain's murder of Abel
- The great ages of early people, with Methuselah topping the list at 969 years
- The giants born from the sexual union of "the sons of God" with "the daughters of men"
- Noah's ark and the great flood
- The building of the Tower of Babel, its destruction by God, and the fragmentation of humankind into different language groups

Major battles about the factual truth of these stories have marked Western culture in the modern period. Prior to the birth of modernity in the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, the factual truth of Genesis was accepted in the Jewish and Christian worlds without controversy, even though its stories were not always read literally.[3] There was little or no reason to question their factuality. Theology and science alike took it for granted that the universe was relatively young and that the earth and its continents, mountains, oceans, and varieties of life were created in very much the same form in which we now find them. Common estimates of the time of creation ranged from 6000 BCE to 4000 BCE.

Around 1650, the age of the earth was calculated with great precision by an Anglican archbishop of Dublin named James Ussher. Using the genealogies in Genesis, Ussher concluded that creation occurred in the year 4004 BCE.[4] His calculation was made just in time to collide with the birth of modern science. Geology and paleontology soon began to point to an immeasurably older earth. The challenge to the factual reading of the Genesis stories of creation was intensified by Charles Darwin's argument for evolution in *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859. Suddenly the issue was not simply the age of the earth but the development of present life forms from much earlier life forms through natural processes.

The nineteenth century was a time of intense conflict between science and the Bible. Some intellectuals and village atheists delighted in using science to debunk the Bible and Christianity. Among Christians, some adjusted quickly to the new scientific claims and integrated them into a nonliteral reading of Genesis.[5] Others felt that the truth of the Bible and Christianity were under attack.

The controversy continues to this day, though it involves a much smaller number of Christians. Advocates of scientific creationism still defend the factual accuracy of the six-day creation story.[6] Expeditions are launched every few years to Mt. Ararat in Turkey, in search of the remains of Noah's ark. Some still think of the Garden of Eden as a real place and seek to figure out its geographical location. (Most often it is pinpointed somewhere in the Middle East, though I recall seeing a pamphlet arguing that it was in Wisconsin.)

But contemporary biblical scholarship does not read these stories as historically factual accounts of the world's beginnings. Instead, it sees them as ancient Israel's stories of the world's beginnings and interprets them as profoundly true mythological stories. In this chapter, I will describe these stories as seen through the lens of contemporary scholarship. More specifically, I will offer a historical-metaphorical reading, focusing primarily on the creation stories in the first three chapters of Genesis.

First, though, I will describe how I heard these creation stories the first time.

Hearing the Creation Stories the First Time

As a child growing up in the church, I heard the stories in Genesis in a state of precritical naivete and thus heard them as true stories.[7] Though I cannot recall a time when I took the six days of creation literally, I am sure I did so in very early childhood. And I would have done so without effort, even as I apparently let go of hearing them literally without conflict. When I learned

about dinosaurs and the immense age and size of the universe in elementary school, I did not experience a religious crisis.

But as I think back on those years, I realize that I continued to take Adam and Eve quite literally as the first two human beings and that letting go of them was more of an issue. In elementary school, I learned about early humanoids with names like Neanderthal, Cro-Magnon, and Peking.[8] But it was not until my teenage years that I was struck by the implications of the evidence of such creatures. When I entered the stage of critical thinking, I began to wonder if I was supposed to identify the earliest of these with Adam and Eve. But I thought of these early humanoids as hulking brutes, perhaps barely capable of language. They did not seem likely candidates for Adam and Eve, whose sons Cain and Abel had engaged in the complex tasks of farming and herding—and Cain had even built a city.

So I began to take seriously the likelihood that Adam and Eve had not been real people. But if that likelihood turned out to be true, what were we to make of the story of the first sin, commonly called "the fall," in the Garden of Eden? If "the fall" was not historical, how (I wondered) would this affect the Christian story of universal sin, our need for redemption, and Jesus' death as the necessary sacrifice? Something more seemed to be at stake in the historical factuality of Adam and Eve and "the fall" than was involved in lengthening the six days of creation to geological epochs. Resolving these questions was a major theological problem for me. As I wrestled with it, the foundations of my religious understanding began to shake. If the story of Adam and Eve was not "true" (as a modern teenager, I thought of truth as that which was factual), what happened to the truth of the Bible and Christianity as a whole?

I now see these chapters quite differently. Reading them through the lens of historical scholarship and with sensitivity to their meanings as metaphorical narratives has enabled me once again to see them as profoundly true stories. And because their purpose is not to provide a factually accurate account of the world's beginnings, it is beside the point to argue whether they

are accurate or mistaken factual accounts. They are not God's stories of the world's beginnings; rather, they are ancient Israel's stories of the world's beginnings.

As we look at these stories now, we will ask two key questions: Why did ancient Israel tell these stories? And why did they tell them this way? A historical-metaphorical approach provides illuminating answers to both.

Historical Illumination

The first eleven chapters of Genesis need to be understood not only as the introduction to the Pentateuch, but also in the context of the Pentateuch as a whole.

They are ancient Israel's stories of her prehistory. By that I mean two things. First, they are Israel's account of humankind in the time before her own particular history, a history whose telling begins with the stories of Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of Israel. Abraham and Sarah, then, are the first *historical* figures in the Bible.[9] Their names appear in a genealogy at the end of Genesis 11, and the story of their call to be the ancestors of Israel begins in Genesis 12. Everything before them is Israel's prehistory and functions as a prologue to the Pentateuch and Israel's story of her own ancestors.

Second, to call these early chapters of Genesis prehistory means that they are not to be read as historical accounts. Rather, as ancient Israel's stories about the remote beginnings before there was an Israel, they are to be read as a particular kind of metaphorical narrative—namely, as myths, about which I will soon say more. For now, I simply note that while myths are not literally true, they can nevertheless be profoundly true, rich in powerfully persuasive meanings.

There is one further point before we turn to the stories themselves. Namely, though we typically begin reading the Bible with the first chapters of Genesis, they are not where ancient Israel first began telling her story. The creation stories were written relatively late. Israel as a people came into existence with the exo-

dus from Egypt in the thirteenth century BCE. At the earliest, Israel told a story of creation some three hundred years later. As we shall see in the next chapter, the story of the exodus, the covenant, and the gift of the promised land is Israel's primal narrative and foundational story. In short, Israel told the story of the exodus and God's creation of her as a people long before she told the story of God's creation of the world.

Two Stories of Creation

The first three chapters of Genesis contain two stories of creation, written about four hundred years apart. The first one, Genesis 1.1–2.3, was probably written in the 500s BCE. Commonly called the "priestly" or "P" story, it is part of a larger block of material extending through the Pentateuch and reflecting priestly and ritual concerns. The second one was written earlier. It begins in Genesis 2.4 and continues through the end of chapter 3. Perhaps written in the 900s BCE, it is commonly called the "Yahwist" or "J" creation story, because the author uses "Yahweh" as the name of God.[10] The Yahwist story is also part of a larger narrative account of Israel's origins that extends throughout much of the Pentateuch.[11] The two stories are quite different.

The P Story

The P story (and the Bible as a whole) begins with the earth as "a formless void." In the primeval darkness, the wind (or Spirit) of God moves over the primordial waters:

> In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.[12]

Then God creates the universe in six days. In a literary structure repeated for each day of creation, the story begins with the creation of light:

> Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day.[13]

In rapid succession, the rest of the universe is created. On day two, God creates the dome of the sky (the "firmament"), separating the primordial waters above the sky from those below. On day three, God creates dry land, the seas, and vegetation. On day four, lights are placed in the dome of the sky: sun, moon, and stars.[14] On day five, God creates sea life and birds. Finally, on day six, God creates land creatures, concluding with the simultaneous creation of man and woman: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'"[15]

There are interesting correlations between what God creates on each of the first three days and what God creates on each of the second three days. A "domain" is created and then populated:

Day one: light	Day four: sun, moon, and stars
Day two: waters and the sky	Day five: sea life and birds
Day three: dry land	Day six: land creatures

Then, we are told, on the seventh day God rests, thereby blessing and hallowing that day as the sabbath.

The J Story

The J creation story begins in Genesis 2.4. It focuses on the creation of humankind and barely treats the creation of the world. It does not mention the creation of light, or firmament, or sun, moon, and stars, or sea creatures. Rather, it begins with the creation of humankind, of *adham,* a Hebrew word meaning "humankind" and often translated "man." The creation of *adham* is the climax of the very long sentence with which the story begins:

> In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not yet caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed *adham* from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and *adham* became a living being.[16]

The P story portrays humankind as the climax of creation by having people created *last,* after everything else. The J story gives humankind priority by having people created *first,* before vegetation and animals. In the P story, humans as male and female are created simultaneously; in J, the creation of woman comes later.

To provide *adham* with a place to live, God plants the Garden of Eden and gives *adham* permission to eat of all of its trees, except one: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."[17]

Then God creates companions for *adham:* "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that *adham* should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'" God creates every beast of the field, and every bird of the air, and brings them to *adham.* But none of them meets the need: "There was not found a helper fit for *adham."* So God puts *adham* to sleep and forms woman out of one of his ribs. No longer alone, *adham* exclaims, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."[18]

Into this paradise comes a talking snake. The serpent tempts the primeval couple to eat from the forbidden tree, "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." He promises them that if they do, they "will be like God, knowing good and evil." They accept the serpent's invitation, and their lives change dramatically. Now aware of their nakedness, they make loincloths out of fig leaves. Of more serious consequence, they are afraid and hide themselves

from God. Punishment follows. The woman, now named Eve, is sentenced to pain in childbearing and subjugation to her husband. The man, now named Adam, is sentenced to the toil and sweat of raising food from an earth filled with thorns and thistles. Both are exiled from the Garden of Eden. The story concludes with Adam and Eve living "east of Eden," the garden's entrance guarded by an angel with a flaming sword. Life in paradise is over.[19]

To return to our two key questions: Why did the people of ancient Israel tell these stories, and why did they tell them this way? One answer sometimes given is that these stories functioned as primitive science: ancient Israel did not know how the world came into existence, and so she created these stories in order to explain how things came to be. But there is much more going on here than a prescientific explanation of origins. To state my central claim in advance, Israel told these stories to express her deepest convictions about God and the world, and about what is often called "human nature"—that is, what we are like, and what our lives "east of Eden" are like.

Before treating more fully the first of these key questions, I begin with the second question: Why did ancient Israel tell the stories *this way?*

Reading the P Story through a Historical Lens

Historical study helps us to understand why ancient Israel told these stories in the way that she did. As already noted, the P story was most likely written in the 500s BCE. To connect this to ancient Israel's history, the Jewish people went into exile in Babylon after the Babylonian Empire conquered their homeland and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The exile lasted almost fifty years, until 539 BCE, when a small number of Jews returned to a Jerusalem in ruins and began the task of rebuilding a Jewish homeland under the domination of a new imperial power, Persia. Thus, the P story of creation was written during or shortly after the exile.

The Six-Day Creation

Because the Jews were sharply reduced in numbers during this period of history, distinctive practices as a means of sustaining their identity as a people became vitally important. Among these practices was the observance of the sabbath (the seventh day of the week) as a day of rest. Though sabbath observance predated the exile, it became even more important during and after the exile. So why does creation take six days in the P story? To make the point that even God observes the sabbath. Rather than being intended as a literal account of how long creation took, the six-day creation story was meant to reinforce the importance of the sabbath.

The Ancient Cosmology

The word "cosmology" refers to one's image or "map" of the cosmos or universe. In common with Babylonian and other ancient Middle Eastern cosmologies, the ancient Israelites thought of the earth as the center of the universe. Above the earth was the dome of the sky, called the "firmament" in many English translations. This understanding is reflected in the P story. On the second day of creation, God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters. . . . And God called the dome Sky." On the fourth day, God created the sun, moon, and stars and "set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth."[20]

What seems like a strange notion to us today actually coincides well with human experience. The sky *looks* like a dome over our heads. On it are mounted the sun, moon, and stars, and it rotates around us. Moreover, the notion that there is water above the dome of the sky also reflects experience: water comes from the sky as rain and snow. Thus, as the flood begins in the time of Noah, we are told, "The fountains of the great deep burst forth *and the windows of the firmament were opened.*"[21] Far from providing us with an understanding of the universe that can be reconciled with modern or postmodern science, the cosmology of the P creation story simply reflects the way ancient Israel thought

things were. Israel told the story this way because she thought of the universe this way. Thus it is Israel's story of creation, not God's story of creation.

The Literary Form of the P Story

The P story of creation was likely adapted from an ancient Israelite liturgy or hymn of praise to God. Its use of repeating phrases suggests refrains such as are found in hymns and liturgies. Each of the following is repeated seven times:

"God said, 'Let there be . . .'"
"And it was so."
"And God saw that it was good."

"There was evening and there was morning . . ." is repeated after each day of creation. Moreover, the six days of creation suggest six stanzas. If a liturgy does lie behind the first chapter of Genesis, we should imagine it being sung or chanted, perhaps antiphonally with a cantor and one or more choirs.

The recognition that the P story is likely to have been a hymn or liturgy has an immediate implication: we do not expect hymns to provide accurate factual information. When Christians sing the hymn "Jesus shall reign where're the sun does its successive journeys run," we are not saying that we believe the sun goes around the earth. The language of hymns is the language of poetry, metaphor, and praise. Creation cannot be described, but it can be sung.[22]

Indeed, Genesis 1 has been described as a "doxology." The roots of that word mean "words of, or about, glory." A doxology is a hymn of praise, as the most familiar English doxology reminds us: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise God all creatures here below." Thus the book of Genesis and the Bible as a whole begin with a hymn of praise to God as creator. It is difficult to imagine a more appropriate beginning.

The Proclamation of Israel's God as Creator

The origin of the P story in the time after the Babylonian conquest adds one more dimension of meaning. In antiquity, when a nation was decisively conquered by another nation, it was commonly thought that the god (or gods) of the victorious nation had defeated the god of the vanquished nation, exposing that god as inferior or perhaps as no god at all. To many—Babylonians and Jews alike—it looked during the exile as if the gods of imperial Babylon had triumphed over the God of Israel.

In this setting, the opening line and the central claim of the P creation story defiantly assert that the God of Israel is the creator of heaven and earth—of all that is. It proclaims the lordship of Israel's God over against the lordship of Babylon and its gods. The story affirms a "counter-world," an alternative world to the world of empire.[23] This affirmation is, as we shall see, a theme that runs throughout the Bible from beginning to end.

Reading the J Story through a Historical Lens

Just as the P story is illuminated by setting it in its historical context, so also is the J story of creation.

The Symbolic Meaning of Names

The author of the J story uses names in such a way as to suggest that they are symbolic. Adam is not a proper name in ancient Hebrew; no other person in the Bible is named Adam. Rather, Adam is the Hebrew *adham,* which (as already noted) is a common noun meaning "humankind." Indeed, the term involves a play on words: *adham* comes from the Hebrew word *adhamah,* which means "ground" or "dust." In other words, the first human is a "dust-creature." We are made of dust, made from the earth. Moreover, because this word means "humankind," its use suggests that the author is thinking not of a specific human but of Everyman (to borrow the name of the well-known medieval morality play). The author is telling the story not of a particular person but of "everyone."

So also the name Eve is not a proper name in Hebrew. It means "mother of all living." "Garden of Eden" also has a symbolic meaning: it means "garden of delights" (and, by extension, paradise). Living in a semiarid climate, the ancient Hebrews pictured paradise as a green and bountiful garden filled with streams of flowing water.

Connections to Israel's History

There are a number of suggestive parallels between the narrative flow of the J story and Israel's history. Like *adham,* ancient Israel was created in a dry land (through the covenant with God in the Sinai desert). Like *adham,* ancient Israel was given a green and pleasant land in which to live. As in the case of *adham,* a prohibition came with the covenant and gift of the land, with the threat of expulsion if the prohibition was violated. And, more speculatively, the tempter is a serpent, a common symbol of Canaanite fertility religion, which was the primary temptation to infidelity to God that Israel faced in the land. The J story may thus have a prophetic edge to it: if Israel abandons the covenant of faithfulness to Yahweh, she faces expulsion and exile from the land/garden that God had given to her.[24]

Reading the Creation Stories through a Metaphorical Lens

Now that we have seen some of the historical reasons why Israel told the creation stories as she did, we turn to a reading of these chapters as metaphorical narratives. A metaphorical (and thus nonliteral) approach to these stories is not new. In the third century, a Christian biblical scholar named Origen, commonly seen along with St. Augustine as one of the two most brilliant theologians of the early church, wrote:

> What intelligent person can imagine that there was a first day, then a second and third day, evening and morning, without the sun, the moon, and the stars? [Sun, moon, and stars are cre-

> ated on the fourth day.] And that the first day—if it makes sense to call it such—existed even without a sky? [The sky is created on the second day.] Who is foolish enough to believe that, like a human gardener, God planted a garden in Eden in the East and placed in it a tree of life, visible and physical, so that by biting into its fruit one would obtain life? And that by eating from another tree, one would come to know good and evil? And when it is said that God walked in the garden in the evening and that Adam hid himself behind a tree, I cannot imagine that anyone will doubt that these details point symbolically to spiritual meanings by using a historical narrative which did not literally happen.[25]

The Creation Stories as Myths

As we begin to address the question of why Israel told these stories, it is important to realize that the Genesis stories of creation are *myths*. That term needs careful explanation, because it has been virtually ruined by its most common modern use. In popular language, "myth" is a dismissive term. To call something a myth is to dismiss it: one need not take it seriously. A myth is seen as a mistaken belief, a falsehood.

But the term means something very different in the study of religion. Myths are not explanations. Myths are not primitive science. Myths are not mistaken beliefs. Rather, myths are metaphorical narratives about the relation between this world and the sacred. Myths typically speak about the beginning and ending of the world, its origin and destiny, in relation to God. Myths use nonliteral language; in this sense, they do not narrate *facts*. But myths are necessary if we are to speak at all about the world's origin and destiny in God. We have no other language for such matters.

The difference between the common dismissive use of the word "myth" and its meaning in the study of religion is pointed to in the title of a book written by Mircea Eliade, one of the greatest scholars of religion in the twentieth century: *Myth and Reality*.[26] In the modern world, myth and reality are commonly

seen as opposites: we speak of myth *or* reality. Eliade's point is the opposite: myth and reality go together, myth being the language for talking about what is ultimately real. For Eliade, myths are true, even though not *literally* true.

To cite another definition: "Myth is a form of poetry which transcends poetry in that it proclaims a truth."[27] To echo what I said about metaphor in the previous chapter, myth is poetry plus, not science minus.

In Christian thought, the Genesis stories of creation have been an exceedingly rich mine of mythological and theological meanings. They treat the great themes of God as creator, the God-world relationship, the nature of reality, human nature, and the character of human existence. As we explore these themes, we will use conceptual language to clarify the meanings of Israel's myths of the beginnings.

God as Creator

To the extent that there is a literal affirmation in ancient Israel's creation myths, it is simply this: God is the source of everything that is. As one of my seminary professors said several decades ago, "The only literal statement in Genesis 1 is 'God created the heavens and the earth.'"

Genesis speaks of creation as having happened "in the beginning." In subsequent Christian thought, there are two quite different ways of understanding this statement. The first sees creation as "historical origination." Namely, at a particular moment in the past, at the beginning of time, God created. The second sees the notion of creation as pointing to a relation of "ontological dependence." This perhaps unfamiliar phrase means that God is the source of everything that is *in every moment of time*.[28] For this view, affirming that God is creator is not primarily a statement about origination in the remote past; rather, it is a statement about the present dependence of the universe upon God. If God ceased to vibrate the universe (and us) into existence, it (and we) would cease to exist. In traditional Christian language, God as creator is also the sustainer of everything that is.

The latter way of thinking about creation seems more important. From a scientific point of view, we do not know whether there was a time when there was "nothing." The contemporary "big-bang theory" of the universe's origin, which speaks of a moment roughly fifteen billion years ago when the present universe began, is quite compatible with thinking of creation as historical origination. Indeed, some have seen the primordial "cosmic flash" of the big-bang theory as strikingly similar to the first act of creation on the first day of the Genesis story: "Let there be light." Twenty years ago, a scientist wryly observed about the big-bang theory:

> For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.[29]

But it is also possible that there were universes before the present one. Indeed, it is possible that there have always been universes. Seeing the statement "God is the creator" as a claim about ontological dependence means that Christians and Christian theology can be religiously indifferent to the question of whether the universe had a beginning. To say "God is creator" affirms a relationship and process that continues into the present. It need not refer to a specific event at a particular time in the distant past.

This way of thinking about God as creator is compatible not only with the big-bang theory but also with whatever scientific theory might (and almost certainly will) replace it. Indeed, thinking about creation this way means that the affirmation of God as "maker of heaven and earth" is compatible with *any* scientific account of the universe's origins. At the level of ultimate origins, there need be no conflict between Genesis and science. The two do not directly compete.

The God-World Relationship

Just as there are two ways of thinking about creation, so there are two models for thinking about the God-world relationship—that is, the relation of God as creator to the universe.[30] The first is known as a "production" model. Namely, like an artisan or artist, God makes the universe as something separate from God's self. Once created, the universe exists separate from God, just as a house or a painting exists separate from the builder or artist who produced it. This model is associated with a particular concept of God. Known as "supernatural theism," this way of thinking about God conceptualizes God as "another being" separate from the universe.

The second way of thinking about the God-world relation has been called a "procreative" or "emanationist" model: God brings forth the universe from God's being. Because the universe comes out of God's being, it is in some sense "God-stuff." This model does not identify the universe with God, for God is *more* than the universe; rather, it sees the universe as being "of God" and "in God." (In other words, the model is panentheistic.)[31] To quote a passage from the New Testament, God is "the one in whom we [and everything] live and move and have our being."[32]

The differences between these two models for thinking about the God-world relation matter. The production model suggests that the universe is separate from God and that creation happened in some past moment. The procreative model affirms the presence of God within and beyond the universe and fits the notion that creation is an ongoing process, not simply a past event. Finally, whereas the production model and its association with supernatural theism emphasize God's separation from the world, the latter model leads to a much more intimate sense of the closeness of God to the world—indeed, of the presence of God in the world.

Obviously, the Genesis stories speak of creation using a production model. In Genesis 1, God speaks and the universe comes into being. In Genesis 2, God is like an artisan molding *adham* out of earth, like a gardener planting a garden, and so forth. In

short, God is portrayed as creating a universe separate from God.

But because this is the language of myth and metaphor, the way we think about the creation stories need not be confined to a semiliteral reading. To cite an analogy, the Bible often speaks of God as a person-like being; this is the natural language of worship and devotion. But that does not mean we must think of God as a person-like being. In any case, whether our thoughts of creation follow a production model or a procreative model, the central truth-claim of the myth remains: God is the source of everything.

The Nature of Reality

Central to Genesis 1 is the refrain repeated after each day of creation: "And God saw that it was good." The pronouncement covers everything that exists. To use a Latin phrase from medieval theology, *Esse qua esse bonum est,* or "Being as being is good." This does not mean that everything that *happens* is good. But whatever *exists* is good.

The creation story is thus strikingly world-affirming. Indeed, the Jewish tradition as a whole has consistently been world-affirming, in spite of the horrendous sufferings that Jews have experienced. The affirmation is also central to Christian theology, although popular Christianity, with its emphasis on the afterlife, has sometimes seen the world (especially "the flesh") as highly problematic, something to keep at a distance, a place to get through on the way to one's heavenly home. But against all world-denying theologies and philosophies, Genesis affirms the world as the good creation of the good God. All that is is good.

Human Nature

Ancient Israel's stories of creation affirm two things about us. We are the climax of creation, created in the image of God and given dominion over the earth. Yet we are also "dust-creatures," people made of earth. As dust-creatures, we are finite and mortal. "You are dust, and to dust you will return" are the final words spoken by God to Adam in paradise.[33]

We do not know what ancient Israel meant by affirming that we are created "in the image of God." Perhaps the claim simply reflects the fact that the Genesis stories of creation are anthropocentric; that is, they are told from a human point of view and are human-centered, highlighting humans as the climax of creation. The stories are also theocentric, of course—that is, centered in God—but the divine creation they describe leads up to us: we are God's culminating act of creation. Thus whatever created "in the image of God" means, it is clear that ancient Israel thought there was something special about us.

The paradoxical juxtaposition of our special status and our smallness in relation to the universe is expressed in the familiar words of one of the creation psalms. In the first half of Psalm 8, the author addresses God and reflects on our insignificance:

> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
> the moon and the stars that you have established:
> what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
> mortals that you care for them?

Then the author affirms:

> Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels,
> and crowned them with glory and honor.
> You have given them dominion over the works of your hand;
> you have put all things under their feet.

The assessment is realistic. We are small, we are finite, we are mortal. And yet there is something different about us.

Though we have learned in the last half-century not to speak of an absolute difference between us and the nonhuman animals, we do have greater consciousness than any species we know of. In us, the universe has become conscious of itself. And to a degree that ancient Israel did not dream of, we have become dominant, with very mixed consequences for the earth and ourselves.[34] Yet we are

creatures of dust, fated to return to dust. Moreover, according to Genesis, we are not simply mortal, but "fallen."

The Character of Human Existence

The term "the fall" does not occur in the Genesis story of creation. As a description of the events surrounding Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise, it is largely a Christian label; Jews typically do not speak of "the fall."

Within the Christian tradition, "the fall" has commonly been understood to mean "the fall *into sin.*" It has also been associated with the notion of "original sin," which is not simply the *first* sin, but a sinfulness that is transmitted to every individual in every generation. This latter notion, which goes far beyond what the Bible says, is usually attributed to the brilliant but troubled theologian Augustine around 400 CE. So as we hear and read this story again, we should try to free ourselves of specifically Christian associations of "the fall."

Though the term "the fall" does not occur in the story itself, the story of Adam and Eve's accepting the temptation offered by the snake points to something having gone wrong. The consequences are vivid, evocative, and thorough. Adam and Eve find themselves living east of Eden in a world that must endure toil and sweat for one's bread and pain and suffering in childbirth. They are banished from paradise forever. The rest of the stories in the first eleven chapters of Genesis describe the deepening consequences. In the next generation, murder: Adam and Eve's son Cain kills his brother Abel. The violence deepens, until even the boundaries of the cosmos are violated: "the sons of God" are mating with "the daughters of men," with monstrous consequences. Things are so out of control that God sends a flood to destroy all life except for those on Noah's ark, so that creation can be renewed. But soon thereafter, the cycle begins again in the story of the tower of Babel: humans try to build a tower that reaches into the heavens. But God overturns their effort and humankind is fragmented into its "babble" of different languages.

Clearly the Hebrew storyteller is saying that something has gone wrong. Life began in paradise but is now lived outside the garden, in an exile of hard labor, suffering, pain, violence, and fragmentation. Though the world is beautiful, something is not right; we *do* live in a world of suffering and pain.

But what went wrong? What action, desire or deed, led to such pervasive consequences? The language of the storyteller is evocative, not precise. It does not clearly point to a particular reading. Thus, over the centuries, a variety of understandings of "what went wrong" have emerged. Each leads to a somewhat different understanding of "sin"—that primal act that plunged human beings into a world of suffering—and each expresses nuances of "what went wrong."

The Primal Act as Disobedience The first understanding is the simplest, though not necessarily the most perceptive. The act responsible for Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden was *disobedience*. God gave them a command, they disobeyed it, and that was that. The emphasis is on the disobedience itself, not on what the act of disobedience was. For this view in its most elementary form, it would have made no difference if God's prohibition had been, "Please don't eat the daisies." This view typically leads to seeing sin in general as a matter of disobedience: God gives us commands and rules and laws, and we break them. The human problem is disobeying God the law-giver.

The Primal Act as Hubris A second understanding agrees that disobedience was involved but emphasizes *what* the act of disobedience involved. In particular, it focuses on the first half of the serpent's temptation: *"You will be like God,* knowing good and evil." The desire is to become Godlike, to tower above who we are, to be the center of creation. In the Christian theological tradition, this is known as *hubris,* a Greek word commonly translated "pride."

But in this context it means more than the everyday meaning of the word "pride," as in the sentence, "I was proud of myself when I did that." *Hubris* means exceeding one's proper limits; it

means giving to one's self the place that belongs to God alone; it means making one's self the center. *Hubris* can take many forms, ranging from a world-conquering arrogance to a self-preoccupied malaise. What these forms have in common is a life centered in the self and its concerns. Sin—the human problem—is thus *hubris* understood as self-centeredness.

The Primal Act as Sloth A third understanding is almost the opposite of the pride discussed above. The word "sloth" does not mean "laziness" in this context. Rather, it means "leaving it to the snake"—letting something else author one's existence. It means uncritically accepting somebody else's ideas about how to live one's life. In this view, sin—the human problem—is heteronomy: living the agenda of others.[35]

The Primal Act as the Birth of Consciousness A fourth understanding also focuses on *what* the primal act was, but it emphasizes the second half of the serpent's temptation: "You will be like God, *knowing good and evil*." "Knowing good and evil" is understood broadly to mean having knowledge of opposites, a capability that is intrinsic to the birth of consciousness. Consciousness involves distinguishing one thing from another; above all, it involves the self-world distinction, the awareness that the world is "other" than one's self.

The birth of consciousness is something we all experience; all of us become aware of the self-world distinction very early in life. Thus we cannot avoid the primal act. Indeed, this understanding emphasizes not the disobedience and sinfulness of "the fall," but its inevitability. All of us begin life in the womb with an experiential sense of undifferentiated unity; we begin in paradise. But the very process of growing up and the birth of consciousness that is intrinsic to it propels us into a world of division, anxiety, and suffering. Living "east of Eden" is intrinsic to the experience of being human. We all go through "the fall" and live in a state of exile and estrangement; it cannot be avoided.[36]

These various understandings can also be combined. For example, the birth of consciousness typically leads to *hubris,* understood as being centered in one's self. Moreover, centering in one's self intensifies the sense of separation from the world, deepening the experience of exile. The process of socialization leads to sloth understood as heteronomy: we internalize and live in accord with the agendas of others, including parents, culture, and religion.

As already mentioned, it is impossible to say that the Hebrew storyteller intended one of these more than the other, or intended any or all of these. But the creation stories are an example par excellence of a religious classic: they are stories that have a surplus of meanings.

Moreover, whatever the storyteller's sense of what went wrong in paradise, the story's picture of the consequences is persuasive and compelling. Most of us most of the time live "east of Eden." What this means is vividly portrayed in the painting *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve* by the fifteenth-century Italian artist Masaccio. As the first couple is driven out of Eden, Adam's head is down, both hands covering his eyes; Eve's face is upturned, but her mouth is open in a howl of pain, her features full of grief and sorrow. At least some of the time, life outside of Eden is like that.

The Creation Stories and Postcritical Naivete

Given the richness of meaning that a historical-metaphorical reading of Genesis reveals, the creation stories strike me as profoundly true. Critical thinking leads to an understanding of why the details of Genesis are as they are and also makes clear that their truth is not to be understood in literal, factual terms. Rather, their truth is expressed in the nonconceptual language of myth and metaphor, and no particular reading can exhaust their meanings.

But I can hear the truth of their central claims. "This"—the universe and we—is not self-caused, but grounded in the sacred. "This" is utterly remarkable and wondrous, a Mystery beyond

words that evokes wonder, awe, and praise. We begin our lives "in paradise," but we all experience expulsion into a world of exile, anxiety, self-preoccupation, bondage, and conflict. And yes, also a world of goodness and beauty: it is the creation of God. But it is a world in which something is awry.

The rest of the Bible is to a large extent the story (and stories) of this state of affairs: the human predicament and its solution. Our lives east of Eden are marked by exile, and we need to return and reconnect; by bondage, and we need liberation; by blindness and deafness, and we need to see and hear again; by fragmentation, and we need wholeness; by violence and conflict, and we need to learn justice and peace; by self- and other-centeredness, and we need to center in God. Such are the central claims of Israel's stories of human beginnings.

NOTES

1. The Hebrew Bible and the Protestant Old Testament are identical in content, though divided differently. In the former, there are twenty-four books; in the latter, thirty-nine books. The Catholic Old Testament includes another twelve books, commonly called "The Apocrypha" or "Deuterocanonical" books. Orthodox Christians (often called "Eastern Orthodox") include another four.
2. This rejection came about in what is known as the Marcionite controversy. Marcion was a second-century Roman Christian who rejected the Hebrew Bible as un-Christian and affirmed a very abbreviated portion of what later became the New Testament.
3. See quotation from the third-century Christian theologian Origen later in this chapter.
4. The dates he calculated still appear in the margins of some Bibles.
5. See George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 17–26; Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 96–104, and *Religion and Science* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 49–74.
6. For an analysis and critique of "scientific creationism" or "creation science," see Conrad Hyers, *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science* (Atlanta: Knox, 1984). His book as a whole is an excellent study of the creation stories, integrating modern biblical scholarship, science, and myth.
7. For a discussion of precritical naivete, see chap. 3.
8. And, of course, we now know of humanoids much older than the ones I heard of when I was a child.
9. To speak of them as historical figures does not imply that the stories about them are straightforward historical reports, or even that we have any accu-

rate historical information about them. Rather, it means that Israel located the story of Abraham and Sarah in a recognizable historical context.

10. Let me explain why J is the common abbreviation for the "Yahwist" source of the Pentateuch. The source theory of the Pentateuch originated in German biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century. The German language, which does not have the letter *Y*, uses the letter *J* for the sound made by the English *Y*. Thus in German the name of God is "Jahweh" and the abbreviation is J. But it is conventional in English to spell "Jahweh" as "Yahweh." Hence the odd result that the Yahwist source is the J source.
11. In this section I accept what has been the common scholarly understanding of the sources of the Pentateuch for over a century. Recently that understanding has come under review and revision by some Hebrew Bible scholars. Though P and its dating in the 500s are still widely accepted, there are serious questions about whether J should be thought of as an early connected narrative or as a mixture of traditions from many periods of Israel's history, with some of it as late in date as P. For a summary of the case made by several scholars for regarding much of J as late, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch* (New York: Doubleday, 1992). Some recent scholars continue to see J as early. See, for example, Terence Fretheim's commentary on Genesis in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 319–674. Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg's *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990) is based on an early date for J (and somewhat provocatively and eccentrically argues that the author was likely a woman). If the debate among Hebrew Bible scholars concludes with a later date for J, my analysis would not be affected in any significant way, for my comments on J do not depend upon an early date.
12. Gen. 1.1–2.
13. Gen. 1.3–5.
14. The *sequence* of creative acts points to the impossibility of reconciling the Genesis stories of creation with modern scientific knowledge simply by extending the timeframe from days to geological epochs. Note that light is created on the first day and yet sun, moon, and stars are not created until the fourth day. Indeed, the creation of vegetation (day three) precedes the creation of sun, moon, and stars.
15. Gen. 1.26–27. The use of the plural pronouns "us" and "our" has often puzzled people: Who is God talking to? Though Christians have sometimes seen this as a reference to the Trinity, that is impossible in an ancient Hebrew story, roughly a thousand years earlier than the notion of the Trinity. Most scholars think that the passage makes use of the image of God as a king surrounded by a heavenly council, such as we find, for example, in I Kings 22.19–23.
16. Gen. 2.4–7. Note: whenever the word *LORD* appears all in capital letters, as it does here, it is a translation of "Yahweh," the Hebrew sacred name of God.
17. Gen. 2.17.
18. Gen. 2.18–23.
19. Gen. 3.1–24.

20. Gen. 1.6, 14–17.
21. Gen. 7.11.
22. For other hymns of creation in the Hebrew Bible, see Ps. 8, Ps. 104.
23. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: Knox, 1982), pp. 24–27. His exposition of Gen. 1–3 is filled with brilliant insights (pp. 11–54).
24. If J is early, then the possibility of exile is a warning. If J is late, then exile has happened. And whether or not the J material is early, its integration into the P narrative occurs during or after Israel's actual experience of exile.
25. Origen, *De Principiis,* 4.1.16. Translation is mine; parenthetical material added. For an older English translation, see *The Ante-Nicene Fathers,* ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, reprint of 1885 edition) vol. 4, p. 365. Origen also says that the Bible contains "countless instances of a similar kind that were recorded as having occurred, but which did not literally take place." Even "the gospels themselves are filled with the same kind of narratives." Origen also strongly affirms that he sees much of the Bible as historical.
26. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).
27. H. and H. A. Frankfurt, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 8. The quotation continues by affirming that myth is "a form of reasoning which transcends reasoning."
28. But not of everything that *happens.* The distinction between "everything that is" and "everything that happens" is important. To say that God is the source of every existing entity is not to say that God is the cause of everything that happens. This applies especially to human behavior, but also to "natural" occurrences such as weather, earthquakes, hurricanes, and so forth.
29. Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (New York: Warner Books, 1980), pp. 105–6. The literature on the relationship between religion and science is vast. Among recent books that I especially recommend are Conrad Hyers, *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science* (see note 6 above); Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Luminous Web* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2000); Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).
30. For the two models, see Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 151–57. See also her *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), pp. 109–16.
31. This view is not to be confused with *pantheism,* commonly understood to mean the identification of the universe with God. The roots of *panentheism* are very ancient. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, the roots go back to the Bible's affirmation of both the transcendence and the immanence of God. For my description of the differences between supernatural theism, pantheism, and panentheism, see *The God We Never Knew* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), chaps. 2–3. As an explicitly developed concept, panentheism is becoming more and more common among mainline Christian theologians. See, for example, Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science,* pp. 82–124.

32. Acts 17.28.
33. Gen. 3.19
34. Some historians of culture have argued that the modern domination and destruction of nature has its roots in the Bible as the sacred text of Western culture, especially the creation story with its affirmation of God-given human dominion in Gen. 1.28: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." The indictment has some substance: the dominion text was often cited to legitimate modern Western "development" of the world. But it is probably not fair to the text itself. Walter Brueggemann comments that the dominance referred to in Gen. 1.28 "is that of a shepherd who cares for, tends, and feeds the animals" and notes that it pertains to "securing the well-being of every other creature and bringing the promise of each to full fruition" (*Genesis,* p. 32).
35. I owe this understanding to the title and content of Harvey Cox's *On Not Leaving It to the Snake* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). Paul Tillich, one of the two most important Protestant theologians of the twentieth century, makes the same point when he speaks of "heteronomy" as one of three ways of living one's life. "Heteronomy" means living in accord with the agenda of others (people, culture, the nation, and so forth). "Autonomy" means living with one's self as the center (and is thus hubris). "Theonomy" means living with God as one's center; it is the desirable state of affairs, and that from which we have "fallen" into either heteronomy or autonomy.
36. For an exposition of this understanding within the framework of Jungian psychology, see Edward F. Edinger, *Ego and Archetype* (New York: Penguin, 1973), esp. pp. 16–36.

Part Three

THE NEW TESTAMENT

8

Reading the Gospels Again

We now move from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament. There is far more continuity between the two than the later division between Judaism and Christianity suggests. Not only is the Hebrew Bible part of the Christian Bible, but it was *the* sacred scripture for Jesus, his followers, the early Christian movement, and the authors of the New Testament.

For all of them—Jesus and those who followed and wrote about him—the Hebrew Bible provided the language of the sacred imagination, that place within the psyche in which images of God, the God-world relationship, and the God-human relationship reside. They referred to the Hebrew Bible frequently, sometimes by quoting it but more often by alluding to its stories and texts dealing with Israel's past. They grew up with the Hebrew Bible and throughout their lives lived within the symbolic universe constituted by its words, images, and stories. It shaped their identity and their vision, their sense of who they were and their way of seeing, as individuals and as a community.

Though I will follow common practice and use the phrases "early Christianity" and "the early Christian movement," it is not clear historically when we should begin using the words "Christian" and "Christianity," if we mean by that a religion distinct from Judaism. Jesus and his early followers were all Jewish and saw themselves as doing something within Judaism, not as founding a religion separate from Judaism. Paul did not regard himself as converting to a new religion, but saw himself as a Jew all of his life. Most (and perhaps all) of the authors of the New Testament were Jewish. The word "Christianity" does not occur in the New Testament.[1]

Yet a "parting of the ways" began to become visible near the end of the first century.[2] Several factors accounted for the division: Gentile converts who did not become Jewish, a growing concern within Judaism to exclude Jews who saw Jesus as the messiah, and Roman perceptions of the Christian movement as a new religion separate from Judaism. But we should not see the emerging division as a complete divorce or imagine that Gentiles soon dominated the movement. A recent study suggests that the majority of Christians were still Jewish in origin as late as the middle of the third century.[3]

Judaism and early Christianity were "Rebecca's children," twin offspring of Israel's ancestors Rebecca and Isaac, to use the Jewish scholar Alan Segal's apt phrase.[4] Though Rebecca's twins were fraternal and not identical, they did have the same mother. Thus we understand the New Testament best when we see it within the world of first-century Judaism, including the way that world was shaped by the Hebrew Bible. And we understand early Christianity best when we see it as a way of being Jewish.

The Historical Transition

From Ecclesiastes, the latest of the wisdom books in the Hebrew Bible, we move forward in time about three centuries. The Jewish people regained their national independence in 164 BCE after a heroic war of revolt against the Hellenistic Empire of Antiochus

Epiphanes. The book of Daniel, the latest book in the Hebrew Bible, was written shortly before the revolt. The books of the Maccabees, Jewish documents in the Christian Apocrypha but not in the Hebrew Bible, tell the story of the revolt and its aftermath.

Independence lasted only a century, however. In 63 BCE, the Jewish homeland was incorporated into the Roman Empire. Roman imperial control was administered for a while by "client kings" appointed by Rome. The most famous of these was Herod the Great, who became king in 37 BCE. At his death in 4 BCE, his kingdom was divided into three parts ruled by his sons. In 6 CE, one part—Judea—came under direct Roman rule through prefects, or governors, sent from Rome. The most famous of these was Pontius Pilate, prefect from 26 to 36 CE.

During these centuries, the great majority of Jews did not live in the Jewish homeland itself, but in the "Diaspora," a term referring to Jewish communities outside of Palestine. Estimates vary, but perhaps as many as eighty percent or more lived in the Diaspora. The number of Jews living in the homeland at that time is commonly estimated at about one million, whereas four to six million lived in the Diaspora.[5] Some were descendants of Jews who had not returned from exile; others had emigrated more recently. Most Jews living in the Diaspora were urban, and they and their synagogues provided the primary network for Christian growth well into the third century.

In the Jewish homeland itself, the first century was a restive and violent time. The violence took several forms. There was the institutional and structural violence of Herodian and Roman rule, including economic and taxation policies that deprived more and more Jewish peasants of their ancestral landholdings and drove them into severe poverty, turning many into landless artisans, tenant farmers, or day-laborers and some into beggars. There was the violence of social bandits, groups of Jews who attacked and robbed Romans and the wealthy of their own people. (These social bandits were more than just *gangs* of bandits; the latter would have been simply outlaws, whereas the former were more like Robin Hood many centuries later.)

There was also the violence of armed revolutionary movements. In 4 BCE, when Herod the Great died, armed revolts broke out in most parts of his kingdom, including Galilee. Roman reprisal was quick and brutal. Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee (and only four miles from Nazareth), was burned to the ground, and many of the survivors were sold into slavery. Revolutionary violence simmered throughout much of the first century CE, culminating in the catastrophic war of revolt against Rome in 66. The Romans brutally reconquered the Jewish homeland and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 70. With the destruction of the temple, Jewish sacrificial worship ceased. The temple was never rebuilt, and Judaism changed forever.

An Introduction to the New Testament

Most of the twenty-seven documents that eventually became the New Testament were written between 50 CE and the end of the first century, although a few were written from the early to middle second century.[6] Whereas the Hebrew Bible was written over a period of around eight hundred years and is the literature of a nation, the New Testament was written in one hundred years or less and is the literature of a sectarian movement numbering only a few thousand people. A recent estimate suggests that there were only about two thousand Christians in the year 60, by which time Paul's genuine letters had been written. By the year 100, when most of the New Testament had been written, there were only 7,500 Christians.[7] It is an impressive literary production from such a small group.

It is common to refer to these documents as the twenty-seven "books" of the New Testament, and I will sometimes follow this convention. But to call them "books" is somewhat misleading. Many of them are very short. (Two are only a page long, for example, and the longest are only about forty pages in most English translations.)[8] Moreover, a "book" in the modern sense of the term is written for a general public not known personally to the author.[9] But all of the New Testament documents were

written to persons or communities personally known to the authors.

These documents fall into four categories. The largest category is letters or epistles (twenty-one, thirteen of them attributed to Paul). The next largest category is gospels (four). The last two categories are represented by one book each: an apocalypse (the Revelation or Apocalypse of John), and a history of the movement (the Acts of the Apostles, or simply Acts).

An Introduction to the Gospels[10]

Among these documents, the four gospels are foundational, even though they are not the earliest writings in the New Testament. All of the genuine letters of Paul were written earlier, and much of the rest of the New Testament was written about the same time as the gospels.

They are foundational because they tell the story of Jesus. Just as the story of the exodus is ancient Israel's primal narrative, so the gospels are the early Christian movement's primal narratives in both senses of the word: "foundational" and "of first importance."

Jesus lived in the first third of the first century. Born around 4 BCE, he was executed by the Romans around the year 30 CE. The gospels were written in the last third of the first century, between approximately 65 and 100 CE. The earliest is almost certainly Mark, and the latest is probably John. Though we call the gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we are not sure who wrote any of them. The author of Mark did not begin his gospel by writing "The Gospel according to Mark" at the top. Names were not assigned to these writings until sometime in the second century. For us they are anonymous documents, but presumably their authors were known in the communities for which they wrote.[11]

Although scholarly debate about their more particular literary form continues, the gospels are at a very general level "public biographies": accounts of the public life—the message and activity—of Jesus. They show little interest in his personal life before his public activity began. Two (Mark and John) do not even

mention Jesus' early years. The other two (Matthew and Luke) have birth stories, and Luke has a story about Jesus at age twelve, but that's all.[12]

Like the historical narratives of the Bible generally, the gospels are the product of a developing tradition, containing earlier and later layers of material and combining history remembered and history metaphorized. They preserve the Jesus movement's memory of Jesus and use the language of metaphor and metaphorical narrative to speak about what Jesus had become in their experience, thought, and devotion in the decades after his death.

As developing traditions combining historical memory and metaphorical narrative, they can be read in two different ways. On the one hand, as virtually our only source of information about the historical Jesus, they can be read for the sake of reconstructing a sketch of what Jesus of Nazareth was like as a figure of history. On the other hand, they can be read as late-first-century documents that tell us about Christian perceptions and convictions about Jesus some forty to seventy years after his death.

The first way of reading focuses on "the historical Jesus": the Jesus of the early layers of the developing tradition behind or beneath the surface level of the gospels. The second way focuses on "the canonical Jesus": the Jesus we encounter on the surface level of the gospels in their present form. We do not need to choose between these two ways of reading the gospels. Both are legitimate and useful.[13]

But we do need to be clear about when we are doing one and when we are doing the other. When we do not distinguish between the historical Jesus and the canonical Jesus, confusion results, and we risk losing both. When what the gospels say about the canonical Jesus is taken as historical reporting about Jesus of Nazareth, as both natural literalism and conscious literalism do, Jesus becomes an unreal human being, and we lose track of the utterly remarkable person he was. Anybody who can multiply loaves, walk on water, still storms, change water into wine, raise the dead (including someone who has been dead four days), and

call down twelve legions of angels from heaven is not a credible human being. He is not one of us.

Moreover, when what is said about the canonical Jesus is taken literally and historically, we lose track of the rich metaphorical meanings of the gospel texts. The gospels become factual reports about past happenings rather than metaphorical narratives of present significance. But when we are clear about the distinction between the historical Jesus and the canonical Jesus, we get both. And both matter.

Most of my previous books on Jesus have focused on the historical Jesus.[14] In radical shorthand, I see the pre-Easter Jesus as a Jewish mystic, healer, teacher of unconventional wisdom, social prophet, and renewal-movement initiator. Thus I see him as standing in continuity with the following strands of the Hebrew Bible:

- The experiential stream of the tradition that emphasizes the firsthand experience of the sacred
- The exodus and prophetic strands of the tradition, with their emphasis upon social justice and critique of and liberation from domination systems
- The critique of conventional wisdom in the subversive wisdom of Israel as represented by Ecclesiastes and Job
- The affirmation of an alternative social vision and vision of community that flows out of the above

I also see Jesus, in radical shorthand, as the Christian messiah. I think it most likely that the perception of him as messiah (and Son of God, and so forth) emerged among his followers after and because of Easter. By "Easter," I mean the experience among his followers of Jesus as a living reality after his death, and the conviction that God had exalted him to be both messiah and Lord. This Jesus—the canonical Jesus—is the Jesus we meet on the pages of the New Testament.

In this chapter I focus on the canonical Jesus. My purpose is to illustrate how to read the gospels in their present form as the primal narratives of the early Christian movement. I will introduce

each gospel and then comment more extensively on selected texts. I will emphasize reading the gospels as metaphorical narratives, incorporating a historical approach that adds to the metaphorical meanings of gospel texts in their late-first-century settings.

The Gospels as Thematic Constructions

As documents written in the last third of the first century in different Christian communities, the gospels are thematic constructions, each with its own distinctive themes, purpose, and emphasis. As I introduce each, I will not seek to be comprehensive; rather, I will simply highlight its thematic construction.

As I do so, I will integrate the inaugural scene of Jesus' public activity in each, to show how the author has constructed it to crystallize his vision of what Jesus was most centrally about. By "inaugural scene" I mean the first public words or public deed attributed to Jesus. In each case, the inaugural address or inaugural deed functions as a thematic introduction. Thus it is an aperture through which we are given an advance glimpse of the evangelist's perception of Jesus and his significance.

I begin with the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are known as "the synoptics" because they are similar enough to be seen together (as the root of the word "synoptic" suggests). The reason for their similarity: they have written sources in common. Matthew and Luke both used the gospel of Mark, incorporating most of Mark's material as well as his narrative structure of the public activity of Jesus: a period of teaching and healing in Galilee in the north of the country followed by a journey south to Jerusalem and death, all occurring within one year. Matthew and Luke also used an early collection of Jesus' teachings known as "Q." Their use of Mark and Q accounts for the family similarity of the synoptic gospels. The gospel of John, as we will see, is very different.

Mark

The gospel of Mark was written around 70 CE, the year that Jerusalem and the temple were reconquered and destroyed by

the Roman Empire as the Jewish war of revolt led to its virtually inevitable climax. That event casts its shadow on the gospel, either because it had recently happened or because it was soon to happen; in fact, Mark has aptly been referred to as "a wartime gospel."[15]

Apocalyptic Eschatology We see the impact of the war and its climax especially in the thirteenth chapter of Mark, called "the little apocalypse." (An apocalypse commonly deals with "the end," and the "big apocalypse" is, of course, the book of Revelation.) The chapter begins with a warning of the temple's destruction. As the disciples look at the temple, one exclaims, "Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" The Jesus of Mark then says to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."[16]

The disciples ask when this will happen and what the sign will be that the time is near. As the little apocalypse continues, the Jesus of Mark speaks of false messiahs, wars and rumors of war, nation rising against nation, persecution and betrayal, and finally says, "When you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be—let the reader understand—then those in Judea must flee to the mountains." The phrase "desolating sacrilege" echoes the book of Daniel, where that wording refers to a previous foreign empire taking over the temple and there offering sacrifice to a foreign god.[17] In Mark, the phrase refers to what has just happened (or is soon to happen) to the temple, an event that Mark says will be followed by suffering "such as has not been from the beginning of creation."

Then, in language that Mark almost certainly understood to refer to the second coming of Jesus, the Jesus of Mark speaks of "the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory":

> But in those days, after that suffering,
> the sun will be darkened,
> and the moon will not give its light,
> and the stars will be falling from heaven,
> and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

> Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out his angels to gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

When will all of this happen? Soon. A few verses later, the Jesus of Mark says, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."[18] Thus Mark viewed the events of 70—the suffering of the final stages of the war, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple—as signs that "the end" was at hand.

In short, Mark's gospel has an apocalyptic eschatology.[19] Apocalyptic eschatology appears earlier in his gospel as well, in a "kingdom of God" saying. In the middle of Mark, immediately after a passage about the Son of Man coming in glory with his angels, the Jesus of Mark speaks of the imminence of the kingdom: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God coming with power."[20] In other words, some of those still alive will see this.

Jesus' Inaugural Scene The imminence of the kingdom of God is the theme of Jesus' brief inaugural address in Mark:

> The time is fulfilled,
> and the kingdom of God is at hand.
> Repent and believe in the good news.

Though Jesus often spoke about the kingdom of God, this passage is Mark's thematic construction, announcing a major emphasis of his gospel. "The time is fulfilled"; the kingdom of which Jesus spoke is now "at hand."

Yet though the events of 70 account for Mark's emphasis on the imminence of the kingdom, they account for surprisingly little of his gospel's contents. The rest of Mark does not often use the phrase "the kingdom of God."[21] Instead, much of his gospel

is about another major theme: the way—that is, the "way" or "path" or "road" of following Jesus.[22]

In what is virtually the title of the gospel, Mark opens with a citation from Isaiah 40: "In the wilderness, prepare *the way* of the Lord."[23] The language takes us back to the exile: the gospel of Mark is about a way of return from exile. The way of return is the way of Jesus, as the pivotal central section of the gospel emphasizes. The story of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem is filled with teaching about the "way" of discipleship, which means "following" Jesus on his "way." That way leads to Jerusalem, the place of confrontation with the domination system, death, and resurrection. As Jesus journeys on his way, he solemnly speaks three times of his own impending death and resurrection and after each invites his disciples to follow him.[24] For Mark, the "way" of Jesus is the path of death and resurrection.

The emphasis on a way of return connects to the final element in Jesus' inaugural address in Mark: "Repent." Repentance here does not mean contrition for sin, as it often has in later Christian theology. Rather, its meaning is rooted in the exile story: to repent is to return from exile. To connect that concept back to kingdom of God language: to repent—to embark on the journey of return—is to enter the kingdom of God.[25]

Thus, for Mark, the canonical Jesus calls his followers to the way of the cross, the path of death and resurrection. The way of Jesus—the way of repentance and return from exile—involves dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being. Taken literally, it is the path of martyrdom, which may have been an issue when Mark was written.[26] Taken metaphorically, it refers to the internal process at the center of the way of Jesus and the life of discipleship.

Matthew

Matthew's gospel is written about ten to twenty years later than Mark's. Its content points to a late-first-century community of Christian Jews in conflict with other Jews. Of the synoptic gospels, Matthew is both the most Jewish and the most hostile to Judaism.

Hostility to Judaism Jews are referred to as if separate from Matthew's community. Synagogues are "their" synagogues, for example.[27] Matthew intensifies Jesus' criticism of scribes and Pharisees by turning it into invective. In a lengthy chapter of condemnation, the formula "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" is used six times, and scribes and Pharisees are called "blind guides, "blind fools," "serpents," and "brood of vipers."[28]

To Mark's version of the parable of the wicked tenants, Matthew adds a verse addressed to the leaders of the Jewish people: "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation [or people] producing the fruits of it."[29] He adds to Mark's account of the trial of Jesus the scene of Pilate washing his hands of the blood of Jesus and thus declares Pilate to be innocent of Jesus' death. Instead, he assigns responsibility for Jesus' condemnation to the Jewish crowd and their descendants: "All the people answered, 'His blood be on us and our children.'"[30] Ever since Christianity became the dominant religion of Western culture, the words have been a text of terror for Jewish people.

The intensity of the conflict with Judaism in Matthew reflects the situation of his community. After the Roman reconquest of the Jewish homeland, the survivors sought to consolidate and preserve Jewish identity in spite of the loss of the temple. Along with the Torah, the temple had been one of the two centers of Jewish practice and identity. Soon after the temple's destruction, the Jewish community began to ostracize Jews who followed Jesus as the messiah, claiming that they were no longer true Jews. One of Matthew's central concerns is to claim the opposite: that his community of Christian Jews is faithful to the traditions of Israel.

Continuity with Judaism Matthew does this by emphasizing continuity with Jewish tradition. He quotes the Hebrew Bible more than any other gospel-writer. Not counting allusions or echoes, he quotes forty times with an explicit phrase such as "It is written" and another twenty-one times without such a phrase.[31]

He traces Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. He reports that Jesus during his lifetime restricted his mission to Jews and ordered his disciples to do the same: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."[32]

In a saying found in Matthew alone, Jesus is said to affirm the enduring validity of the Law and the Prophets, the two divisions of the Hebrew Bible regarded as sacred by Jews by the first century:

> Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.[33]

In addition, Matthew uses a Moses typology to construct his gospel. Matthew uses ninety percent of Mark as he writes, and to Mark's narrative he adds the teachings of Jesus as collected in Q, as well as some material not found in either Mark or Q. But he does so in a distinctive way. Namely, he gathers the teaching of Jesus into five major blocks of material and concludes each with a similar formula: "When Jesus had finished saying these things. . . ."[34] The arrangement of Jesus' teaching into five blocks calls to mind the five books of the Pentateuch.

In presenting the story of Jesus' birth, Matthew echoes the story of Moses' birth. Just as the life of Moses was threatened by Pharaoh's command that all male Hebrew babies be killed, so Jesus' life as an infant is threatened by King Herod's command that all male infants in the area of Bethlehem are to be killed. Matthew's meaning is clear. Jesus is like Moses, Herod is like Pharaoh, and what is happening in and through Jesus is like a new exodus.

Jesus' Inaugural Scene The Moses typology is also reflected in Jesus' inaugural address. On a superficial level, Jesus' first public

words in Matthew are virtually the same as those in Mark. Matthew condenses and slightly changes Mark's advance summary of Jesus' message to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."[35]

But we encounter what is distinctive about Jesus' inaugural address in Matthew in the next scene: the famous "Sermon on the Mount." Three chapters long, it is the first of the five blocks of Jesus' teachings in Matthew. It begins with the beatitudes ("Blessed are the . . .") and concludes with a parable contrasting two ways: one way is the wisdom of building your house on rock; the other way is the folly of building your house on sand.[36] In between, the sermon describes the "way" of Matthew's community, sometimes contrasting it with "what was said to those of ancient times."[37] These three chapters contain some of the most striking and radical teachings of Jesus.

They are called "the Sermon on the Mount" because of Matthew's narrative introduction: "Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up *on the mountain* and taught them."[38] Matthew is responsible for locating this teaching on a mountain; some of it is also found in Luke, where it is spoken "on a level place" and commonly called "the Sermon on the Plain."[39] Why does Matthew set this teaching on a mountain? Doing so fits his Moses typology: just as Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, so Jesus now goes up on a mountain to deliver his teaching.

Thus Matthew constructs the inaugural scene of Jesus' public activity to disclose one of the central themes in his portrait of Jesus: Jesus is one like Moses.[40] Together with Matthew's frequent quotation of the Hebrew Bible and his structuring of Jesus' teaching into five blocks like the five books of Moses, the inaugural scene suggests that his gospel functioned like the Pentateuch for his community. It was their foundational document, combining their primal narrative (the story of Jesus) with teachings about the way of life that flowed out of taking Jesus seriously. This is the way Matthew and his community told and understood the story of Jesus.

Yet though the gospel of Matthew functioned for that com-

munity like the Pentateuch, it did not replace the Pentateuch. As mentioned earlier, according to Matthew 5.17–20, every letter and stroke of the Law and the Prophets remained valid. Matthew was not a supercessionist.[41] Rather, by presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy and as one like Moses, Matthew claimed the traditions of Israel for his community. He did not set out to prove that Jesus was the messiah; he and his community already believed that. Instead, in a late-first-century setting of conflict with other Jews, he claimed that the traditions of Israel belonged to his Christian Jewish community, not to "the scribes and Pharisees." In Matthew, we see an early stage of "the parting of the ways" that ultimately led to Judaism and Christianity as separate religions. But for Matthew and his community, it was still an intra-Jewish struggle.

Luke-Acts

Like Matthew, Luke was most likely written a decade or two after Mark and includes material from both Mark and Q. Unlike Matthew (and unlike any other gospel), the gospel of Luke is the first volume of a two-volume work, the second of which is the book of Acts. The two volumes together are an intricately integrated thematic construction.

Luke's gospel narrates Jesus' mission to the Jewish people in the Jewish homeland; Acts describes the spread of early Christianity into the Roman Empire beyond the Jewish homeland, beginning with Jews of the Diaspora and soon including a mission to Gentiles as well. The gospel begins and ends in Jerusalem; Acts begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome.[42] The movement of Luke's two volumes is thus from Jerusalem to Rome.

The Spirit: Promise and Fulfillment Central to Luke's thematic construction is repeated emphasis on the Spirit of God. Though Matthew and Mark also frequently speak of the Spirit, Luke does so even more often. The first two chapters of Luke not only narrate Jesus' conception by the Spirit, but also report that Elizabeth and Zechariah (the parents of John the Baptizer) are

filled with the Holy Spirit, as is the aged Simeon, who praises God after he sees the infant Jesus in the temple.[43]

Like Matthew and Mark, Luke reports that the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism and led him into the wilderness. Then Luke adds another reference to the Spirit as Jesus begins his public activity: "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee."[44] Near the end of the gospel, the final words of the dying Jesus are, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."[45] The gospel ends with the risen Jesus promising to send the Spirit upon his followers: "I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city [Jerusalem] until you have been clothed with power from on high."[46]

Acts opens with a twofold repetition of Jesus' promise of the Spirit.[47] And that promise is soon fulfilled. In Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (the Jewish "Festival of Weeks," held fifty days after Passover), the Spirit descends on the community:

> They were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.[48]

The gift of "other languages" enabled Jews from many nations and languages who were living in Jerusalem to understand the speakers.[49]

This text is full of rich symbolism. "Wind" and "fire" are classic images for the Spirit in the Hebrew Bible. The gift of universally intelligible language deliberately echoes the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, in which humanity was fragmented into language groups. The coming of the Spirit is the reversal of Babel, the beginning of the reunion of the human community. Then Peter speaks and interprets the descent of the Spirit as the

fulfillment of God's promise for "the last days": "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh."[50]

In the rest of Acts, the Spirit is so central that it is virtually the book's main character. Not only does the Spirit give birth to the community at Pentecost, but the Spirit directs significant advances in the community's mission: Philip's conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch, Paul's conversion, Peter's conversion of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, Paul and Barnabas's commissioning for their first missionary journey, the directive to Paul to take the gospel to Europe, and more.[51]

The Spirit also guides the decision of the Jerusalem council about whether to impose conditions on Gentiles who are joining the movement. In words that have been the envy of church committees ever since, the council concludes, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. . . ."[52] In addition, Luke frequently writes about the community and individuals as filled with the Spirit.[53] Thus in Acts, the same Spirit that conceived, empowered, and guided Jesus now does the same within the Christian community as it spreads from Jerusalem (the center of the Jewish world) to Rome (the center of the Gentile world).

Jesus' Inaugural Scene The centrality of the Spirit and a foreshadowing of the Gentile mission are crystallized in the inaugural scene of Jesus' public activity in Luke. Luke replaces Mark's inaugural text ("The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent . . .") with the story of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown.[54] The scene begins with Jesus reading a passage from the book of Isaiah, the first words of Jesus' public activity in Luke:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,
> and has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
> and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.[55]

This is a remarkably apt summary portrait of Luke's Jesus: in the rest of the gospel, he is a Spirit-anointed social prophet whose activity is directed especially to the poor and oppressed.

As the inaugural scene continues, Jesus speaks about two prophets from the Hebrew Bible who were sent to Gentiles: Elijah to a widow at Zarepath in Sidon, and Elisha to a Syrian leper named Naaman. The crowd in the synagogue who a few verses earlier had heard him gladly now turns on him and the people seek to kill him by hurling him off a cliff. But Jesus "passed through their midst and went on his way."

This is not history, of course. We are not to think that Jesus' mission began with his neighbors in Nazareth trying to kill him—an attempt that anticipates his eventual execution. Rather, like the inaugural addresses in Matthew and Mark, the whole scene is a thematic construction created by Luke.[56] It announces in advance the theme of Luke-Acts as a whole: the mission of Jesus to Israel in the gospel and the extension of that mission to Gentiles by the early Christian movement in Acts. All of this is the work of the Spirit: the same Spirit that anoints Jesus at the beginning of his mission goes on to anoint the Christian community at Pentecost at the beginning of its mission. For Luke, the Spirit active in Jesus continues in the mission of the community. By implication, then, the community is to continue Jesus' activity in the world.

John

The awareness that John (also called "the Fourth Gospel") is very different from the synoptic gospels is a foundation of modern study of the gospels. But the awareness itself is not modern. Clement of Alexandria, an early Christian theologian writing around the year 200, distinguished John from the other gospels and called it "the spiritual gospel."

John as Distinct from the Synoptics The differences between John and the other gospels include the following:

- *Chronology.* In the synoptics, Jesus' public activity fits into a year; in John, three to four years. In the synoptics, overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple occurs in the last week of Jesus' life and is the cause of his arrest; in John, the event occurs at the beginning of Jesus' public activity.[57]
- *Geography.* In the synoptics, most of Jesus' public activity occurs in Galilee; in John, Jesus is more often in Judea and Jerusalem.
- *Jesus' message.* In the synoptics, Jesus' message is about the kingdom of God, not about himself; in John, much of it is about himself. Declarations such as "I and the Father are one" and "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" are found in John, as are the familiar "I am" sayings: I am the light of the world, the bread of life, the resurrection and the life, the way and the truth and life, and so forth.
- *Style of Jesus' teaching.* In the synoptics, Jesus teaches in parables and short memorable sayings; in John, long and remarkably dense theological discourses. John is very "wordy," as my students say.

Yet alongside the dense wordiness of the discourses is the richest symbolic language about Jesus in the New Testament: Jesus as the Word made flesh, as the light of the world, as the Lamb of God, as the bread of life, as the true vine, as the door, as the good shepherd. John also uses a set of dualistic symbols to present the significance of Jesus and his work: darkness/light, below/above, flesh/spirit, death/life, falsehood/truth, earth/heaven. He also sometimes uses the term "the world" to refer not simply to the created order, but to a negative way of being, just as he often uses the phrase "the Jews" as a negative symbol (about which I will say more later in this chapter).[58]

Though both the synoptics and John are a mixture of history and symbol, in John metaphorical narrative dominates history remembered and historical memory. Of course Jesus of Nazareth as a historical figure lies behind John, but he is further removed than in the synoptics. Put positively, John is the most symbolic of the gospels.

Jesus' Inaugural Scene Thus it is not surprising that the inaugural scene of Jesus' public activity in John is a richly symbolic narrative. Rather than an inaugural address as in the synoptics, it is an inaugural deed: Jesus changes water into wine at a wedding banquet.[59] The story is well known: Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are at a wedding in Cana, a village in Galilee; the wine runs out; Jesus changes a large amount of water into very good wine. Indeed, the steward, thinking that the groom has provided the wine, says to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first. . . . But you have kept the best wine until now." This, John says, was "the first of Jesus' signs" and "revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him."

The text reports a miracle, of course: the transformation of a large quantity of water (120 to 180 gallons) into wine. But if we focus on the event's "happenedness," we easily become distracted and miss the point. We then wonder if such a thing could really happen; and if we think it could and did, we then marvel about what Jesus did on a particular day in the past. But the meaning of this story does not depend upon its "happenedness." Instead, it is a "sign," as John puts it. Signs point beyond themselves; to use a play on words, they *sign*-ify something, and what they signify is their significance.

So what is the meaning of this story as a "sign"? What is its significance? A number of its details have caught the attention of scholars: the odd exchange between Jesus and his mother; the detail that the water was "for the Jewish rites of purification"; the anticipation of Jesus' death.[60] Though these details matter, they should not divert attention from the primary symbolic feature of the text: a wedding banquet.

Wedding banquets were the most festive occasions in the

world of first-century Palestine, especially in the peasant class (and Cana was a peasant village). Wedding banquets commonly lasted seven days. They featured dancing, wine, and vast quantities of food. The normal peasant diet was meager: grains, vegetables, fruit, olives, eggs, and an occasional fish. Meat and poultry were infrequently eaten, since people were reluctant to kill the few animals they had. But at a wedding banquet, there were copious amounts of food of all kinds.

Given the above, what is this text—which John places as the inaugural scene of Jesus' public activity—saying? What is Jesus about? What is the gospel—the good news—of Jesus about? John's answer: it is about a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out and the best is saved for last.

To this metaphorical meaning of a wedding banquet can be added historical associations of banquet and wedding imagery in Jewish and early Christian traditions. In Judaism, a banquet was a frequent symbol for the messianic age. Marriage was also used as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel.[61]* In the New Testament, Jesus is sometimes spoken of as the bridegroom and the community of his followers as the bride.[62] The book of Revelation refers to "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Jesus) and ends with a vision of the New Jerusalem descending from the sky "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."[63] A wedding could thus symbolize the intimacy of the divine-human relationship and the marriage between heaven and earth. It is a common mystical symbol, and John is the most mystical gospel.[64]

Did John intend to build all of these meanings into his inaugural scene? There is no way of knowing. But it is the nature of metaphorical language to convey more meanings than the author intended. In any case, it is clear what John is *saying:* the story of Jesus is about a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out.

Selected Texts: Metaphorical Narratives

We move now from seeing the gospels as thematic constructions to reading individual texts as metaphorical narratives. As we do

so, we will attend to two levels or kinds of metaphor: *intrinsic metaphor* and *historical metaphor*.[65]

Intrinsic metaphor is shorthand for the metaphorical meanings intrinsic to the story itself—the meanings that occur to a reader sensitive to the language of metaphor prior to taking into account (or even knowing) the specific historical associations of the language. *Historical metaphor* is shorthand for the additional metaphorical meanings that flow out of the specific historical associations of the language.

I illustrate the distinction by returning briefly to the story of the wedding at Cana. The intrinsic metaphorical meaning of that story is that Jesus is about a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out. The historical metaphorical meanings are those additional meanings that flow out of knowing about the specific associations of banquet and marriage/wedding imagery in Judaism and early Christianity.

The texts I have selected for this section of the chapter are all, in my judgment, purely metaphorical narratives. I do not think a particular historical event in the life of Jesus lies behind any of them, even though I think all of them speak powerfully and truthfully about the significance of Jesus and his vision.

Using different language to make the same point, John Dominic Crossan calls stories like these "parables." Jesus, he says, told parables about God. The early Christian movement likewise told parables about Jesus.[66] He suggests that we ask the following question about the stories in the gospels: "Whether you read the story as history or parable, what is its meaning—for then, for now, for always?"[67]

Walking on Water

The story of Jesus walking on the water is one of only two miracle stories found in both John and the synoptics.[68] With small variations, the details are remarkably similar in Mark and John. It is night, and the disciples are rowing across the Sea of Galilee in a small boat by themselves. There is a strong wind, the sea is rough, and they make little headway. Then they see Jesus walk-

ing on the sea. Initially, they are terrified. But he says to them, "It is I—do not be afraid." Then they are safe.

Intrinsic Metaphorical Meanings What metaphorical meanings are intrinsic to the story and not dependent on either the "happenedness" of the story or the specific historical associations of the imagery? As with any good metaphorical story, the meanings of this one cannot be reduced to a single understanding. I provide a short list of possible meanings—a list whose purpose is not to be comprehensive but to illustrate metaphorical thinking. There is nothing special about my list; generating it required no scholarly expertise. You are invited to reflect on the story to see what other intrinsic meanings occur to you.

- Without Jesus, you don't get anywhere.
- Without Jesus, you're at sea and in the dark.
- Following Jesus may put you in difficult situations.
- Jesus takes away fear.
- Jesus comes to you in distress.
- Jesus stills storms.

I think I see some sermon possibilities here.

As Matthew narrates this story, he adds an episode: Peter walks on the water as well. After Jesus says, "It is I, have no fear," Matthew tells us:

> Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?"[69]

I strongly doubt that Matthew's point is literal: if you have enough faith in Jesus, you can literally walk on water. Rather, his

point is metaphorical, and the intrinsic metaphorical meanings might include the following:

- Without faith in Jesus, fear takes over.
- Without faith in Jesus, you sink.
- With faith in Jesus, you can walk on water (metaphorically).
- When you're sinking, call out, "Lord, save me!"—and he will.

Historical Metaphorical Meanings Additional meanings can be added to the above if we factor in the specific historical associations of sea imagery in the Hebrew Bible. Those associations were ominous. The sea was a mysterious and threatening force opposed to God. Thus, when the ancient Hebrews wanted to stress God's power and authority, they spoke of God's mastery over the sea. The authors of the book of Psalms exclaimed, "You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them," and "The sea is God's, for God made it."[70] In the book of Job, the voice from the whirlwind declares that it was God who "shut in the sea with doors" and said to it, "Thus far you shall come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped."[71]

Indeed, the plight of the disciples echoes a psalm that may have been the model for the gospel story:

> The stormy wind lifted up the waves of the sea.
> They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths.
> The courage of those in the boat melted away in their calamity;
> they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
> and were at their wits' end.
> Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
> and God brought them out of their distress;
> God made the storm be still,
> and the waves of the sea were hushed.
> Then they were glad because they had quiet,
> And God brought them to their desired haven.[72]

So what more do we see and hear in the gospel story by being aware of the historical associations of the imagery? The primary additional meaning is christological. The story's portrait of Jesus walking on the water and calming the waves makes the claim that Jesus participates in the power and authority of God: that which was said about God in the Hebrew Bible is now said about Jesus.

Finally, the disciples of Jesus were sometimes a symbol for the Christian community, and a boat was an early Christian symbol for the church. This suggests that the story is also about the relationship between Jesus and the church.

The story thus witnesses to what the post-Easter Jesus had become in the life of early Christian communities: one with God. The canonical Jesus is one who stills storms, takes away our fear, rescues us—and does so because he participates in the power of God.

Feeding the Multitude

The second miracle story found in both the synoptics and John is the feeding of five thousand people with five loaves and two fish.[73] In both, the story is remarkably similar, and its basic outline is familiar. Jesus, the disciples, and a crowd are in the countryside (the synoptics call it "a lonely place"), and the crowd has nothing to eat. The disciples cannot imagine that feeding them—as Jesus wants to do—is possible and ask, "Shall we go and buy 200 denarii worth of bread?"[74] Instead, five loaves and two fish are found. According to Mark, Jesus then took the food, "looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people." According to John, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks," he distributed them to the crowd himself. All ate and were satisfied. Afterward, twelve baskets of food were left over.[75]

Here the similarities between John and the synoptics end. Unlike the synoptics, John uses the story as a springboard for a long discourse by Jesus.[76] Its subject matter is one of the "I am" statements attributed by John to Jesus: "I am the bread of life." Because John's interpretation of the feeding story is significantly

different from that of the synoptics, I will treat the two interpretations separately.

The Synoptic Story: Intrinsic Metaphorical Meanings Again I invite you to reflect on the metaphorical meanings intrinsic to the story. As I did so myself, the following occurred to me:

- Without Jesus, you go hungry.
- With Jesus, there is more than enough.
- Feeding the multitude matters to Jesus.
- Jesus commands his followers to feed the multitude.
- Jesus' followers resist feeding the multitude: How is it possible, they ask?[77]

Though the narrative is metaphorical, real food for real people mattered to Jesus.

The Synoptic Story: Historical Metaphorical Meanings The historical metaphorical associations with the Hebrew Bible are especially rich in this story. The principal association is with Israel's primal narrative, the exodus story. Just as God fed the Israelites with manna from heaven as they journeyed through the wilderness, so now Jesus provides bread in the wilderness. The exodus story is happening again. Just as Second Isaiah viewed what was happening in his time as a new exodus, so now the gospels view what is happening in Jesus as a new exodus.[78] And though the feeding part of the exodus story is emphasized, the fuller story is also called to mind: Jesus is like Moses, the leader of Israel who liberated his people from bondage and deprivation in imperial Egypt and brought them to the promised land.

John's Story: Intrinsic Metaphorical Meanings In the long discourse and dialogue following the story of the feeding, the Jesus of John says, "I am the bread of life" and "the bread of God" that "comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."[79] Jesus himself is that bread; people are to eat him. The language in John becomes even more graphic:

> Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life. . . . For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.[80]

Obviously, John's story uses the language of metaphor. If taken literally, this passage would smack of cannibalism. So what are the intrinsic metaphorical meanings of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood?

The imagery of eating and drinking connects to a central religious metaphor for our deepest human yearning: hunger, and the closely related metaphor thirst. There are those who hunger and thirst for God, for justice, for meaning, for life. For John, Jesus is the answer to that hunger: Jesus himself is the bread of life who satisfies our hunger. Eat this bread and you will never be hungry: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never be hungry." The next line of the verse invokes the thirst metaphor: "And whoever believes in me will never thirst."[81]

The metaphors remind us of the Christian eucharist, of course. But one should not reduce their meaning to the bread and wine of the central Christian sacrament. Although John's language adds resonances of meaning to the eucharist, to see this language as conveying simply "Eat the bread and drink the wine of the eucharist" flattens the varied metaphors into a single prosaic meaning.

The metaphors also connect to the wisdom literature of Israel, especially to the banquet of Wisdom/Sophia in Proverbs: "Come, eat of the bread and drink of the wine I have mixed!"[82] For John, Jesus is the incarnation not only of the Word of God but also of the Wisdom of God. To take Jesus in, to digest Jesus, is to partake in Jesus as the Wisdom of God.

John's Story: Historical Metaphorical Meanings The metaphors also connect to the mysticism of John's gospel. Eating and drinking Jesus is the way of becoming one with Jesus: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."[83] By taking in and digesting the flesh and blood of Jesus, we live in Jesus and Jesus lives in us: we become one with Jesus.

Abiding or dwelling in Jesus is also the theme of another mystical metaphor in John: Jesus as the true vine and his followers as branches. The branches are joined to the vine and depend on the vine for their life. They are to bear fruit; and the fruit, John tells us, is love: just as Jesus abides in God's love, so Jesus' followers are to abide in his love. Thus the consequence of having Jesus within and being in Jesus is to "Love one another as I have loved you."[84] And part of loving one another is feeding the multitude.

The implicit connection between the feeding of the five thousand and the exodus story is made explicit in John. In his discourse, John explicitly refers to Israel's ancestors being fed with manna in the wilderness. But John's point is not simply *similarity* to the exodus; he also emphasizes contrast. While Jesus "gives life to the world" as "the bread of life," the manna of the exodus did not give life: "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died." What Moses gave them was not the true bread from heaven.[85] But Jesus is "the true bread" and "the living bread," and "whoever eats of this bread will live forever."[86]

Thus in John the point is not really that Jesus now feeds people in the wilderness as God did in the exodus story. The point, rather, is that Jesus provides that which was not provided in the time of the exodus: living bread.

Sight to the Blind

I have already commented briefly about two synoptic "sight to the blind" stories as metaphorical narratives that also reflect history remembered.[87] Here I will focus on a story in John's gospel that deals with Jesus giving sight to a man blind from birth. I leave unaddressed the question of whether this particular healing happened. For a metaphorical reading, the question does not matter.

John devotes the whole of his ninth chapter to the story and its aftermath. The first part of the chapter narrates the healing itself. Jesus gives sight to the man "born blind" by making a paste of clay and spittle and spreading it on his eyes. The second part

concerns the interrogation of the once-blind man and his parents by "the Pharisees" and "the Jews." The response of the man's parents to the interrogation is cautious and careful, because, we are told, "they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue." Then the formerly blind man is interrogated again, and when he unambiguously affirms that Jesus is from God, he is driven out of the synagogue.[88]

Intrinsic Metaphorical Meanings The intrinsic metaphors in this story are "light" and "seeing." As John often does, he makes the intrinsic metaphors explicit. He does so in words attributed to Jesus and the blind man:

> *Jesus:* "I am the light of the world."
> *The blind man:* "Once I was blind, but now I see. . . . Jesus opened my eyes."[89]

The metaphors connect to a major theme of John's story of Jesus: Jesus is the light who brings enlightenment. One chapter before this blind-man-healed story, some of the same language is used: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."[90]

This theme is prominently announced in the elegant prologue to John's gospel. The Word (and Wisdom) of God that became incarnate in Jesus is the life and light of all people:[91]

> The light shines in the darkness,
> and the darkness did not overcome it. . . .
> The true light which enlightens everyone
> was coming into the world.[92]

Darkness and light, blindness and seeing, light and enlightenment—these are archetypal religious metaphors common to many traditions. Though the imagery is used in the Hebrew Bible, the archetypal associations are more important for our

purposes than the specifically historical associations.[93] "Being in the dark" and "blindness" are frequent cross-cultural images for the human condition, just as "light," "seeing," and "enlightenment" are images for the deliverance from that state of affairs.

Enlightenment as an archetypal religious metaphor belongs to a mystical way of being religious. Outside of the Jewish and Christian traditions, the best-known enlightenment experience is the Buddha's mystical experience. Such an experience leads to seeing everything differently. It is not simply an intellectual or mental "seeing," as when we say, "Oh, I see what you mean." Rather, enlightenment as a religious experience involves communion or union with what is, an immediate "knowing" of the sacred that transforms one's way of seeing.

So it is in John: enlightenment is a central metaphor for salvation. To have one's eyes opened, to be enlightened, is to move from the negative pole of John's contrasting symbols to the positive pole. To move from darkness to light is also to move from death to life, from falsehood to truth, from life in the flesh to life in the Spirit, from life "below" to life "from above."[94]

To be enlightened is to be born "from above" and "of the Spirit"—in other words, to be "born again." Thus the "born again" experience in John is an enlightenment experience.[95]

The language of enlightenment connects to John's emphasis upon knowing God. For John, such knowing is the primary meaning of "eternal life"—not a future state beyond death but an experience in the present. To know God is eternal life: "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God." Of course, for John, the true God is known in Jesus, and so the second half of the verse continues with "and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."[96] For John, the Christian enlightenment experience is knowing God in Jesus.

Historical Metaphorical Meanings In the judgment of most scholars, the interrogation in the second part of John 9, with its language of being "put out of the synagogue," points to the historical context in which the gospel was written: late in the first

century.[97] A synagogue, of course, was a local Jewish assembly of teaching and worship. In that world, being "put out" (expelled) from the synagogue was far more serious than being expelled from a Christian congregation or denomination is in our world. Whereas we can simply find and join another church, those who were expelled from the synagogue were no longer considered Jews (or at least not *acceptable* Jews). In a traditional society where most people lived their entire life in the same village or town, this was a powerful social sanction. Those who were expelled faced social ostracism: among other things, expulsion disrupted relationships within families and with neighbors and made marriage to "proper" Jews difficult or impossible.

Followers of Jesus were not threatened with expulsion from the synagogue during his lifetime. At the earliest, this happened a decade or two after the destruction of the temple in 70. John 9 thus not only suggests an approximate date for the gospel but also points to the historical situation with which John and his community were dealing: bitter conflict between Jews and Christian Jews. As it did in the gospel of Matthew, this conflict shapes John's story of Jesus. In particular, it accounts for John's use of "the Jews" as a negative symbol of disbelief. And worse: though "the Jews" claim to have Abraham and God for their father, they are neither Abraham's children nor God's children. Rather—and somewhat shockingly—the Jesus of John says, "You are from your father the devil."[98] The conflict situation helps us to understand this language, even as we must also regret and reject it.

Jesus as "the Way"

Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me."[99]

The last text we shall explore is also from John. It is troubling to many mainline Christians in our time because of how it has commonly been heard and read through the Christian centuries: it has been the classic "proof text" for Christian exclusivism—the notion that salvation is possible only through Jesus, and thus only through Christianity.

Intrinsic Metaphorical Meanings Although this text, like the others we have looked at, has specific historical relevance, it also has universal meanings. We gain access to those meanings by paying attention to the metaphor at the heart of the text: Jesus is "the way." A way is a path or a road or a journey, not a set of beliefs.[100]

So Jesus is "the way." But what does this metaphor, applied to a person, mean? More specifically, what is Jesus' "way" in John's gospel (or what is "the way" which Jesus is)? The answer is found in the movement or dynamic of the gospel as a whole as well as in a single verse:

- *In the gospel as a whole:* From the inaugural scene onward, Jesus' way leads to his death—which is also, for John, his glorification.[101] The way to life in the presence of God is through death.
- *In a single verse:* The Jesus of John says, "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."[102]

In short, for John the way or path of Jesus is the path of death and resurrection understood as a metaphor for the religious life. That way—the path of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being—is the only way to God.

The same point is made in a story I once heard about a sermon preached by a Hindu professor in a Christian seminary several decades ago. The text for the day included the "one way" passage, and about it he said, "This verse is absolutely true—Jesus is the only way." But he went on to say, "And that way—of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being—is known in all of the religions of the world." The way of Jesus is a universal way, known to millions who have never heard of Jesus.

The way of Jesus is thus not a set of beliefs about Jesus. That we ever thought it was is strange, when one thinks about it—as if

one entered new life by believing certain things to be true, or as if the only people who can be saved are those who know the word "Jesus." Thinking that way virtually amounts to salvation by syllables. Rather, the way of Jesus is the way of death and resurrection—the path of transition and transformation from an old way of being to a new way of being.

Finally, the language of incarnation, so central to John, is crucial for understanding the threefold affirmation of this verse: Jesus is not only "the way," but also "the truth, and the life." Incarnation means embodiment. Jesus is the way—Jesus is what the way embodied in a person looks like. Jesus is the truth—Jesus is what the truth embodied in a person looks like. Jesus is the life—Jesus is what life (*real* life) embodied in a person looks like. Taking Jesus seriously is not about a set of beliefs but about a person in whom we see embodied the way, the truth, and the life.

Historical Metaphorical Meanings As in John's gospel generally, though "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" is attributed to Jesus, it does not go back to Jesus himself. Rather, it is the product of a later stage in the developing tradition and was perhaps created by the author of John himself.

One key to reading this text is to set it in the historical context of John's gospel: a situation of bitter conflict in which John's community of Christian Jews was experiencing sharp social ostracism from non-Christian Jews. As a result, some of John's community may have been tempted to return to their community of origin.

In that setting, John wrote these words. He was thinking not of all the religions of the world, but of the synagogue across the street. He was saying, in effect, Stay within the community of Jesus. Don't go back to the way you left behind. Jesus is the way; that way isn't.

Even as we understand the text this way, it is important not to turn it into a rejection of Judaism, as if other religions might be all right, but not Judaism. In short, reading the verse in historical context relativizes it. It is not an absolute pronouncement

about all other religions or about all other forms of Judaism for all time; rather, it is a pastoral exhortation in a particular historical setting.

Conclusion

The gospel portraits of the canonical Jesus make extraordinary claims about him. He is one with God and shares in the power and authority of God. He is the revelation of God. He is also the revelation of "the way," not only in John but also in the synoptics. He is the bread of life who satisfies the deepest hunger of human beings and the light shining in the darkness who brings enlightenment. He lifts us out of death into life. He is the Word and Wisdom of God embodied in a human life. He is the disclosure of what a life full of God—a life filled with the Spirit—looks like.

This is who Jesus is for us as Christians. Some modern Christians have been uncomfortable with these claims because they seem to partake of Christian triumphalism. But for Christians, these claims should not be watered down. For us as Christians, Jesus is not less than this—he is *all* of this. And we can say "This is who Jesus is for us" without also saying "And God is known only in Jesus."

The gospels—as particular documents, as a collection of documents, and as individual stories within them—are Christianity's primal narratives. To say this means that these are the most important stories we know, and we know them to be decisively true.

NOTES

1. The word "Christian" does occur, but only three times: I Pet. 4.16 and Acts 11.26 and 26.28. Formed from the Greek or Latin word for "messiah," in this early usage it meant a follower of Jesus as the Jewish messiah. Thus it did not yet mean a member of a new religion. See Michael J. Wilkins, "Christian," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 925–26.
2. The phrase "the parting of the ways" echoes the title of a fine book by James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Ju-*

daism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).

3. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), chap. 3.
4. Alan Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).
5. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity,* p. 57.
6. Typically dated to the early second century are I and II Timothy, Titus, and II Peter, with the last commonly seen as the latest book of the New Testament.
7. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity,* chap. 1.
8. The two shortest documents are Philemon and Jude.
9. See the illuminating comments of Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: Knox, 1989), p. 6.
10. Excellent accessible introductions to the gospels include Mark Allan Powell, *Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), and W. Barnes Tatum, *In Search of Jesus,* rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).
11. We are virtually certain that none was written by any of the twelve disciples or other eyewitnesses. There is a strong scholarly consensus that Matthew and John were not written by disciples named Matthew and John. With Mark and Luke, a reasonable (though not decisive) case can be made that they were written by people named Mark and Luke, in part because there was no particularly good reason for second-century Christians to name the gospels after these men if they were not the authors. Neither Mark nor Luke was among the twelve disciples, nor was either an eyewitness to the public activity of Jesus.
12. Moreover, most mainline scholars see the birth stories and the story of Jesus at age twelve as metaphorical narratives. Historically speaking, they are thus legendary, even though as metaphorical narratives they make significant affirmations about Jesus.
13. Thus I reject the either-or choice that has marked a fair amount of Jesus and gospel scholarship: that only the historical Jesus matters or only the canonical Jesus matters. *Both* matter. For a vigorous presentation of the case for the primacy of the canonical Jesus, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995). For my summary of the two positions in the history of scholarship, see *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), chap. 9.
14. My understanding of the historical Jesus is described most fully in the following books: *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998; first published in 1984); and, all published by HarperSanFrancisco: *Jesus: A New Vision* (1987), *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (1994), and, with N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (1998). The last one in particular also treats post-Easter perceptions of Jesus within the early Christian movement.
15. Dating Mark to the late 60s or early 70s is widely accepted. I owe the phrase "wartime gospel" to Daryl Schmidt, *The Gospel of Mark* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1990).

16. Mark 13.1–2. A historical comment: I think it is likely that the historical Jesus did address threats to Jerusalem and the temple as the center of the native domination system, just as many of the classical prophets of the Hebrew Bible warned of the destruction of the kingdoms that they addressed. Thus my position is not that Mark has created these warnings but that Mark has composed his thirteenth chapter with the events of the Jewish war in mind. In short, Mark may be using historical material here, even as he applies it to his own time.
17. Mark 13.4 and following. Quoted passage is 13.14, echoing Dan. 9.27, 11.31, and 12.11. In Daniel, the foreign empire is the Hellenistic Empire of Antiochus Epiphanes IV; his desecration of the temple around 165 BCE sparked the Maccabean revolt. Some scholars, including the well-known German scholar Gerd Theissen, have argued that elements of Mark 13 may have originated in connection with the crisis of 40 CE, when the Roman emperor Caligula planned to have a statue of himself erected in the temple in Jerusalem. See Theissen, *The Gospels in Context,* trans. Linda Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 125–65. I regard this as possible (maybe even plausible), even as I also think it is clear that Mark is applying this language to the events of 70.
18. The first and longer quoted passage is Mark 13.24–27; the quoted phrase within it is taken from Dan. 7.13–14. The second quoted passage is Mark 13.30.
19. When speaking about "apocalyptic" and "eschatology," terminological problems abound. Here I use "eschatology" as a fairly broad umbrella term to refer to "the end of things"; adding the adjective "apocalyptic" refers to an eschatology that sees "the end" as imminent, dramatic, and brought about by divine intervention.
20. Mark 9.1, immediately following the Son of Man saying in 8.38. Mark 9.1 occupies a strategic place in the gospel, either as the end of the first half or as the beginning of the second half. Note that it is followed immediately by the story of Jesus' transfiguration, in which the same voice that declared Jesus to be God's beloved Son at the beginning of the gospel in the story of Jesus' baptism (Mark 1.11) is heard again: "This is my Son, the Beloved" (Mark 9.7, in the context of 9.2–8). Just as the first half of Mark begins with a declaration of Jesus' identity at his baptism, so the second half begins with a declaration of his identity at his transfiguration.
21. In addition to Mark 1.15 and 9.1, only eleven more times in words attributed to Jesus in Mark: 4.10–12 (the "mystery" of the kingdom); 4.26–29, 30–32 (two brief parables of the Kingdom); six sayings in Mark 9 and 10 (9.47; 10.14, 15, 23, 24, 25); 12.34; and 14.25. Comparisons: Matthew has thirty-six "kingdom of God" sayings attributed to Jesus, and Luke has thirty-two.
22. Behind all three English words is the Greek word *hodos,* used frequently by Mark.
23. Mark 1.3.
24. The central section of Mark is 8.27–10.45 (or 8.22–10.52, if the two stories of blind men regaining their sight—stories that frame the section—are included). John Donahue, in *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco:

Harper & Row, 1988), p. 984, highlights the section's centrality by comparing the construction of Mark's gospel to the design of a Roman triumphal arch: the side panels point to what is most central, the panel in the middle of the arch. Mark's central section is the middle panel. The three predictions of Jesus' death and resurrection are Mark 8.31, 9.31, and 10.33–34.

25. All of Mark's sayings about entering or being in the kingdom of God are found in his central section: 9.47; 10.14, 15, 23, 24, 25.
26. Shortly before Mark was written, the first persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire occurred. Instigated by the emperor Nero in 64, it happened in Rome itself, and apparently not elsewhere. Though we do not have any specific evidence of persecution and martyrdom of Christians in connection with the Jewish war of revolt against Rome, it is plausible to think that it happened.
27. Matt. 4.23, 9.35. In 7.29, Matthew refers to "their" scribes. See also Matt. 6.2 and 6.5, where those in synagogues are called "hypocrites."
28. Matt. 23. The formula occurs in vv. 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29. "Blind guides," "blind fools," "blind men," and "blind Pharisee": vv. 16, 17, 19, 24, 26. "Serpents" and "brood of vipers": v. 33. "Child of hell": v. 15. Luke 11.37–52 contains some of the same material, and thus Matt. 23 is based on Q; but in Luke (and Q), the criticisms are specific indictments and not broadside invective.
29. Matt. 21.43.
30. Matt. 27.24–25. These verses are a Matthean editorial addition to Mark's account of the trial. So also is Pilate's wife's dream in 27.19, which declares Jesus to be a righteous man.
31. See the excellent excursus on Matthew as interpreter of scripture in Eugene Boring's commentary on Matthew in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), vol. 8, pp. 151–54.
32. Matt. 10.5; see also 15.24. Matthew is not against a mission to the Gentiles, but he attributes the command for such a mission to a post-Easter setting: Matt. 28.18–20.
33. Matt. 5.17–18.
34. The five blocks of teaching material are Matt. 5.1–7.27, 10.5–42, 13.1–52, 18.1–35, and 24.3–25.46. The formula is found in 7.28, 11.1, 13.53, 19.1, and 26.1.
35. Matt. 4.17. Matthew's use of "kingdom of *heaven*" instead of "kingdom of *God*" here and elsewhere in his gospel requires a brief comment. Whereas Mark and Luke consistently use the phrase "kingdom of God," Matthew substitutes "heaven" for "God." But Matthew does not mean a kingdom in another world after death, or heaven as afterlife. Rather, the substitution is another reflection of his continuity with Jewish tradition: out of reverence for God, he seeks to avoid using the name "God" and so substitutes "heaven" as an alternative (incidentally, he uses the plural: kingdom *of the heavens*). Matthew's piety has unfortunately led centuries of Christians to think that the center of Jesus' message was the kingdom of heaven understood as afterlife. But Jesus' focus was on the kingdom of God, which is not at all the same as heaven.

36. Matthew's nine beatitudes are in 5.3–12; Luke has four in Luke 6.20–23. The parable of the wise and foolish builders at the end of the Sermon on the Mount is in Matt. 7.24–27.
37. The contrasts are called "the antitheses" of the Sermon on the Mount, and are in 5.21–48.
38. Matt. 5.1–2. The Sermon on the Mount as a whole is in Matt. 5–7.
39. Luke 6.17. The Sermon on the Plain is in Luke 6.20–47.
40. For Matthew, Jesus is more than this. He is also, for example, the messiah and Son of God. My concern here is not to present Matthew's christology as a whole, but simply to illustrate how Matthew's Moses typology is reflected in Jesus' inaugural address.
41. A *supercessionist* is one who thinks that Israel and the Jewish people *were* the people of God until the time of Jesus but no longer are, and that Christians are now the people of God (in other words, that Christians have superseded Jews as God's "chosen"). Much of conventional Christian belief throughout the centuries has been supercessionist, consciously or unconsciously, though most often without using that label. In our time, supercessionism has been explicitly rejected by the Catholic Church and by many mainline Christians, including most mainline Christian theologians.
42. A "roadmap" of the spread of early Christianity in Acts is programmatically stated in Acts 1.8: the risen Christ just before his ascension says to his followers, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
43. Luke 1.35, 41, 67; 2.25–27.
44. Luke 4.14. References to the Spirit descending at Jesus' baptism and leading him into the wilderness (both paralleled in Mark and Matthew) are found in 3.22 and 4.1.
45. Luke 23.46. It is unclear whether we should understand the words to mean that the Spirit that had guided and empowered Jesus during his life now returns to God, or whether the statement is simply a confession of trust in God as Jesus dies. Both meanings are possible.
46. Luke 24.49. Luke goes on to end his gospel with the story of Jesus' ascension, which he speaks of as having occurred the night after Easter. Then Luke begins Acts with another story of Jesus' ascension—this one some forty days later. The two ascension stories are a bit of a puzzle, especially since they are set forty days apart. Perhaps the contradiction suggests that Luke does not see the ascension story as reporting a literally factual event.
47. Acts 1.5, 8. The Spirit is also mentioned in v. 3.
48. Acts 2.1–4.
49. Thus this is quite different from "speaking in tongues" *(glossolalia)* as reported in the churches of Paul, where what is heard is unintelligible language. In Acts, the gift is universally intelligible language.
50. The story of the first Christian Pentecost continues through Acts 2.41. Quoted words are from 2.17, an approximate citation of Joel 2.28.
51. Acts 8.29, 9.17, 10.19, 13.2, 16.6–7.
52. Acts 15.28.
53. Examples in addition to those already cited: Acts 2.38, 4.8, 4.31, 6.3, 7.55, 8.15–17, 9.31, 10.44, 11.15, 11.24, 13.9, 19.2–6, 19.21, 20.22–23, 21.11.

54. Luke 4.16–30.
55. Luke 4.18–19, quoting Isa. 61.1–2 and 58.6.
56. To avoid a possible misunderstanding, let me add that to say that the inaugural addresses were constructed by the evangelists does not mean that the evangelists made them up out of nothing. Jesus really did proclaim the kingdom of God, and Jesus did say much of what is included in the Sermon on the Mount. But portraying "the kingdom of God is at hand" and the Sermon on the Mount as the inaugural addresses of Jesus is the product of Mark and Matthew. So also here in Luke: historically speaking, Jesus was a Spirit-anointed prophet who proclaimed good news to the poor, and so forth. But Luke 4.16–30 is a Lucan product.
57. John 2.13–22; Mark 11.1–10, with parallels in Matt 21.1–9 and Luke 19.28–38.
58. For an accessible and illuminating treatment of John's contrasting symbols, see Robert Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1993), pp. 58–77. For comments about John's treatment of "the Jews," see my section later in this chapter on John 9.
59. John 2.1–11. Immediately preceding it is the preparation for Jesus' public activity in the first chapter: the witness of John the Baptizer and Jesus' call of his first disciples.
60. John 2.3–4, 6. The "hour" in the phrase "My hour has not yet come" (v. 3) refers in John to the hour of Jesus' death.
61. In the Hebrew Bible, see Hos. 2.14–20, Isa. 54.5, Jer. 2.2. See also Song of Songs; its erotic love poetry has been understood from ancient times as a metaphor for the God-Israel and divine-human relationship.
62. See, for example, Mark 2.19–20, John 3.29, II Cor. 11.2, Eph. 5.21–32.
63. Rev. 19.7–9, 21.2.
64. The story of the wedding at Cana may also have metaphorical associations with the wine of the Christian eucharist. Just as later in the gospel Jesus provides bread when there is no bread, here he provides wine.
65. Because I am not aware of standard terminology for these two kinds of metaphorical meaning, these are my own terms.
66. John Dominic Crossan, *A Long Way from Tipperary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), pp. 136, 168. Crossan is thus using the word "parable" with a broader (but defensible) meaning than its normal meaning. Normally in gospel and Jesus scholarship, the word "parable" refers to an oral form of speech used by Jesus: a memorable short story that is not factually true whose purpose is to invite the hearer into the world of the story and then to see something in light of that story. In an important sense, parables are "fictions"; they do not report something that happened. But they are nonetheless "true" fictions. Crossan's point is that the more spectacular "miracle stories" might be thought of the same way.
67. From the published description of a lecture he gave on the feeding of the multitude at Trinity Cathedral in Portland, Oregon, in September of 2000.
68. Mark 6.45–52, Matt. 14.22–33, John 6.15–21. The synoptics (but not John) also have a second "sea" story: the stilling of the storm in Mark 4.35–41 = Matt. 8.23–27 = Luke 8.22–25. In this story, Jesus is with the disciples in the boat, but asleep. When a storm comes up and the boat is in

danger of sinking, they call out to him, "Do you not care if we are perishing?" He then stills the storm.

69. Matt. 14.28–31; the full story in Matthew is found in 14.22–33.
70. Ps. 89.9, 95.5.
71. Job. 38.8, 11.
72. Ps. 107.25–29.
73. John 6.1–14; Mark 6.30–44 = Matt. 14.13–21 = Luke 9.10–17. Mark and Matthew also narrate a second bread miracle, though Luke and John do not: feeding four thousand people in Mark 8.1–10 and Matt. 15.32–39.
74. A denarius was a unit of money (a coin) commonly understood to be a day's wages. Hence the NRSV translates the phrase "six months' wages."
75. Among the few variations: only John mentions that the five loaves and two fish are supplied by a boy. In John, Jesus himself distributes the food; in the synoptics, the disciples do. The striking similarities include the same numbers throughout: five loaves, two fish; five thousand people; two hundred denarii worth of bread; twelve baskets of food left over. Moreover, in both John and the synoptics, this story is followed immediately by the story of Jesus walking on water. These similarities have led some scholars to think that the author of John knew one of the synoptic gospels or, alternatively, that both John and the synoptics knew a common "signs source." It is also possible that a common oral tradition used by both John and Mark may account for the similar details.
76. John 6.22–59.
77. For Crossan's powerful exposition of this point, see *A Long Way from Tipperary*, pp. 167–68. I condense it to its essentials. Jesus tells the disciples, "You give them something to eat." But "they almost jeer at him." They virtually have to be forced "kicking and screaming, as it were," into the process. "It is the duty of the disciples, the Twelve, the Church to make sure that food is distributed fairly and equitably to all. And, the Church is very reluctant to accept that responsibility. . . . Reluctant then, reluctant now. This [the story of the feeding of the five thousand] is a parable not about charity, but about justice, about the just distribution of the material bases of life, about the sharing of that which is available equitably among all."
78. See chap. 6 above, p. 136.
79. John 6.35, 48, 33.
80. John 6.53, 55.
81. John 6.35. The thirst metaphor is also found in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4.1–42. There Jesus speaks of "living water" (vv. 10–11) in contrast to the water from Jacob's well and says, "Everyone who drinks of this water [from Jacob's well] will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty" (vv. 13–14).
82. Prov. 9.5. See chap. 7 above, p. 150.
83. John 6.56.
84. John 15.1–12.
85. John 6.49, 32; see also 6.58.

86. John 6.32, 51.
87. See chap. 3 above, p. 45–46.
88. John 9.22, 34–35.
89. John 9.5, 25, 30.
90. John 8.12.
91. Though John's prologue refers explicitly only to "the Word of God" and not to "the Wisdom of God," I use both here because, as many scholars have pointed out, the two phrases are close equivalents in John: what John says about the former is also said about the latter in the Jewish wisdom tradition.
92. John 1.5, 9.
93. Imagery of darkness and light is used in passages such as "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them has light shined" (Isa. 9.2); "Arise, shine for your light has come" (Isa. 60.1); "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119.105). Imagery of blindness and sight is used, for example, in these passages: "The eyes of the blind shall see" (Isa. 29.18); "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened" (Isa. 35.5); "You that are blind, look up and see" (Isa. 42.18); "Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes" (Isa. 43.8). In all of these cases, blindness and seeing are used metaphorically, not literally.
94. See earlier in this chapter.
95. The "born again" or "born from above" text is the story of Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3.1–10. It is interesting to note that the story begins with Nicodemus coming to Jesus "by night"—that is, he is in the dark.
96. John 17.3.
97. Persuasively argued about thirty years ago by J. Louis Martyn in *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), it is now widely accepted by Johannine scholars.
98. See John 8.31–59, esp. 39–44.
99. John 14.6.
100. "Way" or "path," as noted in the previous chapter, is a central image in the Jewish wisdom tradition. It is also a central image in Mark (as well as the other synoptics), as argued in this chapter: to follow Jesus is to follow him *on his way.*
101. The death of Jesus is anticipated already in John's inaugural scene, the wedding at Cana; "my hour" in v. 4 refers to Jesus' death.
102. John 12.24.

About the Author

Marcus J. Borg is Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University and author of many books, including the bestselling *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, *The God We Never Knew*, and *Jesus: A New Vision*.

Credits

Jacket design: Jim Warner
Text designed: Jessica Shatan

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Genesis 1.1-2.3

Six Days of Creation and the Sabbath

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens
and the earth, 2 the earth was a
formless void and darkness
covered the face of the deep,
while a wind from God swept
over the face of the waters. 3
Then God said, "Let there be
light"; and there was light. 4
And God saw that the light
was good; and God separated
the light from the darkness. 5
God called the light Day, and
the darkness he called Night.
And there was evening and
there was morning, the first
day. 6 And God said, "Let
there be a dome in the midst
of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." 7 So God made the
dome and separated the waters
that were under the dome
from the waters that were
above the dome. And it was
so. 8 God called the dome Sky.
And there was evening and
there was morning, the second
day. 9 And God said, "Let the
waters under the sky be gathered together into one place,
and let the dry land appear."
And it was so. 10 God called
the dry land Earth, and the
waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And
God saw that it was good. 11
Then God said, "Let the earth
put forth vegetation: plants
yielding seed, and fruit trees of
every kind on earth that bear
fruit with the seed in it." And
it was so. 12 The earth brought
forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and
trees of every kind bearing
fruit with the seed in it. And
God saw that it was good. 13
And there was evening and
there was morning, the third
day. 14 And God said, "Let
there be lights in the dome of
the sky to separate the day
from the night; and let them
be for signs and for seasons
and for days and years, 15 and
let them be lights in the dome
of the sky to give light upon
the earth." And it was so. 16
God made the two great
lights-the greater light to rule
the day and the lesser light to
rule the night-and the stars. 17
God set them in the dome of
the sky to give light upon the
earth, 18 to rule over the day
and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was
good. 19 And there was

evening and there was morning, the fourth day. 20 And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." 21 So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." 23 And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. 24 And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. 26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." 27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." 29 God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the

seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. [3] So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

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Genesis 2.4-3.24

4 These are the generations of
the heavens and the earth
when they were created.

The Garden of Eden

In the day that the LORD God
made the earth and the heav-
ens, 5 when no plant of the
field was yet in the earth and
no herb of the field had yet
sprung up-for the LORD God
had not caused it to rain upon
the earth, and there was no
one to till the ground; 6 but a
stream would rise from the
earth, and water the whole
face of the ground— 7 then
the LORD God formed man
from the dust of the ground,
and breathed into his nostrils
the breath of life; and the man
became a living being. 8 And
the LORD God planted a gar-
den in Eden, in the east; and
there he put the man whom he
had formed. 9 And out of the
ground the LORD God made
to grow every tree that is
pleasant to the sight and good
for food, the tree of life also in
the midst of the garden, and
the tree of the knowledge of
good and evil. 10 A river flows
out of Eden to water the gar-
den, and from there it divides
and becomes four branches. 11
The name of the first is Pishon;
it is the one that flows around
the whole land of Havilah,
where there is gold; 12 and the
gold of that land is good; bdel-
lium and onyx stone are there.
13 The name of the second
river is Gihon; it is the one that
flows around the whole land of
Cush. 14 The name of the third
river is Tigris, which flows east
of Assyria. And the fourth river
is the Euphrates. 15 The LORD
God took the man and put
him in the garden of Eden to
till it and keep it. 16 And the
LORD God commanded the
man, "You may freely eat of
every tree of the garden; 17 but
of the tree of the knowledge of
good and evil you shall not
eat, for in the day that you eat
of it you shall die." 18 Then the
LORD God said, "It is not
good that the man should be
alone; I will make him a helper
as his partner." 19 So out of the
ground the LORD God formed
every animal of the field and
every bird of the air, and
brought them to the man to
see what he would call them;
and whatever the man called
every living creature, that was
its name. 20 The man gave
names to all cattle, and to the
birds of the air, and to every

animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." 24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Expulsion from the Garden

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. 8 They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." 11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I

commanded you not to eat?”
12 The man said, “The woman
whom you gave to be with me,
she gave me fruit from the
tree, and I ate.” 13 Then the
LORD God said to the woman,
“What is this that you have
done?” The woman said, “The
serpent tricked me, and I ate.”
14 The LORD God said to the
serpent, “Because you have
done this, cursed are you
among all animals, and among
all wild creatures; upon your
belly you shall go, and dust
you shall eat all the days of
your life. 15 I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring
and hers; he will strike your
head, and you will strike his
heel.” 16 To the woman he
said, “I will greatly increase
your pangs in childbearing; in
pain you shall bring forth chil-
dren, yet your desire shall be
for your husband, and he shall
rule over you.” 17 And to the
man he said, “Because you
have listened to the voice of
your wife, and have eaten of
the tree about which I com-
manded you, ‘You shall not eat
of it,’ cursed is the ground be-
cause of you; in toil you shall
eat of it all the days of your
life; 18 thorns and thistles it
shall bring forth for you; and
you shall eat the plants of the
field. 19 By the sweat of your
face you shall eat bread until
you return to the ground, for
out of it you were taken; you
are dust, and to dust you shall
return.” 20 The man named his
wife Eve, because she was the
mother of all living. 21 And the
LORD God made garments of
skins for the man and for his
wife, and clothed them. 22
Then the LORD God said,
“See, the man has become like
one of us, knowing good and
evil; and now, he might reach
out his hand and take also
from the tree of life, and eat,
and live for ever” — 23 there-
fore the LORD God sent him
forth from the garden of
Eden, to till the ground from
which he was taken. 24 He
drove out the man; and at the
east of the garden of Eden he
placed the cherubim, and a
sword flaming and turning to
guard the way to the tree of
life.

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Hosea 2.14-20

14 “Therefore, behold, I will
allure her, and bring her into
the wilderness, and speak ten-
derly to her. 15 And there I will
give her her vineyards, and
make the Valley of Achor a
door of hope. And there she
shall answer as in the days of
her youth, as at the time when
she came out of the land of
Egypt. 16 “And in that day,
says the LORD, you will call
me, ‘My husband,’ and no
longer will you call me, ‘My
Ba’al.’ 17 For I will remove the
names of the Ba’als from her
mouth, and they shall be men-
tioned by name no more. 18
And I will make for you a
covenant on that day with the
beasts of the field, the birds of
the air, and the creeping things
of the ground; and I will abol-
ish the bow, the sword, and
war from the land; and I will
make you lie down in safety. 19
And I will betroth you to me
for ever; I will betroth you to
me in righteousness and in jus-
tice, in steadfast love, and in
mercy. 20 I will betroth you to
me in faithfulness; and you
shall know the LORD.

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Isaac 54.5

5 For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.

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Jeramiah 2.2

2 “Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.

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