

The Origins of the New Testament - Part I: Introduction

I launch today a series of columns that will appear regularly over the next twelve to eighteen months. As I always do in this column, this series will augment the essays that are time sensitive and that seek to illumine contemporary issues through my theological lens. Last week's column on the health care debate is a case in point.

The purpose of this unfolding series is to take you, my readers, deeply into those books that constitute the New Testament. There are twenty-seven in number and together they form the volume that arguably has been the most influential and shaping piece of narrative writing in the history of the world. The earliest book of the New Testament is probably I Thessalonians, generally dated around the year 51AD (CE), while the latest is probably II Peter, generally dated around the year 135AD (CE). The influence of this book, while always powerful, has been both positive and negative. On the positive side it is clear that the institution called the Christian Church, which grew out of these twenty-seven books, has inspired quite literally millions of people in many ways. Most of the great universities of the world were begun as part of the Christian Church's commitment to knowledge and in particular, to impart to people the saving knowledge of the sacred scriptures. Most of our healing institutions, from hospitals to hospice, arose out of that Christian sense that every human life is of infinite worth, which carried with it the compelling need to alleviate suffering insofar as it is possible. Most of the great art of the ages, at least up until the 17th Century, has as its content, scenes from these twenty-seven books. These art treasures are of such immense value today that for the most part they are stored in the world's greatest museums as a constant source of enrichment for the people. Most of the great music of the ages, at least up until the dawn of modernity, was an attempt to put the primary themes of the New Testament into the indelible sounds that we today still recognise and sing. One thinks of the St. Matthew Passion and the St. John Passion by Johann Sebastian Bach and of the Christmas Oratorio, "Messiah" by George Frederick Handel as familiar and much loved cultural treasures. One cannot understand the history of the Western world or explore these cultural artefacts without becoming deeply aware of the impact the New Testament has had on the life of our civilisation.

There is, however, also a dark side of the New Testament that must be faced and lifted beyond the stained glass accents of antiquity into full consciousness. The New Testament has had victims whose lives have been diminished at best and destroyed at worst, by the direct impact of reading from this "sacred" source. I think of the Jewish people who have suffered throughout Christian history because of this book. The words attributed to the Jewish crowd by Matthew in his narrative of the crucifixion, "his blood be upon us and upon our children", have caused much Jewish blood to flow in everything from the Crusades to the Holocaust. The Fourth Gospel's use of the phrase "The Jews", spoken so often through clenched teeth, has not infrequently been used to legitimise anti-Semitism. The portrayal of a man called Judas, a name that is nothing but the Greek spelling of the name for the entire Jewish nation, as the anti-hero of the Jesus story, served to give permission to Christians through the ages to justify their feeling of revenge against this ethnic group of people. Lost in this hostile passion is the truth that Jesus was a Jew, the disciples were all Jews and the writers of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were also Jews. The only possible exception to this statement is Luke, thought to be the author of both the gospel that bears his name and the book of Acts, who is believed to have been born a Gentile, but to have converted to Judaism and thus to have come through the Synagogue into the Church. This means that when we read the New Testament, we are reading only the words of Jewish writers, interpreting the experience and impact of the Jewish Jesus primarily in the light of the Jewish Scriptures and under the ongoing influence of the Synagogue traditions of the Jews. Yet these books have fuelled over the centuries a killing frenzy of anti-Semitism. The single greatest carrier of this hostility has been nothing less than our Sunday school curricula and materials. Jewish people thus have a hard time seeing these twenty-seven books as "sacred scriptures".

The institution of slavery was affirmed throughout history from words in the New Testament. Slavery was practiced in the west by God-fearing, Bible-reading Christians. The popes at various times owned slaves. The section of the United States that fought fiercely to preserve this evil institution was also known as the Bible Belt. It was the Bible-reading people of the South who made lynching legal, who replaced slavery with segregation and who resisted every effort to keep racial justice from being achieved. Much of their justification for this behaviour came from quoting St. Paul, who in his letter to Philemon urged the runaway slave Onesimus to return to his master, while simultaneously urging Philemon, his master, to be forgiving to his slave. In the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul, or one of his disciples, instructed slaves to be obedient and masters to be kind. Perhaps it could be said that a kinder and gentler slavery is better than a cruel and harsh one, but it is to be noted that Paul clearly accepted the legitimacy of this cruel institution, making no effort to abolish it and thus legitimising it in the

minds of others for centuries. One wonders how those who were enslaved and their descendents might view the New Testament from which texts were cited to justify both slavery and second-class citizenship. These scriptures were not sources of life to these victims of our prejudice.

Women have also not fared well at the hands of these male written, male read and male interpreted books of the New Testament. They have rather fed the deep-seated cultural misogyny of the ages with such admonitions as those found in Ephesians for wives to obey their husbands, or in Corinthians for women to keep quiet in church, or in Timothy where women are forbidden to exercise authority over men. Under the influence of the New Testament women in the Christian world were denied higher education for centuries. As a result they were denied entrance into the professions, denied the right to vote, denied the ability to own property in their own name and denied leadership roles in the Christian world until well into the 20th Century. When progress did come for women it was driven by the secular spirit while organised religion as expressed in the Christian Church resisted these changes with scripture-quoting vehemence. In major sections of the world this anti-feminist, Bible-laced rhetoric, continues to be articulated both officially through ecclesiastical bodies and by individual believers. One wonders how women would ever be drawn to the texts of this book.

The same could also be said for the victimisation of the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender segments of our population. They too have lived throughout history with Bible-fuelled hostility that manifested itself in gay bashing and in actual murder. Texts were quoted from Romans that called homosexuality "unnatural" and condemned it, to references in other epistles that mistranslated the Greek word *arcenokoitus*, which refers to a passive male, as deviant, sodomite or pervert, even though its original meaning appears to have been male prostitutes. There is no doubt that the centre of homophobia in the western world today remains the Christian Church, now ghettoised from the mainstream of society and is regularly articulated by Christian voices from the Pope to Pat Robertson. One wonders how homosexual people could ever appreciate the message of the New Testament.

In my experience, I do not find it possible to overestimate the levels of biblical ignorance present today inside the Christian population. Most of these just-cited abuses rise out of that ignorance. Much preaching that emanates from both Catholic and Protestant pulpits, not only reflects that ignorance, but also continues to spread it.

In this series of columns I will, therefore, attempt to counter this biblical ignorance and to break the grip that it has on much of our population. While seeking to avoid the technicalities of biblical scholarship that seem to amuse so many in the academy, I will try to state clearly how these books came to be written and so endeavour to oppose the rampant literal misunderstanding that embraces so much of our culture today in regard to the Bible. I will go into both the meaning and the key points of each book in the New Testament, as I have done in past years with the books of the Old Testament. I will try to show the differences among the four gospels that reveal more contradictions than most people believe to be possible. I hope you will enjoy the journey. I know I will.

One final note - a number of small churches across the English-speaking world now use this column for their Sunday morning adult education classes. These essays are subscribed to by the members of the various classes with extra copies reproduced for visitors so that the class and the discussion can have a common basis for discussion. The leader of the class simply convenes the group and introduces the topic. That leadership role can be constant or rotated so long as the purpose is accomplished to allow people to discuss issues openly, to raise any questions they wish and to engage in any debate that arises. When the group gets too large for discussion, it subdivides into two groups. I am gratified to learn this and rejoice that this column might be an instrument in the New Reformation for which many of us yearn. At the very least I hope people find a richness in this book that small ecclesiastical minds have tried for centuries to hide from the average pew sitter. Have fun!

- John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament: Part II - Dating the Jesus of History

In order to understand the New Testament with any real integrity, it must be placed into its historic setting. The events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth did not happen in a vacuum, nor are these events history as history is now defined. Not only was Jesus born in, shaped by and interpreted through a particular context, but also the narrative details of his life found in the gospels were not recorded until somewhere between two and three generations after his life had come to its end. Both of these facts are ignored in many church circles today.

First, we seek to fix the dates around the life of Jesus. That is accomplished by an appeal to both the remembered story of his life and to secular records that we can locate, which date other people who appear in his story. It is not an exact science but it is a trustworthy guide.

Accounts of Jesus' birth are recorded in only two of the gospels, Matthew and Luke and both link his birth to the reign of King Herod, who was known as "Herod the Great". Matthew, the earliest of these two sources, weaves his story of the Wise Men around references to the reign of Herod and the anticipation recorded in the prophet Micah that the messiah will come out of King David's line and be born in King David's birthplace, Bethlehem. He also casts Herod in the familiar Jewish role of the wicked king who, like the Pharaoh of old in Egypt, sought to destroy God's promised deliverer. Matthew, in effect, retells the story of Moses' being miraculously saved from death by divine intervention, but this time it is about Jesus. This attempt to wrap Moses' stories around the memory of Jesus is illustrative of the Jewish interpretive tradition we call "Midrash". While these stories are messianic interpretations and not remembered history, there is still no reason to suggest that this means that the anchoring of the birth of Jesus to the reign of Herod was itself fanciful. Matthew is even more specific, suggesting that the birth of Jesus took place near the end of Herod's reign, just prior to his death. Secular records tell us that Herod reigned in this Jewish nation from 37BC to 4BC.

We also know from historical records that, with Herod's death, the Jewish nation was subdivided into three provinces, each ruled first by the sons of Herod and later by Roman procurators. That is the situation when the adult story of Jesus is brought to its conclusion. From both of these angles, the dating of Jesus' birth fits with what we know of secular history.

Luke confirms this tradition when he dates the births of both John the Baptist and Jesus as occurring when Herod was king of Judea. Luke adds that this was also when Caesar Augustus was on the throne of the Roman Empire and Quirinius was governor of Syria. Secular records reveal that only Quirinius, who did not come to power until 6-7AD (CE), does not fit this historic reconstruction. Luke appears to have inserted Quirinius into his story to support his idea that a general taxation or enrolment was ordered in which people had to return to their family's ancestral home, a device Luke used to explain how this birth happened to occur in Bethlehem. Once again, we observe how the historical facts in the birth story are blended into later messianic interpretations. The association of the birth of Jesus with the last year or years of Herod's reign is, however, fairly clear in the memory of the Christian community. It is for these reasons that most scholars today date the birth of Jesus no later than 4BC, the date of the death of King Herod, and probably no earlier than 6 BC. I tend to share in that bit of historic reconstruction and have adopted as "my best guess" the year 4BC as the time when Jesus was born. I am fairly certain, however, that his birth took place in Nazareth, as the first gospel of Mark assumes and that the Bethlehem birth tradition is a later messianic development. It was Paul, writing to the Romans around the year 58AD, who first claimed that Jesus was in the Davidic line and thus heir to his throne. This was the reference that ultimately gave rise to a Bethlehem birth story.

So, with the birth date fairly accurately set, we search for a way to determine the date on which the end of the life of Jesus occurred. Once again we discover that the gospel tradition is clear in associating the crucifixion of Jesus with the procuratorship of a Roman official known as Pontius Pilate. Although Pilate is not mentioned in Paul, the first gospel of Mark, written in the early years of the 8th decade of the Common Era, anchors the Passion of Jesus in the reign of Pilate so deeply that it would be hard to suggest that these two things were not deeply linked.

Pilate enters Mark's gospel when the arrested Jesus, having been interrogated by the Jewish authorities, is delivered to Pilate early in the morning of the day of the crucifixion. Pilate receives ten other mentions in Mark's gospel, all associated with the passion story, the last one occurring when Pilate allowed the body, now confirmed to be dead, to be delivered to Joseph of Arimathea for burial. While the historicity of this burial narrative in the newly hewn tomb in the garden of this Joseph is largely doubted, the connection between the

crucifixion and Pilate is not. Matthew links Pilate with the crucifixion in nine references. Luke has twelve in number, including two pre-crucifixion mentions, one to date the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and the other to chronicle Pilate's role in a previous Galilean uprising. John raises the number of Pilate references to twenty-one. It is also worth noting that, in these two later gospels of Luke and John, Pilate grows in to a more and more sympathetic figure, while Judas and the Jewish leadership grow more and more negative. We thus can see in the texts themselves traditions and memories changing and developing. To complete the biblical record, Pilate is mentioned three times in the Book of Acts, which is really volume two of Luke and always in speeches attributed to the apostles Peter and Paul. There is only one reference to Pilate in the epistle I Timothy, an epistle whose Pauline authorship is universally denied and is dated in a much later period of Christian history. So, once again, without claiming more than history can validate, it seems clear that the crucifixion of Jesus was connected to the reign of a man named Pontius Pilate as Roman procurator. That being settled, we can then go to Roman records to learn that Pilate served in this post in Judea from 26-36AD, which gives us the limits within which to locate the crucifixion. Through other means, too lengthy to go into here but leaning on narratives about his removal recorded by Josephus, a Jewish historian, we can narrow down that eleven-year span and state the high probability that the crucifixion happened around the year 30AD. This guess could be off by some two years on either side, but it still remains the closest we can come to certainty. So our conclusion is that Jesus lived between 6BC and 32AD at the outside and probably 4BC to 30AD would be our best guess. His life span would thus have been 34 to 38 years.

I have no doubt that Jesus was a figure of history and am completely unimpressed by those recent writers who have tried to prove that he was a mythological figure of Jewish or early Christian fantasy based on Egyptian sources. I think the biographical notes recorded in one of Paul's early and authentic epistles (Galatians 1:18-24) are determinative. Paul relates a conversation that he had with Peter and James, whom he identified as "the Lord's brother", some three years after his conversion. The early 20th Century church historian Adolf Harnack has stated that Paul's conversion had to have occurred within "one to six years" after the crucifixion, so this conversation to which Paul refers had to have occurred no less than four and no more than nine years after the death of Jesus. That is far too short a span of time for mythology to develop. This means that while all the details of the Jesus story are clearly not historical, Jesus himself is. So we locate Jesus in human history as having lived between roughly 4BC and 30AD.

Two things become obvious immediately from this dating exercise. Firstly, Jesus' entire life was lived as a Jew under the domination of the Roman Empire. He was a part of a conquered and oppressed people. Rome first took over the rule of this land in 65BC in an alliance with the successors of the Maccabees and ruled it with an iron hand until the fall of the Roman Empire. That included a war against a Jewish rebellion that occurred between 66-73AD which totally destroyed the Jewish nation, including Jerusalem and the Temple. While that destruction happened well after the life of Jesus, it did occur before any of the gospels were written. Scholars now believe that this later destruction of Jerusalem has shaped the memory of Jesus in the gospels far more than was once was recognised. We will look at this assertion later.

The second conclusion that this dating exercise makes obvious is that the earliest records we have of anyone writing anything about Jesus is in the works of Paul, who did his writing between 51 and 64AD, or 21 to 34 years after the death of Jesus. That means there is a total absence and thus a total silence for at least 20 years before any single detail about the life of Jesus was written down. Even then, we need to note that Paul tells us very little about the life of Jesus and that Paul died before any gospel had been written. The gospels from which we get most of our image of Jesus were written between the early 70s and the late 90s, or some 40 to 70 years after the death of Jesus. This means that the gospels are not eyewitness accounts, but are rather the product of the second, third and even fourth generation of Christians. The gospels were also written in Greek, a language that neither Jesus nor his disciples spoke or wrote. We need to dispense with the idea that these books are either history or biography.

That should be enough to disestablish many of the assumptions that faithful, but not necessarily learned, people have made over the centuries about the New Testament. It also sets the stage for us to begin to examine these Christian Scriptures with fresh eyes and open minds. That is what I hope to do as this series unfolds.

- John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament, Part III

Placing the New Testament Onto the Grid of History

The books of the New Testament did not drop from heaven, fully written, in the King James Version! Yes, that is a caricature, but it still has a tenacious hold on the minds of many Christians. This conviction guarantees that current, competent biblical scholarship will always be a source of much controversy in traditional religious circles.

The facts, however, are these. We have no original words of Jesus in the language in which he spoke. We have no firsthand accounts of the things he is supposed to have done. Even the earliest narrative describing the crucifixion is a creation of at least the second generation of Jesus' disciples and it is constructed not on eyewitness testimony, but on the interpretive use of the Hebrew Scriptures to portray Jesus as the fulfillment of all of their expectations. In the column last week we located the life of Jesus in terms of history, suggesting that the most informed guess for the date of his birth is 4BC and for the date of his death is 30AD (CE). With those dates in mind, let me line up today the books of the New Testament on a time grid of the 1st Century and allow you to see how the New Testament developed. By doing that we can trace such things as when new claims, heightened accounts of the miraculous and the developing layers and traditions of the Jesus story were added to the narrative.

Assume that the life of Jesus was lived between 4BC and 30AD. We face the fact that from the years 30AD to about 50AD, there is not a single word preserved of anything Jesus said or did. A tunnel of total silence exists, into which only speculation is possible. In the years between 50 and 64AD we come to the writings of Paul. Not all the epistles that bear his name are actually Pauline, but we are generally convinced that I Thessalonians, Galatians, I and II Corinthians, Romans, Philemon and Philippians are authentic. Almost all scholars dismiss the Pauline authorship of Hebrews, I and II Timothy, Titus and Ephesians, while the Pauline authorship of Colossians and II Thessalonians is still debated.

The four gospels were written between 70 and 100. The Book of Acts, the pseudo-Pauline epistles, the General Epistles (I, II, III John; I and II Peter; James and Jude) and the book of Revelation would all be dated between the 7th and 10th decades. With that dating system in mind let me go back and chronicle how the story developed between Paul, our earliest New Testament writer and John, the last gospel writer.

Paul is the first person to give us any writing details about the life of Jesus, but these details are scanty indeed. Letter writer that Paul was, it was not his agenda to relate the words of Jesus, stories about Jesus or even the major events of his life, except inadvertently. Paul has no sense of Jesus having had a miraculous birth. He says of Jesus only that he was "born of a woman" like all human beings and that he was "born under the law" like all Jews. He does suggest that he is linked by heredity to King David, but since that was a popular messianic claim, it is hard to judge its historicity. Paul also indicates that he knows James, the brother of Jesus, but he never mentions the names of Jesus' parents nor shares any knowledge about them.

Paul records no account of Jesus as a miracle worker. He reveals no knowledge of the tradition that Jesus was betrayed by one of his disciples. All he says is that "On the night in which Jesus was *handed over*, he took bread" and instituted the Christian Eucharist. The words *handed over* became the fragile basis upon which the betrayal story was constructed. Paul does not suggest that this "handing over" was done by one of his disciples, nor does he identify this "last supper" in any way with the Passover. Paul makes no mention of the content of Jesus' teaching, nor does he reveal any familiarity with any of the parables.

When Paul comes to the final events in Jesus' life, his knowledge is equally scanty. The fact that Jesus was crucified is central to Paul, but none of the familiar details of that event are noted. All that Paul says is: "He died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures". Paul never mentions Pilate, Herod, the soldiers, the two thieves crucified with him, any words that Jesus was supposed to have spoken from the cross or what his death might have looked like. To say that Jesus "died for our sins", appears to be an allusion drawn from the synagogue liturgy of Yom Kippur, while his words "in accordance with the scriptures" may relate to the way that early Christians interpreted the Hebrew prophets as having their words find literal fulfillment in the life and death of Jesus. We do know that the image of the "servant" drawn by II Isaiah (40-55) and of the "shepherd king" drawn by II Zechariah (9-14) were popular images for interpreting Jesus by the time the gospels were written. When he comes to the burial of Jesus Paul writes only "that he was buried". There is no tomb, no Joseph of Arimathea, no angels, no guards, no women visitors. Dead people are buried is all he claims.

About the resurrection Paul says only that "on the third day" Jesus was raised "in accordance with the scriptures", but he does not say into what he was raised. Was it into the life of this world or into the life of God? Was the resurrection a resuscitation of a dead body or an ascension into heaven? There were three stories in Jewish tradition in which a holy man (Enoch, Moses and Elijah) is victoriously translated into heaven. Paul would have been familiar with each of them. Most of Paul's later writing points to the understanding that he believed that Jesus was raised into the eternity of God, rather than being physically resuscitated back into this life. Paul goes on to give a list of those people to whom the raised Christ was "made manifest". He includes "the twelve", which seems to say that Judas was still among them. He also includes himself, claiming his experience of the risen Christ was like all the others except that his was last. When Paul's epistles, written between 50 and 64, were all that the Christian Church had in writing, the fact is that the remembered details on Jesus' life were few indeed.

The first gospel was Mark, written in the early 70s, followed by Matthew in the early 80s and Luke in the late 80s and finally by John in the late 90s. Both Matthew and Luke copied large portions of Mark into their works, with Matthew utilising about 90% of Mark's content and Luke utilising about 50%. John appears to be aware of the first three gospels, but he was not dependent on them, except very slightly. So when we line up the books of the New Testament, in the historic order of their writing we can see the developing story line quite clearly.

Mark in the 8th decade is the first to introduce John the Baptist, to say that Jesus performed miracles or to suggest that his mother's name was Mary. None of those things had ever been mentioned before. He never refers to a father figure at all, much less one named Joseph. Mark is the first writer to introduce Judas as the traitor and the first to write a narrative of the cross. In that narrative, now-familiar details such as Peter's denial, the crown of thorns, the crucified thieves and the cry of dereliction, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" enter the tradition. Mark also is the first to introduce Joseph of Arimathea and to relate the story of Jesus' burial. When Mark gets to Easter, he portrays only an empty tomb and a messenger who makes a resurrection announcement, but never in the first gospel is the raised Christ seen by anyone. That is all we have until the 9th decade.

Matthew, writing about a decade after Mark, adds other touches. He is the first to provide a genealogy, the first to introduce the virgin birth story of Jesus and the first to weave the story of Jesus around the narrative of Moses. Only in Matthew is there a Moses story about a wicked king trying to destroy Jewish male babies, but now told about Jesus and only in Matthew does Jesus preach the Sermon on the Mount, re-interpreting the Law of Moses in a new way from on top of a new mountain. Matthew adds the parable of the sheep and the goats found nowhere else. He also copies all of Mark's miracles, adding none of his own. Finally, Matthew is the first gospel to portray Jesus as physically raised from the dead, though he is quite ambivalent. The raised Christ is physical with the women in the garden, but not with the disciples in Galilee.

Luke, writing a little less than a decade after Matthew, builds on the miraculous birth story, adding details that do not harmonise with Matthew. In Luke angels replace the star and shepherds replace the magi. He adds two new miracle stories to the tradition, the healing of the ten lepers and the raising from the dead of a widow's only son in Nain. Luke is also the source of the best known of Jesus' parables: the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son and Lazarus and the Rich Man, which appear in no other gospel. Luke adds words to the cross unheard of before and he makes the resurrection quite physical. The stories of Ascension and Pentecost are also Lucan. John adds two new miracles: turning of water into wine and raising Lazarus from the dead. He expands the teaching of Jesus, frequently turning it into long, highly developed theological monologues. He prefers the word "sign" to the word "miracle" and makes the ascension something that occurs before Jesus appears to the disciples, not afterwards.

This very brief analysis gives us a sense of how the Jesus story grew as the New Testament developed. We will return to look at this in more detail later. For now, however, I simply want my readers to be aware of how dramatically the story grows between 70 and 100 as the gospels are written. Then I ask you to wonder with me about how the story might have grown from 30 to 70, where we have little or no data for comparison. That will prepare us to enter that dark oral only tunnel where no written data exists when this series continues.

- John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament - Part IV: The Oral Period

Where did the story of Jesus reside in that dark tunnel of time where no records exist? That tunnel began with the crucifixion in 30AD (CE) and lasted until Paul wrote his first epistle to the Thessalonians in about 51AD. From those silent years we have nothing that has survived in writing. From the years 51 to 64, we have available to us Paul alone, but he relates very little about what Jesus said or did. It is not until we get to the gospels that were written between 70 and 100AD, or 40 to 70 years after the end of Jesus' life, that we receive a consistent story, but little of that can be looked at as history. Today we can line up the books of the New Testament in the order in which they were written (Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke and John) and see quite easily how the Jesus story grows and develops. For example, Mark adds miracles, Matthew adds the virgin birth, Luke adds the cosmic ascension and John adds the farewell discourses. From the years 30 to 50, however, there is absolutely nothing that remains and these years present a huge challenge to Christian scholars. When we can see and date from gospel sources the expansions of the Jesus story from 70 to 100, we cannot help but wonder how the story might have grown during this oral tunnel of silence. In this column, I will seek to throw some light on this darkness.

Where does one go to look for clues? I know of only one possible place. If a subject is filtered through any vehicle for a significant number of years, that vehicle ought to leave an imprint. So we study the gospels looking for signs that identify how the material was preserved. Such signs are not hard to find in the early gospels. The first clue comes when we examine how often the word *synagogue* appears in the gospels. One finds a reference to the synagogue or synagogues eleven times in Mark, nine times in Matthew, sixteen times in Luke and five times in John. Historically we know that the Christian movement was expelled from the synagogue in 88AD and that John's gospel is the only one of the four that reflects that expulsion, which is perhaps why synagogue references drop in John. The fact remains that deep into the fabric of the Jesus story, as we have that story in the gospels, is written a very deep connection between people's memory of Jesus and the synagogues of the Jews.

The second clue is to see how it was that by the time the gospels came to be written, Jesus had been interpreted through, presented as the fulfilment of, and his story had been wrapped inside the scriptures of the Jewish people. There are constant references to these scriptures in almost every line of the gospels, especially Mark, Matthew and Luke. Indeed the gospel writers assume that their readers or listeners will have a deep familiarity with these scriptures. In the very first verse of Mark, the first gospel, the author writes, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ; as it is written in the prophets". He then proceeds to quote both Isaiah and Malachi. Mark moves on to tell the story of Jesus' baptism by presenting John the Baptist as the new Elijah. Mark clothes John with camel's hair and a leather girdle, the clothing that Elijah wore, according to the Old Testament. He suggests that John's diet consisted of "locusts and wild honey", the food that the Old Testament tells us Elijah ate. Mark locates John the Baptist in the desert or wilderness, which is where the Old Testament suggested that Elijah lived. Only those familiar with the Jewish Scriptures would understand the level of communication that was going on here.

The feeding of the multitude by Jesus with five loaves and two fish in Mark is reminiscent of the story in the Hebrew Scriptures of Moses providing bread to feed the multitude in the book of Exodus. The miracles that Mark ties to the story of Jesus are closely identified with the miracles attributed to Old Testament heroes Moses, Elijah and Elisha, or with the miraculous cures that Isaiah says will accompany the coming of the messiah. Once again only an audience familiar with these sources would know their original form and what it was that Mark was trying to communicate.

When one turns to the second gospel, Matthew, who adds the account of Jesus' miraculous birth to the developing tradition, we discover that Matthew suggests in those opening chapters that everything that happened to the infant Jesus was a fulfilment of the prophets. Why was he born of a virgin? To fulfil words from Isaiah that Matthew immediately quotes, or in this instance actually misquotes. Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem? To fulfil the expectations of the prophet Micah, who once again Matthew quotes. Why did the wicked King Herod come to Bethlehem and slaughter the male children two years old and under? To fulfil the prophecy of Jeremiah that Rachel, one of the "mothers" of the Jewish nation, would weep for her children who were not. Why did Joseph flee to Egypt with Mary and her baby? To fulfil the prophecy of Hosea, Matthew said, who wrote that God would call his son out of Egypt. Even the later move from Bethlehem to Nazareth occurred, said Matthew, to fulfil the prophets.

When we turn to Luke, this pattern continues. Luke simply copies much of his narrative from Mark, but when he adds material, it is also out of the Hebrew Scriptures. Only Luke tells the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers, one of whom is a foreigner, a Samaritan, which is deeply reminiscent of the story of Elisha healing the leprosy of a foreigner, Naaman the Syrian, from the book of II Kings. Only Luke tells the story of Jesus raising from the dead the only son of a widow in the village of Nain. This story is clearly patterned to conform to a story of Elijah raising the only son of a widow from the dead in I Kings.

There are countless other illustrations of the fact that the memory of Jesus had, by the time the gospels were written, become deeply wrapped inside the Jewish Scriptures. The question is where could this coalescing of the memory of the life of Jesus with the scriptures of the Jewish people have happened? The answer is only in the synagogue! Why? Because only in the synagogue did people hear the scriptures read, taught, discussed or expounded. Only in the synagogue was there any familiarity with the Hebrew Sacred Scriptures, which would enable the readers of the gospels to understand how these Jewish stories had been applied to and retold about Jesus.

The next step in this discovery process is to place ourselves inside the experience of the people who lived in the 1st Century world and then the picture becomes very clear. The printing press had not yet been invented. Books were rare because they were expensive. Every book had to be hand copied. Therefore, individuals did not own personal bibles. There were no Gideons to place the Hebrew Scriptures in your motel or hotel room. The only place in which 1st Century people could possibly have become familiar with the Jewish sacred story was by attending the synagogue and hearing those scriptures read. For these scriptures to have been used to interpret Jesus' life was an activity that could only have happened in the synagogue. For this reason, we can be fairly certain that in the silent period we call "the oral period", the memory of Jesus, including the things he said, the things he did and the narratives told about him, could only have been recalled, restated and passed on in the synagogue.

We add to this knowledge the tradition attested in the gospels that suggests that the life of Jesus was lived inside and interpreted through the great events of the Jewish liturgy. When that connection is made, we have another major clue. All of the gospels, for example, tell the story of Jesus' crucifixion against the background of the Jewish observance of Passover. In the story of the transfiguration there are echoes of the Jewish observance of the Festival of Dedication, or Hanukkah. In the narrative of John the Baptist, with which Mark opens his gospel, there are numerous notes of the Jewish observance of Rosh Hashanah.

The memory of Jesus was not transmitted individually. It reflects rather the corporate presence of the synagogue gathered in worship. In the 1st Century synagogue's liturgy there would be just a long reading from the Torah, the books of Moses; then a reading from what the Jews called the former prophets (Joshua through Kings); and finally a reading from what they called the latter prophets (Isaiah through Malachi). At that point, the synagogue leader would ask if anyone wanted to bring the message. Followers of Jesus would stand and relate their memories of Jesus to the reading of that Sabbath. In this moment the story of Jesus was recalled, Sabbath by Sabbath, year by year, until the gospels appeared 40 to 70 years after the end of Jesus' life.

Thus we shine the light of the synagogue onto the dark, mysterious oral period of Christian history and suddenly the darkness of the unknown fades and we begin to see that the gospels are the product of the synagogue. That clue will open a rich interpretive vein, which we will discover as this series on the New Testament unfolds.

Paul was the first person to break that silence with his letters that we still possess. So we begin our study of the content of the New Testament with the person of Paul. When he wrote, the followers of Jesus were still participants in the synagogue. The church as a separate institution had not yet been born. These "followers of the way", as the Christians were then called, represented a challenge to the traditions of the Jews. Paul began his life as a rabid opponent of that challenge. We turn to Paul next week.

- John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part V: Interpreting the Life of Paul

The first person to crack the silence and write anything that we still possess about Jesus of Nazareth was the man known as Saul of Tarsus, who later changed his name to Paul. His conversion to being a believer in and a disciple of Jesus occurred, according to the work of the 20th Century Church Historian Adolf Harnack, between one and six years after Jesus' crucifixion. If we adopt the generally accepted date of 30AD (CE) for the crucifixion, then Paul's conversion would be located between the years 31 and 36. The story of that conversion, with which most people are familiar, is hardly history, since it was written by the author of the book of Acts more than thirty years after Paul's death and perhaps sixty years after his conversion. I doubt if Paul would have recognised any of those details. In his own authentic writings Paul never refers to a life-changing experience on the road to Damascus. He never mentions the bright light that supposedly rendered him temporarily blind, or the vision he was supposed to have had, which involved a conversation with Jesus, or his baptism at the hands of Ananias. I suspect that the narrative in Acts was a fantasy created by Luke to give content to what Paul does say about his pre-Christian life. In his Epistle to the Galatians, written in the early 50s, Paul writes, "You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the Church of God violently and tried to destroy it". Perhaps the closest Paul ever comes to describing his conversion experience occurred when writing to the church in Corinth: "I know a man in Christ", he said, "who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven - whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter". Whenever there is a conflict between an account of Paul's activity as recorded in the Book of Acts and the authentic writings of Paul himself, the weight of scholarship always comes down on the side of Paul's own work.

From autobiographical notes found in his Epistles, we get the picture of Paul as a religiously zealous student, devoted to the Torah and proud of his Jewish heritage. He calls himself "a Hebrew of the Hebrews" and a "son of Abraham". It was into this Jewish faith tradition that he was born and from which, in his mind he never left, since he saw Jesus as the fulfilment of both the law and the prophets. Paul says of himself, I was "circumcised on the eighth day". He identifies himself as "a member of the tribe of Benjamin" and as "a Pharisee". He calls himself "blameless under the law" and claims that he actually advanced far beyond his peers in the pursuit of holiness. He presents himself as the star pupil in the rabbinical school, so it should surprise no one that he came to understand Jesus by applying familiar Jewish symbols to him. By studying Paul carefully we can begin to regain the perspective that Paul had, namely that Jesus was a Jew, as were his disciples and all of the writers of the books that now constitute the New Testament. The followers of Jesus were at the time of Paul regular worshippers in the synagogue. That is indeed, as I have suggested in a previous Discussion (see 29th October – *"The Origins of the New Testament – Part IV: The Oral Period"*) the setting in which the oral tradition developed. Christianity did not become a religion separate from Judaism until the latter years of the ninth decade, by which time we need to understand that at least the gospels of Mark and Matthew were written, and perhaps even Luke. John is thus the only gospel clearly written after the synagogue and the church had split. So during the years in which Paul was writing, the disciples of Jesus, known then as the *"Followers of the Way"*, were still members of the synagogue. Paul can thus only be properly understood when we hear his words in this Jewish context.

In the epistle that we today call I Corinthians, Paul suggests that the two principle events in the life of Jesus, namely the crucifixion and the resurrection, happened "in accordance with the scriptures". The only scriptures that existed at that time and thus the only thing to which he could have been referring were the books of what we now call the Old Testament. Paul had obviously used the Jewish sacred writings to help him interpret Jesus. The first layer of interpretation that was laid on the memory of Jesus was to see him as the fulfilment of these scriptures. The earliest interpreters of the meaning of Jesus were Jewish people who saw him as their expected messiah who would bring about the Kingdom of God. That was why they wrapped the images found in the Old Testament around him. Separating the person of history named Jesus from the interpretations applied to him by zealous followers based on the scriptures is not now and never has been easy. The death of Jesus was given purpose primarily under the influence of the writings of a prophet we call II Isaiah (Chapters 40-55 – see the discussion for 1st October 2008 - *The Origins of the Bible, Part XIII: II Isaiah - The Figure of the "Servant"*). This un-named person, whose words were attached to the scroll of Isaiah, thus giving us his name II Isaiah, wrote after the devastation of the Babylonian Exile, to paint a new vocation for the people of Israel in their defeat. They could no longer aspire to greatness. II Isaiah thus drew a portrait of one he called the "Servant" and called the Jews to emulate this figure. The "Servant" found the meaning of his life not in victory or glory, but by absorbing the world's pain, bearing the world's hostility and even by enduring death handed out by the world and transforming it into life-giving love. It was the "Servant" vocation to draw negativity from the people of the world

and to leave them whole. This understanding of the crucifixion to which Paul was alluding when he said that Jesus died "in accordance with the scriptures", was destined to grow and to find an even fuller expression by the time the gospels were written.

It was not just the scriptures, but the worship life of the synagogue that also shaped Paul's understanding and interpretation of the life of Jesus. When Paul said that Jesus "died for our sins" he was quoting directly from the liturgical day in the Jewish liturgical year known as Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement. In synagogue worship on that once-a-year holy day an innocent lamb, chosen for its physical perfection, was sacrificed "to atone for the sins of the people". The blood of the animal would then be smeared on the mercy seat of God in the Holy of Holies, that part of the Temple where God was believed to live. The blood of the sacrificed animal was supposed to make it possible for the people to enter God's presence for they travelled "through the blood of the Lamb" and thus had their sins covered by the lamb's innocence. So far as we know from the available written records, it was with Paul that the death of Jesus came to be viewed through the lens of the sacrifice of Yom Kippur. When Catholic Christians say today that in the Eucharist "the sacrifice of the mass" is re-enacted, or when Protestant Christians say, "Jesus died for my sins", they are both reflecting in a literalised form, this early identification of Jesus with the sacrificial lamb of the Day of Atonement. Paul has clearly made this identification in his epistles.

By the time the gospels are composed, well after Paul's death, the crucifixion has also become located inside another Jewish liturgical celebration that we call the Passover. Mark, Matthew and Luke have identified the Last Supper as a Passover meal. That was a post-Pauline development of which Paul was certainly not aware. Paul dates the institution of the Last Supper only with the words that it occurred on "the night in which he was handed over". Later, in I Corinthians 5: 7, Paul calls Jesus the "new paschal lamb". The gospels exploited that identification to locate the crucifixion in the season of Passover.

Paul saw in the death of the Passover lamb, as well as in the death of Jesus, an action in which the power of death itself was broken. Recall that, according to the book of Exodus, it was when the people of Israel placed the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorposts of their homes that the angel of death "passed over" and death was banished from their households. Paul was suggesting that long before the crucifixion story was identified with the Passover, in the death of Jesus the cross had become the doorpost of the world and the blood of the new paschal lamb on that cross also broke the power of death for all who came to God through the life of this Jesus.

So in the writings of Paul we get the sense that the memory of Jesus was interpreted through the Jewish Scriptures and related to the synagogue's liturgical cycle with its holy days like Yom Kippur and Passover. That identification will expand greatly by the time the gospels are written. Paul is thus the first window into this Jewish interpretative clue, but it will grow and develop as the New Testament and the Christian creeds come into being, well after Paul's death.

There is one other detail in Paul that we need to examine before we begin to look at his writings in more detail. It is found in his constant denigration of himself found throughout his epistles. I refer to such words as "O, wretched man that I am who will deliver me from this body of death..." (Romans 7: 24)", or "I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate..." (Romans 7: 14-15). "I can will what is right but I cannot do it..." (Romans 7: 18)

Do these words fit a pattern? If so, what do they reveal? We will look at that next week.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part VI: Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

Have you ever wondered what Paul's deepest secret was? Surely he had one. If you listen to his words, an agony of spirit is easily recognised, perhaps even a deep strain of self-hatred. How else can we read these words, "I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. The very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me". He goes on to say of himself, "I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate". Having thus indicted himself, he offers a rather self-serving explanation, which is little more than a feeble attempt at exoneration. "It is no longer that I do it", he says, seeking a satisfying explanation, "but sin that dwells in me". Don't blame me, he is arguing, blame sin! It is like one saying, "It is not my fault, the devil made me do it!" Next he offers what might be a clue. "Nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh", he says. What do you suppose it is that tortures Paul? It is clearly something inside him. Once Paul spoke of "fightings without and fears within", but while he described the external threats, he never identified the "fears within". Now he seems to locate those fears "in my flesh", and clearly he believes that they have power over him to the point that he feels powerless against them. "I can will what is right", he laments, "but I cannot do it". Once more he tries to find something outside himself to blame and so he repeats his previous idea, "If I do what I do not want (to do), it is no longer I that do it, but *sin* that dwells within me". Still writing introspectively he states, "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin, which dwells in my members". The word translated as "member" is a strange word, at least as Paul uses it. The Greek word for "members" is "melos", which literally means a bodily appendage - like arms and legs. How could sin dwell in one's arms and legs? How could one's arms and legs be in warfare against one's mind? Males, however, have another appendage, called euphemistically "the male organ". It is clearly an appendage, but it is also a gland that does not always obey the mind of the person to whom it belongs. This gland is stimulated on some occasions when it is quite inconvenient. On other occasions, it is not stimulated when one desires it to be. If that were not so there would be no market for Viagra or Cialis! Since Paul is constantly suggesting that evil sin dwells in his flesh, can we not conclude that whatever disturbs him so deeply is somehow connected to his sexuality? It seems apparent that such a connection is real, for he winds up this series of self-accusatory phrases with an outburst that demands some explanation, "Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this *body* of death?"

In other parts of Paul's epistles he says, "What return did you get for the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death". Paul seems to feel that his life is lived under the sentence of death. He has a deep-seated sense of shame. Paul also reveals that he has a hidden aspect to his life. He calls himself "an imposter who yearns to be true", one who is unknown "who yearns to be known and one who "though dying yearns to be alive".

Paul is also a religious zealot, perhaps a fanatic. He was a strict adherent of the Torah in which he had obviously bound himself tightly. He describes himself as one who obeyed every requirement of the law. I was, he says, "Circumcised on the 8th day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless!" He even says of himself, "I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age, so extremely zealous was I for the tradition of my fathers".

Given that self-description, one must ask what was there about the Jesus movement that threatened Paul so deeply that he was moved to try to stamp it out. Religious zealotry always says more about the zealot than it does about the cause. Again, he says of himself, "I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it". One does not attack Muslims in the Crusades unless something about Islam itself is seen as an imminent danger to the Christian claims that are being made. One does not burn heretics at the stake unless the lives of the heretics threaten something deep within their persecutors. One does not oppress and murder Jews, as Christians have done through the centuries, unless the very existence of the Jews caused that which was basic to Christianity to collapse. One does not fly airplanes into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon to "kill the infidels" unless those infidels call into question the truth by which Islamic fundamentalists live. That is the nature of religious persecution. Paul was a persecutor of the Christians, so we need to ask what there was about the Christian movement that caused him to believe that if the Christian movement survived, he would not. That is the question that fanaticism in any form asks. So our search continues.

Another autobiographical detail appears in his epistles when Paul counsels those who are not married "to remain as I am", that is, single. So we know that Paul was not married. He also counselled those who could not control their sexual desires to marry, since as he stated, "it is better to marry than to burn with passion". Paul, however, never sought to alleviate his internal pressures by following his own advice. Paul actually seemed to have negativity toward women. Women do not like him to this day, especially women priests. He warned his readers against even touching a woman, yet he seemed to have a peculiar attraction for a woman's hair, about which he made overt references.

Paul also shared with his readers that he possessed a "thorn in his flesh", which he never defines, but which he had prayed for God to take away. It appears that the removal of this thorn was beyond God's power. There is finally one other revealing passage in the Pauline corpus that for me pulls this investigation together. In the first chapter of Romans, a text frequently cited to uphold the deep prejudice in the Christian Church against homosexuality, Paul suggests that homosexuality is actually a punishment inflicted by God on those who do not worship God properly. That is, Paul argues, that God, in punishment for not paying attention to the intimate details of worship, confuses human sexuality so that men are attracted to men and women to women. It was and is a strange argument, but one perhaps understandable to a religious person who feels driven to obey every jot and tittle of the law.

Some years ago, while studying at Yale Divinity School, I came across a 1930's book written by Arthur Nock in which this author raised for me for the first time the possibility that Paul might have been a deeply repressed gay man. As such he would have been taught by his religion that being homosexual placed him under a death sentence according to the law of God as recorded in Leviticus 18 and 20. Paul would also have been aware of the books of the Maccabees, which were very popular among Jews in Paul's time. IV Maccabees stated that if one worshiped God properly and with consuming intensity "all desire can be overcome".

When I put all of these things together a pattern appears. Paul was a zealot who tried with all his might to worship God properly. He bound his unacceptable (to him) desires so tightly within the law of the Jews that he was able at least partially to suppress the desires that he found natural within him but deeply troubling and intensely negative.

This was the internal pressure that caused Paul to view his body quite negatively. The promise of death, said the Torah, was the end result of the sin, which he felt sure lived in his uncontrollable "member". He experienced the Christian movement to be one that relativised the power of the law to control evil desires in the name of something the Christians called "grace", which they defined as the infinite and undeserved gift of love. He heard Christians telling people that they did not have to struggle as he had struggled to be righteous, but they had only to trust this divine love that accepted them "just as I am", or as each person was. Freedom always frightens people who are hiding from themselves inside a rigid religious practice. So it was that Paul appears to have determined that if Christianity succeeded, his security system built on years of binding repression would fall apart. That is what led to him to persecute. That is also what led Paul to exclaim after his conversion, that now I know that "nothing can separate me from the love of God", not even, as he said, "my own nakedness".

Was his thorn in the flesh his deeply repressed homosexuality? Other theories have been offered: epilepsy, a chronic eye disease, perhaps even an abusive and distorting childhood sexual experience. None, however, fit the details we know of Paul's life so totally as the suggestion that he was a gay man. Christians could not listen to this possibility so long as they were in the power of a definition of homosexuality as something evil. That definition, however, has died under the influence of modern science and medicine. So the idea of Paul gay and a good Jew are not now incompatible. Imagine rather the power of the realisation that we Christians have received our primary definition of grace from a gay man who accepted his world's judgment and condemnation until he was embraced by the Jesus experience and came to the realisation that nothing any of us can say, do or be can place us outside the love of God. Paul, a deeply repressed gay man, is the one who made that message clear.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part VII: Paul's Early Epistles, I Thessalonians and Galatians

In our Origins of the New Testament series, I now turn to the epistles of Paul since he was the first author to write any part of the New Testament. My plan is to divide the authentic writings of Paul into three broad categories. There is what I call "the early Paul", best seen through his first two epistles, I Thessalonians and Galatians; then there is what I call "the middle Paul", best illustrated through his most familiar works, I and II Corinthians and Romans; and, finally there is "the late Paul", best observed through the epistles known as Philemon and Philippians. Please note that these seven epistles constitute what scholars all but universally agree are the authentic letters of Paul. I will examine Paul in his various roles as pastor and as theologian. This Pauline segment of our larger task of examining the origins and makeup of the New Testament will then conclude with a brief analysis of the disputed epistles, the dispute being whether or not they are the authentic works of Paul. That list includes Colossians and II Thessalonians, which very few scholars still contend are Pauline. Then we move on to those about which there is almost no dispute at all, since these letters appear to have been written well after Paul's death. In this category we locate Ephesians, I and II Timothy and Titus.

Most Christians are unable to discern any differences in voice, tone or content in the entire body of work that we now call the epistles, whether written by Paul or not. That is probably because we never read them as a whole and thus never get a sense of Paul's specific thinking. We tend to hear them instead only in small snatches being read as lessons in church and with no context. My hope is that through these columns I will be able to provide my readers with sufficient knowledge of the distinctiveness of each epistle that the differences between them become obvious. It might even be exciting to enable people to become biblically literate, which would place them among the minority of Christians who are conversant with Paul's thinking.

The first epistle that Paul wrote, most scholars agree, was I Thessalonians. It is, however, placed sixth in the epistle section of the Bible because these letters were put into the canon of scripture according to their length. Romans, Paul's longest letter, is first and Philemon, Paul's shortest letter, is last. If they had been listed chronologically I Thessalonians would be first, Galatians second, I and II Corinthians third and fourth, Romans fifth, Philemon sixth and Philippians seventh. So we begin our study of Paul's content with his first two works.

Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia and Galatia was in central Asia Minor. The book of Acts tells us that Paul visited both of these towns on his early missionary journeys. He wrote these two epistles in the first few years of the sixth decade, probably between the years 51 and 53. At this time the followers of Jesus were still members of the synagogue. Paul came to each town as a travelling evangelist who also happened to be a rabbi. The venue for his words was thus the Sabbath service in the synagogue, though we need to recognise that in those two towns the synagogues were far removed in both miles and strictness from Judea. Members of these synagogues were Greek-speaking Hellenised Jews, who lived as members of the Jewish Diaspora. The synagogue was thus not only a worship centre for them, it was also their cultic and cultural centre. Diaspora synagogues had by this time begun to attract Gentile worshipers. It was a time of great religious ferment in the Greek-speaking Roman Empire. The gods of Olympus had lost most of their appeal. The mystery cults seemed too bizarre and had not yet become established. This meant that the synagogue was more and more a place to which serious worshipers of many varieties turned. In the synagogue there was a firm conviction that God was one. The Torah of the Jews portrayed this one God as concerned about life and ethics, as well as about patterns of worship. As the Jews moved further away from their homeland many of them began to shed the more rigid aspects of their religion and Judaism for them became more abstract, more spiritual, and less definably Jewish. Gentile worshipers were not drawn to the cultic aspects of Judaism, like kosher dietary rules, circumcision and Sabbath day observance, so these changes made it even more attractive to them.

Paul, as a Greek-thinking Hellenised Jew, was thus frequently more appealing to these modernising Jews and the Gentile visitors, than he was to the stricter Jewish members of the audience, who viewed the synagogue as their last attachment to their ancestry. In Thessalonica Paul had clearly emphasised in his preaching the messianic claim for Jesus. That role had many connotations for the Jews, but among the most compelling was that the messiah, when he came, would establish God's eternal kingdom and inaugurate God's earthly rule. In the service of this idea the early disciples of Jesus had been consumed with the task of connecting the life of Jesus to the messianic promises found in their scriptures. They thus searched their sacred writings for hints and clues to prove that Jesus was the expected messiah. Sometimes they stretched these texts beyond the breaking point. At the heart of the Jesus message was the claim that death had been conquered and that his followers would be transported into eternal life very soon. The Gentile visitors to the synagogue had bought this message

and had formed themselves into a separate community of believers within the synagogue. They still attended Sabbath day services, but they also gathered on the first day of the week for the Christian liturgy they called "the breaking of the bread", at which time they prayed "thy kingdom come".

The obvious desire by Gentiles to be in the synagogue, but not *of* the synagogue, was more than some traditional Orthodox Jews could tolerate, so Paul and his teaching became a source of divisiveness in the various synagogues of the empire. The Orthodox Jewish believers began to attack Paul's credentials and his reputation. The Gentile worshipers had turned from idols to the one God of the Jews, but Paul had located this God in the life of Jesus and so deeply convinced them of this that they had begun to wait for Jesus' promised return from heaven. Clearly this was the message they had heard from Paul.

As time passed, however, the Kingdom did not arrive and they began to waver. When Thessalonian family members began to die, their despair increased. Something was clearly wrong if they died before the kingdom arrived. The bulk of Paul's message in his first epistle was designed to assure these troubled worshippers that the dead would rejoin the living when that second coming arrived. No one knows, he assured them, either the time or the season when that second coming will occur. Paul, the pastor, thus urged them to be vigilant, to keep awake, to be sober and to put on "the armour of God", an image that he would expand in later works.

In Galatia, the pastoral issue was a little different. The content of Paul's message in this second epistle was that in Christ alone their salvation was assured. This had caused those who responded to that message to move dramatically away from the law of the Jews. Keeping the cultic rules of Judaism lost its urgency in Paul's proclamation of the infinite love of God that he believed had been revealed in the life of Jesus. This seemed to Orthodox Jews to be nothing less than a prescription for moral anarchy and the obliteration of the Torah itself. So they struck back at Paul and were supported by the heavy guns of the more traditional Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, including Peter and James, the Lord's brother. This tension erupted into the first major division in Christian history. Was the Christ figure merely a new chapter in Judaism? Was he another prophet in a long line of Jewish prophets waiting to be incorporated into the ongoing Jewish story? Did believers in Jesus have to come through the rituals and rites of Judaism in order to be Christians? This was the position that Peter and James took and defended.

For Paul that stance was a violation of everything his Christian experience had taught him. Paul had found in Jesus a love sufficient to embrace him just as he was. Paul had tried the other way. By his own confession he had sought to obey every commandment of the law in order to win salvation. That had not proved to be a path that led him toward wholeness. Religious observance never is. It was and is just another form of human slavery, another attempt to win divine favour, to manipulate the deity with good behaviour. At best that approach produced religious self-centeredness, not the glorious liberty of the children of God. For Paul the battle he was fighting in this epistle was for the heart of what he believed was the Christ experience. In defence of his understanding of Christ, he mounted a strong counter-attack dismissing Peter's behaviour as unworthy of the gospel and expressing a strong dislike for James, the Lord's brother. He berated those in the congregation in Galatia who had so quickly abandoned his gospel for this new religious bondage. Galatians reveals Paul not only at his most passionate, but also at his angriest and his most human. Defending his claim to be an apostle, Paul tells us more in this epistle than anywhere else about his conversion experience and the meaning he found in Jesus that had been the source of his conversion. When the smoke of battle cleared, Paul stood victorious and the book of Acts would later relate the story of Peter's conversion (see Acts 10).

It is also in Galatians that Paul first articulates the unity that he finds in Christ, who obliterates the human security boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, males and females, bond and free. All are one in Christ, he asserts. Paul, as we noted earlier in this series, felt himself loved beyond anything he had imagined possible and he refused to allow that single message to be compromised. He won this battle, but it would be one that Christians would fight again and again throughout history. Perhaps it was that this message of unqualified love was simply too good to be true. Imagine a God who knows the secrets of our hearts, but who loves us anyway. That is, however, the meaning of the Christ story for Paul and as such, it would represent a major step into what it means to be human.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part VIII: The Corinthian Letters

Paul was a complicated mixture of many things. He was a missionary who travelled hundreds of miles by foot and by boat to tell his story. He was, as we noted last week when examining the letter to the Galatians, an intense zealot who would fight vigorously to defend his understanding of the gospel. He was a theologian who sought to put his experience of God into rational thought forms so that they could be passed on. Perhaps above all things, however, Paul was a pastor who sought to smooth out disputes, confront evil and ease hurt feelings in the congregations that he founded and served. When we examine his correspondence with the church in Corinth, it is this pastoral side that dominates. Even when he discusses issues like the resurrection, his discussion is pastorally oriented as he seeks to ease in the people of the Corinthian church their anxiety connected with mortality.

The first thing to note about the two Corinthian letters is that they appear to be composites of a more extensive correspondence that perhaps reached a total of four or even five Pauline letters. By a careful analysis of our two remaining epistles to the Corinthians, scholars have come to the conclusion that these "lost letters", to which Paul actually refers in the epistles that we do have, have been included, at least in part, in what we call II Corinthians. These scholars point to such passages as II Corinthians 6:1-7:1, II Corinthians 10-13 and even in the extraneous verses in Corinthians 11:32-33 that appear to be inserts into the texts that actually break the flow of Paul's argument. Despite this strange construction, however, scholars find no evidence to suggest that all of II Corinthians is the authentic work of Paul. We need to remember that preserving letters in the 1st Century was an inexact and costly procedure of hand copying, and that no one had yet assigned the status of "Holy Scripture" to the writings of Paul. Maybe that is why they preserved only what they believed was most important.

When we turn to the content of these two Corinthian epistles themselves, we find Paul, the pastor, dealing with human beings who are acting like human beings. Paul knows what every pastor knows, namely, that congregations are not made up of angels. At the same time congregations learn very quickly that ordination does not bestow perfection on their ordained leader. Pastoral care is the sensitive attempt to bring wholeness out of an exchange between human passion and human insecurity. It is a delicately nuanced balancing act, the job of which is to enhance the humanity of all who are involved. If we need a text to describe the goal of all pastoral activity, it would be the Fourth Gospel's definition of Jesus' purpose: "I have come", John's Jesus says, "that they might have life and have it abundantly". That is finally both the mission of the Christian Church and the hoped-for outcome in every pastoral situation. Abundant life, please note, does not always mean happiness or even the easing of pain. Many people seek wholeness in quite destructive ways, with addiction to drugs, alcohol, sex and even success being just a few of them. Sometimes abundant life becomes possible only in confrontation and brokenness. Real pastoral care is not about making it feel good; it is about helping wholeness to be created. Paul understood that and every pastor must learn it sooner or later. Wholeness is seen in the freedom to be, in the ability to escape the survival mentality that inevitably locks us into self-centredness. Wholeness is found in the maturity of being able to live for another by giving our love away. It will be through the lens of that understanding of pastoral care that I will seek to explore the issues found in the epistles to the Corinthians.

The Corinthian congregation appears to have had more than its share of pastoral needs and even to have exasperated Paul on more than one occasion. Some of the issues to which he refers are party lines and divisions among the people. Some claimed loyalty to Paul, some to Apollos and still others to Peter. Beyond that their rowdy behaviour had begun to distort the worship of the people. In that early part of Christian history the Eucharist was begun with a community meal called "The Agape Feast". The Corinthians, however, had turned this common meal into a gluttonous orgy that left some of the poor hungry. Then they had turned the Eucharistic wine into an occasion of public drunkenness. Paul obviously needed to speak to this behaviour.

There was also a dispute in the congregation about the meat served at this "Agape Feast". It had been bought at a local butcher shop where, in this pagan society, it had been slaughtered in ceremonial offerings to the idols of the people. Could Christians eat meat that had been offered to idols? Some Corinthian followers of Jesus were offended by this idea. Still others had become enamoured with Paul's message of salvation as the ultimate expression of God's grace and the conviction that this grace, so abundantly and freely given, was not dependent on their personal behaviour. This meant that they had now become what the Church came to call "antinomianism", that is, some were suggesting that the more they sinned, the more God's grace abounded. This stance appeared to render any sense of personal ethical responsibility completely meaningless. Still others seemed to have a hierarchy of value associated with certain activities of the synagogue. Prophets who shared

their prophetic words with the congregation were deemed to be of less value than those who claimed the gift of "glossolalia" or "speaking in tongues", that is, the ability to utter words that only God could understand. This was, they seemed to think, the highest gift of all and thus the most to be honoured.

If this were not enough for one pastor to deal with, there was also a gender dispute going on. Some Corinthian women seemed to take seriously Paul's words, in his earlier letter to the Galatians, that "in Christ there is neither male nor female, but all are one". This new freedom and equality for women obviously challenged the patriarchal value system of that ancient world. Some women, quite clearly, pushed these boundaries well beyond even Paul's comfort level. No one, not even Paul, escapes his or her cultural prejudices completely. The extent of this boundary pushing becomes obvious when Paul asserts his threatened male authority by saying, "I forbid a woman to have authority over a man!" Since no one forbids what has never happened, these women were overtly claiming authority over men in the life of the Church.

While Paul's prejudiced humanity is in full display in this last conflict, on most of the others he rises to the pastoral challenge. Paul begins by telling them that Christ alone is their foundation and that any division of loyalties among the followers of various leaders was based on the inability to understand that these leaders were simply "servants through which you believed - I planted, Apollos watered, but only God gave the increase". In regard to the Eucharist, Paul upbraids the members of this congregation for eating and drinking in such a way that some are hungry and some are drunk. He urges them to eat and drink in their own homes and to recognise that the act of breaking bread and drinking wine in the Eucharistic feast is "a participation in the body of Christ" and what his life of love and sacrifice was all about. The Eucharist, he proclaims, is a liturgical way in which they participate in Christ's wholeness.

Paul takes anti-nomianism on directly, reminding them of their mutual responsibility to one another. He suggests that immorality, at its heart, was to treat another human being as a thing to be used rather than as a person to be loved. He defuses the debate about meat offered to idols by saying that since idols are nothing, meat offered to idols is meat offered to nothing, so there is no prohibition as to its use. He continues, however, by stating that this stance misses the point of this dispute. "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful but not all things build up." It was a subtle, but powerful, distinction. The evil in this debate, he continues, is the lack of sensitivity on the part of some to the feelings of others. Candy is not evil, but to offer candy to one battling with obesity is not loving. It does not build up the person or fulfil the goal of Christ.

Finally, Paul gets to the debate on spiritual gifts. There is no hierarchy of gifts, he argues, for all gifts are in the service of the same spirit and are expressions of the same God who inspires us all. The gifts of the people offered in worship are necessary to the building up of all, he suggests. Every gift is for the benefit of the whole community that he calls the body of Christ. Following that analogy of the body, he moves on to suggest that their bickering as to whose gift is the most important makes as much sense as a debate between the eye, the ear, the hand and the foot as to which part of the body has the higher value.

This sets the stage for Paul's writing of what is surely the most beautiful, the most memorable and the most quoted passage in the entire Pauline corpus. After describing the body in which the various organ and parts work together for the good of the whole, Paul says, "I will show you a more excellent way". Then he begins his famous ode to love. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." He continues by defining love as patient, kind, not boastful or jealous and never ending. He recognised that all human knowledge is partial. No one sees God face to face. We all see "through a glass darkly". He urges the Corinthians to put away childish things and to grow up. Finally, he concludes "that faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love". It is Paul at his insightful best.

- John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part IX: Paul on the Final Events in Jesus' Life

"I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received." With those words Paul set out in writing to the Corinthians the earliest account we have of the final events in the life of Jesus. Paul was not an eyewitness to these final events, since as far as we know he never met or confronted the Jesus of history. Nevertheless, he presents himself in this epistle as the protector of and the conduit through which the critical events in Jesus' life are passed on to another generation. This is, he was asserting, the core and the crux of our faith story. It is therefore of "first importance".

Where did Paul receive this tradition? The best guess is informed by his words in the epistle to the Galatians written two to four years earlier. There Paul gives us the only first-hand account that we have of his conversion. It is not, however, the conversion story with which most people are familiar. It does not feature a journey to Damascus with orders from the Chief Priest to bring back in bondage any "followers of the Way", which was the title first used to designate the disciples of Jesus. Paul never mentions a bright light from heaven, or a voice, assumed to belong to Jesus, asking him why he was persecuting Jesus. Paul makes no mention of ever having been temporarily blind and shares no account of his baptism at the house at which time he recovered his sight. That "Damascus Road" story, of which these familiar details are a part, was the product of Luke's pen when he authored the book of Acts, a work that was not written until the middle years of the 9th decade 81-90AD), or some thirty years after Paul's death. Paul was not around to defend himself against the myth-makers. There is no mention in the authentic works of Paul that he might ever have had a dramatic experience on the Road to Damascus or that a man named Ananias might have played a significant role in that conversion. The book of Acts alone suggests that Ananias actually served as Paul's "midwife" in his birth as a Christian.

Most biblical scholars simply dismiss the historicity of this Acts account, yet they do not dismiss the historicity of Paul's conversion. The reason for that is that Paul tells us himself: "I persecuted the Church of God violently and tried to destroy it". He claims to have advanced dramatically in "the tradition of my Fathers, until God called me through his grace and was pleased to reveal his Son to me in order that I might preach among the Gentiles". Paul himself gives us no other details of his conversion. He does, however, and in a rather full way, relate his activities following this life-altering moment. "I did not confer with flesh and blood", he says, "I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me". Instead, he says, "I went away into Arabia and again I returned to Damascus".

Continuing his chronicle of that time, he says, "After three years, I went up to Jerusalem". His purpose, he said, was to visit Cephas, which was Simon's nickname. Simon was called "the rock". In Greek the word for rock was "petros", while in Aramaic the word for rock was "kepha". So Simon is best known in the Bible for his nicknames, Peter in Greek and Cephas in Aramaic. Both meant something close to our word "Rocky" today. In those 15 days with Cephas, Paul must have heard for the first time the details of the life of Jesus in their earliest and most primitive form. This meeting with Peter would have come no earlier than four and no later than nine years after the crucifixion. So in these words of Paul we have gotten back to the first decade of Christian memory and have touched primitive Christianity. Jesus is clearly a person of history, not a mythological creation.

It is fascinating to note what Paul actually says and perhaps even more to note what he does not say about the death of Jesus. He covers the cross in just ten literal words: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures". Elsewhere in Paul's writing he refers to the cross and to Jesus as the crucified one, so I think it is fair to say that Paul knew that Jesus had died at the hands of the Romans by means of crucifixion. Paul has also begun to interpret the meaning of that death. It was "for our sins", he asserted. That phrase, which was destined to form a major building block in the much later theologies of the atonement, appears to have been lifted by Paul out of the Synagogue's liturgy of Yom Kippur, in which the "innocent lamb of God" was slain as an atonement offering for the sins of the people.

Paul adds further that this death of Jesus was "in accordance with the scriptures". The two places in the scriptures to which Paul might have been alluding were the "servant" passages of Isaiah 40-55, in which the servant absorbed the pain and hostility of the world and returned it as love; or perhaps to II Zechariah (9-14), in which the shepherd king of the Jews was betrayed into the hands of those who bought and sold animals in the Temple for thirty pieces of silver. Within the first decade of Christian history, we can safely assume that these two passages in the Hebrew Bible had become incorporated into the disciples' understanding of Jesus. Please note also that Paul seems to know nothing of the later developing narratives that purport to tell the details of the

crucifixion. There is for Paul no betrayal by Judas, no prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, no arrest, no trial, no Pilate, no Barabbas, no denial by Peter, no torture by the Romans, no purple robe or crown of thorns, no Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross, no one crucified with him, no words spoken from the cross, no expression of separation from God, no cry of thirst and no darkness at noon. All of those things appear to be later developing details that simply are not part of what was handed to Paul as being of "first importance".

Then Paul moves on to look at the rest of the final events in the life of Jesus. After he died, says Paul, "he was buried". Again no details are given. Paul appears not to know anything about the tomb in which Jesus was laid or the spices that were used in the burial. He certainly appears to know nothing of a man named Joseph of Arimathea, who comes into the tradition much later as the architect of the burial. Again most scholars today regard the familiar burial stories of the gospels as late developing traditions. Paul probably does not include any reference to these things, because these traditions had not yet been developed or even born.

Paul then moves to the crux of the Christian claim: Jesus, he says, "was raised". Paul always employs a passive verb to describe what came to be called Easter. Jesus never "rises" in Paul. God always "raises" him. Into what? That should be the question we ask. Did God raise him from death back into the life of this world? Was the body of Jesus physically resuscitated and thus enabled to walk out of the tomb? That has been the way many have incorrectly read Paul. That is, however, clearly not what Paul understood Easter to be. If resurrection was a resuscitation of a dead person back into the life of this physical world, then the raised person would inevitably have to die again at a later point in time. There is no other way to get out of this life. Paul will, however, write in another place these words: "Christ being raised from the dead dies no more. Death has no more dominion over him". That does not sound like physical resuscitation back to the life of this world to me.

Paul adds to the resurrection account only two details. Whatever this raising was it occurred, he said, "on the third day" and it was, he repeats, "in accordance with the scriptures". Was this reference to the "third day" a reference to physical time? Or had these words already become a symbol developed before Paul, but then adopted by Paul? When the early gospels were written, their authors were not sure whether this traditional and thus proper time measure was "after three days", which is what Mark quotes Jesus as having said on three occasions, or "on the third day", as both Matthew and Luke changed Mark to read. That would not be the same day. Either way, "on" or "after" the third day is hard to fix chronologically with the way the gospels tell the story. If the timeline of the gospels is followed literally Jesus dies at 3pm in the afternoon and is buried by sundown or by 6pm. From sundown to midnight is six hours. From midnight on Friday to midnight on Saturday is twenty-four hours. From midnight to dawn or 6am on Sunday morning is six more hours. Put those time markers together and the best one can get is not three days, but thirty-six hours, which is only a day and a half. So how did we get to the concept of three days? That is some of the data that suggests that three days is a symbol and not a literal measure of time. If that is so, then we need to wonder where it came from. Was it adapted from the three days it takes the moon to move into total darkness and then back to light as "the new moon?" "Three days" could possibly be a time measure like "forty days", which the Jews used to mark revelatory moments in history. I think it is obvious that three days was for Paul a symbol and not a measure of "clock" or "calendar" time.

Then Paul gets to what he calls those to whom the raised Jesus was "made manifest", or those to whom Jesus appeared. The Greek word that is translated "appeared" in this Corinthian text is the same word used by the translators of the Septuagint (a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek between the 3rd and 2nd Centuries BC) to describe how God "appeared" to Moses at the Burning Bush (see Exodus 3). Did Moses "see" God in a physical way? Could Moses have caught the likeness of God on his camera if he had had the ability to take pictures? Or was this a poetic description of a defining insight? Was it an example of what we would later call "insight" or "second sight"? The story is far more complex than most people think. Next week we will look at the list of names of those to whom Paul says the raised Christ appeared. The story then gets more intriguing, so stay tuned.

– **John Shelby Spong**

The Origins of the New Testament

Part X: Resurrection According to Paul - I Corinthians

The first written account that we have of the Easter event in the Bible - Paul addressing the congregation in Corinth around the year 54-55 - gives us material that is both scanty and provocative. In order to understand his meaning fully, we need to cleanse our minds of the traditional Easter content found in the gospels. When Paul wrote, no gospel existed. Indeed Paul died without ever knowing that there was such a thing as a gospel. To go where this column needs to go I must not allow myself to be influenced by ideas of which Paul had never heard. So to understand what resurrection meant to Paul I seek to put myself and you, my readers, into the actual frame of reference that was present a generation before any gospel had entered history.

To show how thorough this purge is we need to be aware that there is in Paul's writing no hint of a special tomb in a special garden owned by one named Joseph of Arimathea, no account of a stone that had been placed against the mouth of this tomb, no mention of either a messenger or an angel making the resurrection announcement and no reference to women coming to the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week, bringing spices to anoint him. Paul has no narrative detail such as the setting Matthew employs on a mountaintop in Galilee, which enabled the raised Jesus to give the divine commission. He reveals no knowledge of Luke's narrative of the two disciples walking to the village of Emmaus who are overtaken by a stranger, who turns out to be Jesus, or of John's narrative that focused on a resurrection appearance with Thomas absent, his subsequent doubt and his later ecstatic words, "My Lord and my God". Paul only provides a list of those to whom he claims this raised Christ was manifested. In Paul, there are no supernatural signs accompanying either Jesus' crucifixion or his resurrection. Paul knows nothing about the supposed darkness of the sun from 12noon to 3:00pm on the day of the crucifixion, of which all the gospels take notice. He mentions no earthquakes, no Eucharistic context for the resurrection and no cosmic ascension, all of which play a large role in the various gospel narratives. If these things were part of the original Easter story, then we must conclude that Paul was either not interested in or aware of them, or we must raise the distinct possibility that these traditions were not part of the original Christian story, but were developed after Paul's death and thus are not historical at all. As these realisations dawn, the traditional reading of the resurrection stories, as if they are literal recollections, begins to fade as realistic possibilities. Paul thus provides us with the earliest glimpse we have into primitive Christianity and it is quite revealing, even troubling, since it challenges what has become "common Christian wisdom".

When Paul finally gets around to listing the key witnesses to whom, he asserts, the raised Christ had made himself "manifest", we enter a world of mystery and intrigue. Even Paul's list calls most of our pious Easter conclusions into question.

Was the resurrection of Jesus a physical event that took place within the boundaries of time, an event that could be documented as a literal, observable, historical occurrence? I do not think so. Paul actually asserts in the letter to the Romans (written some four years after I Corinthians), that it was in the resurrection itself that God "designated" Jesus to be "the Son of God". By the standards of the Nicene theology of the 4th Century, Paul was thus a heretic, for he asserts that God raised Jesus into the status of being the divine son *only* at the resurrection. This attitude would later be called "Adoptionism" and was condemned by a future church council as an "impaired" understanding of Jesus. Our study, therefore, begins to force us to probe a far deeper mystery, that is the nature of Jesus, himself.

When Paul gets around to listing his witnesses, he begins with Cephas. Cephas was the Aramaic nickname for the disciple whose given name was Simon. Tradition suggested that Jesus had called him "the Rock". The word for rock in Greek is "petros", so Peter was his Greek nickname. The word for rock in Aramaic is "kepha", so Cephas became his Aramaic nickname. Paul always called Peter "Cephas". There is nothing unusual about Cephas being listed first. Simon was generally regarded as the head of the disciple band, but one wonders whether this was a reading back into history of the role that Simon played in the life of the early church and thus in the resurrection drama. We will never know for sure, but the primacy of Peter is a note present throughout the gospel writing period. In Mark, the messenger of the resurrection says to the women, "Go tell the disciples and Peter". Peter is the one portrayed as making the confession that Jesus is the Christ at Caesarea Philippi. Peter is the one for whom Jesus says he will pray that "when you are converted, you will strengthen the brethren".

Next on Paul's list is "the twelve". The designation "the twelve" is fascinating for two reasons. First, while the number twelve for the disciples is a constant in the gospels, they do not agree on who constituted that body. Mark and Matthew have one list. Luke and Acts have another. John does not ever provide a list of the twelve, but he refers to people not on any other list, like Nathaniel, whom he portrays as clearly at the centre of the Jesus movement. It is quite possible that the number twelve was a more important symbol than were the actual people who constituted the twelve. The second fascinating thing about Paul's use of the designation "the twelve" is that Judas is clearly still one of them. Paul quite obviously had never heard of the tradition that one of the twelve was a traitor. The betrayal involving Judas Iscariot thus also appears not to have been an original part of the Christian story. When Judas does appear in the gospels, he is a literary composite of all of the traitors in Jewish scriptures, which hardly suggests that he was himself a person of history.

Next, Paul says that the raised Jesus appeared to "500 brethren at once". There is nothing in any later gospel that provides any clue as to the content of this claim. An early 20th Century New Testament scholar sought to establish a connection between the appearance to these 500 brethren at once and the Pentecost experience described in the book of Acts, but that is a huge stretch! This strange list will get even stranger as it gets longer.

Paul moves on to say that next, the raised Jesus appeared to James. Who is this James? Is he James, the son of Zebedee; James, the son of Alphaeus; or James, the brother of the Lord? Those are the three "James" included in the pages of early Christian history. By a process of elimination, James, the brother of the Lord, appears to be the probable one. James, the son of Zebedee, was killed by King Herod in the early years of the Christian movement, according to the book of Acts (12:1). James, the son of Alphaeus, is a total unknown, never mentioned again in any Christian writing that we can locate beyond this inclusion on the list of twelve disciples. James, the brother of Jesus, however, was a major player in early Christian history. It is this James at whom Paul directs his anger in the Epistle to the Galatians. It is this James who appears to have been the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem when Peter departed on his missionary journeys. It is this James who insisted that Gentiles had to become Jews first before they could become Christians. The weight of scholarship suggests that this is the James to whom Paul is referring. The idea that Jesus had no brothers and sisters was born in a much later period of history, when the attempt was being made to prove that the mother of Jesus was a "perpetual virgin". Mark, the first gospel to be written, refers to Jesus' four brothers by name (Mark 6:3): James, Joses, Judas and Simon. Mark further states that Jesus had at least two sisters, neither of whom, in that patriarchal world, was deemed worthy of naming. So the intrigue deepens.

The next name on Paul's list only adds to that mystery. "Then", says Paul, "he appeared to all the apostles". Who are they? He has already mentioned the twelve. This must be a different group. Paul was not given to vain repetition. A distinction between "the twelve" and "the apostles" was clear to Paul, but it had disappeared by the time of the gospels.

The final name on the list is the most fascinating of all. "Last of all", Paul writes, "as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me". Paul was making the startling claim that he too had been a witness to the resurrection and that his resurrection experience was identical to the experience that everyone else on his list had, except that his was last.

How much later would "last" be? The early 20th Century church historian Adolf Harnack made a study of this and came to the conclusion that the conversion of Paul could not have happened any earlier than one year or any later than six years following the crucifixion. No one has challenged that finding. If that is accurate, as I believe it is, then we have to conclude that Paul understood the resurrection very differently from the way it is portrayed in the later gospels. For Paul, the resurrection was not an act of a dead man walking out of a tomb and back into the world. It was not the physical resuscitation of a three-days-dead body. A resuscitated formerly-deceased body does not wait around for one to six years to make another dramatic appearance. Even St. Luke recognised this when he placed the ascension of Jesus forty days after the first Easter, at which time, he states, the appearances ceased. Resurrection thus clearly meant something different to Paul in the early years of the Christian Church. By the time the gospels were written (71-100 AD - CE) the idea of resurrection had evolved until it had become quite physical and stories were told about the resurrected Jesus walking, talking, eating, drinking and interpreting scripture in a physically functioning, resuscitated body. That, however, is clearly not Paul's understanding. What, then, did the resurrection mean to Paul? Can we ever recover that original meaning of Easter? We can try and I will seek to do that in next week's column.

- John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XI: Resurrection as Paul Understood It

It is quite easy to see how one could read Paul, especially those epistles known as I Thessalonians and Galatians and come away believing that Paul saw the resurrection of Jesus as a literal miracle in which a deceased body, quite physically, was restored and walked out of a tomb alive and once more was part of the life of this world. That distortion in understanding Paul is the all but inevitable result of reading Paul through the lens of the later gospels, especially Luke and John, in which this understanding of resurrection had clearly come to be believed. Paul, however, had never seen and would never see a gospel. He died before the first gospel was written. His view of resurrection, as a matter of fact, is quite different from what most suppose.

Nothing makes this as clear as an examination of other writings that are authentically from the pen of Paul. In Romans (1:1-4) Paul writes: God declared (or designated) Jesus "to be the Son of God" by raising him from the dead. That does not mean physically resuscitating him back into the life of this world, as many have argued. If it did, the words attributed to Paul in Colossians would make no sense. In this epistle Paul is made to suggest that the resurrection was the account of Jesus being raised into the presence and eternity of God: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek those things which are above *where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God...*" Please be aware that the story of Jesus being at the right hand of God is a reference to the resurrection, not the ascension, since the story of the ascension, against which these words are misinterpreted, would not be written for almost thirty more years. The word "raised" in Paul's mind embraced both dimensions of what would later be separated into the dual activities of "resurrection" that is, being raised from death and the grave and "ascension", which meant being united with God in heaven. For Paul those two actions were one thing. Jesus was not resuscitated back into the life of this world; he was raised into being part of who God is. It was not resuscitation, it was transformation.

This interpretation is confirmed once more in another text from Romans that we quoted earlier in this series. There Paul writes: "Christ being raised from the dead, will never die again, death has no more dominion over him - the life he lives, he lives to God". A person raised physically back into the life of this world would surely die again. That is the universal law of life - all living things ultimately die. It is clear that resuscitation back into the physical life of this world is not what Paul had in mind when he spoke of Jesus "being raised". Again in Romans, Paul suggests that "As Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father, we too might walk in newness of life". That is, in this Christ figure a new dimension has been added to our lives that is not subject to death. Paul later speaks of being raised to the "new life of the spirit". He says that the one (Jesus) "who was raised from the dead and who is at the right hand of God", has been enthroned as part of the life of God, understood as dwelling above the sky, external to the life of this world. Still later Paul writes to the Romans: "Who will ascend to heaven to bring Christ down?" In the mind of Paul, resurrection raised Jesus into the presence and being of God. Paul argues in 1st Corinthians that "flesh and blood cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven". He is so obviously not talking about the physical resuscitation of the body of Jesus so that he could return to his former life. It is not for this life that we have hope. Resurrection was rather the transformation of who he was to a realm or to a state of consciousness, beyond the boundaries of time and space. That is why Paul goes to such lengths to make a distinction between our natural bodies and something he called "a spiritual body".

We have trouble envisioning what this is all about for two primary reasons. The first is that we are using human words that are bound by both time and space to describe an experience that, if it is real, is beyond time and space. Second, our minds have been corrupted by later understandings of resurrection, shaped primarily by the last two gospels to be written, Luke and John. In those gospels the physicality of the resurrected Jesus is emphasised. The portrait of the raised Jesus drawn in these two 9th and 10th decade pieces of writing is a body in which death has been reversed. He asks for food to demonstrate that his gastrointestinal system is functioning. He is portrayed as both walking and talking to demonstrate that his skeletal system, his vocal chords and his larynx are functioning. He is interpreted as teaching and opening their minds to the meaning of scripture to demonstrate that his brain is functioning. He is said in Luke to have argued that he was not a ghost and to have urged the disciples to touch his very physical flesh to demonstrate that he was in fact fleshly. In John he is pictured as inviting Thomas to examine his wounds. Of note is the fact that only in Luke and John are resurrection and ascension portrayed as separate events. As two distinct acts resurrection and ascension have very different meanings. Resurrection gets Jesus physically back into the life of the world; ascension gets him back to his origins that were thought to be in God, God's self.

What we need to embrace is the oft-forgotten fact that Paul was a Jew and that he thus processed everything that he experienced in and through the life of Jesus in terms of the Jewish traditions. So to hear Paul's words in this proper Jewish context, we have to look at the traditions of the Jews for examples of people being raised from life or even being "translated" from death into God's presence. In none of these cases was this act conceived of as a physical resuscitation back into the life of this world. There are three such episodes in the Hebrew Scriptures and each one of these three finds itself referred to in the Christian story. It is clear that these Jewish stories served as the examples that were destined to shape not only Paul's thought on the resurrection, but also informed all early Christian thinking.

The first one of these Jewish stories involved a man named Enoch, whose story is told in a single verse in the 4th Chapter of Genesis. He is identified simply as the father of Methuselah, who was presumed to be the oldest person in the Bible, having reached, according to the Bible, the ripe old age of 969 years. Of Enoch it was said that he "walked with God and was not, for God took him". Enoch was considered to have lived a life of such goodness and holiness that his virtue was rewarded by being lifted beyond death into the immediate presence of God. Later much mythology gathered around the figure of Enoch and during the inter-testament years he was said to have authored a book that described the realm of God as only an eyewitness could do. This "Book of Enoch" found a place in writings called the "Pseudapigrapha" - and from that position exercised great influence on the developing Jesus story.

The second of these Jewish stories described the final events in the life of Moses, the greatest of all the Jewish heroes, the founder of Israel and the father of the law. The death of Moses is recorded in Deuteronomy 34 with great care, but also with much mystery. Moses was said to have died in the wilderness of the land of Moab with only God present. God was said to have buried him in a grave that God had prepared, the location of which is "unknown from that day to this". God was portrayed as writing an epitaph that presumably was designed to eulogise this gigantic figure. It was not long, however, before the tradition began to grow that Moses had not actually died, but had been transformed and transported into God's presence and was now himself an inhabitant in the dwelling place of God.

The final figure in this Jewish trilogy was Elijah, probably second to Moses alone in the hierarchy of Jewish heroes. Elijah was deemed to be the father of the prophets and thus of the prophetic movement in Judaism. When the Jews defined Judaism, it was in terms of its twin towers - the law and the prophets, or Moses and Elijah.

The story of Elijah's death is told in II Kings, again with details that are full of wonder and mystery. In effect the narrative says that Elijah did not really die at all. He was rather transported into the presence of the living God by a magical, fiery chariot drawn by magical, fiery horses and propelled heavenward by a God-sent whirlwind. In that new status, as one who shares in the presence of God, Elijah was portrayed as dispensing a double portion of his spirit onto his single disciple, Elisha, who had been chosen to be his successor. When Luke wrote the story of Jesus' ascension in the book of Acts, he borrowed many of the details from this story of the ascension of Elijah. In a revealing interpretive clue, Mark, Matthew and Luke all relate the story of the "Transfiguration" of Jesus in which it was said that Jesus conferred with Moses and Elijah, both of whom had transcended the limits of death and were already dwelling in the presence of the God of life.

These were the things that the Jewish Paul had in mind when he said that Jesus had been raised from the dead. The resurrection was for Paul the act by which God affirmed the life of Jesus as holy by raising him at death into the eternal life of God. Jesus was thus able to offer to his followers a pathway through himself into the eternity of God. The raised Jesus was thus the mediator of this access, the way into eternal life for all who came through him. The resurrection of Jesus in its earliest formulation thus had nothing to do with empty tombs, physical resuscitations and apparitions. Those expansions would all come later in the developing Christian story. This is, however, where Paul was and this is what the resurrection of Jesus meant in the primitive Christian community.

When this series resumes, we will look at Paul's most systematic work, the Epistle to the Romans.

- John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XII: Romans - Paul's Most Thorough Epistle

If there is one book in the New Testament that might be called "The Gospel of Paul", it is the Epistle to the Romans. This letter is different from all of Paul's other work in several ways. First, Paul had never been to Rome and so he had no relationship whatsoever with the Roman church. He was not unknown to these Roman Christians, but this church did not view him as related to them in any special way. Neither Paul nor any of his disciples had been its founder. He was thus not in charge of its ongoing life and it was not his responsibility to adjudicate their disputes or to solve their problems. These were the things that had in large measure framed the context of Paul's other letters. Second, and as a direct consequence of this first distinguishing mark, this letter was a reasoned theological treatise with universal themes rather than a response to critical, but nonetheless local issues. Third, Paul was a supplicant in this letter to Rome. He was in the position of asking a favour from them, so he was eager to present himself favourably in order to win their support. Paul wanted this congregation in Rome to assist his missionary endeavours by providing him with a base of support, so that he might expand his journeys to places as far away as Spain. To gain that support, Paul was concerned to put his theological understanding of the Christian faith clearly before them and to minimise the negativity that always followed him from conservative parts of the Christian community. For these reasons, Paul's Epistle to the Romans reflects a clear and concise statement of Paul's conception of Jesus, the meaning of salvation as he understood it and his version of what Christianity was all about.

The Epistle to the Romans is Paul at his studied best. It is also the longest and most carefully organised piece of Paul's writing that we possess and is a logical, orderly and systematic treatise. He moves from his introductory and salutary opening verses (1: 1-15) to the statement of the theme basic in all of Paul's work. Salvation, he argues, is the gift of God and it is available to all people. This theme is overtly stated in 1: 16-17.

Next, he proceeds to build his case by articulating his perception of the need present in both the Gentile world and the Jewish world for the Christian gift (1: 18-3:30). Then he spells out his understanding of the Christ (3: 21-4:25). He concludes this section of the epistle with what is probably the most crucial and carefully stated words of Paul's career, by articulating his understanding of what life in Christ is and can be (5: 1-8:39). That brings his basic theological argument to its climax and conclusion as he reaches his crescendo in verses 38 and 39 of chapter 8, where he pens these climactic words: *"For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord."* We will return to the totality of this Pauline argument in the columns over the next few weeks in order to explicate the earliest understanding we have of the role of Christ in the drama of human salvation. For now, however, I want to move quickly in an effort to create in the minds of my readers a clear picture of the totality of this epistle.

Having come to his powerful conclusion at the end of Chapter 8, Paul next moves on to what can only be understood as a large parenthesis that consumes him in chapters 9 through 11. Here he addresses a question close to his heart as a Jew and about which the Christian movement was at that time still torn in conflict. Why was it that the people of his Jewish nation as a whole appeared to be rejecting the promised gift of salvation that Christ came to bring, which he believed had been promised to them and for which, in Paul's mind, both the Jewish Scriptures and all of Jewish history had been preparing them? So deeply did the Jesus message resonate with the Jewish Paul that he found it all but unfathomable that all Jewish people did not see it as he saw it. So he wrestles with this question in this great parenthesis in a very public way.

Paul introduces Chapter 9 with assertions that cause us to recognise how painful this dilemma was for him. "I am speaking the truth in Christ", he begins. "I am not lying", he assures them. "My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit." No one uses those particular phrases unless that person is quite apprehensive as to whether his argument will prevail. Then Paul goes on, with much emotion, to express his "great sorrow and increasing anguish in my heart". He would rather, he says, find himself accursed and cut off from Christ forever than to find his people, his tribe, in their present negative position. He argues that the people of Israel have been given a special relationship with God, which he characterises with the word "sonship". He recites the treasures found in Judaism: "The glory of the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship in the Temple and the promises of God". He traces this Jewish heritage as it flowed down the centuries from the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, until it came to what Paul believes is God's ultimate gift of salvation found in Christ Jesus. Yet he is aware that the majority of his own kinsmen stand apart from and are even negative to that gift. "Has the word of God failed?" he asks. He finds some consolation in that part of biblical history that suggests that not all the

descendants of Abraham were destined to share in the promise. God had chosen Isaac, Abraham's second-born son, over Ishmael, the firstborn. God had chosen Jacob, the younger twin, over Esau, the older twin. These were not examples of God's injustice, he argues, but a recognition of the fact that no one receives the promise of God as a birthright, but only as a gift of grace. It is, he argues, God's prerogative to have mercy on those on whom God decides to have mercy. It is a matter of being receptive. The clay, he states, does not tell the potter what the potter can mould the clay into being. He quotes first from Hosea and then from Isaiah to fortify his argument. He calls Moses to his aid. He suggests that Israel is still caught in its tribal identity and does not yet recognise that there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, since God is Lord of all and does not limit divine grace by nationality or even religion.

Paul wants no one to suggest that God has rejected the chosen ones. He reminds them that he is an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. He then recalls that the Jewish scriptures inform us that both Elijah and Elisha were sent to others and not just to the Jewish people.

Finally, as if the answer he was seeking dawned on him as he wrote, Paul came to a new insight, a new conclusion. The rejection of Jesus by the Jews was simply part of God's plan. Because of Israel's apparent inability to hear or to see, the door to salvation had been opened for the Gentiles to enter the Kingdom of God and thus the message of salvation could reach the entire world. Israel's negativity must be seen as playing a role in the divine drama. The hardness of heart that Jews now displayed toward the gift of salvation was an act of divine providence, since it was the means whereby God would offer salvation to the world.

In many ways this was a strange argument, but it managed to bring resolution to what was for Paul an enormous conflict. Salvation was God's free gift to all beyond every human division and even Jewish rejection was destined to serve that purpose. So Paul, greatly relieved by this new insight, brings this segment of his letter to the Romans to an end with a doxology: "O the depth of the riches and the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways." Even as Paul says this, he offers his explanation of how the mind of God works.

Having completed this long parenthesis, Paul now employs the word "therefore" to hook together the theological argument of his first 8 chapters with the ethical implications of that argument, to which he now turns in chapter 12. He reminds his Roman readers that they are to treat their bodies as a living sacrifice, "acceptable to God". He urges them not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed, so that they do not think of themselves more highly than they ought to think. He repeats his body analogy that the church must be like the human body, a single whole but with many members. Christians are to rejoice in the gifts of all the members. He urges them to let their love be genuine, to hold fast to what is good, to contribute to the needs of the saints and to practice hospitality. Followers of Jesus are not to be overcome with evil but to overcome evil with God.

Next Paul addresses the responsibility of Christians to the civil authorities. He suggests that all authority comes from God, so they are not to resist political power. All earthly rulers, he declares, are "God's servants on earth". It was a variation of the later divine right of kings argument. We might note in passing that this, or similar texts, have been used throughout history against all revolutionary movements. The British used it against the Americans in 1776 and the North used it against the South in 1860. Martin Luther King, Jr., had to set Paul's words aside to carry out his role as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement. It is a perennial tactic of the established authority against the rising of a new consciousness.

Paul finally introduces relativity into things when he says that nothing is unclean in and of itself, but it is unclean for those who think it unclean. This idea was contained in Paul's plea for followers of Jesus to be sensitive to the values of one another. Christ, he concludes, was even willing to become a servant to the circumcised in order that Gentiles might glorify God.

Having glimpsed the sweep of his entire argument, we will turn in the next weeks to examine the core of Paul's thought in much deeper detail. I hope you will stay tuned.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XIII: The Theology of Paul as Revealed in Romans

Paul of Tarsus was a 1st Century man. He thought in categories consistent with the world view of his time. He believed that he lived in a three-tiered universe over which God reigned from a heavenly throne just above the sky. Paul had never heard of a weather front, a germ or a virus. He viewed both the weather patterns and human sickness as being divine punishment sent from this external, supernatural God and based on our deserving. One should not, therefore, read the 1st Century Paul as if he spoke from the vantage point of eternal truth. That is what biblical literalism does. The Bible, which many Christians call "the Word of God", includes letters that Paul wrote. They are personal, passionate, argumentative and sometimes even vindictive. Paul would probably be the most surprised person in the world and the most disturbed, to learn that the words in his letters had been elevated by the people of the Christian Church to a realm in which they have achieved the position of ultimate authority in which Paul's voice is actually confused with the voice of God.

This is not to say, however, that Paul was without insight. He was a keen observer of human life and one who was a perceptive, even if an introverted, examiner of his own inner thought and being. Our task as modern interpreters of Paul is to separate Paul's incredible insights into human life from the dated and thus distorting world view of his day. It is not an easy task, but it is a doable one.

Paul was a human being with intense feelings. Prior to his conversion experience he was an uncompromising persecutor of the Christian movement. Following his conversion he was an uncompromising advocate for the Christian faith. While the object of his passion shifted dramatically, his personality remained quite constant. Almost inevitably he interpreted both what he believed was the meaning of the claim of Jesus' divinity and what he believed was the meaning of salvation out of his 1st Century understanding of human life and in the process, he always universalised the lens through which he viewed his world and himself. One must, therefore, never forget the highly subjective nature of Paul's insights.

Paul was also a Jew. He had studied under the great rabbi Gamaliel. He identified himself as a Hebrew, a member of the tribe of Benjamin and a zealot for the Torah. Judaism was the tradition in which and through which he viewed all of life. Paul did nothing, certainly including his religious life, in a halfway or lukewarm fashion.

We start to unravel this Pauline viewpoint first by looking at his understanding of the human situation. What does it mean to Paul to be human? From where comes the pain, the fear and the insecurity that marks human life? Paul was quite sure, out of his Jewish background, that human life was created in God's image with God's law written across the human heart. This human creature, who was in Paul's mind almost divine, had fallen from that lofty status into what he called "sin". It was, he believed, a cosmic fall that affected every human being and it doomed all people to a life in bondage to the incalculable power of sin. So Paul, looking at all human life through his own experience, lamented: "We cannot do the things we want to do, indeed we do the very things that we do not want to do". Sin for Paul was an alien power. "It is not I" who does these things, he offers defensively, but "sin that dwells within me". We are not now and we cannot ever be, he stated, what we were created to be. The human impulse toward sin was, for Paul, so deep that it actually prompted the act of sinning. This impulse is not and cannot be part of nature, lest God be blamed for it, but it nonetheless holds human life in its power. Listen to the pathos in Paul's words: "I delight in the law of God in my inmost nature, but I see in my members another law which is at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law that dwells in my members". It almost sounds like schizophrenia, but that is how Paul perceived himself and when he writes we hear his yearning to be freed from this state and his desire to be capable of directing his own life toward the purpose for which he believed he was created. To find the ability to do just that was for him the meaning of salvation and it was this gift of salvation that he believed he had experienced in Jesus. Human life, which was, he thought, created for fellowship with God, instead has been estranged from God, divided within itself and separated from all others. His dream was to be made whole, to be at one with God. He sought a biblical explanation for this human reality in the creation story that, true to the mind set of his day, he assumed to be history and thus a divinely inspired analysis of the human condition. St. Augustine, the 4th Century bishop of Hippo and the primary theologian in the first thousand years of Christian history, would take this Pauline insight and make it the basis for what is still called "traditional Christianity". It was because of this Paul/Augustine line of thought that Christianity still today wallows in sin and traffics in guilt. The Protestant mantra, "Jesus died for my sins", expresses it. So does the Catholic interpretation of the Mass, as the constant re-enactment of the moment in which Jesus overcame the sin of the world with his death on the cross. It was out of this mentality that guilt became the coin of the realm in institutional Christianity and that is how and why behaviour control has become the primary activity of the

Christian Church. When this "original sin" was tied by Augustine into sex and reproduction, the repression of sex became in Christianity an aspect of salvation. Celibacy and virginity became the higher paths. Repression, however, including sexual repression, never gives life. It rather creates victims. Christianity has become the major religion of victimisation in the western world. Bad anthropology inevitably creates bad theology.

Paul, perceiving what he believed was this fatal flaw in human nature saw Jesus ultimately as the rescuer of the flawed ones. Since all human life shared in that flaw, salvation was a universal gift given to all, "to the Jews first but also to the Gentiles". In this gift Paul believed that Christianity had the power to transcend all human divisions, including religious divisions, even the divisions created by the holiness of the Torah, the Jewish law, which excluded all who were not bound to the Torah. Salvation in his mind was that process in which human wholeness is offered to all. In Christ, he wrote, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, bond nor free. Salvation was a call to a new humanity and it was this vision that compelled Paul to become the missionary to the Gentiles, the one charged with turning the message of the Jewish Jesus into the gift of salvation offered to the entire world. When he wrote his letter to the Church of Rome, he spelled out this point of view hoping that the Roman Christians would feel as strongly about this vocation as he did and would thus be willing to provide him with the means that he hoped would carry him and his missionary activities to Spain and thus to "the uttermost parts of the world".

Paul's message was in this one sense profoundly true. There is about human life a sense of separation, of loneliness and a drive for survival that does indeed make us chronically self-centred, at war with our higher instincts. Paul's way of understanding and dealing with that humanity was and is, however, profoundly mistaken. Indeed it is inoperative and, by literalising this mistaken understanding, Christianity is today threatened with extinction.

As post-Darwinians we now know that there never was a perfect creation. All life has evolved from a single cell into our present self-conscious, enormously complex human life, which is for the time being at least at the top of the evolutionary process. Since there was no perfect creation, then there could not have been a "fall" from perfection. One cannot fall from a status one has never possessed. If we have not fallen from perfection, we do not need to be saved, redeemed or rescued. So the way Jesus has traditionally been interpreted falls into irrelevance. One can only artificially resuscitate a dying form as long as the presuppositions under-girding that form are still believable. The human experience, however, still cries out for some other explanation of this experience. What is it?

We are self-conscious creatures. All living things are survival oriented. Plants stretch to receive the light of the sun in order to live. Animals fight for life or flee danger in order to survive. Neither plant life nor animal life, however, is aware of its survival drive. Human beings are. When self-conscious creatures make their own survival their highest goal, they then organise their world around that need. That is what makes human life inevitably and universally self-centred, separated and cut off from others. We are our own worst enemy and we do violence to others in our drive to survive. This is not, however, because we have fallen into sin, as religious people still operating in a Pauline context continue to assert; it arises directly out of the given nature of our biological life. As still incomplete, evolving creatures we do not need to be "saved", we need rather to be lifted to a new level of humanity, a new level of consciousness where we can live for others, give ourselves away in love for others and be empowered to become all that each of us can be. *This is what salvation means.* This is what Paul experienced in Jesus, but he was trapped inside the presuppositions of his 1st Century, Jewish view of human life. He found in Jesus the power to accept himself, to love himself and to become himself. "Nothing", he said, "nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus." Paul's experience of human life was correct. His explanation was wrong. His experience of Christ as life-giving love was correct. His explanation of how that love was manifested in Jesus' life was wrong.

Next week, we will push this study of Romans to a new place and seek to translate Paul's experience into our presuppositions. I hope you will join us then.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XIV: What Does Salvation Mean to Paul?

Paul was a person who discovered in his Christ experience new dimension of life unknown to him before. In that sense he was a classic mystic. Every human experience, however, in order to be shared must pass through the medium of words. There is no other means of communicating content to another. In that process the wordless experience inevitably takes on the dimensions of the human mind with all its limitations. Human beings always reflect the presuppositions of the cultural wisdom of the day. They reflect the level of knowledge that the speaker has achieved. Inevitably they become limited and warped by that transition and are rendered finite and mortal. An experience of God may well be eternal, but no human explanation of that experience will ever be. That is a fact that religious believers in all traditions constantly forget. All sacred scriptures, developed creeds and complex theological doctrines cannot help but compromise truth, because nothing about the time-bound words they have to employ can ever be eternal. In a similar way God is by definition beyond the scope of the human mind, which is always captured in time and space. Since a horse cannot escape the limit of its "horse-ness" to describe what it means to be human, neither can a human being escape the limits of humanity in order to describe who or what God is. Paul wrestles with this reality constantly.

Paul talks about his experience of encountering the Christ as that which enabled him to transcend all of his limits and to cross all of those boundaries that separate him from others. In this newfound sense of an expanded humanity he came to a new sense of oneness. Because he was quite sure that this new wholeness resulted from his encounter with the risen Christ, he desperately needed to find the words to explain just how that worked. He was a Greek-speaking Jewish man living in the Mediterranean world of the 1st Century of the Common Era and had no other categories of thought to use, except the ones that his world provided. Our task in this column is to search through the time-bound words that he used in order to find a way to separate the eternal experience, which was so obviously real to him, from the pre-suppositions of his time and place in history that he used to explain his Christ experience, most of which have been dismissed by modern knowledge as no longer believable inside our world view. That means that, as students of the New Testament, we must always be engaged in an activity that is not unlike delicate surgery and we will find it a never-ending task. The world does not slow down to give any of us time to adjust. We begin with an analysis of Paul's view of human life.

Paul's writing reveals a person who is very much aware that something is wrong with humanity in general and with his own humanity in particular. He is quite sure that whatever this distortion is, all human life somehow shares in it. Paul expressed this in his ever-present sense that he was alienated from God, from all others and even from himself. There was indeed a war, he said, that is going on in his members. His Jewish tradition affirmed this sense that human life is somehow separated from God. The Jews, over their long history, had developed an annual fast day, which they observed with great solemnity and which they believed enabled them to acknowledge liturgically what their human reality was. They called this day "Yom Kippur" or "The Day of Atonement". The observance of "Yom Kippur" involved the slaughter of a carefully chosen sacrificial lamb, the blood from which they then smeared on the mercy seat in that part of the Temple called the Holy of Holies, which they believed was God's earthly dwelling place. A second Yom Kippur ritual occurred when they symbolically piled their sins on the back of a goat, known as the "scapegoat" and then drove this sin-bearing creature out into the wilderness, thus leaving them purified and newly at one with God.

Similar doctrines of atonement are found in almost every religious tradition the world over, because there is a universal human sense of being separate and alone that I believe is born in the emergence of self-consciousness, which only human beings possess. It manifests itself in the idea that none of us is what God intended us to be. The content of that statement varies widely, but the experience is part of what it means to be human. The Jewish version of it was based on the idea that God was the creator of all things and that nothing God made could itself be defined as evil. They had, therefore, to find a way to account for this human definition without blaming God. The ancient creation story in the beginning of the book of Genesis served this purpose well. In that story the goodness of God was upheld by the assertion that God looked out upon all that God had made and pronounced it good. The problem of human alienation and its resultant human evil, therefore, had to be something that human life brought upon itself. In that ancient Jewish story the perfection of God's creation had been broken by the disobedience of Adam and Eve. As a direct consequence, Adam and Eve and through them, all future human beings were condemned to live not in "Eden", but "East of Eden", to borrow a phrase from John Steinbeck. Human beings, this story asserted, were not so distorted that they did not remember their original glory, so they still possessed a yearning to return to the mythical garden where before being expelled they had once lived in the oneness of God. The story asserted, however, that the gates to that garden were forever locked

and were now even guarded by an angel with a flaming sword. Human life, the story suggested, could never return to its original status. So in this world of imperfection Cain killed Abel, Jacob cheated Esau out of his birthright, Joseph's brothers sold him into Egyptian slavery, the Jews escaped starvation by moving to Egypt, only to be cruelly treated by their Egyptian overlords and ultimately God was said to have intervened in history to bring these Jews to freedom. That is the way the biblical story unfolded.

That story, with that understanding of human life, shaped the liturgical life of the Jewish people. That is what created Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, to provide an annual occasion for the Jews to recall the glory of their creation and to face liturgically the fact of their alienation from that original goodness. The perfection of the sacrificial lamb, both physically, in that it could have no blemishes or broken bones and morally, in that it did not have the power to choose to do evil, represented to them what human life was created to be. So the perfect lamb was offered to God as a substitute for the human life, which was not worthy to be that offering. Human beings, out of their sense of alienation had to come to God only when they had been cleansed by "the blood of the perfect lamb of God".

Paul, shaped by this Yom Kippur understanding, interpreted Jesus under the symbol of Yom Kippur's the "Lamb of God" who had the power to "take away the sins of the world". He saw the death of Jesus on the cross to be analogous to the slaughter of the lamb on Yom Kippur. It offered a doorway back to God for all people. This is not only what salvation was all about to Paul, but that is also what Paul believed he experienced in the person of Christ. He accepted this gracious gift, undeserved and freely given, as that which had rescued him from "the bondage of sin". Thus he climaxed his theological argument in Romans by proclaiming that now "nothing in all creation can separate me from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus..." To offer this compelling gift to the world was what fuelled his missionary fervour.

We live today, however, on the other side of Charles Darwin, whose thought has destroyed most of Paul's presuppositions. For Darwin there never was a perfect creation. Life rather evolved over billions of years from a single cell into self-conscious complexity. Without original perfection there could have been no human fall into sin. If there was no human fall, there was no need for a divine rescue. No one can be rescued from a fall that never happened or be restored to a status one has never possessed. So the basis upon which Paul has constructed his concept of salvation has become inoperative. The universal experience that Paul sought to address may well still be real, but his explanation has been destroyed by the march of time.

Students of the life sciences have identified the drive to survive as a universal characteristic present in all living things. Survival drives adaptability. It is seen when plants gravitate to the sun, when vines snake across the forest floor in search of the tallest trees to which they then attach themselves, when desert cacti develop a capacity to store water, when fresh water plants develop elaborate systems to filter salt in tidal rivers and when wasps and ants in the jungle develop mutual defence alliances. This drive for survival is instinctual, not conscious in plant or animal life. In self-conscious human life, however, this drive to survive rises to our awareness and is installed as the highest human value, making us the world's first self-conscious, survival-oriented creatures. Everything in human life is bent to the service of our survival and that in turn inevitably makes human beings self-centred. This is not the result of some prehistoric or mythological fall - this is in the nature of our biology. Out of this survival mentality all of our fears about "others", our xenophobia and our prejudices arise. It is out of our survival needs that we fight wars, enslave and segregate those who are different, denigrate women, abuse homosexuals. That behaviour religion has dubbed "sin", the result of "the fall".

Can one find salvation by being rescued from this, as Paul seemed to believe? I do not think so. We can, however, find wholeness in the experience of being lifted beyond these boundaries. I am now convinced that this was the heart of what the Jesus experience was.

Next week, in our final column on Romans, we will seek to tell the Christ story as Paul experienced it, but against the background of this analysis of what it means to be human. It still rings for me at least with authenticity and integrity.

- John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XV: Who is Christ for Paul? The Gospel in Romans.

Paul's experience-based conviction that somehow and in some way everything that he meant by the word "God" had been met and was present in the life of the one he called Christ Jesus. "God was in Christ" was the way he referred to it rather ecstatically in one of his earlier epistles. Of course, as a citizen of the 1st Century, Paul believed that God was a supernatural, external being who had by some means been met in human history in the person of Jesus. Part of what this Christ experience meant to Paul was that "in Christ" all human boundaries disappeared. As Paul wrote to the Galatians several years earlier, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free..." That was for Paul "a new creation" that had overcome the deep-seated human sense of being separated, alone, broken and in need of restoration or healing. In Paul's mind only God could do this act of healing or be the healer to bring about this sense of a new wholeness. Because he believed that he found this healing in Jesus, he was driven to the obvious conclusion that through some means or by some process God must be uniquely present in this Christ. This was in a nutshell Paul's thinking process.

How did the holy God become present in Jesus so that this gift of salvation in Jesus could be offered? That was not so clear in Paul. He gives no evidence that he had ever heard of the late-developing (9th Decade) tradition introduced by Matthew that Jesus was miraculously born of a virgin, who had conceived by the Holy Spirit. Of Jesus' origins Paul says only that "he was born of a woman", like every human being is born and that he "was born under the law" like every other Jew. The word Paul used in this reference had absolutely no connotation of "virgin" in it. Paul also appears to have no knowledge that Jesus was a miracle worker. He never mentions a miracle attributed to Jesus in the entire Pauline corpus. Miracles appear to be an 8th Decade addition to the developing Jesus story introduced primarily by Mark, then copied by Matthew before being developed in more detail in both Luke and John. For Paul, Jesus was not a deity masquerading as a human being or a divine visitor to Earth; he was rather a human life in whom God had been experienced as present. As I mentioned earlier in this series, Paul seems to say in the first four verses of Romans that God actually incorporated Jesus into God at the time of the resurrection. Whenever Paul talks about the resurrection, he describes it as an act of God, not an act of Jesus. God raised Jesus from the dead for Paul; Jesus never rises from the dead by his own power. Paul did speak in Philippians, in a passage that I will get to soon, about God somehow emptying the divine presence into Jesus of Nazareth, but the words there do not mean pre-existence, as they are so often interpreted to suggest. There was, however, a God presence that was in Christ, of which Paul was certain and in that God presence, he rested his claim for the salvation that he was certain Jesus came to bring. Can we translate Paul's experience of being made whole in Christ Jesus into an explanation that is appropriate to our time, when to speak about God as dwelling above the sky violates everything we have learned since the days of Galileo in the 17th Century? Can we speak of God as intervening in life and history in a supernatural way without violating everything we have learned about how the universe operates since the days of Isaac Newton? Can we still speak of the original perfection of human life and its subsequent fall into sin, without violating everything we have learned about human origins from the time of Charles Darwin? That is our task in this column.

We begin by turning the religious question around. What was there about Jesus that caused the people who had experienced his presence to explain it in supernatural terms? What was there about him that caused people to assert that human life alone could never have produced what it was they met in Jesus? That was what virgin birth traditions were designed to do. What was there about Jesus' life that caused them to attribute miracles to him; nature miracles, healing miracles, raising of the dead miracles? In the climax of the Jesus story, what was there about Jesus' life that caused them to believe that death itself, what Paul called the last enemy, was overcome by him? Paul was certain that wholeness was the gift of Christ, that in this Jesus the world that had long been separated from God was now reconciled, that in Jesus God and human life had come together and that humanity and divinity had entered one another. The eternal and the temporal had in the life of Jesus touched each other.

In seeking to understand how the disciples of Jesus tried to communicate this truth, we have to look at the way the Jesus experience was described in the later gospel tradition. First, tribal boundaries were transcended. The call of Christ was to a new humanity in which tribal identity mattered not at all. We see this all over Mark's Gospel, as he has Jesus heal the daughter of a Syrophenician Gentile woman and then raise back to life the daughter of a Gentile named Jairus. It is Mark who has Jesus feed a Jewish crowd of 5000 people with five loaves on the Jewish side of the lake and then feed a Gentile crowd of 4000 with seven loaves on the Gentile side of the lake. It is Mark who puts a Gentile soldier underneath the cross to watch Jesus draw his final breath and then to pronounce that truly God was present in this life. "Surely this man was the Son of God", he is quoted as saying. This soldier was not engaged in a 4th Century Christological debate, as he is so often interpreted to be

doing. He was rather describing the new God-filled humanity found in the human ability to give life away, to escape the survival-oriented reality of humanity. It was Matthew who has Jesus' final words be the divine commission to carry the meaning of Jesus, the life-giving love of God, beyond the boundaries of our tribal security by going into all the world - to those who are different, unbaptised, uncircumcised, unclean, but still not beyond the love of God, as this Jesus revealed. It was Luke who suggested that the story of Jesus was not complete until it had rolled from Galilee, where it began; to Samaria, the home of those who were the objects of the deepest Jewish prejudice in the 1st Century; to Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish world; and finally to Rome, which was then the centre of the world itself.

The Jesus experience that would ultimately dominate the gospels would set aside human prejudice against Samaritans, against lepers, against women, because human wholeness can never be found in the denigration of another. The Jesus of the gospels would transcend the boundaries of religion in the name of humanity, best symbolised in the words attributed to him that all religious rules are finally in the service of expanded humanity. Even the Sabbath day laws must always be set aside if they ever diminish human life.

These were the things that seemed to flow from the life of this Jesus, bearing witness to the fact that his humanity was full, complete and free. He did not need the sweet narcotic of human praise in order to be whole. He did not have to build himself up by tearing down another or even lording it over another. He embraced everyone just as they were, from the rich young ruler to the woman caught in the act of adultery. He loved them into being all that they could be.

This quality of the life of Jesus is more profoundly recorded in the story of his crucifixion than anywhere else. Jesus was betrayed and he loved his betrayer. Jesus was denied and he loved his denier. Jesus was forsaken and he loved his forsakers. Jesus was judged worthy of being condemned, mocked, persecuted and murdered and he loved those who condemned, mocked, persecuted and killed him. That is not the picture of a broken human life, but of a whole life, a complete life, one free to give life away because that one possesses life so fully.

The quintessential essence of his life comes in the portrait of his dying. Jesus is not pictured as grasping at life or seeking to extend it another minute; rather as his life is draining away, he is still portrayed as giving life and love to others. As he dies, he is pictured as speaking a word of forgiveness to the soldiers, a word of hope to the penitent and words of consolation to a grieving mother. That is a life power in him that death cannot overcome. Those who do not know how to live cling to life with a desperation born out of fear, but those who possess life are free to lay it down because death no longer has dominion over them. That is what people saw in Jesus.

These were also the things about Jesus of Nazareth that grasped at the heart of the fragile, self-denigrating Paul, the Paul who felt fragmented, who experienced a war between the law that governed his body and the law that governed his mind, the Paul who cried out in anguish, "O, wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death?" In and through Jesus, as Jesus had been presented to him, Paul experienced the healing presence of the love of God, a love that accepted him as he was and called him into being all that he could be. That was the meaning of salvation for Paul and since only God could bring that salvation, so Jesus must be of God. Paul opened himself to that experience and lived into it. That is why he claimed that he lived in the glorious liberty of the children of God. That is why he could write that nothing could separate him from the love of God. It was out of Paul's sense of having found wholeness, reconciliation and atonement in Jesus that he wanted to bear the Jesus message to the world. All human life, he believed, quite accurately, must find a way to be lifted beyond its survival mentality into the ability to live for another, to give life away to another. Paul found that power in Jesus.

The Christian Church lives today but for one reason: To make people aware of the love of God that accepts us as we are and then calls us to life fully and to be all that each of us can be. Then we give that gift away to all. That is what it means to say God was in Christ.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XVI: The Elder Paul - Philemon and Philippians

The process of aging works wonders on the human spirit. Battles once so emotional that they seemed to pit life against death lose their rancour in time and the differences that once divided people so deeply lose their potency. Age brings both mellowing and perspective. That was surely true of Paul. In this series I have tried to read Paul chronologically - that is, in the order of his writings. It is an inexact science, but I am comfortable with the order we have adopted. In that way we can see the changes taking place before our eyes. In I Thessalonians, written about the year 51 and thus Paul's first epistle, he was concerned about the fact that the second coming of Christ had not yet arrived. Why, they wondered, had Jesus not returned by now to inaugurate the desired kingdom of God on earth? Paul tries anxiously to explain the delay. In Galatians, his second epistle, we see the white hot anger that separated Paul from those he called "the Judaisers", who are symbolised in Galatians by James, the Lord's brother and by Peter, both of whom were demanding that all converts keep the Torah and only be allowed to come into Christianity by way of Judaism. Paul, deeply touched by what he came to call "grace", would never submit to this legalistic point of view from which he had fled, namely that salvation came through one's deeds, one's obedience to the Torah.

The Paul of the middle years of his career was thoughtful, systematic and good at problem solving. In this phase of his life, he penned his letters to the Corinthians and his masterpiece, his epistle to the Romans. In the Corinthian letters, he was majestic in spelling out the meaning of love: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" and also in that epistle he wrote the fullest understanding of Jesus' resurrection that we possess. In Romans he comes as close as he ever would to systematising the meaning of Christ in beautiful words that ring across the ages like "Nothing can separate me from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus".

The years rolled on for Paul, however, as they do for all of us and he grew mellow. He was no longer convinced that Jesus would come again in his lifetime, so he settled into long range plans and even began to contemplate his own death. In this phase of his life, which is true for most of us, he lived more in the "now" and less in the future and so relationships grew in importance for him. It was at this stage of his life that he wrote the two epistles that we consider today, Philemon and Philippians, both of which reflect the more contemplative Paul. With the completion of our consideration of Philemon and Philippians, we will have probed the seven epistles about which there is no debate as to their being the authentic work of Paul. Next we will look at those epistles that have much Pauline substance, but increasingly scholars suggest they are "pseudo-Paul", that is, written in Paul's name, but not by Paul himself. They are II Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians. There are other epistles that bear the name of Paul, namely I and II Timothy and Titus, that are in a third category. Universally they are regarded as not authentic and they are actually dated later than some of the gospels, so we will look at them later. If we are trying to study the New Testament in the time sequence in which its various books are written, we will have to place Mark and perhaps Matthew ahead of these "Pastoral Epistles". For now, however, we focus on Philemon and Philippians, the epistles of the elder Paul. Both are written, according to majority opinion, but certainly not the unanimous opinion of the reputable scholars, while he was imprisoned in Rome, only a couple of years before his martyrdom.

Philemon is fascinating in that one wonders why it was preserved at all and why it was placed in the collection of Paul's letters that circulated among the churches before the first gospel was written. It is so different in essential ways from every other epistle. Philemon is a personal letter of his, less than one page in length. It is addressed to an individual, not to the church community. It has to do with a request made by Paul to have a runaway slave named Onesimus, who has become Paul's valued companion and primary caregiver, be set free so he can once again be in Paul's service. Paul makes this request even as Onesimus is being returned to his master because, in the culture of that day, it was the right thing to do. Paul hopes that by obeying the law, his request to allow Onesimus to come back to him will be granted. Paul tells his friend Philemon, to whom he writes this letter, of Onesimus' conversion and of his indispensable faithfulness in Paul's service. Paul wants Onesimus pardoned so that he can freely come back to be Paul's assistant. It is hardly the kind of letter that would rank inclusion in a group of epistles written to various churches that also included the carefully reasoned argument of the Epistle to the Romans. Yet here it is.

John Knox, a top-tier 20th Century Pauline scholar, offers a fascinating explanation as to why it was included. Basing his argument on an epistle written by one of the church "fathers", Ignatius, in the early years of the 2nd Century that indicates that a man named Onesimus had become the Bishop of Ephesus after Paul's death, Knox

suggests that this was the same Onesimus about whom Paul was concerned in the Epistle to Philemon. The reason it might have been added to this collection of Paul's letters, says Knox, is that it contained significant material that was important to the church in Ephesus, which scholars now believe was to have been the destination of this first collection of Paul's epistles. It is an interesting speculation and worthy of being passed on, so long as it is clear that it is a speculation. There seems to be no other plausible argument as to why this private and very short letter became treasured church property.

When we move on to Philippians, we come to the most affectionate letter Paul ever wrote and also to the picture of a Paul who knows that his life is nearing its end. The Philippian congregation clearly cares for Paul emotionally and Paul clearly cares for them. He writes them as "saints" for whom he gives thanks "upon every remembrance" of them. Philippi was the first city in Europe that Paul had visited and where his first European church had been planted. The Philippians had sent him gifts in prison and they were clearly worried about both his safety and his personal well being. Paul's agenda in this letter is to thank them and comfort them about his situation. He fears he may never see them again. He promises to send Timothy to assure them of his well being. He fills the epistle with words of joy, hope and consolation. He no longer expects the return of Christ in his lifetime and so he wrestles with his own death, which he assumes to be imminent. He wonders out loud whether it is better to depart this life to be with Christ or to persevere for the sake of his churches. He suggests that when one stands at last in the presence of Christ, this earthly life will be seen as being of no great value. "To live is Christ, to die is gain" is his conclusion. There is a deep-seated contentment in Paul that finds expression in this epistle. "I have learned", he says, "to be content in whatever state I find myself". I can do all things, he assures his readers, through Christ who strengthens me. In his conclusion, he does not go into a long ethical treatise as he does in so many of his earlier epistles, where he moves from spelling out his understanding of Christ to drawing from that the implications for those who seek to live out the Christ life. In Philippians, his ethical teaching is one verse (4: 8) "Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things".

The most memorable passage in Philippians and one of the most mysterious and oft-quoted of all Paul's work, is found in 2: 5-11. It is called the "self-emptying" passage. My sense is that in these words there is a powerful affirmation that for Paul, all that we mean by God has been experienced in Christ, but when these words were translated into English, they reflected the ancient battles in which the church sought to determine how it was that Jesus could have been both human and divine. I do not think that the Jewish Paul ever thought in those categories. The way it is read today is that Christ did not grasp after the divinity that was his, but rather emptied himself, taking the form of a servant and he was, therefore, exalted by God to the status for which he was qualified. So Paul then draws his conclusion by stating that "At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow". Many scholars believe that Paul is quoting in these "self-emptying" verses an early Christian hymn. That may be so, but I believe it also reflects Paul's vision of Jesus as "The New Adam". The first Adam did grasp after the dignity of God. The serpent's temptation in the Garden of Eden story was that if Adam would but eat the forbidden fruit, "you will be like God". The people in the Philippi church had tensions in their lives over how to worship, what to believe and how to act. Each side in each debate claimed superiority. Paul urges them to let the mind of Christ be their mind. Then he explained that Christ did not grasp after a superior status, but emptied himself. It was in the fullness of his humanity that he found the freedom to give his life to others and that was how God was seen in him.

The ultimate purpose of human life is to love the face of hatred, to forgive the face of pain, to live in the face of death. In doing those things one must be free of the need of self exaltation. That is what it means to reveal the divine in the human. It was this concept that convinced Paul that the God presence has been experienced in Jesus. The pathway into divinity is through humanity. The pathway into eternity is through time. This is the closing theme in what we now believe was the final authentic letter of the Apostle Paul.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XVII: The Birth of Mark, the First Gospel

It is difficult to study the gospels accurately unless we step outside the Christian Church as we traditionally experience it today. That may sound like a strange statement, but increasingly I believe it is true. The gospels have been read in liturgical worship for two thousand years. They have provided the texts upon which sermons have been preached in churches under a variety of historical circumstances. Some of these churches were under persecution; some were so established that they participated in the persecution of others. Sermons preached on gospel texts have been heard in churches that lived through the break-up of the Middle Ages, in churches undergoing both the Protestant reformation and the Catholic counter-reformation and in churches making their witness in the modern and even the post-modern world. So deeply has the message of these gospels been captured in liturgy, translated through hymns and enshrined in buildings that most of us cannot separate gospel content from cultural artefacts. This deep familiarity must be removed before the original power of the gospels can be recovered. Familiarity does bring both contempt and misunderstanding. What has sometimes been called "gospel truth", sometimes turns out not to be true at all.

It is amazing, for example, how people use the Bible to justify their cultural prejudices, totally unaware of their own ignorance. These prejudices are then re-enforced by the assumption that their culturally blended knowledge is actually biblical. Of interest is the fact that most people learn the content of the Christmas story not from reading the Bible, but by watching Christmas pageants over the years. In these pageants, poetic or dramatic license is regularly practiced. People are therefore amazed to discover that only two of the gospels (Matthew and Luke) include birth stories and that these two contradict each other in many places. How many people know, for example, that in the texts of the Bible there are no camels in the story of the wise men, no donkey on which Mary rode to Bethlehem while she is "great with child", no stable in which Christ was born and no animals that populated that non-existent stable?

Moving deeper into the Christian story, there are no "seven last words" spoken by Jesus from the cross. Mark and Matthew record only one, saying from the cross and that is what we call "the cry of dereliction": "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Luke omits that saying as far too human to be spoken by "the Son of God", but then proceeds to add three of his own creation. John then omits all of these previously recorded sayings and creates three totally new ones never heard before. Finally, almost every detail of the Easter story in each of the four gospels is contradicted in the writings of another gospel. The most important thing to embrace, however, is that, in regard to the Bible, the ignorance is so profound that most people do not even know that they do not know. Part of what I am seeking to do in this series on the gospels is to penetrate this culturally imposed fog, so that we today might hear the message of each of the four gospel writers in the way each was heard by the first listeners to their words.

In order to accomplish this task we first need to dismiss many of the assumptions that we bring to our hearing of these gospel narratives. The first and most important of these is that the gospels are not biographies of Jesus. They are not eyewitness accounts of what Jesus actually did, nor are they tape recordings of the things that Jesus literally said. I shall never forget being on a late night talk show some years ago when on a media tour with the publication of my book, *"Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism"*. My host that evening was Tom Snyder, who was operating out of a studio in Burbank, California. As the interview progressed, I suggested that the four gospels in the New Testament were generally dated no earlier than the year 70AD (CE) and no later than the year 100. Tom, a lapsed Roman Catholic, bestirred himself and said, "Now, wait a minute, Bishop! I just got out my short pencil and began to do some figuring. If the gospels were written that late then none of them could have been written by eyewitnesses". "That is correct, Tom", I responded. "None of them claims to have been written by an eyewitness, except the Fourth Gospel, but no reputable scholar today thinks that John Zebedee actually wrote this book." John Zebedee was described in the book of Acts (4: 13) as an "uneducated man", while the gospel that bears John's name is filled with long, complex theological discourses, which require enormous sophistication. Finally, this gospel was written in Greek, not in Aramaic, which was, so far as we know, the only language that John Zebedee could speak. Stunned, Tom Snyder said, "That is not what the nuns taught me in parochial school!" I enquired as to what they had taught him and he replied: "They said the disciples of Jesus followed him around, writing down everything he said and that this is how we got the gospels!" Amused at how unlearned a grown and rather worldly-wise man could nonetheless be, I asked, "Tom, did the nuns also tell you that the disciples used spiral bound notebooks and ballpoint pens?" At that moment, the dawn of a new realisation swept across my host's face.

The facts are that all four of the gospels were written by the second generation and in the case of the Fourth Gospel, maybe even by the third generation of Christians. The gospels were written in Greek, a language in which neither Jesus nor the disciples were fluent. They were also written with no punctuation and without even being divided into chapters, paragraphs, verses or sentences. In the style of that day they did not even include a space between words, just line after line of letters. At the end of a line, on whatever they used for a page, there would be no dash to warn the reader that a word was being broken and it would continue on the next line. There were no capital letters. All punctuation, all separation of words, all divisions into verses, paragraphs and chapters would be imposed on these texts hundreds of years later.

How much of the Jesus story was known before each gospel was written is hard to determine, but the probability is that for most people the first time they heard a gospel being read was the first time they had heard most of the Jesus stories that they contain.

Prior to the writing of the earliest gospel of Mark, all that the people knew about Jesus was whatever had been conveyed in vignettes through preaching and the oral tradition and the high probability is that the setting for this hearing was in the synagogue at Sabbath day worship. This means that the same story might be used on different occasions with new details added or old details deleted, making our attempt to find historical accuracy in them simply not possible. When one multiplies this fact by a period of 40 to 70 years, the dimension of the problem we face in creating hard history begins to come into view. Perhaps the best we can do is to demonstrate when the various stories about Jesus entered the written tradition.

In order to understand how the first gospel, Mark, was initially received, we need to embrace the fact that before Mark wrote, the written details about the crucifixion of Jesus were contained in one line in Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "He died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures". That is all Paul said, and thus that is all Christians had before the early 70s. Mark thus introduced such narratives as the account of the last supper on the night before the crucifixion, the story of the Garden of Gethsemane, the account of Judas' betrayal at midnight, the role of the Sanhedrin in determining Jesus' guilt, the denial of Peter, the flight of the disciples, the trial before Pilate, the freeing of Barabbas, the torture with the crown of thorns and the story of the thieves crucified with him. None of these details were written prior to Mark.

Of the burial of Jesus all that was known in writing before Mark was, again, what Paul had written: "He was buried". That was it. Mark thus introduced the story of the tomb, the character of Joseph of Arimathea and the various details of his burial. In regard to the story of Easter, all that the Christians had in writing before Mark was found, once again, in a brief Pauline narrative: "He rose again on the third day in accordance with the scriptures". Paul goes on to relate that Jesus "appeared" to Cephas, the twelve, 500 brethren at once, James, the apostles and finally to Paul. No detail of any of these appearances, however, was given and even the word "appeared" is open to a variety of meanings. Paul counts himself as one of those to whom the risen Christ "appeared". Since Paul's conversion was some one to six years after the crucifixion, an appearance to Paul could hardly have been physical. Please notice that before Mark wrote in the early 70s, there was also no account of an empty tomb, no angels, no visit of the women and no messenger to announce the resurrection. Mark added these details as the tradition unfolded.

There were other things in the Jesus story that Mark appears to have introduced for the first time. Mark is the first person to tell us about the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and the first person to associate the story of Jesus with miracles. The idea that Jesus was a teacher of note or that he taught in parables was still another Markan-introduced theme. When we embrace these things, we begin to understand something of how the Christian faith evolved and how dramatic an event it must have been to have the first gospel appear in the 8th decade of the Christian era.

Next week we will begin to put the message of Mark's gospel into the context of its 1st Century Jewish world. It looks quite different from the way we read it today, but even if it is a little-known story, I believe we will find it to be a beautiful one.

– **John Shelby Spong**

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XVIII: Mark, the First Gospel

The original gospel, the one we know as Mark, was written, I believe, after the fall of Jerusalem and its subsequent destruction by the Roman army under the command of a general named Titus, in 70AD (CE). It was the climax of a war that began in Galilee in 66 and would finally culminate in a mass suicide of the final defenders of the Jewish cause at a place called Masada in 73. The echoes of this fall of the "eternal" city are heard in a number of places throughout Mark's text. The apocalyptic words recorded in Chapter 13 seem to describe the pain endured by the residents of the holy city in that catastrophe and includes the suggestion that they must flee into the hills of Judea and perhaps even to Galilee. The story of Jesus being transfigured on a mountain in Chapter 9, also suggests that in the minds of his disciples he has now replaced the Temple as the meeting place between God and human life. On him the "shekinah", the light of God, that once was believed to have enveloped the Temple as a sign of God's presence, now shines on him. I do not believe that a story like that of the Transfiguration would have been written unless the Temple itself had not already been destroyed. Even the rise of the story of a traitor named Judas, introduced for the first time in Christian history by Mark's gospel, suggests that those Jews, who were followers of Jesus, wanted to put some distance between themselves and the Temple authorities. To make the name of the traitor identical to the name of the now defeated nation, Judah, over which the Temple authorities had once exercised authority, accomplished that task. These are just a few of the things that cause me to date the writing of the first gospel around the years 71-72.

We have previously suggested that the synagogue had to be the setting in which the story of Jesus was remembered, recalled and retold during the time that we call the "oral period" (see *the discussion for 29th October 2009*) of Christian history. That assertion is based on the fact that when this first gospel appears, the story of Jesus has already been wrapped inside the sacred scriptures of the Jews. This could only have happened in the synagogue, since that would be the only place in which 1st Century people would ever hear the Jewish Scriptures read, taught or engaged. There was no such thing in that day as a "family Bible". Books, which had to be copied by hand, were far too expensive to be individually owned, so the scrolls of the Hebrew Scriptures were community property - treasured, kept and read only in the sacred setting of the synagogue.

When Mark's Gospel appeared, its text revealed that the memory of Jesus had already been incorporated into those Jewish scriptures. The story of Jesus had been orally transmitted in and through the synagogue. Mark reveals this in the first verse of his gospel when he announces that this is the gospel of Jesus Christ "as it is written in the prophets". Then he starts his story by quoting first Malachi and then Isaiah. When this gospel introduces John the Baptist for the first time it is clear that John has already been interpreted as the Old Testament figure of Elijah, who in the expectations of the Jews had to precede the coming of the messiah. John is clothed by Mark in the raiment of Elijah, camel's hair and a girdle around his waist. He is placed in the desert where Elijah was said to dwell. He was given the diet of locusts and wild honey that the Hebrew Scriptures said was the diet that Elijah ate. Then Mark relates the story of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River at the hands of John the Baptist. That was the moment, Mark asserts, when the power of God in the form of the Holy Spirit, entered into the human Jesus and he was acclaimed to be God's son. Mark has obviously never heard of the story of the virgin birth, which offers a different way for this divine presence to enter Jesus. Next Mark moves on to tell the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness for forty days, but he gives no content to those temptations. That was destined to come in later gospels that expanded Mark with developing stories. One can see the oral period at work here, for in the synagogue on the Sabbath first the law was read, then the prophets and then the disciples of Jesus would relate Jesus stories that seemed appropriate to those readings. Increasingly they saw in the Hebrew Scriptures the anticipation of the messiah's life and when they became convinced that Jesus was the expected messiah, they began to interpret these scriptures as anticipatory of their day and the life of Jesus became more and more the one to whom all the Hebrew Scriptures pointed.

The second clue that reveals the synagogue as the place in which the story of Jesus was remembered, told and retold is that the gospel of Mark reflects the liturgical year of the Jews and thus has an appropriate story about Jesus designed to be read at each of the great liturgical observances of that year. One cannot see this, however, if one is not familiar with these liturgical synagogue patterns, revived annually by the Jews. So let me file, almost by title, the major events recalled in the worship life of the Jewish people during their liturgy.

The first worship event in the synagogue, which marked liturgically the birth of the Jewish nation, was called "the Passover". It re-enacted annually the Jewish flight from slavery in Egypt and thus their beginnings as a separate and distinct people. Passover is to the Jews, what the Fourth of July is to the citizens of the United States. It was

celebrated on the 14th and 15th days of the Jewish month of Nisan which, according to the book of Leviticus, was the first month of the Jewish calendar, although Jewish practice was not consistent as to when the year began.

The second great observance of the Jewish year was Shavuot, or Pentecost, which comes fifty days after Passover, hence the name Pentecost, which means fifty days. On this day the Jews commemorated God's giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai and it was observed in traditional Jewish circles with a 24-hour vigil, dedicated to recalling and celebrating the beauty and wonder of the Torah. The law represented to the Jews God's greatest gift to God's people.

After Shavuot there were no major holidays in the Jewish year for about four months. Then in the seventh month of their calendar, a month known as Tishri, three major observances occurred in rapid succession. The celebration began on the first day of Tishri with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Rosh Hashanah was observed by blowing the shofar, the ram's horn, to gather the people together. When they gathered the announcement was made that the Kingdom of God was at hand and the people were urged to prepare for its arrival. It was the promise of each new year that the Kingdom of God would someday come.

On the tenth day of Tishri came the observance of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This was a day of deep penitence that included both confession and sacrifice. Liturgically this was an attempt to cleanse the people of their sins and thus to allow them to have their sins borne away, which would, of course, leave them fit to enter the presence of God as only the High Priest could now do and he only once a year at Yom Kippur. Beginning on the fifteenth day of the month of Tishri and lasting for eight days, was the Festival of Booths, also called Tabernacles, or Sukkoth. This was the harvest festival, the Jewish day of Thanksgiving, but it also recalled the years of Jewish history when the people were homeless wanderers in the wilderness between Egypt and the land they regarded as their promised destiny. It was, therefore, observed by the erection of booths or temporary shelters, which recalled their wilderness years. Sukkoth was the happiest and most anticipated holiday of the Jewish year. It was also the last Jewish festival for about two months.

When the month of Kislev arrived, located as it was in the dead of winter, the Jews observed a "festival of lights" known then as Dedication, but known today as Hanukkah. This was a celebration born in the Maccabean period of Jewish history (167-63 BC) and it recalled the restoration of the light of God to the Temple after it had been defiled by the Seleucid King of Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes, who was defeated in battle by Judas Maccabeus. The end of the Jewish year came in the early spring with the month of Adar, which brought the people back liturgically to the month of Nisan and its celebration of the birth of their nation. Every year the people of the synagogue relived this cycle of feasts and fasts and every year for at least forty years the followers of Jesus, who were still part of the synagogue, thought of him and spoke of him inside this liturgical framework. When the first gospel of Mark was written, this liturgical framework was clearly present and it became, probably quite unconsciously, the organising principle of Mark's gospel - and because both Matthew and Luke built their gospels on Mark's model, it became the organising principle of all three.

We know that Mark began the custom of setting the story of the crucifixion inside the celebration of Passover and because of this, Jesus was increasingly seen as the new paschal lamb who, like the lamb of Passover, died to dispel the power of death. What we do not see so clearly is that if we attach Mark's story of Jesus' passion to the Jewish season of Passover and then roll Mark's gospel backward across the liturgical year of the Jews, we will discover that an appropriate Jesus narrative falls at exactly the right spot in the gospel to fit the calendar to enable it to illumine the festivals and fasts of the Jewish year and in their proper order.

Next week I will develop that correlation, and then I trust it will become clear that Mark was written as a liturgical book to be read in the synagogue with the purpose of revealing Jesus as the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. It is not a history book. It incorporates the memory of Jesus into the ongoing life of the synagogue. If you, my readers, are like me, then once this key unlocks the story, the gospel of Mark will never be the same.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XIX: How the Synagogue Shaped the Gospel of Mark

Has it ever occurred to you that Mark, the first gospel to be written, was in fact a Jewish book created in the synagogue and organised according to the liturgical pattern of synagogue worship? Such an idea sounds very strange to modern Christian people for it carries our imaginations far beyond the boundaries inside which we Christians are comfortable. I would like, however, in this column to show you that this claim is in fact accurate.

The first thing we need to embrace in order to study the gospels properly is the history of anti-Semitism in the Christian Church. I learned most of my anti-Semitism in my Sunday school as a child. In my printed Sunday school material I was never introduced to a good Jew! All of the Jews in the Jesus story appeared to me to be sinister and hostile; the bad guys in the drama, always out to get Jesus. They had names that I was taught to disrespect like Judas Iscariot, Annas, Caiaphas, Sadducees, Pharisees and scribes. No one in my Sunday school ever told me that Jesus was a Jew. When I saw pictures of him, he looked rather Nordic, with blond hair, blue eyes and a fair skin. I thought he must have been a Swede! I was also never told that the twelve disciples were Jews, that Paul and Mary Magdalene were Jews, that all of the writers of the books in the Bible were Jews, with the only possible exception being Luke, who appears to have been born a Gentile, but to have converted to Judaism.

Our cultural anti-Semitism has actually served to blind us to the deep roots in Judaism that the Christian story possesses. All Christians are "spiritual Semites". Judaism is the womb in which we were conceived and the faith tradition in which Christianity was nurtured until the church and the synagogue parted company in a rather unpleasant manner around the year 88AD (CE). Embrace that date if you will. The Christian movement did not separate itself from Judaism until some 58 years after the crucifixion of Jesus! This means that, at the very least, the gospel of Mark and the gospel of Matthew were written before the Christians separated from the synagogue. While Luke's gospel may have come after the split, it is based so deeply on Mark that it too bears the stamp of the time when Christians and Jews both worshiped together Sabbath by Sabbath in the synagogue. The disciples of Jesus at this time were not called "Christians" but "The Followers of the Way" and they were regarded by the Orthodox power centre of Judaism as a group of Jewish Revisionists who were dedicated to incorporating Jesus into the ongoing Jewish story as prophets like Isaiah, Amos and Micah had themselves once been incorporated. All of this means that the primary place the stories of Jesus were remembered and recalled during the "oral period" of Christian history was in the synagogue at a Sabbath day service. (*See Part IV of this series on the Origins of the New Testament - which was the Discussion of 29th October 2009*). In that liturgy, first the Torah and then the prophets would be read, interspersed with Psalms. Next, the assembled worshipers would be solicited for their comments on the scripture readings. In this manner, the disciples of Jesus recalled events and teachings in Jesus' life and related these to the lessons just read. Soon the scriptures began to be understood by these disciples as pointing to Jesus and even to being fulfilled in Jesus. Inevitably, these Jesus stories were also incorporated into the annual cycle of feasts and fasts regularly observed in the synagogue. Ultimately, forming a consistent and set body of material, these stories were gathered together in the order of the Jewish liturgical year. It was this custom that ultimately shaped the gospel of Mark.

With this order in place in Mark, when Matthew and Luke used Mark as the basis of their volumes they inevitably adopted the same liturgical frame of reference. Even with Mark in common, Matthew and Luke differed since they reflected two very different Jewish world views, Matthew being traditional and Luke reflecting the world of dispersed Jews into whose life gentiles were constantly coming. Still, the first three gospels had so many similarities that the three of them came to be known as the "synoptic gospels", the reflections of those who had seen (optic) with (syn) their own eyes. While that eyewitness claim is now dismissed as factually accurate, the essential unity and internal dependency of these three gospels is still widely asserted. Matthew has in fact included about 90% of Mark in his narrative and most of it almost verbatim. Luke, a bit less dependent on Mark, has still included about 50% of Mark's content in his narrative. Both of these later gospels also adopt Mark's outline, which was the telling of the Jesus story against the background of a one-year cycle of synagogue liturgical observances. That is why each of these gospels presents Jesus' public ministry as a one year phenomenon - not because that ministry was one year long, but because the story of his public life, from his baptism to his crucifixion, was told against the background of a one year synagogue cycle. Unfortunately, this background material is not seen unless and until a reader is knowledgeable about that liturgical pattern. Let me try to lift it to the awareness of my readers.

The climax of Mark is the story of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. In Mark, almost 40% of his gospel deals with the last week in the life of Jesus. Of Mark's 16 chapters, chapters one to ten are dedicated to the life of Jesus from his baptism up to his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, five days prior to Good Friday and just seven days prior to the story of the resurrection. That last week becomes the context of chapters 11-16. To draw the contrast even more sharply, the story of the last twenty-four hours of Jesus' earthly life consumes 105 verses of Mark's text, while the Easter story is relegated to only eight verses.

The first and most obvious fact is that the crucifixion of Jesus is told against the background of the Jewish observance of the Passover celebration. Jesus had been identified as the new paschal lamb by Paul when he wrote some fifteen years before Mark that "Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed for us" (I Corinthians 5:7). People have assumed for centuries that the crucifixion had occurred during the Passover season, when the fact was that it was more probable that the Passover had been used by the followers of Jesus to interpret the death of Jesus and that this is what pulled the two observances together. There is a body of data in the gospels that suggests that the crucifixion occurred not in the spring, but rather in the fall of the year. (That data is beyond the scope of this column, but for those who might be interested I outlined it in my book: *"Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes"*. The death of the paschal lamb was believed by the Jews to have broken the power of death at the time of the Exodus. The death of Jesus was believed by his disciples to have broken the power of death at the time of his cross and resurrection. So, the story of the death of Jesus was purposefully designed to be observed during the Passover season. That was not history so much as it was liturgy.

Once we connect the Passover with the crucifixion, it is possible to see that, in the whole gospel of Mark, the story of Jesus is being retold against the events of the Jewish holy days. So place the crucifixion of Jesus at the time of the Passover and then roll Mark's gospel backward across the synagogue's liturgical year and it becomes obvious that this is how Mark organised his gospel. The Jewish celebration, about three months prior to Passover, is called Dedication or Hanukkah. This holy day recalls the time when the light of God was restored to the Temple during the period of the Maccabees. The story in Mark's gospel that occurs at exactly that time is the story of Jesus' Transfiguration in which the light of God falls not on the Temple as the Jews asserted, but on Jesus first and then Moses and Elijah, transfiguring them all. This story further suggests that Moses, a symbol for the Law, and Elijah, a symbol for the prophets, are subsumed into the meaning of Jesus, who is then interpreted as the new Temple. Presumably, the old Temple, which had been destroyed by the Romans in 70AD (CE), was no more and the disciples of Jesus were interpreting him as the new meeting place between God and human life.

If one keeps rolling Mark backward, the next Jewish feast is Sukkoth or Tabernacles which was the eight-day celebration of the harvest. The Jesus story which Mark relates in chapter four comes exactly at that place where Sukkoth is being observed. It is the parable of the sower, who sowed the seed on four different kinds of soil, yielding four different types of harvest and is then followed by Jesus' explanation of that parable. Indeed, this chapter with its clear harvest theme contains sufficient material to cover the eight days of the harvest festival.

Keep rolling Mark backward and one comes next to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, observed some five days before Sukkoth begins. Here one discovers in Mark's chapters two and three a series of healing, cleansing stories, including the call of Levi into discipleship from the unclean world of being a tax collector for the Gentile conqueror. These are perfect Jesus stories to carry the meaning of Yom Kippur. Once again, Mark's order fits the synagogue's liturgical year. Finally, Mark runs out with chapter one that occurs at the time when the Jews were celebrating Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. The Jews observed that day by blowing the shofar, gathering the people, announcing that the Kingdom of God was at hand and urging them to prepare for it by repenting. Here, Mark's gospel opens with the story of John the Baptist, portrayed as the human shofar, gathering the people, announcing to them that the Kingdom of God is dawning in the life of Jesus and urging them to prepare for his coming with repentance.

The unrecognised organising principle in the first gospel to be written reveals that Mark has crafted Jesus stories for use in the synagogue from Rosh Hashanah to Passover, or for six and a half months of the Jewish liturgical year. Have you ever wondered why Mark is shorter than Matthew or Luke? Mark only covered six and a half months of the calendar year. Both Matthew and Luke would stretch Mark by providing stories for the other five and a half months. First, grasp the concept. Then we will fill in the details.

John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XX: Seeing the Crucifixion as Related Liturgically to the Passover

The first narrative of Jesus' crucifixion to be written achieved its shape and form in Mark's gospel, specifically in 14:17-15:47. Prior to this, all the Christians had in writing was one line from Paul: "Jesus died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures". Not a single narrative detail was given by Paul. Perhaps there were no narrative details to be given, since Mark's gospel is quite specific in 14:50 that, when Jesus was arrested, "They all took flight and fled". This would mean that Jesus died alone without any eye witnesses.

That would be a shattering insight to many since we have literalised the details we have in Mark's gospel down to recording not just what Jesus said from the cross, but what Jesus and the high priest said to each other and even what Jesus and the crowd said to each other. One might wonder who was present to record all of these words of conversation. The overwhelming probability is that the familiar details of the cross are not the result of historic memory at all, but are rather liturgical interpretations of who it was who died on the cross and what his death meant. A quick analysis of the details from this narrative reveals that they were drawn not from the memory of eye witnesses, but from the scriptures of the Jewish people, primarily from Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. So even the central story of the final events in Jesus' life now looks more like the work of an interpretative imagination than it does the work of a historian.

From Psalm 22, Mark drew many of the familiar elements of his story, including first the cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" with which that psalm opens. Next Mark refers to the attitude of the mocking crowd, "shaking their heads" and stating that, "since he trusted in God, let God deliver him", which Mark has incorporated almost verbatim into his narrative (Psalm 22:8). The notion of disjointed bones (Psalm 22:14), the reality of thirst (Psalm 22:15) and the "piercing of his hands and feet" (Psalm 22:16) are notes also found in this psalm which Mark has clearly drawn into his portrait, as well as the reference to the soldier's parting his garments and casting lots for his robe (Psalm 22:18). When it becomes obvious that the words used to describe the crucifixion are drawn from a work written at least 400 years before the events being described, then it is surely clear that this is not "eye-witness" reporting.

From Isaiah 53, which is part of a portrait that this author, called II Isaiah, paints of a figure he calls the "Servant", or the "Suffering Servant" of the Lord, Mark incorporates into his account of the death of Jesus the picture of one "despised and rejected", a "man of sorrows and one acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3), to say nothing of the image of being "wounded for our transgressions" and "bruised for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5). The "Servant" in Isaiah, like Jesus in Mark, "is silent before his accuser" (Isaiah 53:7). Of Isaiah's "Servant" it was said, "with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5), language that later informed the Christian idea of Jesus in the substitutionary theory of the atonement.

This identification becomes even more exact when we read in Isaiah that the "Servant" will be numbered among the transgressors (Isaiah 53:12), which in time gave substance to the story introduced by Mark of Jesus being crucified between two thieves. Isaiah also stated that this "Servant" would, in his death, "make his grave with the rich" (Isaiah 53:9), which eventually led to Mark's story of his being buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, who was "a ruler of the Jews" and thus a person of means.

As much as this knowledge flies in the face of a familiar literalism, which has been carved in stone for us in such artifacts of our worship as the "Passion of Jesus" set to music by J. S. Bach, the traditional Good Friday liturgies of the church through the ages and in such ecclesiastical habits as sermons preached on the "seven last words", supposedly spoken by Jesus from the cross, the truth is that Mark's story of the crucifixion is not the remembered history of an eye witness at all, but second generation interpretations of Jesus' death, shaped by biblical sources that had fed Jewish messianic expectations through the ages drawn, as they were, directly from the Hebrew Scriptures. So our first step in understanding the familiar story of the cross is to free our minds from any assumption that we are reading history. What we are reading is the interpretation of Jesus' death as his Jewish disciples had come to understand it.

The second step in this eye-opening process is to notice that this first narrative story of the cross was itself crafted by Mark to serve as a liturgical re-enactment of the meaning of Jesus' passion. Current studies of 1st Century Judaism inform us that the Jews observed Passover in a family setting that usually consumed about three hours. Included in these three hours were the family gathering, various games played to enhance the holiday spirit, the meal itself which included feeding "on the body of the lamb of God", as well as the use of the

various symbols of their past, like bitter herbs and unleavened bread, which reminded them of their life in slavery and their hasty exodus from Egypt. Following the meal the youngest boy in the family would say to the senior patriarch of the family, "Father, why is this night different from all other nights?" - which would give the head of the household the chance to relate the story of the Exodus and thus to recount the moment of their birth as a nation. The meal would then conclude with the singing of a hymn and the family members who did not live in this house, would depart into the night for their own houses.

Church historians and liturgical scholars have discovered some evidence that by the latter years of the 2nd Century AD (CE), Christians were observing the passion of Jesus by stretching the three-hour Passover celebration of the Jews into a twenty-four hour vigil. The question is, when did that vigil practice begin? I think the evidence in Mark's story of the Passion is that it began very early, certainly prior to the writing of this first gospel, for the outline of a twenty-four hour vigil is in the text of Mark itself. If we look at Mark's story of the Passion (Mark 14:17-15:47) and if we study the text carefully we can see the outline of a twenty-four hour vigil. It is a twenty-four hour narrative that runs from sundown on what we now call Maundy Thursday to sundown on what we now call Good Friday. Let me point out the time markers that are in the text itself of Mark's gospel. Mark 14:17 has Jesus arrive with the twelve at a house in Jerusalem for the Passover "in the evening", that is at sundown or approximately 6pm. Mark has earlier given us the details of the preparation the disciple band has undergone to ready a place for this night. The supper is then described and Mark says the evening ended with the singing of a hymn and Jesus and his disciples went into the night. It is thus now about 9pm. Then they went to the Garden of Gethsemane where the disciples were not able, without falling asleep, to watch with him "one", "two", or "three" hours, which would carry the vigil to midnight. In 14:43 Mark then relates the act of betrayal at midnight, making the darkest deed in history occur at the darkest moment of the night. It is dramatically powerful, but hardly historically accurate.

Following the arrest comes the trial before the high priest and the chief priest, which is told from 14:53-65 and which carries us to 3am. The watch of the night between 3am and 6am is called "cockcrow" and into these three hours Mark has placed the story of Peter's threefold denial (14:66-72), presumably one denial for each hour of that watch, until the cock crows and the broken Peter is portrayed as weeping.

Then the text says (15:1) that "when morning came", which means it is now about 6am and this is the time to which Mark has assigned the trial before Pilate (15:1-14). The story of Barabbas and the torture by the soldiers, complete with purple robe and a crown of thorns, are also described in this segment. Mark then informs us (15:35) that it was the third hour when they crucified him, or 9am. The drama of the cross reaches its crescendo when, in verse 33, the text says "when the sixth hour", or noon, comes darkness covers the earth until the 9th hour, or 3pm, when Jesus utters his cry of dereliction and dies. When we arrive at 15:42, we are told of his burial before "evening came", or about 6pm. For the Jews, Sabbath started at sundown on Friday, not at midnight. The fact that they did not have time to complete the burial process before the Sabbath began, is Mark's segue to explain just why it was that the women had to come with embalming spices at dawn on the first day of the week and thus set the stage for the Easter story.

Vestiges of the twenty-four hour vigil still exist in liturgical churches today. The climax of Holy Week begins with the Maundy Thursday service commemorating the establishment of the Eucharist. This is followed by a stripping of the altar until it is left bare and tomb-like. The Sacrament is then placed into the ambry and worshipers are invited to keep watch through the night. Sometimes churches organise the vigil to make certain that some members are always present. On Good Friday, the elements are distributed from the Reserved Sacrament since the sombreness of the day precludes a "celebration" of the Eucharist. Then comes the three-hour service with worshipers observing that time when darkness was covering the earth between 12 noon and 3pm. Then Jesus' rest in the tomb is marked on "holy Saturday" until the fires are lit that evening at the first "Mass of Easter". The tradition is ancient. The Easter Vigil was observed, I am now convinced, before the first gospel was written. Mark did not create it; Mark observed it and wrote his gospel account of the Passion to help people act it out.

It was thus the liturgical life of the synagogue and not the remembered life of Jesus that was the organising principle in Mark's first written gospel. He in turn set the example for Matthew and Luke to follow. As we turn to consider those two gospels, we will see how both expanded and lengthened Mark, but neither ever challenged his organising principle, which was and is the annual cycle of the liturgical life of the synagogue.

John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XXI: Introducing the Gospel of Matthew

The second gospel to be written is called Matthew. It made its debut into the world a decade or so after Mark, which would date it in the 82-85AD (CE) range. Matthew's gospel was heavily dependent on Mark; indeed he incorporated about 90% of Mark into his text with many of these quotations being verbatim. A revealing insight into the mind of this second gospel writer can be gained by analysing the parts of Mark that Matthew omitted, but that is beyond the scope of this study. One only has to read a book called *Gospel Parallels* published by Thomas Nelson Co., to become aware of exactly what these omissions are. It is clear that Matthew bends Mark's message toward a more traditional Jewish perspective.

Who was Matthew? The early church tradition that linked this gospel with Levi Matthew, the tax collector, is today generally discredited. This gospel was written originally in Greek, indeed a better Greek than that which appears in Mark. A Jewish follower who sold his services as a tax collector to the unclean Gentiles would hardly have been expected to have the educational and scriptural background that is revealed in this book. This gospel also displays a rather sophisticated theological perspective, probably only second to that of John among the gospel writers. We have no reason to believe that any of the twelve were educated or learned men and this would certainly be true of one called Levi-Matthew.

From internal evidence we can discern that the author appears to be the leader of a synagogue, which followed the liturgical patterns and observed the high holy days of the ongoing Jewish tradition. Whoever the author was, he had a deep knowledge of and appreciation for the Jewish Scriptures as well as the historic Jewish expectation that the messiah would come to and for the Jews. When we analyse the editing of the text of Mark's gospel, from which he copies so freely, we discover that he is prone to remove from Mark things that might offend the Jews. Some scholars have even suggested that he wrote an autobiographical note into his text when he told the brief parable of the householder (Mark 13:51-52). Here he wrote: "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old". Matthew was clearly dedicated to preserving what was old.

Matthew at the same time adds a number of things to the developing Christian tradition. Most people do not know the gospels well enough to distinguish what parts of the Jesus story are added by each gospel writer. To make us aware of Matthew's unique contributions, we need to note that this is the first gospel to introduce a genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1-17) that begins with Abraham and journeys through the high points of Jewish history to King David, then through the kings of the House of David to the Babylonian Exile and finally to the life of Jesus. Luke, writing 10-15 years after Matthew, also gives us a genealogy but he goes backward from Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, all the way to Adam, the father of all human life. In many details we need to note that these two biblical genealogies are very different and cannot be reconciled. They differ first on who Joseph's father was. Was it Jacob, as Matthew asserts, or Heli (Eli) as Luke contends? Did Jesus' line flow through the royal house of kings from David to Solomon to Rehoboam, as Matthew states, or did it avoid royalty altogether by going from King David to Nathan and skipping all of the Judean kings as Luke states? Luke's genealogy also includes many more generations than Matthew. They cannot both be accurate. The consensus of the scholars is that neither is accurate. There are other distinctions between the two ancestral lists, but that is enough to make the point of their radical incompatibility. Biblical literalists generally simply ignore these differences hoping that no one will notice.

Matthew is also the first person to introduce any account of Jesus' miraculous birth into the developing traditions. Once again, Luke, writing 10-15 years after Matthew, also tells us a virgin birth story, but it is quite different from the one in Matthew. Only in Matthew do we have an account of a star in the east and magi who followed that star bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ child. Only Matthew involves King Herod in the birth narrative, both by having him give the magi directions to Bethlehem and later developing the account of Herod sending his soldiers to slaughter all the Jewish boy babies in a vain attempt to wipe out the presumed threat to his throne. Only Matthew has the holy family flee to Egypt to escape this murderous wrath of Herod and then to return to their home in Bethlehem after Herod's death. Later, God was said to have warned Joseph in a dream about the continuing danger represented by Herod's son, who was now on the throne and directed him to take the child to the safety of Galilee, in order for Jesus to grow up in the village of Nazareth. In each of these episodes in Matthew's birth story, he makes the claim that these manoeuvres occurred "in order to fulfil the scriptures", by which he always meant the messianic expectations of the Jewish scriptures. Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem? Matthew says it was to fulfil the expectations of

Micah (5:2) that the messiah must be born in the city of David's birth, in order to demonstrate that he was the direct heir to David's throne. Why was Jesus born of a virgin? It was, says Matthew, to fulfil a text from Isaiah (7:14), which interestingly enough does not have the word virgin in it. Why did Herod slaughter the male babies of Bethlehem? It was, says Matthew, to fulfil a text in Jeremiah (31:15) that spoke of Rachel weeping for her children who were lost. Why did Mary, Joseph and the child flee to Egypt? It was, says Matthew, to fulfil the words of Hosea (11:1) that "out of Egypt have I called my son". Why did Jesus move to and grow up in Nazareth? It was, says Matthew, to fulfil a prophecy that he would be called a Nazarene, but we have no idea which prophetic text it was to which Matthew was referring!

Were any of these particular texts being properly used by this author? If we are speaking literally, not one of them was! Indeed they are not even close! Micah was referring to a Davidic messiah coming out of Bethlehem who would restore the fortunes of the Jews. In all probability Jesus was born in Nazareth. The first gospel, Mark, assumes that. In Isaiah 7:14, the prophet was referring to a birth in the royal family that would be a sign that Jerusalem would not fall to the foreign armies of Kings Pekah and Resin that were surrounding the holy city as Isaiah wrote. He was certainly not referring to an event 700 years in the future. Jeremiah was referring to Rachel, the tribal mother of the Northern Kingdom, weeping for her children who were lost to the Assyrians when they conquered the Northern Kingdom in 721 BC. Hosea was referring to the Exodus in which God called his people out of slavery in Egypt, not to a trip of safety engineered by Joseph for Jesus centuries later. Finally, we know of no expectation that messiah will be related to Nazareth. The fact is that Matthew quoted scripture in a fast and loose way.

Matthew was also the first gospel writer to give content to the story of the temptations in the wilderness. Mark had only said that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days being tempted. Matthew spells out the content of each of the three temptations and recorded Jesus' response to each.

To the surprise of many when they first hear it said, Matthew is the only gospel to record Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount. Luke scatters some of the Sermon on the Mount material throughout his gospel, but only Matthew pulls it together in the form that we know best.

Parables unique to Matthew include the parable of the weeds (13:24-30) and its interpretation (13:36-43); the parable of the hidden treasure and the "pearl of great price" (13:44-46); the parable of the net (13:47-50); the parable of the unmerciful servant (18:23-25); the parable of the wise and foolish maidens (25:1-13) and the parable of the Judgment where the sheep are separated from the goats (25:31-46).

When we come to the narrative of the final events in Jesus' life, Matthew adds the unique notes that the betrayal by Judas was for thirty pieces of silver and that Judas hurled that money back into the Temple when he repented of his deed. Matthew alone tells us that Judas then went and hanged himself. Matthew is also the first gospel writer to portray Jesus as appearing to the disciples in Galilee following the resurrection. He said this appearance occurred on a mountain top and in this narrative we have the first occasion that the risen Jesus was quoted as saying anything to anyone. Those words you may recall are what we now call the "Great Commission". Go into all the world. There is no Pentecost moment in Matthew, but only the promise that Jesus is "Emmanuel", which means "God with us". "Lo, I am with you always" is as close to the coming of the Holy Spirit as Matthew gets.

I believe it is necessary to absorb these special Matthean touches before we can begin to put this gospel into an interpretive context. For now, I ask you simply to embrace these special Matthew contributions to the developing Christian story. Try to isolate Matthew's point of view as it is revealed in his additions to the story. Then we will begin the process of penetrating the mind of this writer of the second gospel in order to discern just how he perceived Jesus. To that story we will turn next.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XXII: The Figure of Moses as the Interpretive Secret in Matthew

Matthew's gospel has always fascinated me more than the others. It is not the most profound of the gospels, but it does open interpretive eyes for me more widely than the others. The doorway into this perception is found in the process of being able to ask the right questions. Matthew is the "Jewish Gospel", par excellence and if one does not understand what it means to be a Jewish Gospel, one will never understand this book. Two biblical characters are taken by Matthew from the Jewish scriptures and used as symbols around which he weaves his story of Jesus. Today I will look at both of them in an effort to illustrate that Matthew is deeply dependent on his audience having a sufficient understanding of Judaism to recognise his allusions both to Jewish history and to Jewish scripture.

The first of these Jewish characters is Joseph, the patriarch whose story is told in Genesis Chapters 37-50. This is the Joseph of the coat of many colours, the first born son to Jacob by his favourite wife Rachel. In our earlier trek through the Old Testament, we noted the deep and historic division between Judah, the dominant tribe in the south and the Northern Kingdom of which Joseph was the principle ancestor. Recall that the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, both sons of this same Joseph, were the dominant tribes in that separate part of the Hebrew nation. You may also recall our earlier discussion of how it was that the tribe of Judah not only produced King David, but also produced the Yahwist version of the Hebrew scriptures, while the Joseph tribes in the North produced the Elohist version of the same scriptures and how these two strands of Jewish history were later put together by an interpreter to form a major step in the production of the Torah.

One agenda that drove Matthew's gospel was to present Jesus as the messianic life who was capable of binding up this deep historic division that had long divided the Jewish people. When we read Matthew, knowing this background, we can watch just how he does it. Matthew opens his gospel with a seventeen verse genealogy in which he traces the lineage of Jesus through King David and the kings of the Jewish world that centred in Jerusalem. In this passage he clearly roots Jesus in the tribe of Judah, which was the tribe to which David and his royal house belonged. Jesus was clearly the son of Judah.

Then Matthew introduced into the developing tradition the story of Jesus' miraculous birth and in the process, confronts us with a new character who is also going to be portrayed as Jesus' father. His name is Joseph and he has never before been mentioned anywhere in Christian writing. In the new story of Jesus' birth to a "virgin", there is a clear need for someone to play the role of "earthly father" and to give the child the protection that only a man could give in that fiercely patriarchal society. By having Joseph name this child, thus claiming him as his own, Matthew sought to dampen the rumours of illegitimacy that were swirling around from the 9th Decade critics of the Christian movement. In this manner, Joseph, the name of the other major patriarch of Jewish history, enters the story as this child's protector and defender. In this manner, Matthew has bound Jewish history together in the person of Jesus.

Next look at the portrait of Joseph, as Matthew painted him. Everything we know about Matthew's character Joseph we learn in Matthew's birth narrative. Joseph never appears in any part of the gospel tradition except in the birth narratives. From Matthew's account we learn three things about Joseph. First, he has a father named Jacob (Matthew 1:16). Second, God only speaks to him in dreams (Matthew 1:20, 2:13, 2:19, and 2:22). Third, his role in the drama of salvation is to save the child of promise from death by taking him down to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-16).

Now go back to the story of the patriarch Joseph in the book of Genesis (Chapters 37-50) and read that narrative. There you will discover three things about the patriarch Joseph. First, he has a father named Jacob (Genesis 37:2). Second, he is constantly associated with dreams (Genesis 37:5-11) and was even called the dreamer by his brothers (Genesis 37:19). As the story of his life unfolds he is noted primarily as the interpreter of dreams (Genesis 40:1-19) and even rides into political power in Egypt based on that gift (Genesis 41). Third, his role in the drama of salvation is to save the people of the covenant from death by taking them down to Egypt (Genesis 46).

Is this simply coincidence, or are we beginning to discern how the Jewish Scriptures were used to interpret the Jesus experience? Matthew was not writing a biography of Jesus, he was interpreting Jesus in the light of the Jewish scriptures. Literalism is not the way to read a Jewish story. Literalism is, in fact, a late-developing Gentile

heresy. To make Jesus simultaneously the son of Judah and the son of Joseph was something Matthew's Jewish readers would understand.

The second shadowy figure from the Hebrew Scriptures around which Matthew weaves the story of Jesus is Moses. Moses was the founder of the Jewish nation, the giver of the Law, or Torah and the ultimate hero of Judaism. Moses makes his first appearance in Matthew's birth narrative in the account of the wicked King Herod, who slaughtered the male babies in Bethlehem in a vain attempt to wipe out this threat to his throne (Matthew 2:16-18). Every Jewish reader of Matthew's gospel would have recognized that story as a Moses story. When Moses was born, a wicked King Pharaoh decreed that all the Jewish boy babies were to be destroyed so that his power would not be threatened (Exodus 1:8-22). To save their son from this fate, Moses' parents put him in a basket on the River Nile where, according to that story, he was rescued by the Pharaoh's daughter. Matthew in these opening verses of his gospel is signalling to his readers that he was interpreting Jesus under the popular messianic image of the New Moses. This theme is picked up later in the birth narrative when Matthew quotes Hosea as saying, "Out of Egypt have I called my Son". This was once again a clear reference to Moses, but used by Matthew to mark Jesus' return from his flight to Egypt, to which he had fled to avoid Herod.

Matthew next interprets the baptism of Jesus in such a way as to frame it as an analogy to Moses' crossing of the Red Sea, by separating the waters so that the people could walk through the sea on dry land. Once again Jewish readers would recognize this theme for splitting the waters was a regular theme in the Jewish Scriptures. Moses did it at the Red Sea; Joshua did it at the Jordan River. Both Elijah and Elisha also split the waters of the Jordan River on their way to and from the place of Elijah's departure in a fiery chariot. Now Matthew brings Jesus in the first story of his adult life to the Jordan River for baptism. In this narrative, he was clearly seeking to say that the God presence we have met in Jesus is even greater than the God presence our ancestors met in Moses. It was a stunning claim. How did he develop this theme? At the baptism, Jesus steps into the waters of the Jordan River, but he does not split these waters. That had been done so many times that it represented nothing special. Jesus rather splits the heavens that we are told in the creation story was "the firmament" that separates the waters above from the waters below (Genesis 1:7). Jesus thus splits the heavenly waters, which then fall on him as the Holy Spirit, for that is what "living water" means in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Zechariah 14:8).

What did Moses do after his "baptism" in the Red Sea? The Torah says he wandered in the wilderness for forty years trying to determine what it meant to be the "chosen people". What did Matthew have Jesus do after his "Red Sea" experience in the Jordan River? He wandered in the wilderness for forty days trying to determine what it means to be the chosen messiah. While Moses was in the wilderness he had three critical experiences. The first involved the shortage of food and it was solved with manna from heaven. The second was when the shortage of water forced Moses to "put God to the test" by striking a rock and demanding that water flow from it. The third occurred when his people in his absence turned away from God and began to worship a golden calf as "the god who brought them out of Egypt".

Matthew, as noted previously, is the first gospel writer to give content to the temptations, which Jesus had to endure in the wilderness. Examine that content. The first temptation involved the shortage of food. "Turn these stones into bread, Jesus." The second had to do with putting God to the test. "Cast yourself off the pinnacle of the Temple, Jesus. He will give his angels charge over you." The third temptation had to do with worshipping something other than God. "Bow down before me, Jesus and I will give you all the kingdoms of this world."

Once more, do you think this is coincidental? Or are you beginning to see Matthew's gospel as interpretive writing, designed to show that Jesus relived the messianic image of being the new Moses by having Moses' stories from the Hebrew Scriptures wrapped around him. Matthew's Jewish audience would immediately have understood the interpretive tools he was employing. Western, non-Jewish, literalists still do not comprehend.

The most distinguishing marks of Matthew's gospel begin to form a pattern. The baptism story with the heavens parting is a Red Sea story. The temptations are shaped by the Moses narrative. Then comes the powerful Matthean portrait of Jesus giving the Sermon on the Mount. No other gospel in the New Testament includes the Sermon on the Mount. It is Matthew's special creation because it enables him to portray Jesus as the new Moses on a new mountain, giving a new interpretation of the Torah. In this sermon, Matthew has Jesus compare Moses with him: "You have heard it said of old - but I say unto you". He reinterprets Moses driving the external Law of Moses toward the internal level of motivation. Moses is quite clearly one of the great interpretive clues to Matthew's gospel. One has to read this book with Jewish eyes. **– John Shelby Spong**

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XXIII: Matthew and the Liturgical Year of the Synagogue

In one of my earlier columns on the gospel of Mark, I sought to demonstrate that it was the liturgical life of the synagogue that formed the organising principle in the first gospel to be written. What Mark had done was to provide Jesus stories appropriate to the synagogue celebrations from Rosh Hashanah (the John the Baptist story), to Passover (the crucifixion story). Rosh Hashanah, however, comes in the mid fall (autumn) of the year and Passover comes in the early spring, so the gospel of Mark only covered six and a half months of the twelve month year, leaving out the five and a half months that separate Passover from Rosh Hashanah. There was, therefore, a desire after Mark's gospel appeared to fill in that blank space with additional Jesus material, which soon became an imperative need. Within about a decade, Matthew wrote the first expansion of Mark and aimed his story at the disciples of Jesus who worshipped in rather traditional Jewish synagogues. Luke wrote the second expansion of Mark and he aimed his story at the community of Jesus' disciples who worshipped at synagogues that were made up of dispersed Jews and those Gentile proselytes, who were beginning to be drawn into the synagogue community. Recall once again that the split between the church and the synagogue would not occur until near the end of the ninth decade, so when Mark and Matthew were written and maybe even Luke, Christians were still synagogue worshipers calling themselves "the followers of the Way". If one has ever wondered why Mark is so much shorter than the other two shortest of the gospels, the answer is quite simply that he wrote a Jesus narrative to provide material only from Rosh Hashanah (in October) to Passover (in April), or for just six and a half months of the calendar year. Matthew and Luke were longer because they both stretched Mark to cover a full year.

When Matthew, like Mark, correlates the crucifixion with the Passover (Matthew 26-27), he signals that the core of Mark will remain intact in his gospel. Like Mark, Matthew has also correlated the transfiguration with the festival of Dedication (Matthew 17:1-8), the harvest stories, including the Parable of the Sower, with the festival of Sukkoth or Tabernacles (Matthew 13); and Jesus' teaching on fasting, cleansing demons and curing sicknesses with Yom Kippur (Matthew 12). When, however, Matthew comes to Mark's correlation of John the Baptist with Rosh Hashanah, he has a problem. The baptism of Jesus by John was the first event in Jesus' ministry according to Mark, but Matthew must cover five and a half months of Jesus' story before he comes to Rosh Hashanah. In Mark the baptism of Jesus had inaugurated his ministry, but Matthew could not save that story for five and a half months. How Matthew managed this dilemma is fascinating.

Matthew follows Mark by having the baptism of Jesus come as the first event in Jesus' adult life so he uses this material early in his story. He begins his gospel with a genealogy and the story of Jesus' miraculous birth, which fills chapters one and two. Then he uses the John the Baptist story in chapter three, which means it had to come long before the seventh Jewish month of Tishri, where Rosh Hashanah is celebrated on Tishri 1. So when he gets to Rosh Hashanah in late September or early October, the baptism narrative material that Mark used as his Rosh Hashanah story has already been related. So what does he do? He uses a trick that has been frequently employed by the motion picture industry (think of Cecil B. DeMille!) and employs a "flashback".

In chapter 11 of his gospel, at the time when Rosh Hashanah rolls around, Matthew reintroduces John the Baptist, who is now in prison, by having him send a messenger to Jesus. "Are you the one who is to come (that is the messiah) or do we look for another?" the messenger inquires. Jesus does not answer directly, but refers him to a passage in Isaiah 35, a passage regularly used in the synagogue at the observance of Rosh Hashanah. "How will we know when the Kingdom of God is about to dawn?" the prophet is asked. To this query, Isaiah responds: The signs will be that the blind will see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and the mute sing. To this litany of signs Jesus adds other things that demonstrate his messianic claims: "the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them". It is the Jewish Rosh Hashanah, or New Year theme. Then Jesus moves on to speak about John the Baptist in glowing terms. It is a perfect Jesus story to be used in the observance of Rosh Hashanah.

There is one other Jewish festival that Mark, with his truncated six and a half month format, had simply ignored. Fifty days after the Passover, the Jews celebrated Shavuot or Pentecost, as they called it, a name that simply means "fifty days". On this day, which would usually fall each year in late May or early June, the Jews celebrated the moment in their history at which time God gave the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Shavuot was normally observed with a 24-hour vigil. The longest psalm in the Psalter, Psalm 119, was written to be used at this vigil. It is both a hymn to the beauty and power of the law and it is long enough to provide material for the entire vigil. Psalm 119 opens with an eight verse introduction, the first two verses of which begin with the word

"Blessed". Then there are eight segments of three stanzas each, designed for use at each of the eight three-hour sections of the 24-hour vigil. To provide an appropriate Jesus story that demonstrates the theme of Shavuot was the agenda that Matthew faced. Look now at how he did it.

At exactly the right time in the year, assuming that Matthew was stretching Mark's six and a half months out to twelve, we find in Matthew's gospel three chapters, 5, 6 and 7, what we call "The Sermon on the Mount". Here, Matthew portrays Jesus as the new Moses going up to a new mountain to deliver a new interpretation of the Torah. Matthew patterns this sermon after the Shavuot Psalm 119. He opens with an eight-verse introduction in which each verse, not just the first two, begin with the word "blessed". We now call these eight "blesseds" the Beatitudes. Then in the rest of the sermon, Matthew provides a commentary on each of these beatitudes, in reverse order from eight to one, which in effect supplies the Christian content for the eight three-hour segments of this 24-hour vigil. It is a perfect fit.

In the body of the sermon, the contrast is between Moses and Jesus with the Ten Commandments a major part of the focus. "You have heard that it was said by men of old - You shall not kill." Jesus is quoting Moses since this is the sixth commandment. Then, to set the contrast, he says, "But I say unto you" and sets himself as the interpreter of Moses by driving the law from external behaviour, to internal motivation. Murder finds its genesis in human anger and human insults, he says, so to stop murder one has to deal with the anger that precedes it. Jesus does the same thing with commandment number seven. Adultery, he says, starts in the lust of desire that grows out of our insecurity and until that is addressed, adultery is all but inevitable. Jesus then takes the summary of the law, which commands us to love our neighbour and he drives it so deeply into life by defining our neighbour as including even our enemies. Matthew constructs the Sermon on the Mount in such a way as to drive the Torah to a new level of inward motivation. When the Sermon on the Mount was over (7: 22-23), Matthew said "the crowds were astonished at his teaching". His authority was confirmed. It was authentic, that is it was not the secondary type of authority that came by quoting the scriptures, which was the method employed by the Scribes.

Covering Shavuot also completed the last festival of the synagogue year. To provide Jesus material to carry the worshippers from Passover, where Mark had told the story of the crucifixion, to Rosh Hashanah, where he had told the story of Jesus' baptism, Matthew had to front end load Mark. Look again at exactly how he did it. Matthew added the genealogy and the birth story to fill up chapters one and two. He used the story of John the Baptist baptising Jesus to introduce Jesus to the public as Mark has done, but he has expanded that story by including some of the content of John's preaching. In chapter four, he has taken Mark's two verse account of the temptations in the wilderness and included in it the content and full descriptions of the three temptations and indeed of exactly how Jesus responded to each. Then he adds the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5-7. When Matthew gets to chapter 13, he has finally caught up with where Mark was in chapter 4. From that point on, the two gospels track very closely together.

Matthew has expanded Mark's content to give the worshipping disciples a sufficient supply of Jesus stories to enable them to cover the entire year. Now when we read it closely, we begin to discern another Matthean interpretive tool. He has woven his Jesus story around the biography of Moses, the greatest hero in the Jewish world view and clearly Matthew's model. Next we will pull the analogy of Moses out of Matthew's text and raise to our consciousness his editorial genius. From the story of the wicked king who tried to destroy the great deliverer at birth to likening the crucifixion of Jesus to a new exodus not from physical slavery, but to the slavery to sin, Moses is clearly in the background of Matthew's Jesus story. The New Testament is quite exciting as soon as you dismiss a literal meaning and begin to discover the interpretive meaning that each gospel writer sought to convey.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XXIV: Introducing Luke

By the time the third gospel, the one we call Luke, was written, history had moved to the last years of the 9th decade at the earliest and quite possibly to the early years of the 10th decade. The Christian movement had journeyed beyond its earlier traumas and tensions and was now concerned about making a case for its legitimacy in the Roman Empire. I date Luke between 89 and 93, though with all proposed dating there is debate on both ends. This gospel, however, does reflect Christianity's transition out of Judaism and toward to the Gentile world. The community for which Luke's gospel was written appears to have been made up primarily of dispersed Jews, who no longer followed their traditions in a rigid pattern and as a consequence, are beginning to attract a rising tide of converts from the Gentile world. These Gentile proselytes, as they came to be called, had little dedication to or interest in the cultic practices of circumcision, kosher dietary rules and unfamiliar liturgical practices such as a 24-hour vigil around Shavuot or Pentecost and the eight-day celebrations of the Harvest Festival known as Sukkoth. They were not intent on discarding or losing the meaning of these holy days, but they clearly were eager to reduce their place of importance and the hold they had once had on their lives.

The author of Luke is unknown, but the tradition has always identified this book with Luke the physician, who accompanied Paul and is mentioned in both Colossians 4:14 and in II Timothy 4:11. Please recall, however, that Colossians is disputed as to its being genuinely Pauline, with the weight of scholarship against it, while no New Testament scholar of significance would attribute II Timothy to the pen of Paul, so this identification is tenuous at best. What we do know about the author of the gospel of Luke and the same person clearly wrote the book of Acts as Volume II of his gospel, is that in all probability he was born a Gentile and had been drawn first into the ethical monotheism that marked Judaism. He appears to have actually converted to Judaism and to have joined the synagogue through which he moved into Christianity. He may well have been a convert of Paul's, at least he has clearly identified himself with Paul's point of view and he champions it in both the gospel and the book of Acts.

The internal data that point us to these conclusions are plentiful. First, there is the genealogy of Luke in chapter three, which, quite unlike the genealogy in Matthew, carries the ancestry of Jesus back not just to Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, but to Adam, who would have been understood in the world view of that day as the father of the whole human race, which would include the Gentiles. Also in Luke's genealogy it needs to be noted that while he ties Jesus to King David, he does not carry that lineage through the royal lines of the kings of the Southern Kingdom as Matthew does, but suggests that the line ran not from David to Solomon but from David to Nathan. Biblical sources tell us of no son of David named Nathan, but David had many wives so he might have had many sons whose names we do not know. Where Luke got the name Nathan or why he settled on it is hard to say, but the moral hero of the story of David and Bathsheba was a prophet named Nathan, about whom I have written before. In other places, Luke appears to borrow names from Old Testament characters if it suits the message he is trying to articulate, so the connection with Nathan, the prophet, might be a good guess. We also know that Luke was not impressed with royalty or with magi, as they both get de-emphasised in this gospel.

In other notes that may give us insight into Luke's values, we note that this is the first gospel and thus the first place in the Bible, ever to mention the Samaritans and Luke does so with sensitivity and inclusiveness. Only Luke, for example, tells us the parable of the "Good Samaritan". That is just one more indication that his community has moved beyond the Jewish point of view. Later in the book of Acts (chapter two), Luke emphasises anew the universal theme in his narrative when he suggests that when the Holy Spirit fell on the gathered Christian community. He is quite pointed in noting that Pentecost was a worldwide event in which the Spirit fell, not only on the Jews, but on the peoples of the world, who then proclaimed the gospel in whatever language those hearing spoke. To make sure that his readers understood this point, he named those who were present. They were: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, dwellers in Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Egypt and Rome (Acts 3:4-10). Clearly Luke envisioned a Christianity loosed from the ethnic limits of Judaism and propelled into being a universal faith.

We note also that the author of this gospel makes no claim to his ever having been an eye witness, but rather mentions the research that he has done, which enabled him to produce this work. He says in his preamble that "many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of the things which are surely believed among us, even as they delivered them to us, which from the beginning were eye witnesses and servants of the word (Luke 1:1-5)". We can now be certain that Mark was one of these sources since Luke reproduces in

his gospel about half of Mark. Many scholars also suggest that Luke and Matthew both had a common source made up of a collection of Jesus sayings from which they both quote frequently and almost identically. This popular hypothesis requires the existence of a now lost book to which the title Q has been attached. There are some other scholars, a minority, who dismiss the Q hypothesis and assert instead that Luke also had Matthew in front of him when he wrote and that, while he preferred Mark, he did use a number of Matthew's additions to Mark and that is what created the similarities between Luke and Matthew that are attributed to Q. While the majority of scholars still follow the Q hypothesis, I for one have never been convinced of it. It is not important to enter that debate here; I merely state it as a way of keeping the argument open.

Luke also introduces a number of things into the developing Christian story that have not to our knowledge been there before. The first one is the account of the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1). It is a fascinating story from many angles, but it is clearly not history. It reminds me of a song popular in my teenage years entitled, "Anything you can do, I can do better". John is born to post-menopausal parents. That is a wonder, but it pales into insignificance in the light of the story of Jesus being born to a virgin. When the birth of John occurs, the neighbours gather to celebrate. When Jesus was born, however, it was not neighbours, but angels who come crashing through the midnight sky to celebrate his arrival. Clearly, when Luke wrote, there was still some tension between the followers of Jesus and the followers of John the Baptist. That is why there is such a concentrated effort in all the gospels to assert that John the Baptist, who was clearly the first of the two on the scene, knew that he was subservient to Jesus: "He must increase, I must decrease". Luke pushes this to the extreme by having the foetus of John the Baptist in the womb of Elizabeth leap to salute the foetus of Jesus in the womb of Mary (1:39-45). In this narrative, Luke appears to have borrowed a story from Genesis and applied it to his narrative (see Genesis 25:12-23). In both stories, a baby leaps in the womb of its mother. In the Genesis story, it is Rebekah, Isaac's wife, who is pregnant with twins. As these twins struggle in Rebekah's womb, she seeks the counsel of an oracle to determine the meaning of this leaping only to learn from the oracle that the older son (Esau) would ultimately serve the younger son (Jacob). In Luke's story the babies are not twins, but Luke does make them kin - perhaps cousins - but the meaning is the same, the older boy, John, will serve the younger boy, Jesus.

The custom of taking material from familiar Old Testament sources, such as the book of Genesis, to tell the Jesus story is discernable in other places. In Luke's narrative about the birth of John, he says that the Baptist's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, conceived him when they were both post-menopausal. That motif was clearly borrowed from the story of Abraham and Sarah, who did the same thing when Isaac was born. The names of John the Baptist's parents were also, in all probability, plucked from Old Testament sources. Luke will portray John the Baptist, not as Elijah, but as "the voice crying in the wilderness", a phrase that comes from the book of Malachi. The immediate predecessor to the book of Malachi in the Bible was the book of Zechariah, so Luke uses that name for the father or immediate predecessor of John the Baptist. Identifying the source of the name Elizabeth for John's mother is more difficult. There is only one other Elizabeth in the Bible and she is the wife of Aaron, the brother of Moses and the sister of Miriam. Elizabeth, written as Elisheba in Hebrew and Miriam, written as Mary in Greek, would thus be sisters-in-law and thus their children would be first cousins. Only Luke implies kinship between Jesus and John and I believe that he accomplishes this by his creative use of names drawn from the story of Moses and his siblings.

As we look more deeply into Luke's unique way of telling the Jesus story, we will see again and again that Luke's purpose is to interpret Jesus in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures, not to recreate him historically. Unless we understand this clearly and thus free our minds from the shackling literalism that distorts the modern ability to study the scriptures, we will never be able to hear the powerful message of Luke. This new vision also introduces into the study of the Bible a playful kind of speculation that leads us deeper and deeper into its truth. As our consideration of Luke moves on, that will become clearer and even more obvious.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XXV: Concluding Luke and the Synoptic Gospels

In this final segment on the third gospel we call Luke I want to summarise and to establish firmly in the minds of my readers the major thesis that I have sought to develop in my comments on the synoptic gospels: Mark, Matthew and Luke. My thesis is that each of these gospels is organised on the basis of the annual liturgical cycle of the synagogue, where Christianity lived in its first generations as a movement within Judaism and so these gospels must be read through a Jewish lens. The later Greek thinking period, which shaped the creeds in the 4th Century and informs Christian doctrine to this day, has actually distorted the gospel message in a radical way. We have already observed that Mark was the original gospel to be written and that both Matthew and Luke incorporated Mark into their work, expanding Mark in a way appropriate for the community for which each wrote. Matthew's community was traditionally Jewish. Luke's community was made up of dispersed Jews living far from home and interacting increasingly with their Gentile neighbours. Clearly Gentiles were beginning to come into Luke's community, drawn by the ethical monotheism of Judaism, as they faced the demise of the gods of the Olympus. That was why, as we have seen, that the gigantic figure of Moses, the inward-looking father of the law, became the popular symbol against which the Jewish Matthew told his Jesus story and the gigantic figure of Elijah, the outward-looking father of the Jewish prophetic movement, became the symbol against which the more universally-minded Luke told his story of Jesus. It was also this one year liturgical cycle of the synagogue that caused each of these writers to portray the public ministry of Jesus as one year in duration. This time sequence, I am now convinced, has nothing to do with the actual time of Jesus' ministry, but rather it had everything to do with the fact that Jesus' ministry in these synoptic gospels was being recalled and retold against the liturgical year observed in the synagogue.

The first holy day in the liturgical year of the Jews was, according to the book of Leviticus (23:24), the Passover, which was observed on the 14th and 15th days of the first month of the year known as Nissan. The Christians obviously told the story of Jesus' crucifixion against the background of this Passover celebration and then adjusted the Jewish calendar by concluding their Jesus story on the Sabbath and first day of the week following Passover on which they celebrated the Resurrection. So the beginning of the Christian liturgical year was always at least a week and sometimes two weeks after Passover. Once we can embrace this crucial time disparity, the synoptic gospels go in a very orderly way through the other feasts and fasts of the Jewish year. With that preamble, I seek to focus our final consideration of Luke's Gospel on how this particular gospel writer followed the liturgical pattern of the synagogue. That will put Luke's gospel into a very different context from the literal pattern that traditional Christians assume to have been the case.

Fifty days or seven Sabbaths after Passover, the Jews observed the festival of Shavuot or Pentecost (which means 50 days). On that day they recalled God's gift of the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The Law was assumed by the Jews to have been God's greatest gift to them. Luke, however, probably under the influence of Paul, had come to believe that the Holy Spirit, rather than the Law, was God's greatest gift to the Christians. When he actually tells the story of Pentecost in Chapter 2 of Acts, the second volume of his gospel, this becomes his focus. So in his gospel he wants to make sure that he presents the Pentecost theme with a suitable Jesus story that would thus be appropriate to Shavuot. Watch how cleverly he does it.

First Luke needs to supply Jesus material for each of the seven Sabbaths between Passover and Shavuot. He does this by expanding the birth narratives with elaborate details about the nativities of both John the Baptist and Jesus. Next he relates some substantive content from the preaching of John the Baptist. Then when he arrives at the Shavuot lesson he has John the Baptist point to and interpret Pentecost exactly as Luke will later describe it in Acts 2, by saying: "I baptise you with water, but he who is mightier than I, will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire..." In effect, he has John say exactly what will happen when Pentecost rolls around. Then he adds an even longer genealogy than that of Matthew and expands the temptation story and the forty days Jesus supposedly spent in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. Then he proceeds to add enough Jesus material to complete the entire Galilean phase of Jesus' ministry, using much of the content that Matthew had placed into the Sermon on the Mount. Finally, having produced a sufficiently long narrative to carry us through five and a half months into the year, he finds himself confronted by the celebration of the New Year, or Rosh Hashanah, where Mark had opened his gospel by having John the Baptist convey his Rosh Hashanah themes. Luke, however, like Matthew before him, has obviously used that story much earlier in his narrative so he needs to find a new way to convey the Rosh Hashanah message. Exactly as Matthew had done earlier, he re-introduces the Baptist with the story of John, now in prison, sending a messenger to ask Jesus, "Are you the one that should come?" To this question Jesus

responds by quoting the favourite synagogue Rosh Hashanah lesson from Isaiah 35 in which the prophet announces that the signs of the Kingdom, when it comes, will be that "the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and the mute sing". When Luke gets to chapter 7:18-23, he is back in synch with Mark and both now have stories that allow the liturgical year to be introduced by John the Baptist. The shaping of the Jesus message by the life of the synagogue is in full view.

Rosh Hashanah was the first of three major Jewish observances that occurred in the month of Tishri, the seventh month in the Jewish calendar. Rosh Hashanah was on the first day of Tishri, Yom Kippur on the tenth and Sukkoth (the Harvest Festival) filled the eight days between Tishri 15-22. Since John the Baptist has been reintroduced and Rosh Hashanah has been observed, we need to be on the lookout for Yom Kippur and Sukkoth stories. They come right on cue. There is a series of verses (7:24-35) that are available for use on any Sabbath that falls between Tishri 1 and Tishri 10 and then, in 7:36-50, the Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, message comes front and centre. It is the story of the woman coming into the house while Jesus is at dinner and anointing his feet. Focus with me now on this story.

The first thing we notice is that it is out of place, at least according to Mark and Matthew. In both of those gospels the anointing of Jesus by the woman was an event just prior to the crucifixion (see Mark 14:3-9 and Matthew 26:6-13). "She has anointed me beforehand for burial" (Mark 14:8 and Matthew 26:12), is how Jesus explains this action. Luke, however, has moved this story and placed it early in the Galilean phase of his ministry. In neither Mark nor Matthew is there even a hint of scandal, no suggestion that this woman is evil, no intimate fondling of Jesus' feet and no drying of them with her hair. So Luke has not only moved this story to a new place, but he has also greatly heightened the sensuous quality of this act and made the woman evil. Luke has the woman identified as "a woman of the street", that is, a prostitute who kisses and rubs his feet. She is by definition unclean and by touching Jesus, has presumably made him unclean. Jesus is even judged by his Pharisaic host not to be a prophet, for a prophet would know what kind of woman this is and would not allow her behaviour!

When we place this story in Luke on the grid of the liturgical year of the synagogue, we discover that it falls exactly where Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, falls and he has clearly chosen, moved and adapted this story to fit this observance. At Yom Kippur, the people are cleansed of their sins and made pure. Jesus is thus portrayed as entering the world of ritual uncleanness and instead of being corrupted by it, actually transforms it and purifies the evil. That is what atonement is all about. He concludes this story by having Jesus banish the demons from Mary Magdalene and other women, once again a Yom Kippur theme. When Yom Kippur is over, Luke connects again with Mark and uses Mark's parable of the Sower for his harvest story to celebrate Sukkoth. That account begins in chapter eight, but, as we might expect, it is considerably shortened. Luke's Gentile leaning community does not do eight day festivals or twenty-four hour vigils. When Luke's story moves on he comes to the winter festival called Dedication, or Hanukkah and once again, like Mark, he relates the story of the Transfiguration, where the light of God is not restored to the Temple, but falls on Jesus, the new Temple.

Then Luke has Jesus begin his journey to Jerusalem. Luke uses this journey sequence to be the hook on which he hangs the concentrated material that constitutes the teaching of Jesus. So here we have a series of teaching episodes until he has entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Luke completes the cycle now by having Jesus observe the Passover on Thursday, be crucified on Friday and be raised on Sunday. The journey from the Sabbath after Passover through the Jewish observances of Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkoth, and Dedication back to Passover is now complete. This was the cycle of remembering the story of Jesus and it is tied in every detail to the liturgical year of the synagogue. Here the form of the gospels - at least Mark, Matthew and Luke - was born. That is why I entitled one of my books *"Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes"*.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament, Part XXVI: The Book of Acts

In the early manuscripts of the Bible, the book of Acts served the purpose of providing transition from the gospels to the epistles. There was a deep historical fallacy in this assumption though it seemed logical, at least historically, to have stories of the life of Jesus precede stories of the spread of Christianity after the end of Jesus' earthly life. The fact is that the authentic epistles of Paul were written first (51-64) and then the gospels, or, at least, the first three gospels (70-93). John was much later (95-100). Into that framework also needs to be placed the Pastoral Epistles that claim Pauline authorship, but are clearly written in Paul's name long after his death (circa 64) and the General or "Catholic" Epistles that are called by the names of Peter, John, James and Jude, but which were clearly not written by the one to whom each is attributed and some of which are even quite clearly the products of the 2nd Century. Then there is this book of Acts, which purports to tell the story of the Christian movement and how it spread after the Easter event from Jerusalem to Rome. Although its title claims that it is the story of all the apostles, it features stories primarily about Peter, with John appearing in a secondary role before moving to its obvious star, Paul, who is known in the early church simply as "the Apostle". Not only was he not one of the twelve, but there is no evidence that Paul ever met or knew the Jesus of history.

Originally, Acts was designed to be volume two of the Gospel of Luke. The two works are clearly inter-related and are obviously the products of the same author. They agree in vocabulary usage, in common themes and in the fact that Luke's gospel anticipates the book of Acts and the book of Acts looks back on the gospel of Luke. It is unfortunate that, when the New Testament was formed, the gospels - now four in number - were put at the beginning, which necessitated splitting Luke-Acts into two volumes, with the gospel of John breaking their original unity. In this study, however, I will try to rectify that mistake by treating Luke-Acts as one continuous story. We can then move with better understanding into the Pastoral Epistles, the General Epistles and that rather unique epistle we call the Letter to the Hebrews, before concluding our journey though the biblical text with the Johannine corpus, which includes the gospel that bears John's name, the three epistles purportedly written by him and the book of Revelation, which claims to have been written by John while he was imprisoned on the Isle of Patmos. So with that apologia for the placement of this book in both the Bible and in this series, let me bring into focus the Acts of the Apostles.

I noted in our earlier study the impact the synagogue setting had on the organisation and the content of the gospels themselves (I am speaking now primarily of the first three: Mark, Matthew and Luke) and raise the question about whether or not the book of Acts might fit into that same liturgical pattern. Please note first that the book of Acts is approximately the same length as both Matthew and Luke, so if Matthew and Luke were designed to enable Jesus stories to be read in the Sabbaths of the liturgical year, as I have suggested, Acts is a similar length so that it would also lend itself to be read in segments over the course of one liturgical year.

We also need to be aware of the practice in the synagogue of reading the Torah first in the Sabbath liturgy. There appear to have been two patterns at the dawn of the Christian era. The pattern in the more traditional synagogues was to read the Torah in its entirety over the Sabbaths of a single year. This would mean a very long first lesson, some five to six chapters from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In those communities of "the Diaspora", in which the Jews were dispersed throughout the empire into pockets in predominately Gentile cities, the pattern developed of reading the Torah over a three year cycle, thereby making the lessons much shorter each Sabbath. Once the reading of the Law was complete and probably following the recitation of a psalm, a second lesson would be read from the historical books that the Jews called "the Early Prophets" - the books of Joshua, Judges, I & II Samuel and I & II Kings. Basically, this portion of the sacred story was the narrative of what happened to the Jewish nation after the end of the life of their founder, Moses. The Jews did not regard these writings as in the same category of importance as the Torah, so the passion to complete their reading in a particular period of time was not a matter of great urgency.

It appears to me that the book of Acts was designed by Luke after the analogy of this Jewish practice and was meant to provide Christians with a lesson tracing the history of the church as it moved out of the Jewish orbit and into the wider Gentile world. Like the books called the "Early Prophets", the book of Acts chronicles the life of "the New Israel" following the death of its founder, Jesus. If that is true, we might look for stories in the book of Acts that would be appropriate to the various feasts and fasts of the liturgical year in the synagogue. The first one is obvious for in Acts 2, Luke gives us the narrative of Pentecost in which he tells the story of the

coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Christian community. The Jews regarded the Law as the greatest gift God had ever given to Israel and they marked this at Pentecost. Christians, however, wanted to transform Jewish Pentecost into a Christian celebration to mark what they believed was the greatest gift God had given the Christians, namely the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost, which literally means 50 days, was also called Shavuot. When we previously examined Matthew's gospel, we noted that Shavuot was observed by the Jews as a twenty-four-hour vigil focusing on the Sinai experience in which Moses received the law. We also noted that Matthew marked that holy day with the Sermon on the Mount that portrayed Jesus as the new Moses on a new mountain giving a new interpretation of the Torah, together with sufficient material to cover eight segments of three hours each in this twenty-four hour vigil. That is why there are eight beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount and eight commentaries or elaborations of each of the beatitudes. Matthew's traditionally Jewish community observed Pentecost in an orthodox way.

We also noted earlier that Luke's community was constituted of dispersed Jews and an increasing number of Gentiles who had been attracted to the synagogue by its theology of ethical monotheism. These Gentile proselytes, however, were not attracted to the cultic elements of Judaism. They would thus not be particularly interested in observing a twenty-four-hour vigil. When we were considering Luke's gospel, we noted that when this author came to the time in which Pentecost was celebrated, he simply had John the Baptist point to the narrative that he planned to write when he got to the second chapter of Acts where Luke would reveal his new understanding of Pentecost. He did this by having John say, "I baptise you with water, but one comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to unloose, he will baptise you with *the Holy Spirit and with fire*".

In the fifty day period between Passover and Pentecost in the Jewish calendar, Pentecost will be reached on or near the seventh Sabbath. Luke, therefore, needed to provide six gospel lessons before he gets to Pentecost. As the Easter stories began to proliferate he provided for three of these in his gospel itself. The lesson for the Sabbath after Passover, when the Christians celebrated the resurrection, would be Luke 24:1-12. Next, he added the Emmaus Road resurrection story (24:13-35) that no other gospel writer recorded to be read on the second Sabbath after Passover. Then Luke's gospel has a third resurrection story (24:36-53) in which Jesus appears to the disciples for the first time and commissions them to be his witnesses to "all the nations", before he departed from them.

The early Christian community would then turn to the book of Acts where Luke has three more quite distinct lessons to carry him to Pentecost. First, there is his introduction (Acts 1:1-5) in which continuity with the gospel of Luke is established, together with the note that the appearances of the raised Jesus went on for fifty days. Second was the story of the Ascension that brought those appearances to an end (Acts 1:6-14). Finally there was the story of the community choosing Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot so that the new Israel, like the old Israel, could continue to have twelve tribes. That brings us to the seventh Sabbath and the day of Pentecost. Right on cue, the reading was the story of how the Christians had turned Pentecost into a Christian celebration of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-13). There are other stories in the book of Acts that seem to be appropriate to the other Jewish holidays and each comes in the correct liturgical order: Stephen is a kind of Rosh Hashanah figure as he points to the coming of the kingdom (see Acts 6:1-8); Yom Kippur is referenced when the Christian movement begins to enrol Gentiles (6:9-15); Sukkoth or Tabernacles is recalled when Stephen recites and recalls the time the Jewish people lived homeless in the wilderness (7:1-36). The festival of Dedication or Hanukkah, which came in the dead of winter, might well be replicated in the story of Paul's conversion in chapter 9:1-22 in which the light of God comes, not on the Temple as it did in the Hebrew observance, or even on Jesus as it does in the gospel story of the Transfiguration, but on Paul as he journeyed on the road to Damascus.

When we get to the end of Acts, we discover the trial of Paul also appears to replicate in many places the trial of Jesus and would be read at the time when Passover for the Jews and the crucifixion for the Christians were being observed. My conclusion is that the book of Acts, like the Synoptic Gospels, was written as a liturgical book patterned after the synagogue's holy day observances and in the proper order. Now we are ready to look at the content of this book.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament, Part XXVII: Acts and the Rise of Universalism

The book of Acts is a travelogue, a journey, designed by Luke to bring fulfilment to the words he puts into Jesus' mouth at the very beginning of this book: "You shall be my witnesses", Jesus says and then he tells them where: "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Luke is intent upon portraying the Jesus movement to be one that starts humbly in the hills of a remote Galilee and then moves through Samaria on its way to Jerusalem, where he records his first climax in the crucifixion of Jesus. Asserting that the death of Jesus is not the end of this movement, he then proceeds to tell the story of how this movement began to spread from Jerusalem until it reached its second climax in the capitol of the known world, the city of Rome. So this author has his story move only in one direction and he never has the story return to a place from which it has departed. One illustration of this becomes visible when the angelic messengers of the resurrection in Luke's narrative do not order the disciples to return to Galilee, as they do in both Mark and Matthew, but rather "not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4). To signal the beginning of the next phase of his story, Luke repeats the words of the promise originally stated earlier in his gospel by John the Baptist that, while John has baptised with water, the disciples of Jesus will be baptised by the Holy Spirit and in the power of that Spirit a world wide mission will be inaugurated.

Then in quick succession, Luke begins his Volume II, which we now call the book of Acts, by bringing the appearances of the Risen Christ to an abrupt end. He removes Jesus physically from the earth in an act of ascension and then he inaugurates the Christian Church with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the gathered community in which the people of the world discover a new sense of oneness. The reader is not allowed to miss the worldwide significance of this story, for Luke says that those gathered at that time included Parthians, Medes, Elamites, dwellers in Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphilia, Egypt, Libya, Cyrene, Crete and Arabia! Given the knowledge of geography available in that day, this is a rather impressive list. This vision of a new oneness in this vast world is celebrated by the symbol that in the power of the Spirit they were all able to speak the language of their hearers. It was, as many have observed, a reversal of the Tower of Babel story from the book of Genesis (11:1-9) in which the languages of the people of the world were confused and human isolation into protective tribes was both inaugurated and explained.

Luke uses the device of sermons that he places on the lips of Peter (Acts 1:15-20, 2:14-36, 3:12-26, 4:8-12) and Stephen (7:2-56) to communicate his message. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Jewish Scriptures and his story announces that God has made Jesus "whom you crucified" both Lord and Christ - that is, both a divine presence and the expected messiah of the Jews. In the process, we are given a view of how Luke perceived the early Christian movement. With the election of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:22-26) the Christian Church was to be patterned after Israel with twelve tribes or leaders. The followers of Jesus devoted themselves to "the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:43). They were to be capable of signs and wonders, since the Spirit dwelled within them and they held all things in common (Acts 2:44 and 5:1-11). They attended the Temple "day by day" and in the privacy of their homes they conducted the Eucharist by breaking bread together. Peter was always cast as the leader according to Luke, sometimes accompanied by John, but Peter was clearly the spokesperson for the Christian movement.

Next Luke introduces the first account of tension with the leaders of Judaism in the persons of Caiaphas, John and Alexander, together with all of the members of the high priestly family. That conflict came to a resolution, according to the book of Acts, in the words of a leader of the Pharisees named Gamaliel, who urged the rulers to wait upon the test of time. "If this movement is of God", he said, "you cannot stop it and if it is not of God, it will fail without help from you" (Acts 5:33-42). It was sage advice and Gamaliel prevailed and we watch as this tension between church and synagogue began to fade. This is part of the process we use to date the book of Acts, for the author is describing life in the early church between the year in which the followers of Jesus were expelled from the synagogue around 88AD (CE) and before the year 100.

That original tension, however, was replaced by one within the movement of the followers of Jesus themselves and the book of Acts now turns its attention to this battle, which issued in the first intra-church battle. It was between the strict constructionist Jewish Christians on one side and the newly-converted Hellenist or Greek Christians on the other. The book of Acts will pivot on this conflict. Peter was the champion of the strict Jewish point of view, which argued that Jesus did not set aside the Torah, but rather

fulfilled it. This meant that the power of Jewish law was still to be observed in Christian circles, including the rituals of circumcision, kosher dietary laws and the Sabbath worship traditions. This group also asserted that the only doorway open to Greek converts to Christianity was to become Jews first and then Christians. Paul is introduced in this book as the one who would ultimately become the champion of the Gentile Christian movement. Stephen entered the story as one of the clearly chosen deacons who would expand the Christian Community's leadership in order to enable them better to care for the needs of the "Hellenists".

According to the book of Acts, Paul began his career as a defender of the full power of the Torah and as a persecutor of those who would relativise its claims. The narrative in the book of Acts pauses to allow the tensions in the Christian community to build by introducing another deacon named Philip, who also presses the boundaries of the Torah. Philip baptised an Ethiopian eunuch, who violated the way the strict constructionists interpreted the Law on two levels. First, the Ethiopian was a Gentile who was brought by his baptism directly into the Christian movement, with no journey through Judaism required to reach his destination. Second, as a eunuch, this Ethiopian was a direct challenge to the literal truth of the Torah, for Deuteronomy could not be more specific on this issue since it states: "He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off should not enter the assembly of the Lord" (Deut. 3:1).

Next, Luke moves to relate the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, after which in quick succession he is baptised, has his blindness ended and begins his missionary career. From Paul's writings we have already learned about the conflict he had with those he called "the Judaisers" and his showdown with Peter, their spokesperson (Galatians 1). By the time Luke wrote the book of Acts, however, that tension was more a part of history than it was currently alive and real. Luke even explains how it was overcome by telling how Peter had been converted to Paul's perspective. This dramatic tale forms the end of the Peter section of Acts and opens the Paul section (Acts 10:9-16). Peter's conversion took place on a roof top at noon where, Luke says, he was engaged in prayer. Being hungry, this narrative tells us, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened, from which a great sheet descended, laden with creatures, animals, reptiles and birds that were edible, but not kosher, perhaps including both pigs and shellfish. A heavenly voice invited Peter to ease his hunger by rising, killing and eating. Peter declined by saying, "I have never eaten anything common or unclean". To which the voice from heaven proclaimed, "Peter, what God has cleansed, you must not call common" (Acts 10:15). This vision was repeated, says Acts, three times before Peter got the message and went to the home of an "upright and God-fearing Gentile" named Cornelius and baptised him and his whole family. That was the moment, says Luke, when the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles. The words of Peter then became the new mantra for the Christian movement, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34, 35).

The issue at stake in this battle was whether or not Christianity would become a universal movement. It was Peter himself, the champion of the "strict constructionists", who forged the new way forward. Peter thus is portrayed, not only as the one who launched the Christian movement, but also as the life through which the boundary between Jew and Gentile was breached and as the one in whom the new vision of universalism was born. His work being completed, Peter fades away and Paul now moves front and centre. It is ultimately on the shoulders of Paul that the inclusive character of Christianity would be formed, one that would, as Paul says in Galatians, embrace: "Jew and Greek, male and female, bond and free".

So Luke turns to the story of Paul and through his life we watch Christianity reach Rome and the "uttermost parts of the earth". The tribal boundary that separated the Jews from the Gentiles was enormous. As intense as this battle was inside Christianity, it would not be either the last or the bitterest fight that would mark Christianity in its journey toward universalism. There would be other fights before Christians were able to see women, people of colour, adherents of other religions, homosexual persons, mentally ill persons and even left handed persons as fully human. There would also be others in history who would play the role of Peter and ease the Christian movement into its calling to bring abundant life to all. Only then could the invitation of Jesus, "Come unto me, all ye", not "some of ye", be fully heard. The book of Acts chronicles the story of Christianity's walk into what it was created to be. Today we continue to write our chapter in this same ongoing narrative.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament, Part XXVIII: Acts III - The Story of Paul

When the book of Acts moves beyond the conflict that set Jewish Christians against Greek Christians, it is ready to chronicle the story of how Christianity became a universal human religion. From the capital of Judaism to the capital of the Roman Empire is the story line that the book of Acts follows. The hero of this phase of the Christian movement is Saul of Tarsus, who would come to be known as Paul the Apostle. We have previously examined the content of his epistles, but now in the book of Acts, Luke begins to flesh out the portrait of his life and his personality as others experienced him. How much of this portrait is historical and how much is the product of Luke's fertile imagination is often hard to determine. Luke writes the book of Acts some forty years or two generations after the death of Paul and legends about heroes do tend to grow after they have died. This fate may well have befallen Paul in the book of Acts. My rule for interpreting Paul is to follow the actual writings of Paul wherever they conflict with the much later narrative of Acts. This rule will place all of the details of Paul's conversion story on the road to Damascus into doubt as something that actually happened in history. It is worth noting that Paul never writes about his conversion. He assumes a conversion from the role of the prosecutor of Christians, but he gives us no details, making Acts seem dramatically unhistorical.

Acts does give us, however, the only cohesive picture we have of Paul's adventurous missionary journeys, which correlates well with corroborative details in the Pauline epistles. This sense is strengthened when Acts introduces in Acts 16:10 and then continues through most of the rest of the book, a section of his travel narrative that does not use the descriptive pronoun "they", but rather the autobiographical pronoun "we". It is as if Luke found a diary of the journeys of Paul written by one of Paul's companions and simply incorporated this diary into his larger work. These "we" sections of the book of Acts are accorded by many, but certainly not by all New Testament scholars, a place of greater significance and greater authority than any other part of the book of Acts, so I simply call these passages to you for your attention and further study.

When I try to flesh out the portrait of the Paul of history as we have received it from ancient times, I always find the "personal notes" dropped almost accidentally into the text of the book of Acts to be enormously helpful. These notes offer a kind of unplanned access to the person. I think, for example, of that tale in Acts about an event that occurred on his first missionary journey, during which he was the number two person to Barnabas on the missionary team. In this story, the two missionaries were in the city of Lystra (Acts 14:6ff) and it gives us an insight into Paul's physical appearance. Barnabas and Paul were both mistaken for Gods visiting from Mt. Olympus. The people, looking at the two of them, began to refer to Barnabas as Zeus, the king of the Gods and to Paul as Hermes, the messenger God. In the cultural patterns of that day, the tradition defined Zeus as tall and commanding in stature. We can, properly, I assume, suggest that Barnabas must have himself been a person of imposing size to have been mistaken for Zeus. Hermes, the messenger God, was portrayed as small and wiry and as constantly speaking. For Paul to have been thought of as Hermes, he must have been similar in stature and above all talkative. Clearly Paul elicited that kind of image in the minds of his hearers. Paul is described in one other 2nd Century apocalyptic source as thin, with dark connecting eyebrows stretched across the entirety of his face. There is some similarity in these two descriptions.

In chapter 13:13-15, Barnabas and Paul were in the town of Perga in Pamphylia and the liturgical practice of the 1st Century synagogue was described just by chance, giving us the best insight we have of how the synagogue functioned on the Sabbath in the 1st Century. There we learn of the priority of the reading of the Torah, which contains the books Genesis through Deuteronomy, which were attributed to Moses. In the more traditional synagogues, the Torah was required to be read in its entirety on the Sabbaths of a single year. In some less traditional synagogues, a three-year cycle was followed, but the centrality of the law, the Torah, in both was crucial. Following the Torah came readings from the prophets. The Jewish tradition meant two things by the phrase "the prophets". First, there were the "early prophets", that is the biblical books of Joshua through II Kings, which told us, as I have previously noted, the history of the Jewish people after the death of their founder, Moses. Second, they meant the "latter prophets", that is, those books attributed to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the book the Jews referred to as "the Book of the Twelve". This volume contained on one scroll what we call today the Minor Prophets or the books from Hosea through Malachi. Please note that Daniel was not one of the prophets, since Daniel was not written until about 168BC (BCE) and had not yet been incorporated into the sacred text. Readings from either the early or the latter prophets did not have the same gravitas associated with the law, so those lessons were read in much smaller portions over an indeterminate amount of time. Next, the members of the congregation would be invited to speak, relating their own insights gained from these readings. I am now convinced that this is where the disciples of Jesus began the process of

attempting to demonstrate that the Jewish Scriptures pointed to Jesus in almost every verse. By the time the gospels are written, this interpretative pattern is both assumed and operative. The author of Acts relates Paul's sermon in 13:16-41 and provides us with dramatic insights into the way Christians employed the Jewish Scriptures and the way that Christianity emerged in the synagogue.

The book of Acts also chronicles in some detail the hostility that broke out over Paul and his teaching on the part of the Orthodox Jewish world. On his journeys in whatever city he visited Paul always went to the synagogue first. He never thought of himself as anything but a Jew. In these synagogues, which were always outside of the Jewish homeland, there were three distinct groups gathered for worship: the orthodox, traditional Jews who believed that the entire truth of God was embodied in the Torah and who were not therefore prepared to welcome any deviations from or additions to the traditional text; the liberal-leaning Jews dispersed, from their homeland and more and more interacting with their Gentile neighbours; and finally those people known as "Gentile proselytes", who were people drawn to the synagogue by the ethical monotheism of Judaism, but were unwilling to adopt and some were even repelled by, the cultic practices of circumcision, kosher dietary laws and Sabbath day observance.

Paul's message appealed to these Gentile proselytes and significantly to the liberal Jews of the Diaspora, but he drew little more than hostility from those identified as the Orthodox party for whom any change threatened their security. So they were the primary source of the hostility toward Paul, which plagued him everywhere he went. Acts 15 describes a council of church leaders gathered to deal with this tension and according to this Acts account, a compromise was worked out by James, the Lord's brother, who appears to have headed the Jerusalem community of Jewish believers in Jesus. In this compromise, Paul was given carte blanche to continue his work among the Gentiles and was assured that his converts did not have to comply with Jewish ritual practices. The converts were asked, however, to agree to three things: to abstain from eating meat that had been offered to idols, from unchastity and from blood from any animal that had been strangled and was thus not ceremonially clean. Whether the details of this council are accurate is hard to say, but it did serve to set the Christian movement free from the constraints of those Jewish practices and began its separation from Judaism which had birthed Christianity.

When Paul and Barnabas prepared for their second journey, a dispute broke out leading to a split between the two. The issue, according to Acts, was whether to take John Mark with them. Mark appears to have abandoned them on the first journey to return home. Paul then became the senior member of a second missionary team and chose Silas to accompany him. Barnabas took Mark and in this manner the movement spread.

On this second tour we learn that Paul had a dream of a Macedonian imploring him to come to Macedonia. Paul obeyed the vision and Christianity moved into what is now Europe. Paul had adventures in Greece, including a debate in Athens that he clearly did not win. Paul's direction was now set and he turned his efforts toward the vast Gentile world, which increasingly aroused the hostility of the Orthodox Jews.

Paul returned to Jerusalem to bring money for the relief of the Jewish followers of Jesus there and his journey back to this holy city. His condemnation by the Orthodox party of Judaism, his appeal to Rome under his privilege as a Roman citizen and his subsequent journey to Rome by ship, make up the bulk of the remainder of this book. On both the trip to Jerusalem and the trip to Rome, the book of Acts becomes an exciting adventure story. On one occasion, Paul began a sermon at midnight and preached so long that a young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in a window, went to sleep and fell to the floor as if dead. Paul revived him, but the admonition against long sermons found a scriptural basis. On his trip to Rome, we read of storms, shipwrecks at sea, surviving the bite of a poisonous viper and many other adventures. In verse 16 of the final chapter 28, Paul finally arrives in Rome and there the book of Acts closes rather abruptly saying that Paul lived there at his own expense for two years under very loose arrangements, welcoming all who came to him.

While the story of Paul's death is not told, Luke's purpose has been achieved. The Christian message has travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem to Rome and was now planted firmly in the capitol of the known world. As we say, "The rest is history". Is Acts accurate history? We can never be sure. The Church did, however, move with Paul into all the world.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament, Part XXIX: I and II Timothy and Titus - The Pastoral Epistles: We Have the Truth!

Thus far, as we have explored the origins of the various books of the New Testament, we have not yet come across that familiar form of human religion that asserts: "We have the Truth!" "If you disagree with me, the truth is not in you." It is our "God-given duty to define truth, defend truth and impose truth". Up until this point in the biblical story, the Christian movement has basked in the wonder of the Christ experience, sought words that can convey the power of that experience to another and has dealt with conflict only in the attempt by believers to clarify what this Christ experience really meant. Since, however, religious systems almost always, devolve into a security-giving system in which "my understanding" of God is assumed to be the same as God, we should not be surprised to disc over this negativity making its appearance inside the Christian movement. When we turn to the Pastoral Epistles, the ones we have named I and II Timothy and Titus, our wait comes to an end. This mentality that suggests than any person can possess "ultimate Truth" in his or her propositional statements permeates almost every verse of these particular writings. This attitude is so apparent that it actually helps us to date these works. That, in turn, forms the data that makes us absolutely certain that Paul is not the author of any of these epistles.

The Pastoral Epistles are so clearly the product of a later period of church history, when missionaries, prophets and teachers have been replaced by hierarchical and authoritative figures called bishops, priests or presbyters and deacons - all institutional functionaries. Even more, the office of a senior bishop, elder, or archbishop has had time to develop and the primary task of this official, it seems, is to impose order on the life of the various congregations in a given geographical region and to guarantee conformity in both their worship and their teaching. From other sources, we can identify this ecclesiastical structure as reflecting the period in church history no earlier than 90AD (CE) and possibly as late as 120AD (CE). While these dates alone rule out Pauline authorship, they also make us aware that enough time has passed so that Paul is regarded as a respected, not a controversial figure, as the Paul of history certainly was. In these works, Paul has become the symbol of a revered elder apostle possessing such authority that these words are buttressed by being written in his name. Timothy and Titus, the younger companions of the historical Paul, named in his own authentic letters (Timothy in Romans, I and II Corinthians, Philippians and I Thessalonians) and (Titus in II Corinthians and Galatians), have been transformed into symbols of the next generation of Christian leaders who listen eagerly to the elder Paul's advice. While the Paul of history could write his ode to love in I Corinthians 13 and speak about his own conversion in Romans 8: 38-39, the Paul of the Pastoral Epistles is only interested in order, "sound" teaching, proper obedience and the need to drive away erroneous and false teaching. In the Pastoral Epistles "orthodoxy" has been defined in non-flexible ways.

In content, the Pastorals are quite similar to the five letters of Ignatius of Antioch, written between 110 and 113AD (CE) while he was on his way to his own martyrdom. They reflect similar church structures, similar lines of authority and issue similar warnings against false teachers, once again demonstrating that they are the products of about the same time. The chief function of a bishop in both of these sources is "to defend the faith" and to "establish orthodoxy", which simply means "right thinking". Words like "doctrine" and "teaching" are a major concern of these books that clearly favour "catholic-orthodox" formulae.

It is apparent that something is threatening this sound doctrine. Historians have identified the enemy as a group of Christians who called themselves "Gnostics". The Pastoral Epistles exhort younger leaders to protect the "true faith" by confronting evil, rebuking or silencing these false teachers who are disparaged as "imposters, unbelievers and deceivers". The battle grew quite hostile with words like "stupid, unprofitable and futile" being used. God-given authority was claimed for established church leaders. They alone were authorised to determine what constitutes "true doctrine" and they alone had the power to ordain new leaders, who in order to qualify themselves for ordination, had to take vows to be faithful to the established tradition. Those who, in a previous generation, had themselves been "revisionists" in the synagogue were now determined to allow no revisionists in the church. The language of the Pastorals is replete with familiar religious hostility. Titus 1:13 refers to Cretans as "liars, evil beasts and lazy gluttons". I Timothy calls those opposed to sound doctrine "immoral persons, sodomites, kidnapers, liars and perjurers". II Timothy says its enemies engage in "godless chatter" and likens their talk to "gangrene". Church fights can frequently be anything but Christian! By this time in church history the disciples of Jesus seem to have moved rather far from Jesus' admonition to "love your enemies"! Yet in the midst of this rather rampant hostility we are startled to find familiar and treasured words that we might have heard, but of their origin we had no clue. I refer to such phrases from the Pastorals as: "A little wine is good for your stomach". "The love of money is the root of

all evil." "We brought nothing into this world and it is certain that we can carry nothing out." Christianity so often blends good and evil.

Someone once said that Christianity probably would not have survived had it not become institutionalised and that it might not survive because it did become institutionalised. Institutions, certainly including the Christian Church, always subvert truth to institutional needs. That is why the Church developed irrational power claims like, "My pope is infallible", or "My Bible is inerrant", or "There is only one true Church" and it is mine, or "No one comes to the father except through my church or my faith tradition".

These assertions always arise in religious movements when the decision is made that the wonder, truth and mystery of God can in fact be captured inside human words developed inside human minds. God and my understanding of God become the same. The power needs of the religious institutions become identified with the truth of God and the well-being of church leaders. This mentality almost inevitably produces religious wars, religious persecution, the Inquisition and the incredible cruelty that we Christian people have poured out on our victims over the centuries. It also finds expression in the rudeness frequently seen in religious debate.

Two stories will serve to make this point clear and to reveal why I have no great appreciation for the Pastoral Epistles, which not only introduced, but also justified these attitudes and helped to make them part of the life of institutional Christianity. The first story is personal; the second comes to me from another source.

I have been on a number of book tours to Australia. In the Anglican Archdiocese of Sydney, Christianity has been captured by a Northern Irish Protestant fundamentalism of an 18th Century variety and frozen in time in the South Pacific. The Bible to them has to be read literally, women can not be ordained or have authority over men and homosexuality is an abomination! So my presence there appeared to frighten Sydney's Anglican leaders and call them to arms against the anti-Christ. When I came on a lecture tour for my book, *"Resurrection: Myth or Reality?"* these leaders quickly got out a fundamentalist paperback rebuttal that hit the bookstands the day my plane landed. In addition to that, they devoted a number of pages in their Archdiocesan newspaper, "The Southern Cross", to arming their people with the "facts" necessary to resist the onslaught of this non-fundamentalist and therefore non true-believing, Christian. Finally, they appointed a "truth squad" headed by one of their bishops, named Paul Barnett, to follow me around Australia to "correct my errors publicly" lest the people be corrupted. They contacted any radio or television station on which I was scheduled to appear to demand "equal time" for "the truth". One noonday TV program decided to book us together rather than accede to "equal time". The conversation went well, at least from my point of view, until Paul Barnett exploded with the words, "Jack, you're nothing but a Gnostic". I responded, "Paul, the wonderful thing about that charge is that 99% of our Australian viewers do not know whether you have just insulted me or complimented me". I apparently bothered Paul Barnett as much as the Gnostics had bothered the authors of the Pastoral Epistles.

The second story came to me from a member of a book study group in a large conservative Episcopal Church in the suburbs of Louisville, Kentucky. This group had been meeting for some time in this church to read and discuss some popular modern religious writers like Marcus Borg, John Crossan and even Rowan Williams. The local parish clergy got wind of the fact that this group was actually discussing theological ideas that did not fit their definition of orthodoxy, so they decided that one of them should sit in on the discussion to protect the participants from "heresy". In the future, the group was informed, the clergy would pick the books the group would read, suggesting champions of yesterday's orthodoxy like N. T. (Tom) Wright and Luke Timothy Johnson. If this group would not agree to these conditions they were told that space in this church would no longer be available for their gatherings. The group immediately found another church that would welcome them and so they moved on.

Religious leaders need to learn that ultimate truth can never be fully captured in propositional statements at any point in human history: not in scripture, not in creeds and not in doctrines. That strange and destructive idea was first introduced to the Christian movement by the Pastoral Epistles. Christianity has been compromised from that day to this.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament, Part XXX: The Epistle to the Hebrews

We do not know who wrote it. We do not know the date of its composition. We do not know to whom this book in the Bible was actually written. We are clear that it was not authored by Paul. It was certainly not written as a letter or an epistle. Its format is much more that of an address, a lecture or a sermon. The "Hebrews" to whom this work is addressed do not even appear to be Hebrews, at least not in a religious sense. They were, rather, Jewish Christians - that is, people of Jewish background who had become followers of Jesus. They had roamed far from the strict orthodoxy of traditional Judaism, but they were still deeply familiar with and committed to Jewish liturgical practices. They were Hellenised and breathed deeply of the Greek culture that had spread over the known world from the time of the conquest by Macedonia in the 4th Century BC (BCE) under the leadership, first, of King Philip II and later of his son, Alexander the Great. This letter to the Hebrews was written in Greek, not Aramaic, the language of traditional Judaism. It nonetheless reveals a deep and significant connection to the Hebrew Scriptures, but it is noteworthy that, whenever the Epistle to the Hebrews quotes these scriptures, it does so from the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament done about 250 years before the birth of Jesus. Where these Greek-speaking, dispersed Hebrews lived when they received this book cannot be determined. The guesses as to the time of its writing range from the late 60s AD (CE) at the earliest, to about 140AD (CE) at the latest. The weight of opinion, however, would fix its date no earlier than the late 80s and no later than 100AD (CE). The Epistle of Clement, a well-known piece of early Christian writing which is generally dated in the middle years of the tenth decade, does in fact quote the book of Hebrews. This should provide us with an outer limit, but the proposed date of Clement is itself also widely debated, though most would gravitate to around 96AD (CE). All we can really do is to peruse the text of this book and learn whatever we can from its content about both its author and its audience.

The atmosphere reflected in the Epistle to the Hebrews is tense. It speaks of those who are in danger of drifting away (2:1). It mentions those who have fled for refuge (6:18). It urges its hearers to hold fast to their confession of hope without wavering (10:23). It refers to those who have the need of endurance (10:36). It urges perseverance in the race or task set before them (12:1). Finally, it assures its readers that since Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever, their hearts should be strengthened by grace (13:8-9).

Many scholars suggest that this level of tension in the Christian community reflects the persecution under the Emperor Diocletian, which ravaged the Church between 81 and 96, making the latter years of this reign our best guess for the date of the composition of Hebrews.

The recipients of this treatise seem to reflect one constituency in the evolving Christian Church. While Christianity was born in a Jewish womb as a Jewish movement within the synagogue, it turned, primarily under the influence of Paul and of Paul's followers like Luke, Timothy and Titus, into being more and more a gentile religion. This fact served to make it harder and harder for some of the earliest disciples of Jesus, who were traditional Jews, to continue to live and worship inside the Christian movement. That is a reality that has been replicated again and again in religious history. Growth always marginalises the original members who feel left behind and thus not part of the present consensus. They no longer felt that they fitted into what Christianity was becoming. They were tempted to pull away from their Christian convictions and were tempted to return to the Judaism of their childhood. The author of this book sought to dissuade them from this step by demonstrating the superiority of Christianity to traditional Judaism. The way this author chose to do that is quite telling.

A significant holy day in the life of the synagogue was Yom Kippur, The Day of Atonement. It came in the fall of the year and was observed with a 24-hour vigil of solemn penitence and sombre mood. The liturgy focused on two animals that were brought to the high priest. Both animals had to reflect what the Jewish people yearned to be, physically perfect in body and morally perfect in mind and spirit. These two animals could be lambs or goats, or one of each and they were gone over scrupulously by the high priest until he was assured first that they were perfect physical specimens; they could have no scratches, blemishes, scars or broken bones. Secondly, they were deemed to be morally perfect since they lived below the level of human freedom and were thus incapable of choosing to do evil. One of these animals, normally a lamb, was then slaughtered in a sacrificial, liturgical manner and its blood was smeared on the mercy seat of God in the Temple's Holy of Holies. This blood was believed to possess cleansing power. Through the blood of this perfect lamb of God,

the people believed they could now stand before God on this one day despite their sinfulness. They came to God "through the blood of the lamb" that washed their sins away.

The second animal, referred to in Leviticus as a goat, was then brought into the assembly of the people and placed before the high priest who, taking the goat's horns began to confess the sins of the people. The sins of the people were thus said to come out of the people and to land on the head and back of this goat, making this goat the bearer of the people's sins. This animal was then banished from the assembly and run into the wilderness, leaving the people symbolically cleansed from their sins. This goat was called "the scapegoat" for he bore the sins of the people and vicariously endured the fate the people had earned for themselves.

There is no doubt that the liturgy of Yom Kippur was instrumental in interpreting the Jesus experience among the earliest Jewish Christians. Echoes of this connection are found throughout the New Testament. Paul uses this Yom Kippur formula when he wrote in I Corinthians 15 that "Jesus, (like the lamb of Yom Kippur) died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures". Mark makes reference to this liturgical understanding when he wrote (10:45) that Jesus, like the lamb of Yom Kippur, gave his life as a "ransom" for many. When John the Baptist sees Jesus for the first time in the Fourth Gospel, he called him "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world", a phrase lifted almost verbatim from the Yom Kippur liturgy.

It was this understanding that later got incorporated into substitutionary theories of the atonement, which found expression in the Protestant mantra, "Jesus died for my sins!" and is referenced when Catholics refer to the Eucharist as "the sacrifice of the Mass". The mass thus makes timeless the sacrifice of Jesus as the lamb of God, to take away the sins of the people.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews was thus writing to discouraged Jewish Christians, who no longer felt at home in predominately Gentile worshipping communities, hoping to prevent their return to the fold of Judaism. One cannot go back, he argues, to the ineffective sacrifice of the lamb at Yom Kippur, which has to be repeated annually, because it affects nothing permanently. Yom Kippur, he contends, only expresses a yearning for change; it does not itself create change. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, he argues, did in fact break the power of sin that made sacrifices necessary in the first place. We can now enter the presence of God, the author of Hebrews argues, just as we are with all our warts and shortcomings visible, for in the cross of Calvary the love of God accepted the offering of the new lamb of God, embraced us in our sinfulness and transformed us by assuring us that nothing we can do and nothing we can be will finally separate us from the love of God seen in Christ Jesus. This was the message Jesus lived because he reached out in accepting love, even to those who betrayed him, denied him, forsook him, tortured him and killed him. In the death of Jesus on the cross, a once-and-for-all act was accomplished, which brought God and human kind together in a new creation. So, he concluded, if one leaves the Christian faith to return to Judaism, one is actually leaving the sacrifice that made all future sacrifices unnecessary in favour of a sacrifice that must be repeated annually. Jesus was the perfect offering for which God yearned, while the Yom Kippur animals were only a symbol of the eternal human yearning to be whole. Thus, this writer argued that in the sacrifice of Christ all sacrifices were brought to an end and all human beings can now become new creations in the oneness of God. It is to our ears a strange argument, but it resonated with the audience to whom it was first addressed.

The author of Hebrews also likens the priesthood of Jesus, not to the high priests of Jewish worship, but to the eternal priesthood of a figure named Melchizedek, mentioned in the book of Genesis. His priesthood was without beginning or ending. Perhaps this is the place when the idea of pre-existence first entered the Christian story. In this paradigm, the Christ is at one and the same time both the new sacrifice and the sacrificing high priest. It was an argument based on ancient worship patterns, but it must have impressed some contemporary leaders, since this book was quickly incorporated into the Canon of Christian scriptures. Yet, as the Church became more and more Gentile, the power of this argument faded. Today it sounds like another version of the old religious cliché: "My God is superior to your God!" In its day, however, it stated the essential Christian claim that all people can come into the presence of God "just as I am without one plea", which is, I believe, the one irreducible Christian claim. Yet, strange as it seems, some parts of the Christian Church still deny that the love of God is extended to all regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or even creed. The Epistle to the Hebrews ultimately proclaims that there are no boundaries on the love of God. That is a worthy message, even when couched in an archaic form.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament, Part XXXI: The General Epistles - James; I & II Peter; Jude

When we come near the end of the New Testament, we run into four small books that bear the names of well-known figures in the gospel tradition. They are James and I Peter, each of which consists of five chapters; then there is II Peter with three chapters and finally Jude with only one. James is, in many ways, a counterpoint to the main thrust of the New Testament, particularly to Paul and was traditionally thought to be the work, not of James, the son of Zebedee, or even James, the son of Alphaeus, both of whom are on a biblical list of the twelve, but James, the brother of the Lord. That is a statement that sometimes startles people who have, usually unconsciously, bought into the idea that Mary was a "perpetual virgin" and thus could not have had any other children. Yet the facts are that in Mark 6, the brothers of Jesus are named as James, Joses, Simon and Judas. Mark also says that Jesus had at least two sisters, though they are unnamed. James, the Lord's brother, also appears in Paul's letter to the Galatians as the head of Jerusalem's Christian community and as Paul's adversary. James is identified by Paul as one who is articulating and insisting on the point of view that says that the doorway to Christianity can only travel through Judaism with all its rules and with the acknowledgement of the centrality of the Torah. Paul countered this perspective in Galatians and with his whole ministry, which involved his attempt to carry out a mission to the Gentiles. At one point, James, the Lord's brother, seemed to have represented a strong option and to offer a viable aspect of what it meant to be Christian. The epistle of James seeks to present a later form of that early argument and it serves today to balance Paul's overwhelming theology of Grace. Martin Luther, clearly a direct theological descendant of Paul, called this epistle an "epistle of straw" and tried to have it expunged from the New Testament. Obviously, he failed! The epistle of James asserts that faith is insufficient without works; indeed, he says that without works faith is dead!

Like the epistle to the Hebrews, the epistle of James is more a treatise or a sermon than it is a letter, but it does represent that earliest Jewish-Christian strand of pre-Pauline Christianity. In its 108 verses, it contains 60 imperative statements about how the gospel is to be lived. It has some echoes in it of the Sermon on the Mount and it is steeped in ethical prescriptions. For this epistle, "ethics" means the demands of the law or the Torah, while for Paul "ethics" means the fruit of the Spirit. Therein is set the battle lines for the oldest fight in Christian history. This epistle is generally dated in the last decade of the 1st Century between 90 and 100 and it would appear unlikely that James, the brother of Jesus, is its actual author. It is, however, fair to say that the argument of this book supports the point of view that James appears to have held, but we must face the fact that all we know about James comes from Paul in Galatians or from Luke in the book of Acts. There are some references in John's gospel to the "brothers of Jesus", none of which are flattering. We have no reason to believe that any of these sources were objective. I find the epistle of James to be of value, but not of great value. It has, in fact, inspired charitable work among the poor and that is its major claim to belong in the New Testament.

The epistle I Peter was written probably late in the 1st Century and in elegant Greek that Simon Peter, the fisherman from Galilee, could never have mastered. Its purpose was to encourage Christians undergoing persecution, probably in the region of the world that we today call Turkey. It purports to have been written from Rome at the time of the persecutions under Nero, when Peter was crucified, but according to undocumented tradition his crucifixion was upside down. This epistle has thus been used to buttress the Vatican's claims that Peter became the first bishop of Rome and thus the first Pope. This idea was then augmented with the words that Jesus supposedly said to Peter in Matthew's gospel that "upon this rock, (i.e., Peter, instead of Peter's faith) I will build my church". It is arguments like these that are supposed to provide us with clear evidence that Jesus intended the Christian Church to be run from Rome. Of course, there have been other such claims in history. Constantine thought the Christian Church should be run from Constantinople. The Mormons thought it should be run from Salt Lake City. The Religious Science movement thought it should be run from Boston. We ought never to confuse institutional power claims with the gospel.

There are, nonetheless, some noteworthy things in the epistle we call I Peter that merit mention. It seems to oppose the physicality of the bodily resurrection and to identify Jesus' resurrection with what later came to be called "the ascension", rather than with a resuscitated body. This would line the author of this book up with Paul and to place him in opposition to Luke where the resurrection is made to be quite physical. This fact causes me to date I Peter prior to Luke, or prior to the time when Luke's gospel gained ascendancy in the mid 90s.

It is also from I Peter that we get the phrase in the creed, "He descended into hell", a phrase that originally meant not the place of torment, but Gehenna, the abode of the dead. Peter suggests that between the crucifixion and the resurrection, Jesus went and preached to "the souls in prison". This text was thus used to support the argument that Christianity developed, seeking to give access to salvation to those who lived before Christ, while still maintaining the authority to make exclusive claims for the ultimacy of this new faith system. Human sensitivity always seems to find a way to lessen the horror of hostile theological rules. Creeds that many seem to believe "dropped out of heaven fully formed" in fact reveal a remarkable ability to adapt to new realities and new sensitivities.

II Peter was probably the last written book to be included in the New Testament. It is generally dated in the first half of the 2nd Century, perhaps around 135-140AD (CE). Obviously, this book was not written by Peter. None of the author claims made for any of these books will stand up to any real scrutiny, a fact that has been known in Christian academic circles for at least two hundred years. II Peter actually quotes from the Epistle of Jude, which we know was not written until well after the turn of the 1st Century. It also refers to Paul's letters as if they are not only bound together in a single volume, but also as if they are already regarded as "scripture" equal in authority to any other part of the sacred text. These attitudes once again reflect a point of view and indeed a practice that did not develop until the 2nd Century. In today's world II Peter is, I fear, little noticed and seldom quoted. That is probably what it deserves for, like some of the lesser prophets, it speaks almost not at all about the concerns of today's world.

Jude is the final of the non-Johannine general epistles. It too claims to be written by Jude or Judas, also one of the brothers of Jesus. There is no suggestion that the Judas, who is supposedly the traitor, is the author of this book, but it does open us to consider the meaning of the fact that, on some of the New Testament's lists of the twelve, there are two apostles named Judas, one of whom is thought of as good. Luke calls this good Judas simply the son of James (Luke 6:16) and lists him alongside Judas Iscariot as one of the twelve. John, who never gives us a list of the twelve, does, however, refer to one called Judas, who is "not Iscariot" (John 14:22). It is Mark's gospel, once again, that refers to a Judas who is the brother of Jesus. Tradition has tried to associate one of these figures with the Epistle of Jude. To identify any biblical character with the authorship of this book is by any measure a stretch. Jude is a late 1st Century work written well past the life span of any of the New Testament characters, a fact revealed quite clearly in its text.

The Epistle of Jude is a late treatise that reflects a time similar to that of the Pastorals. It assumes that Christianity is now a fully worked out, even codified faith system. It speaks of a Christianity that has been and can be articulated in a recognisable creedal form. It even refers to Christianity as "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints". It seems to assume that Christianity dropped from heaven in a set of propositional beliefs, well buttressed with footnotes. Some "systematic theology" books today appear to believe that this is still true. The authors of these books talk of "the deposit of faith", which reminds me more of a cow patty than it does of a living relationship with God. This attitude is part of what has created the kind of religion in general, or the kind of Christianity in particular, that has fuelled religious wars, religious persecutions, the Crusades, the Inquisition and the activity we call forced conversions. When I wrote my book, *"The Sins of the Scriptures"*, this text from Jude was one of what I called "the terrible texts of the Bible". It earned that designation by the fact that it has been used throughout history to justify a variety of life-killing prejudices: anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, homophobia and even the continued degradation of our environment. The book of Jude has, in my opinion, few saving graces, but one of them might be the Benediction with which the book closes (1:24, 25) that, in an adapted form, has entered the liturgies of many churches.

Not all parts of the Bible are equally holy. The General Epistles we have looked at in this column do not come close to some other parts of the New Testament in either integrity or power. They are, however, "in the book" and so, to complete our journey through the Bible, I include them. I urge you to read them once. It will not take more than ten minutes. Then you will have done it and you will never have to do it again, for, some parts of the Bible, once is enough.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament, Part XXXII: Introducing the Johannine Material

The last series of books that I will consider to complete our study of the Bible's origins is referred to as "The Johannine Literature". It consists of five books: the Gospel of John, the three epistles, I, II and III John and the Revelation of John. There was a time when people generally assumed that these five books were the products of the same author. That point of view has long been abandoned in academic circles. There are connections that bind the Johannine material together to be sure. I John and the Gospel of John are quite similar in content, style and word usage, sufficient to cause some scholars to assume common authorship. Others suggest that the author of the first epistle of John was writing a treatise on the gospel from which he quoted liberally and that this accounts for the similarities. There are more questions about II and III John, the texts of which claim as their author one who was known as "The Elder". Almost no one today believes that the Book of Revelation and the Gospel of John are products of the same person.

There appears to have been a school of Christian thought near the end of the 1st Century organised around a man known as John the Elder, who himself may have been a disciple of John Zebedee, which opens us to the possibility that these five books are the products of different members of that Johannine School. If that is so, it would account for the similarity found in these works as well as for the obvious differences. Although one can only be speculative about 1st Century authors, this proposition makes more sense to me than anything else and I have adopted it until further study offers a better possibility.

Without doubt the crown jewel of the Johannine literature in the Bible is the Gospel of John, frequently called the "Fourth Gospel" in academic circles. It is clearly the last of the gospels to be written. It is dramatically different from the first three, Mark, Matthew and Luke, which are known as the "synoptic gospels" and are deeply interdependent and bound together. John's gospel, however, has exercised a disproportionate influence on the development of the Christian creeds and the doctrines that define "orthodoxy" in the western Christian Church. It is probably the favourite of most people who sit in the pews of our churches, if they had to choose a favourite. It contains many passages with which church people are familiar. The Prologue, a hymn of praise to the "Logos", translated as "word" in most English Bibles, has been the most frequently used part of the New Testament in Christian liturgies. Passages from John are the assigned reading in almost every Christian funeral - "In my Father's house are many mansions" being the most familiar funeral line.

The Fourth Gospel has created unforgettable characters that dot the landscape of the Christian imagination. One thinks of doubting Thomas; the Samaritan woman by the well; Lazarus who was raised from the dead; Mary Magdalene, alone and weeping at the tomb on Easter Day; Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night; and the man born blind who is the hero of a long and detailed narrative. All of these figures are made vivid in our imaginations through the literary genius of the author of the Fourth Gospel. With the exception of Mary Magdalene, they are not mentioned in any other gospel and she stands out in John in a way quite different from the synoptic accounts.

Was the author of the Fourth Gospel familiar with the earlier gospels? Certainly there was a common body of tradition from which each of the gospel writers drew. We know that both Matthew and Luke incorporated great portions of Mark into their work. John certainly reveals a familiarity with the story line followed by the synoptics. All four gospels begin with the story of the adult Jesus in the presence of the figure of John the Baptist. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, John actually baptises Jesus. John introduces John the Baptist in the proper place, but then only has him point to Jesus as the one who must increase as he decreases, but John never baptises Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. All of the gospels conclude their narratives with a triumphal entry that we associate today with the Palm Sunday procession. The passion story of each has the account of a betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, however, the only time Jesus journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem was at the time of the crucifixion, while in John Jesus goes back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem on several occasions. Mark, Matthew and Luke treat the public ministry of Jesus as something that is told over a one-year period. John suggests that the public ministry of Jesus was up to three years in duration. We can find references that appear to point to a rather specific connection between Mark and Luke and the Fourth Gospel that suggests a possible dependence on these two as sources for John's writing, but that is harder to do with Matthew.

Yet despite all these similarities and connections, there are some very real differences between John and the other three gospels. There is no story in John of Jesus' miraculous or "virgin birth". On two occasions, in chapters 1 and 5, John's gospel refers to Jesus as "the son of Joseph". Jesus delivers no parables in John. The teaching of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel comes in long, somewhat convoluted theological discourses. John records no agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, but rather has Jesus walk resolutely toward his crucifixion, which he expects to be his moment of glorification. The "High Priestly prayer" in John, Chapter 17, appears to be John's version of Jesus' prayer: "Let this cup pass from me" found in the synoptics. There is no account of the Last Supper in John; instead we read the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. John denies that the Last Supper was the Passover, while the earlier three gospels claimed that it was. John is the only gospel writer who places the mother of Jesus at the foot of the cross to watch the crucifixion. She is simply not present in the other gospels, a fact that renders most of Mel Gibson's motion picture, "The Passion of Christ", to be almost biblically illiterate and that also calls into question the accuracy of most of the piety of the ages that revolve around the Virgin Mary. Miracles present in the three synoptic gospels are turned into "signs" in John. The resurrection of Jesus in John is quite physical, sufficient to have Thomas be invited to touch the print of the nails in Jesus' hands and feet and to thrust his hand into the wound in Jesus' side, a wound that only John describes. In these details John is closer to Luke, whose resurrected Jesus asked the disciples to handle him because ghosts do not have flesh. This put John, however, into opposition with Paul, Mark and possibly Matthew, all of whom suggest that the risen Christ represents a new dimension of life and even of consciousness that transcends the realm of the physical. Indeed, the differences between the Fourth Gospel and the earlier three are so significant that a harmonisation of the gospel tradition into a single theology of Jesus is almost impossible. In common language, Mark presents us with a fully human Jesus upon whom God's Spirit was poured at his baptism, making him a God-infused, but still human life, while John suggests that Jesus was the pre-existent word of God, en-fleshed in the life of Jesus. The Jesus of Mark can cry from the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" The Jesus of John ends his life with the pronouncement, "It is finished", which replicates the original creation story and portrays Jesus as the author of the New Creation. For John, Jesus is never separated from God: "The Father and I are one", John's Jesus says.

When the Fellows at the Jesus Seminar were doing their work aimed at determining the authenticity of the words of Jesus recorded in the four gospels, they came to and published their conclusion, that only 16% of the words attributed to Jesus in the entire gospel tradition were actually spoken by him, which of course means that 84% were not. It is of interest to note that none of the words attributed to Jesus by John were deemed to be in the 16% that they claimed represented the authentic words of the Jesus of history. Yet, even if that judgment is correct (and as one fellow in the Jesus Seminar, I find no reason to argue with that conclusion) I still concur in the opinion that John's gospel captures the essence of the Jesus experience more profoundly than any other part of the New Testament. That experience, however, simply cannot be contained within the boundaries of literalised human words. So I think of John as the least literal, but the most profoundly true of the four canonical gospel writers. I will return to this claim in subsequent columns to put more flesh on its bare bones.

I doubt if there is any biblical book about which we could say that we have in the present, surviving text of that book, the exact words the original author actually wrote. Things hand copied over a number of centuries lend themselves to the probability of having words edited, added and even deleted. The Gospel of John is no different. There are three textual conclusions about John that have gained wide, almost universal support. One is that chapters five and six need to be reversed. In their present order, they make no contextual sense. The second is that the beautiful story in chapter eight of Jesus standing between the woman taken in the act of adultery and her accusers is not and never was part of the original text of John's gospel. The third is that chapter 21 is an appendix, an epilogue that was added later to the gospel and was not part of the original. I assume the truth of these three textual insights.

With this introduction, I will turn now to look at John's gospel then I will move on to John's epistles and finally I will close this study with a look at the book the Revelation of John. So stay tuned.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament, Part XXXIII: The Gospel of John

If I had to give my readers one clue and one clue only that would unlock the Fourth Gospel and allow its honesty and wonder to flow forth, it would be that in reading John one must always keep in mind that the author is not writing history or biography. Indeed, this author is constantly poking fun at anyone who would take his message literally, misunderstand his use of symbols or attempt to literalise the words he has attributed to Jesus. Can any of us imagine for one moment an itinerant prophet named John the Baptist literally saying the first time he meets Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" and then claiming for this Jesus the status of a pre-existent divine being? Yet that is what John the Baptist does in the first chapter of John. It is a text that sets a pattern that this gospel writer will follow. What does it mean to name Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? What does it mean to claim for him a pre-existent status? What experience is this author seeking to communicate? That is the question with which one is confronted in the opening chapter of this book and that is only the beginning.

In the second chapter, we find equally enigmatic words. Here we are told that at a wedding party Jesus actually changes water into wine so that the party can go on! Can any of us imagine a set of circumstances in which that narrative would be taken literally? Medieval alchemists spent centuries trying to turn iron into gold and failed. Given the price of good wine today, perhaps they would have been more successful if they had followed Jesus' example and tried to turn water into wine. Surely John did not think of this as a literal story and the suggestion later in the story that Jesus' freshly fermented beverage was so superior to that which was served first that it violated the social norm of the day, which was to serve the "good stuff" first and then when the guests were well drunk to bring out the "screw top gallon bottles". So we need to ask just what it was that John was seeking to communicate when he opens his second chapter with this story and calls it "the first sign" of Jesus' public ministry that "manifested forth his glory". Perhaps this author drops another clue that these words are not to be taken literally when he begins this particular narrative with the words, "On the third day", since these words would be deeply fraught with meaning in the company of believers to whom these words were addressed.

In the next episode described by John, Jesus is in Jerusalem and there he drives the money changers out of the Temple. In the earlier gospels, this story of the cleansing of the temple is the provocative final act that leads directly to the crucifixion. John, however, places it at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Once again the Jewish audience that first reads John's words would immediately identify this narrative with a reading from the book of Psalms (69:9), which stated that the Messiah would show zeal for the house of God - zeal indeed that would consume him. They also knew that John was using this episode, not to describe something that happened, but to make a messianic claim. These readers would have been familiar with the account from the book of Zechariah, which said that when "the day of the Lord" came, "there would no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of Hosts" (14:21). That was destined to be only the first of many references that John would take from the book of Zechariah, a book that shaped the Jesus story far more than most of us have imagined.

Continuing the same theme in chapter three, John has Jesus say to a man named Nicodemus, "unless you are born anew, you cannot see the Kingdom of God". Nicodemus is baffled because he hears these words literally and wonders how it is possible for a grown man to be born anew when he is old, "Can I climb back into my mother's womb and be born a second time?" Literalism makes no sense, but John is not writing a literal story.

In the fourth chapter of John, the author has Jesus speaking to a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well about water. The conversation began when he asked the woman to give him a drink from the well. When she demurred and retreated into the boundary that separates Jew from Samaritan, Jesus said to her, "If you knew who it was that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water". The woman looked at him with the blank stare of literalism and said, in effect, "Man, you don't even have a bucket!" The Jesus of John's gospel then says, "Whoever drinks of the water I give will never thirst again". The woman still trapped in the prison of literalism responds, "That is great. Give me your water and I will never have to come again to this well. That would make my life easier".

As if that were not sufficient warning that this book is not to be read literally, John continues his theme when he relates the story of Jesus' disciples returning and interrupting this private conversation. They then urge Jesus to eat. To this urging, however, John's Jesus responds by saying, "I have food to eat of which you do

not know". The disciples, still blinded by the literalism through which they hear his words, say to one another: "Has anyone brought him food?" The theme of anti-literalism goes on.

In the sixth chapter of John, Jesus is made to place his message into Eucharistic language and then to watch as his words are once again heard as if they are meant to be understood literally. Here he says: "he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me". The literal-minded disciples are repelled by what seems to them to be a reference to cannibalism and they begin to draw back and to cease following him. Time after time, the author of the Fourth Gospel displays the truth that this book is an interpretive book not a literal one. It is a symbolic book, not an historical book or a biographical story. No one can read the Fourth Gospel with literal eyes without missing the essence of his message. Yet, throughout Christian history, this book has been read with literal eyes and this literal misreading has been used to buttress the case for orthodoxy, binding creeds and such rationally incomprehensible ecclesiastical doctrines as the Incarnation and the Holy Trinity.

One other unique aspect found in John alone is the fact that Jesus time and again is quoted as calling himself by the name, which, according to the book of Exodus, God revealed to Moses as God's own at the burning bush. Tell them, God said to Moses on that occasion, that "I AM" sent you. So John now has Jesus say, "Before Abraham was, I AM!" When you see the Son of Man lifted up, then you will know I AM". There is no "he" in that latter statement, despite the fact that the translators add one because they do not understand what this gospel writer is trying to say. At the time of Jesus' arrest in the dark of night in the Valley of Kidron, John portrays Jesus as approaching the band of soldiers and Temple police led by Judas and asking, "Whom do you seek?" They respond, "Jesus of Nazareth". Jesus says, "I AM". Translators once again render that "I am he". John's context, however, renders that translation inoperative, for John goes on to state: "When he said I AM, they drew back and fell to the ground". It was strange behaviour for an armed guard confronting an unarmed political prisoner if he had said something as mundane as "I am he". If, on the other hand John was portraying him as uttering and claiming the divine name as they were about to arrest him, then that would be quite another matter.

"I AM" is a key concept in the Fourth Gospel repeated over and over again. John alone has Jesus say such things as: "I am the bread of life; I am the door; I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the vine; I am the good shepherd and I am the resurrection". Jesus even asserts through that "I AM" claim that he is the exclusive pathway to God, a statement that has been used throughout Christian history to justify the basest forms of religious imperialism and to fuel the most insensitive kind of missionary evangelism.

John's gospel must not be literalised if it is to be understood. It is a profound, even mystical, interpretation of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, written by a person deeply rooted in Palestinian Judaism and its words are designed to lead John's readers beyond literal words into a life-giving relationship with God. History reveals what a high price has been paid because Christians have insisted on literalising the words of this gospel. At the Council of Nicea, a literalised understanding of John was used to justify the new orthodoxy of a man named Athanasius, which was destined to cloak the Christian story in a hierarchical authority system in which it became oppressive, insensitive and anything but life-giving. When the shell of literalism is broken, however, the gospel of John enhances life, expands consciousness and calls us into a new relationship with the one whose deepest claim is to be a doorway into a new experience of that which is transcendent, holy and other. The call of John's Jesus is not into an engagement with a supernatural being, created in our image, who somehow lives above the sky and who, in the person of Jesus, was thought to have masqueraded as a human being. This is, of course, a caricature, but only a little one. John's gospel is a work to be entered, a message to be breathed and a doorway into a life to be lived. It was not written to enable us to play religion's oldest game, "My God is better than your God and I control the doorway into true belief. No one can come to God except through my faith system".

I once was repelled by the Fourth Gospel because I related to it as if it were a literal document. When I broke the bondage of that mindset, I found in this gospel a real understanding not just of God and of Jesus, but of life itself. Someday, I hope to spell out that thought in detail. For now, I must content myself to sketching a new vision of this gospel that all can see.

- John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament, Part XXXIV: The Raising of Lazarus and the Identity of the Beloved

We began this study of John with the assertion that the author of this gospel was writing a highly symbolic, interpretive account of Jesus of Nazareth. He created this account some 65-70 years after the events he is describing, which marked the end of Jesus' earthly life. He tells his readers time and again that his words are not to be treated literally; indeed, he mocks the literalising tendencies that he finds in the religious community of his day. To bring this theme into an even clearer focus, I turn now to two uniquely Johannine narratives, not even alluded to anywhere else in the Christian tradition, other than in the Fourth Gospel. The first of these is the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead and the second is the series of stories through whom the introduction of the strange and enigmatic figure, known only as "the beloved disciple" or as "the disciple whom Jesus loved", comes into the tradition. In an interesting way these two apparently separate narratives are significantly interconnected.

Note first the dramatic place in his drama to which the author of the Fourth Gospel has assigned the story of the raising of Lazarus. It is for John the catalyst that leads directly to the crucifixion. He then both compares and contrasts this Lazarus story with the raising of Jesus from the dead, which will be the grand climax that will conclude his gospel.

We begin our probe of this story by raising the question: Is it possible that the author of the Fourth Gospel ever entertained the possibility that there was even a shred of historical data underlying his account of raising Lazarus from the grave? The answer to that question is simple. Not a chance! Consider these facts: Mary and Martha, two sisters who lived in Bethany, have been figures in the Christian memory for quite a while, even starring in the gospel of Luke. Nowhere in that earlier tradition, however, was it recorded that they had a brother named Lazarus. John has clearly created Lazarus for his own literary purposes. Next John describes the raising of Lazarus from the dead as an event that was quite public. Crowds, consisting of both the friends and enemies of Jesus, have gathered to mourn the passing of Lazarus. This was not a miraculous event done in private, the details of which might, in the course of time, be exaggerated. There were eye witnesses galore. The lead-up to this story sets the stage for this event to be the source of great wonder. Jesus, we are told, postponed his journey to Bethany until the news came that Lazarus was actually dead. When he finally does arrive, the burial of Lazarus has been completed since it was the fourth day after his death. Both Martha and Mary express their displeasure by berating Jesus for not coming earlier when, they suggest, he could perhaps have used his powers to save Lazarus and to restore him to health. There is no hint anywhere in the Christian tradition that anyone anywhere had ever heard about this episode before. Embrace what that means. Here is a public event attended by a great crowd in which a man, dead for four days, has already been buried in a cave with a great stone covering its entrance. Jesus, the itinerant preacher, now proceeds to reverse this death even though the corpse was already in the decaying process. To accomplish the miracle this teacher, over the protests of the sisters of the dead man ("already he stinketh", the King James version has Martha say), orders the stone removed and he calls Lazarus to come forth. The mesmerised crowd then watches as the corpse of Lazarus, bound in the burial bands of cloth that secured both his hands and his feet and into which the burial spice of myrrh had been generously poured, comes staggering out of the cave. Jesus then orders them to "unbind him and let him go". If this were history, can you imagine how the account of this event could have been so deeply suppressed that no hint of it would have appeared in any Christian circle until John decided to write about it some three generations later? No, the raising of Lazarus is not an event that occurred in history. Then how are we to read this story? What was its origin?

There is only one other figure named Lazarus who appears in the New Testament. He is a character in a parable that only Luke records. We call it the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, who is sometimes named Dives. This Lucan parable is about judgment. Lazarus, a beggar at the gate of the rich man, dies. So does the rich man, who apparently never "sees" this beggar. Lazarus is carried into the "bosom of Abraham" and the rich man is removed to the tortures of the condemned. In torment, Dives asks Abraham to send Lazarus with water to ease his thirst. Abraham responds that one cannot get to Dives from where Lazarus is. Then Dives asks him to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers to amend their lives lest they too come to this place of torment. Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets to warn them". If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, "they will not listen *even if one is raised from the dead*". John takes this Lucan parable, historicises it and demonstrates its truth in the life of Jesus. The raising of Lazarus does not create faith or change behaviour; it actually serves to make the crucifixion of Jesus inevitable. The character we call Lazarus is a literary creation of the author of the Fourth Gospel, based on a parable, which John uses to

stand as a symbol for those who see God in Jesus, respond to that experience and move from their religious past into the new consciousness that became available in Jesus.

Moving on now to look at "the beloved disciple", we note several other crucial items in this narrative. First, this character called Lazarus is the only person whom the author of the Fourth Gospel says that Jesus loved. The message that comes to Jesus from Mary and Martha, notifying him of their brother's illness and urging him to come quickly, is this. "Lord, *he whom you love* is ill". Next this text says, "Now Jesus *loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus*". Later Jesus is portrayed as weeping as he makes his way to the tomb, causing the crowd to say, "See how *he loved him*". If Jesus had a single "beloved disciple", it is interesting that this gospel never suggests that it could be anyone other than this literary character known as Lazarus. Second, it is also true that the designation of "one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved" does not enter the Johannine narrative until after the story of the raising of Lazarus. Only then is the "beloved disciple" pictured as present at the Last Supper "lying close to the heart of Jesus". He is the one whom Peter implores to ask Jesus to identify the name of the traitor. We next confront the beloved disciple in John's text at the foot of the cross and hear the dying Jesus commend his mother to the care of this person. Could the mother of Jesus be a symbol for Judaism, the mother of Christianity and could the beloved disciple be a symbol of one who sees the meaning of Jesus so deeply that he can carry Jesus' message into a new context in the Gentile world without losing "his mother", Judaism, in the process? Rudolf Bultmann, probably the greatest New Testament scholar in the 20th Century, seemed to think so and advanced this possibility in his monumental commentary entitled simply: *The Gospel of John*.

The next time "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is mentioned in this gospel is in the Easter story. There we are told that he comes with Peter to the tomb that Mary Magdalene has reported to be empty, her suspicion being that the grave had been robbed, which would represent the final insult to the memory of Jesus. Peter and "the beloved disciple" run together, Peter the older, the one who is rooted in the tradition of Judaism, runs more slowly. The beloved disciple is younger, the one who will guide the Jesus message into its universal future, so he runs more quickly and arrives at the tomb first. He does not go in, but pauses at the entrance. Judaism must enter the new place before the Christian movement can do so. The new tradition must be built on the old. It cannot be born, except out of the old. Religion always evolves by transcending the limits of the past and giving birth to a new consciousness. So Peter, arriving later and presumably out of breath, enters the tomb. He sees the signs. The grave clothes are neatly lying in place exactly where the head, the hands and the feet of the deceased Lord would have been. This resurrection was not to be like that of Lazarus, a resuscitation back to life in this world and still bound by the grave clothes. This was a transformative experience in which death is transcended, limits are crossed and new life is achieved. "The disciple whom Jesus loved" then follows Peter into the tomb. Like Peter, he also sees, but he takes the vital next step - this seeing causes him to believe! They both return home and that evening John's gospel says that Jesus appeared to them, along with all of the other disciples. This raised Jesus was portrayed as being intensely physical, but at the same time we are told that he entered the house despite the fact that the doors were shut and the windows barred. Once inside, we are told, he breathed on them the life-giving breath of God. It was that same breath that had brought Adam into being at the first creation. This was the new creation and it was the beloved disciple who first steps into it. The beloved disciple is clearly a symbol, not a person. He represents those lives in which the meaning of Jesus leaps the boundaries of yesterday's religious understanding, by which people have always sought to control the wonder of the being that Jesus came to bring.

This beloved disciple is mentioned once more in the Epilogue to John's gospel. By the time this chapter was written and added to the text of this gospel, the literalising process had already begun and John's symbol of the "beloved disciple" is identified with a particular one of the twelve who has clearly died. The theory apparently had developed that this beloved disciple was supposed to live until Jesus' second coming. So his death had to be explained and the Epilogue seeks to do so. The point is then made that Jesus does come again every time another person enters the new life, the new consciousness that Jesus came to bring. Lazarus and the beloved disciple are one and the same, symbols of those raised to new life, those who in Christ are able to step beyond traditional religious thinking into a new consciousness.

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament, Part XXXV: The Epilogue of John

The last chapter of John's gospel, known as the Epilogue, is not believed by most scholars to be part of the original text of this gospel. A careful reading of chapter 20 makes it clear that this was how the original evangelist chose to end his story. Listen to his closing words: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples that are not written in this book but these are written that you may believe, that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing you may have life in his name" After that one expects no more. Yet chapter 21 has been added. It seems not to follow from or to fit in with anything said in chapter 20. The scene has shifted from Jerusalem to Galilee. A significant amount of time has elapsed. The disciples seem not motivated at all by the appearances of Jesus recorded in chapter 20. They have clearly passed the stage of mourning and have returned to their Galilean homes and picked up the pieces of their pre-Jesus lives. They have even gone back to the source of their livelihood as fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. One other aspect to chapter 21 of John is that it replicates fairly closely the details of a Lucan narrative (see Luke 5:1-16), which Luke asserts was a miracle story, not of the risen Christ, but of the Galilean Jesus near the beginning of his public ministry. Despite these problems, I have always been attracted to this Epilogue and it has played a major role in my understanding of the Easter event. I close my columns on John's gospel by describing how that connection came into being.

Earlier in my career, I made an extensive study of all of the resurrection narratives in the New Testament. This study resulted in the publication of a book entitled *"Resurrection: Myth or Reality?"*. In that book, I tried to sort out the elements that seemed to culminate in the enormous power that was connected with the Easter moment. I asked four questions: Who was it who stood in the centre of the resurrection experience? Where were the disciples when the experience of resurrection dawned? When was the moment in time in which the meaning of resurrection broke through in the lives of the disciples? What was the context, the setting, in which the Easter experience emerged? I then began to explore the clues present in the New Testament that might lead to new conclusions about this central experience in our faith story.

As I worked through not only all of the specific resurrection texts, but also anything else that might throw light on the Easter experience, recognising that every word in Paul and in each gospel was actually written as post-Easter narratives, I came to these conclusions.

Peter is the crucial, central figure in the Easter story. Peter is singled out as the one who first saw. Paul says, *"He appeared first to Cephas"*. Mark, the first gospel to be written, has the messenger say, "Go tell the disciples *and Peter*". Luke has the disciples claim, "The Lord has risen and *has appeared to Peter*". John portrays Peter as the first one who entered the tomb and saw its emptiness, including the burial clothes neatly placed where his hands and feet would once presumably have been. In Matthew and in other parts of the gospel text, Peter is the one who makes the first confession at Caesarea Philippi. He is always listed first when the disciples are named. In John's gospel, Jesus is quoted as saying to Peter, "When you are converted strengthen your brethren", as if Peter would be the first one who would enable the others to see. The primacy of Peter in the entire gospel tradition seems to me to rest on the fact that Peter was the first one whose eyes were opened to see both the meaning of Jesus and his resurrection. Then I searched every Peter story in the gospels looking for resurrection clues. I believe that they are there, from the story of Peter after the feeding of the multitude in John, saying "Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the word of eternal life", to Peter demanding to be washed all over when Jesus washes the feet of the disciples. All Peter stories, I concluded, ought to be read as resurrection stories, for they show Peter's coming to faith very clearly. So I filed my first conclusion. Peter stood at the centre of the resurrection tradition.

Secondly, I pursued the "where" question. The New Testament is divided between the competing claims for primacy in the resurrection tradition between Galilee and Jerusalem. Mark has the Easter messenger direct the disciples to return to Galilee with the promise that, "there you will see him". Matthew says that it was only in Galilee that the raised Christ ever appeared to the disciples. Luke, however, counters this Galilean tradition by asserting that the appearance of the risen Christ occurred only in Jerusalem and its environs, thus overtly refuting the Galilean tradition. John supports Luke by insisting on the primacy of Jerusalem, but then to the end of John's gospel was attached the Epilogue that centres the resurrection squarely in Galilee. A deeper analysis of these competing texts, however, reveals that the Galilee tradition was not only earlier, but it was the more primitive and the more original. It is noteworthy that all the Jesus sightings, the visions, the aspects of his bodily physicality, the feeling of his flesh and the touching of his wounds, are associated with the later and clearly secondary Jerusalem tradition. So Galilee emerged from this study as the answer to the question

about where the disciples were when the resurrection experience dawned. Building on that conclusion, I then looked at other stories that might also contain Easter references, from the disciples mistaking him for a ghost coming to them out of the darkness, to Jesus walking on the water, to the account of the transfiguration, which portrays him as translucent. I noted that all of these were set in Galilee.

I came next to the "when" question and confronted the familiar time symbol "three days". A study of the New Testament reveals that this symbol is wobbly at best. Paul and Mark say "On the third day". Matthew and Luke change that time designation to "after three days", a variation that sounds similar, but clearly is not, for "on" and "after" do not result in the same day. According to a literal reading of the gospels, the time from burial on Good Friday to the empty tomb at dawn on Sunday morning is only 36 hours, or a day and a half. Mark, however, has the messenger say only that they will see him in Galilee, but Galilee is a seven to ten-day journey from Jerusalem, so this "seeing" could not possibly occur inside the literal "three day" symbol, whether it is "on" or "after". Luke stretches the appearance stories to forty days, culminating with the first account of the ascension. John has resurrection appearance stories occur in Jerusalem over a period of eight days, but then in the Johannine Epilogue the resurrection appearances seem to cover a period of months. These were the data that drove me to conclude that the phrase "three days" is not only a symbol, but one that was never intended to be a literal measure of time. That insight opened me to the possibility that the time between the crucifixion and the Easter experience needs to be expanded at least to months. My third conclusion thus became that I needed to destabilise and de-literalise the symbolic time marker of three days and to extend the time between crucifixion and resurrection significantly.

Finally, when I searched for the context in which resurrection dawned, I found the key phrase in Luke, "He was known to us in the breaking of bread". That valuable clue led me to look at all the feeding stories in the gospels for resurrection clues. So I examined the stories about the feeding of the multitude with a limited number of loaves and fishes, I examined the various accounts of the Last Supper and I even looked at the parables of Jesus that focused on a great banquet. In each of these places I found elements of the interpretive meal in which the risen Jesus made himself known and present.

My study drove me to these conclusions: First, whatever Easter was, Peter stood at the centre of it and was the first to "see" and was thus the one who opened the eyes of the others so that they could also see. Secondly, Galilee was the original setting in which the meaning of Easter dawned, while the Jerusalem tradition was secondary. That is why the Jerusalem stories feature a supernaturalised Jesus and insist on the resurrection being understood as a resuscitated Jesus. Third, I concluded that the moment of Easter dawned slowly and over a period of months after the crucifixion. Finally, I became convinced that the common meal of the church was designed to be a liturgical re-enactment of what the original resurrection experience was, so that liturgical meal must have played a role in the beginning. With these conclusions in hand, I returned to the gospels in search of a resurrection narrative that was based on these four principles.

I found it only in the Epilogue to the Fourth Gospel, which I now regard as the most authentic and maybe even the earliest, of the resurrection narratives in the New Testament. It is about Peter fighting his way through to a new understanding. It is set in Galilee. It clearly occurs some time after the crucifixion. It concludes by suggesting that it was during a beachside, early morning Eucharist that the experience of their living Lord broke through first to Peter, then to the twelve.

The Epilogue of John thus grew in significance for me. Further study opened me to the possibility that this narrative might well have been an earlier tradition that floated freely during the oral period and found two very different resting places, first in Luke and then in the Epilogue of John. My supposition is that someone, perhaps a member of the Johannine School, recognised its authenticity and decided to attach it to the Fourth Gospel. That decision preserved, I believe, the earliest and most authentic memory of the dawning of Easter and at the same time, true to the Johannine principle, it was clear that this experience could never be literalised, for it was not bound inside either time or space. It is fitting that with this story the Fourth Gospel is drawn to its second conclusion and that is why John says that "to know Jesus is eternal life".

– John Shelby Spong

The Origins of the New Testament

Part XXXVI: Johannine Epistles and the Book of Revelation

We come this week to the final chapter in our three-year-long walk through the 66 books of the Bible. We conclude with the final pieces of the Johannine literature: the three epistles that bear his name and the book of Revelation that is also attributed to John. Since I treated the gospel in more detail and even mentioned these other Johannine pieces briefly in the introduction to the gospel, I will not spend much time on them in this final piece. This Johannine material is not necessarily the final work in time that makes up the New Testament. That honour usually goes to II Peter that, as we mentioned earlier, is quite clearly a mid-second century work. The Johannine Corpus, however, is dated at the end of the first century (95-100), which makes the Gospel of John clearly the last gospel to be written and the Johannine material has always been used as a counter weight to the Synoptic Gospels. So there is a sense in which the New Testament does not become whole or complete until the writings of John have been added to it. That is why I made the decision to treat it last. Throughout Christian history, the work of John has tended to dominate the life of the church. It was, more than any other book, the quoted authority behind the development of creeds, doctrine and dogma. It was the sole source quoted by Athanasius at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE in his duel with a man named Arius, who incidentally buttressed his argument by quoting from all of the gospels. When that council backed Athanasius and dismissed Arius, the ascendancy of John in the development of traditional Christianity was clearly established. No less a person than Isaac Newton, writing in the 17th Century, was learned enough to state that in his opinion the anti-Arius decision of that council was "the greatest mistake" made in Christian history. It just may be that, because of the ferment in contemporary theology, coupled with the critical insights of modern biblical scholarship, we are today in the process of rebalancing that traditional emphasis on John.

When we focus on the three epistles that bear John's name, only the first appeared to be substantial, both in length and in substance. It has five chapters, whereas II and III John have only one each. I John is a powerful treatise based significantly on the gospel and intent on drawing out its ethical implications. Its similarity to the gospel, both in vocabulary and style, has led many to the conclusion that these two pieces of writing are the products of the same person. That is not true of the second and third epistles of John, both of which indicate that they are written by one who is self-identified as "The Elder" and both reflect a time when there is a clearly defined body of truth that they feel must be defended and passed on. It is the tendency of religious people always to believe that they have in some way captured truth that is ultimate. I think it is fair to say that if II and III John had not been included in the canon of the New Testament, not much of any great significance would have been lost to the Church. It is interesting that no part of these latter two epistles that bear John's name is included in the various lectionaries for public readings at worship, a fact that speaks volumes about how these two books have been viewed historically.

That, however, is not the case with I John. This epistle has had a rich history. It is oft quoted, oft read and is frequently the subject of sermons. I John is the primary place in the New Testament in which God is specifically defined as "Love". This author states that only the person who loves can truly be said to have been "born of God". One cannot know God if one does not know love, this author argues. The presence of love, he states, is the ultimate manifestation of the presence of God. We love each other only with the love that God has given to us of God's own nature. The only way any of us can abide in God, he concludes, is to abide in love. There is no fear in this love, he states, because "perfect love casts out fear". To make this point very clear, this epistle states that "If anyone says, 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God who he has not seen". His ultimate commandment to those to whom he writes is this, "the one who loves God, must love his or her brother and sister also". This text has been violated by the Church over the centuries, but it is so powerful that the violation has required that the object of our scorn and hatred be viewed as something sub-human. So the anti-Semitism of the ages has been accompanied by the definition of Jews as those who fall outside the boundaries of our definition of humanity. One reads the writings of some of the figures of Christian history like Irenaeus, Polycarp, John Chrysostom and even Martin Luther for documentation of this thesis. In those writings, Jews were described as "vermin" and as "unfit for life".

Women, people of colour and homosexual persons have also been defined by the Church throughout history in such a way as to put them outside the boundaries of that which is fully human and thus outside of God's all-encompassing love. So women were denied higher education for 1900 years of Christian history, denied the right to vote until the 20th Century and denied the possibility of ordination as pastors, priests and bishops in most churches until the 21st Century. In the two largest Christian bodies in the world today, the Roman

Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, the ordination of women is still prohibited and that prohibition continues to be justified on the basis that a woman is somehow physically defective (i.e., not fully human) and thus cannot represent God to the people before the altars of these churches.

People of colour were defined as sub-human so that they could be enslaved by Christians, segregated by Christians and denied equal rights by Christians. Only in the 1954 decision in the case of Brown vs. the Board of Education was the back of segregation finally broken.

Gay, lesbian, transgender and bi-sexual people have also been defined as both depraved and sub-human and thus have been denied equality. They have been rejected, oppressed and even killed throughout the ages by self-identified Christians. In the struggle in the United States over full equality for gay people and gay couples, the opposition has overwhelmingly been from various parts of the Christian Church, most especially from the Roman Catholic and Evangelical Protestant wings of Christianity. The first epistle of John has been the central biblical text in confronting this religious tyranny. I'm glad this small book was included in the New Testament for I hear the "Word of God" speaking through the words of John and commanding us to love one another as God loved us.

The Bible closes its pages with the book of Revelation. It is a piece of apocalyptic or "end of the world" literature. Presumably that theme struck the leaders of the early Church, who still expected the end of the world to be near, to think that this book represented the proper way to close the New Testament. The book of Revelation has been a godsend to those who like to predict "doomsday" all of whom, let it be noted, have thus far been 100% incorrect! It is also the favourite book of those who believe that events in modern history are the fulfilment of and can be explained as the living out of biblical prophecy. In my lifetime I have heard the beast of Revelation 13 being identified with Adolf Hitler, Tojo, Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev and Saddam Hussein, just to name a few. My mother told me that Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany was called the beast of Revelation during World War I. I have never found the book of Revelation to be worthy of the study it would take to open it to its own meaning and context. I have read it a number of times, but I have never been edified by it. It is all but nonsense to me. My good friend and admired colleague, Professor Elaine Pagels of Princeton University's department of Religion faculty, is now writing a book on Revelation. I shall read her work with delight when it is published, but I have never felt compelled personally to explore its words with any depth myself. I see this book primarily as a dated piece of 1st Century literature and little more.

Despite this I can still say that my favourite text from Revelation is in chapter three where the author, writing to the Church of Laodicea, condemns them for being neither "hot nor cold", but "lukewarm", regarding them thereby as "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked". As a bishop, I have known lukewarm congregations, which stand for nothing and thus have no passionate commitments. These churches will die of boredom long before they die of controversy. The love of God demands that our love go beyond our limits, confront our prejudices and call us into transformed lives. That always means that controversy is part of the Christian life.

I began this series of columns on the origin and meaning of the books of the Bible in the year 2007. It has taken me over seventy columns to complete it, interspersed as they were with treatment of the events of the day. This series has required me to go back to my library to familiarise myself anew with every book included in the sacred text, even those that I had long ago dismissed as irrelevant. It has also kindled anew in me my long time love affair with this book, which began on Christmas Day in 1943, when my mother gave me my first personal Bible. From that day to this, I have read it daily, going cover to cover at least twenty-five times. Some of its books I have read too many times to count. On many of its books I have spent more than a year in concentrated study. I am at this moment beginning my third year of study on the Fourth Gospel. Underneath its limited words it conveys to me a sense that all life is holy, that all life is loved and that each of us is called to be all that we are capable of being. Those are the themes that I hope our world never loses.

I close this series with the words that capture my understanding of Jesus. These words come from John's gospel (10:10). "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." Love which breaks down all barriers of separation is the life power that I find in Jesus and that is why he is and remains Christ for me.

– John Shelby Spong