

John Shelby Spong

Author of Why Christianity Must Change or Die

Biblical Literalism: *A Gentile Heresy*



Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy

A JOURNEY INTO A NEW CHRISTIANITY
THROUGH THE DOORWAY OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

John Shelby Spong



Dedication

FOR
Christine,
My Wife,
Whose love
Expands my life endlessly
and almost miraculously;

AND FOR
Our Five Children,
Ellen
Katharine
Jaquelin
Brian
Rachel

AND
IN MEMORIAM
John Elbridge Hines (1910–1997)
John Arthur Thomas Robinson (1919–1983)
Michael Douglas Goulder (1927–2010)
My Three Greatest and Most Appreciated Mentors

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Preface

I DID NOT THINK I WOULD EVER WRITE another book. The time, the study, the sheer discipline and the rigor of writing just did not seem to fit into my life at this stage. When this book comes out in 2016, I will be eighty-five years old. Did I still have either the desire or the will to complete such an arduous task? Does the Christian world want or need another “Spong book”? After all, my autobiography came out in the year 2000 under the title *Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love and Equality*.^{*} Normally, one is supposed to die in the last chapter of one’s autobiography or, at the very least, to move along with sufficient haste that an editor’s note must be added to the text explaining that the author had passed from the stage of history in that critical interval between the time the book was completed and the time it was published. Somehow, I failed to cooperate with that tradition!

Indeed I went on to experience the years of my retirement as the most creative and growing years of my life. Among other things, I was named the William Belden Noble Lecturer at Harvard University. While delivering these lectures at Harvard (published under the title *A New Christianity for a New World*^{*}), I also taught two classes at the Harvard Divinity School, where I had the pleasure of meeting the most engaging theological students I have ever encountered. I formed stimulating friendships with a number of the theological faculty, including Peter Gomes, Harvey Cox, Diana Eck and Dorothy Austin. I also got to know and to interact with members of the university faculty and with those at the Kennedy School of Government, where the former senator from Wyoming, Alan Simpson, was teaching.

Following that, I taught for a semester at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, and formed a lasting friendship with Professor Lawrence Meredith and his wife, Pat. Larry had earlier headed up the department of religion at this university. I also served on the faculty of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and the Pacific School of Religion, also in Berkeley, on seven different occasions as part of their summer school. These experiences gave me new insights into West Coast Christianity and introduced me to some rather remarkable and very diverse students and faculty. Over a period of two years I taught three different courses in the Theological School of Drew University, a Methodist institution possessing the most international student body that I have ever engaged. In that capacity I was privileged to get to know three different and very gifted deans. The first was Maxine Beach, one of the earliest women clergy to head a denominational seminary; the second was Jeffrey Kuan, an Old Testament Scholar from Malaysia and the first Asian to head a Methodist seminary in America; the third was a young Hispanic scholar named Javier

Viera, whose vision for contemporary theological education is exciting and demanding. The Theological School at Drew University became a major asset to my life. Not only did it regularly affirm my gifts, but it also made available to me its magnificent theological library. The dean of the libraries at Drew was Dr. Andrew Scrimgeour, who time after time aided my research and, in the process, became a close personal friend.

Perhaps the highest honor of my life also came during those retirement years, when my portrait was commissioned to be painted by Morehouse College in Atlanta, to hang in its “Hall of Honor” at the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel, among those who had contributed deeply to the Civil Rights struggle in the United States during the years of the twentieth century. The dean of the chapel, Dr. Lawrence Carter, said in the unveiling ceremony: “You have done for gay and lesbian people what Martin Luther King Jr. did for people of color.” I hang today just beneath Justice Thurgood Marshall.

During the years of my retirement I also wrote and HarperCollins published five new books, each of which expanded my life and my intellectual scope enormously. I lectured extensively on these books all over the world, including appearances at some five hundred universities, colleges and theological seminaries in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Spain and Thailand.

When my books began to be translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, Korean, Arabic and the languages of Scandinavia, my work and ideas reached an expanded world audience. I was able to develop European lecture tours and to have articles published in prominent journals in Latin America.

In my retirement I have also developed a career as a weekly columnist on the Internet, working ultimately for a company that my wife Christine and I earlier helped to found entitled Progressive Christianity Inc. I have now written that column for sixteen years, and through its question-and-answer feature, I have been able to develop a dialogue with people around the world.

One other great privilege of my retirement years was that I was made a “fellow” of the Jesus Seminar, that remarkable biblical and early Christianity think tank founded by Dr. Robert Funk, a brilliant scholar, who once served as the executive secretary of the Society of Biblical Literature. In this seminar some 250 scripture scholars, of all religious traditions, meet regularly to explore contemporary biblical issues and to do so in a very public way. It was the intention of the Jesus Seminar not to allow its findings to remain hidden inside the ivy-covered walls of academia, but through the use of public media to reach the working clergy and, perhaps more importantly, the thinking laypeople who occupy the pews of our churches on Sunday mornings.

Above all I continued in retirement my lifelong habit of serious study in the early-morning hours of each day. My appetite for exploring the Bible outside the boxes of traditional religion was whetted anew by the five years from 2006–2010, a period that I devoted to the study of the Fourth Gospel, which resulted in the publication of a book entitled *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*.^{*} It was, I thought, the most creative piece of writing in my career. The responses I received from audiences around the nation convinced me that a case can be made for the continued power of the Bible among educated people, if biblical scholars are courageous enough to break

out of the straitjackets of their threadbare and time-warped approaches to traditional religion.

In 2014, at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York, more than ten thousand people attended my five days of lectures on John's Gospel, and about twenty-five percent of that audience was Jewish! When this book on the Fourth Gospel was complete, I felt, once again, that my writing career was over. Just to continue the habit of a lifetime, however, I began to engage the gospel of Matthew, reading continuously and exclusively on this subject for more than four years. This study was so enriching and so "eye-popping" that it led eventually to the publication of this present volume. I have now begun a time of intense study of the gospel of Luke, but I am doing it for the joy of the study alone. I do not believe that I have sufficient longevity left in what William Shakespeare called "this mortal coil" to produce yet another book at age ninety! No one other than my mother would probably want to read it anyway! So this book on Matthew will (probably) be my final book.

In addition to my wonderful wife, whom I love beyond measure, and who has been my primary editor on this volume, and to our five now adult children, I have dedicated this book "in memoriam" to the three people whom I acknowledge as "the three greatest mentors" of my life. I want to say just a word about each of them in this preface. Time moves so rapidly that brilliant, magnificent and heroic people are quickly forgotten. This is the inevitable fate of all of us, but let me roll back the curtain of time for just a moment and pay a final tribute to these three heroes of mine.

The first is John Elbridge Hines, a native of Seneca, South Carolina. His distinguished career as an Episcopal priest carried him from St. Louis County in Missouri to Hannibal, Missouri, to Augusta, Georgia, to Houston, Texas, where in 1945 at age thirty-five he was elected bishop in the Diocese of Texas. He served that diocese until 1963, when the entire Episcopal Church elected him to be its presiding bishop. He was in that post from 1964 to 1973. John Hines thus served and steered his church during those tension-filled years in America, marked by racial desegregation, urban riots and the Vietnam War protests. In the process he taught me to value honesty, integrity and courage as the primary qualities of leadership. He did not know how to compromise when truth was at stake. He called his church and, through it, all of American Christianity into a new level of engagement with the world that was startling, controversial, demanding and life-giving. I have been in John Hines' presence when threats on his life were so regular from fellow members of his own Episcopal Church that he was forced to wear a bulletproof vest, even on one occasion while presiding over a national General Convention of that church. When he retired in 1973 under great pressure from the reactionary elements in his church, I had just been elected to the Executive Council, the national governing board of the Episcopal Church, where I could begin to press the same issues that he represented. With his consent and cooperation I was invited to study his life with an eye toward being his biographer. The book was published in 1995 under the title *Granite on Fire*, but I was not the author. I had been elected bishop in 1976 and the time to write that book was simply not available to me. I turned over my massive notes and reams of taped interviews to Kenneth Kesselus, a priest in Texas, who ably wrote the book using much of my research. He did a splendid job. I talked to John Hines by telephone once a week for most of the years of his retirement. In many ways he was like a father to

me. He addressed my Diocesan Convention in Newark every year of my episcopacy until aging made travel difficult. He died in 1997, while the General Convention of our church was actually in session in Philadelphia. In the last speech that I would make in that national assembly, I was asked to pay tribute to him. I was so touched by having been given that honor that I decided not to speak again in that body. John Hines showed me that the church, as an institution, can affect our society in dramatic ways if its leadership is informed, filled with integrity, and willing to pay the price that effective leadership always requires, namely the willingness to absorb the abuse of those people who are terrified by change. I loved this man dearly and to this day his portrait sits on my desk so that looking at him I can always recall his example.

The second of my three great mentors was also a bishop, but this time in the Church of England. His name was John A. T. Robinson, the bishop of Woolwich, an area south of London inside the diocese of Southwark. John Robinson was a New Testament scholar and lecturer at Cambridge University when he was appointed bishop of Woolwich by the diocesan bishop, Mervyn Stockwood, one of the Church of England's more notable "characters." John Robinson broke upon the national scene in England when he defended the right of D. H. Lawrence to publish the unexpurgated version of his book *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the face of efforts brought in the name of public morality to suppress it. This novel was about the adulterous relationship of a gamekeeper with a titled English lady for whom the gamekeeper worked. John Robinson served notice in this episode that he was not going to be one of those typical Anglican bishops who could be colored "gray," as so many of that church's bishops tended to be.

A few years later John, having been confined to his bed by his doctor for several months to treat a deteriorating spinal condition, decided to use his time to write a book. It came out in 1963 under the title *Honest to God*.^{*} This book had the quality of a hot journalistic piece of writing. It was not a long tome, only 130 pages in length, and originally published in paperback, not hardcover, but this book touched a nerve and opened the floodgate on religious debate. It made available to the lay public the theological thinking that was commonplace in Christian academic centers. Because of that book people in the pews, London cabbies and those members of English society who had their "pint" in the pubs of England at the end of every day suddenly began to discuss and to debate theology.

What John Robinson did in that book was simple. He took the work of three of the twentieth century's most seminal theological thinkers—Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—and he made their ideas something the average person could understand and appreciate. Bultmann had talked about "de-mythologizing" the New Testament; Tillich had redefined God not as "a being," but as "Being Itself"; and Bonhoeffer had spoken of developing a Christianity without religion, or "religionless Christianity." The leaders of institutional Christianity had steadfastly refused to introduce laypeople to any of these concepts, feeling that the average person's "Sunday School faith" could not stand the shock. Ironically, it turned out to be the clergy and the bishops who could not stand the shock. Laypeople devoured this book, breaking on the church scene, as it did, with volcanic power. It was translated into almost every language of the world and it sold more copies than any religious book since *Pilgrim's Progress*.

My first book, *Honest Prayer*,* published in 1972, was inspired by John Robinson's *Honest to God*. I met John for the first time in 1973. It was a brief meeting in a public gathering. I had the chance to give him a copy of my book and to thank him for what he had meant to me. I thought that would be the end of my relationship with him.

Five years later, however, I had been elected a bishop and found myself in attendance with him at the Lambeth Conference of the world's Anglican bishops that convened in 1978. There we not only met again, but we bonded in a friendship. Neither of us enjoyed the endless discussions among the bishops at this conference, which often sounded like last Sunday's sermon being preached under the guise of debate, and so John and I would vacate the assembly and walk together in the woods of the county of Kent in England until we found a country pub. On these occasions we would discuss the New Testament. They were rich conversations. After that, we corresponded regularly. The Church of England did to John Robinson what religious institutions normally do to their most creative bishops. He was marginalized as "too controversial" ever to be given his own diocese. Rather than remain for his whole career in the secondary role of an assisting bishop, he resigned his position as the bishop of Woolwich and returned to teaching the New Testament at Cambridge University. Even there, however, he was marginalized, for the university declined to restore to him the title of "lecturer," which he had held before becoming a bishop. He rather was forced to serve in positions of secondary importance, while he continued to write. He died prematurely of cancer in Yorkshire in 1983, just a few months before he was scheduled to visit me in New Jersey, where he had agreed to lead my clergy conference. My wife and I have on two occasions made a pilgrimage to his grave in Arncliffe, Yorkshire, and we regularly visited his wife, Ruth, when we were in the United Kingdom, until her death.

John Robinson broke open the theological ground onto which I was to walk in subsequent years. In many ways I felt it was my vocation to pick up the gauntlet that he had laid down. I, too, was a bishop challenging the church theologically. Our paths had curious connections. When I wrote a book on sexual issues, published in 1988 under the title *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*,* I became as controversial in that dispute as he had become in his testimony regarding the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. When I wrote *A New Christianity for a New World* in 2001, I felt I was moving the work that he had started to a new place, and I said so in the preface. In my role as a theological gadfly in the House of Bishops, I had become his heir. In the worldwide Anglican Communion, I, like him, forced church leaders all over the world to react to new possibilities.

In 2011 an annual lectureship was established in the United Kingdom at a conference center in Hawarden, Wales, previously called St. Deiniol's, but now called Gladstone's Library. It was built originally to house the books and papers of William Gladstone, prime minister of Great Britain on a number of occasions during the nineteenth century, rotating regularly in the office of prime minister, it seemed at every election, with Benjamin Disraeli. That lectureship is called "The John A. T. Robinson–John Shelby Spong Lectureship on Contemporary Theology." I was and am delighted to be linked in this way with my mentor.

The last of my trio of honored mentors was a professor of New Testament at the

University of Birmingham, also in the U.K. His name was Michael Douglas Goulder. I will speak of him in more detail in the course of this book, so I will be very brief here. It was Michael Goulder who opened the door for me to linking the order of the gospel of Matthew to the liturgical calendar of the synagogue. That step, more than anything else, enabled me to escape the effects of biblical literalism without losing my great love for the Bible. I am not a disillusioned ex-fundamentalist. I am a transformed Christian. Michael was never as close a friend as the other two, but he probably influenced my life the most. He died in 2010. He remains one of the three great mentors of my life. In this preface I have the privilege of saluting all three just this one more time.

There are a few other people I need to acknowledge. Not to do so would violate both my love for them and my appreciation of them. At the top of the list is Christine, my wife, about whom I never seem able to say enough. She organizes and sustains my career, making me twice as effective as I could ever be without her, and the love that we share is transformative. She is also the best editor with whom I have ever worked. Next to her come my three daughters: Ellen, Katharine and Jaquelin. All three of them are rather incredible women whose careers in banking, law and science still amaze me. I treasure every opportunity I have to spend time with them. I also have great affection for their life partners: Gus Epps, Jack Catlett and Virgil Speriosu.

To this threesome I acquired through my marriage to Christine a wonderful stepson, Brian, and stepdaughter, Rachel. Brian is a tower of strength forging a life in northern Vermont as an executive for a telephone company and developing the lifestyle of a Vermont farmer. Rachel is an M.D. practicing in Delaware, after having had a number of other careers. Those included nine years as an officer in the United States Marine Corps piloting the Cobra helicopter, with three tours of duty in the second Iraq war. Both of these unique people are helped and supported by their spouses, Julieann Barney and Scott Carter.

Beyond this there are six grandchildren: Shelby, Jay, John, Lydia, Katherine and Colin, all of whom enrich our lives greatly. Finally, there are the menageries of creatures—dogs Jersey Rose, Brown Dog, Gretchen, Clyde, General, Lucca, and Emma, followed by cats, horses, chickens, turkeys, lambs (named Cain and Mabel), pigs and bees. There is additionally a single cow also named Mabel and her new calf, Ellie Mae. All of these creatures are now, by adoption and grace, part of our family.

The person who typed this manuscript, turning it from handwritten legal pads into a Word file, was Rhian Jeong, a graduate of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California, who is now the public relations and communications officer for the dean of Drew University's Theological School. I appreciate her work.

Finally, Christine and I are sustained by two congregations in which our lives are regularly nurtured. So to St. Paul's Church in Richmond, Virginia, and its rector Wallace Adams-Riley, and to St. Peter's Church in Morristown, New Jersey, and its rector Janet Broderick, and our many friends in both churches we express our deep gratitude.

JSS, Morris Plains, New Jersey
March 2016

PART I

How the Gospels Came to Be Written: The Liturgical Year of the Synagogue as the Organizing Principle

CHAPTER 1

Stating the Problem, Setting the Stage

I WILL TRY IN THIS VOLUME to reclaim the Jewish past that can illumine our gospel narratives in a way that is almost unimaginable. I will seek to demonstrate that the presence of an anti-Jewish bias over the centuries has kept the Christian church locked inside an anti-Semitic, Gentile exile. Part of my task in this book will be to pull back the layers of a long-standing Gentile ignorance of all things Jewish that has marked our traditional approach to the New Testament. In the process I will reveal that biblical fundamentalism is, in fact, a product of that ignorance. I will also seek to show just how deeply Jewish the Christian gospels are and just how much they reflect the Jewish scriptures, Jewish history and Jewish patterns of worship. To read the gospels properly, I now believe, requires a knowledge of Jewish culture, Jewish symbols, Jewish icons and the tradition of Jewish storytelling. It requires an understanding of what the Jews called “midrash.” Only those people who were completely unaware of these things could ever have come to think that the gospels were meant to be read literally. It was this same Gentile ignorance, I will argue, that created in the minds of Christians over the centuries the necessity of defending the literalness of such events in the life of Jesus as the virgin birth, the miracles, the details of the passion narrative, the understanding of resurrection as physical resuscitation and the cosmic ascension as an act that actually took place in both time and space. In this book I will show how these stories would have been understood by both the Jewish authors of the various gospels and by the Jewish audiences for which these gospels were originally written. I hope it will be a work that will radically reorient my readers to look at the gospels with a brand-new set of eyes.

Before I can begin that task, however, I must seek to explain how it was that Christianity, born in a Jewish world, developed into the primary source of the anti-Semitism that has plagued our world and that remains today as the darkest blemish on the Christian soul.

I have a second and equally compelling reason for writing this book. Since I regard biblical literalism as a Gentile heresy, I feel a burning necessity to expose fundamentalism for what I believe it is. Unless biblical literalism is challenged overtly in the Christian church itself, it will, in my opinion, kill the Christian faith. It is not just a benign nuisance that afflicts Christianity at its edges; it is a mentality that renders the Christian faith unbelievable to an increasing number of the citizens of our world. The irony of the task that I undertake in this book is that many literalistic Christians will see this book as an attack on Christianity itself. Not knowing any other

way to read the Bible except to claim literal truth for it, they will suggest that I have abandoned “every tenet of traditional Christian thought.” I have heard that charge more than once. So distorted will this point of view be that they will be unable to see either how deeply Christian I am or how deeply Christian this book is. So let me begin with a brief autobiographical statement.

I have lived my life professionally and personally between two polarities that seem to tear at the deepest part of my soul. The first reality is that I am a convinced and committed Christian. The second is that I despair daily about the state of institutional Christianity, including its denominational seminaries. Is it possible for both of these things to be true? Read carefully and I think you will discover that it is.

I walk the Christ path by a deliberate and conscious choice. I have lived my entire life inside the Christian church. The church for me has been like a second home. I cannot remember a time in my life that I did not want to be a priest. Indeed I still treasure that vocation. I had the pleasure, indeed the privilege, of serving in that role for twenty-one years. Then, after being elected a bishop by the clergy and laypeople of the diocese of Newark, I had the even greater privilege of serving in that capacity for twenty-four years. The Christian church and its faith are not tangential to who I am; they are at the heart of who I am.

Being a priest opened doors that allowed me to enter deeply into the lives of many people. I have rejoiced with new parents at the birth of a child, and then celebrated that event publically in that child’s baptism. I have worked with young adolescents struggling with their identity issues as they lived through that period of life when they ceased to be children but had not yet become adults. I have been with these teenagers when they were trying to deal with all their conflicting emotions and clanging hormones. Then I have celebrated their maturity publicly in the act of confirmation, the church’s liturgical “puberty rite.” I have sat with passionate lovers as they contemplated forging a life together. Then I have celebrated publicly their union in the liturgical event we call “holy matrimony.”

I have also walked with families through valleys of excruciating pain. I think of an eleven-year-old girl who died of Hodgkin’s disease; a two-year-old baby who died after ingesting a poisonous substance in a house that was not “childproof”; a mother and father who lost their only two children, both daughters, in separate, strange, unrelated and unpredictable accidents before either of these young women reached the age of twenty-six. I have tried then to make sense of these events in a liturgy called “the burial of the dead.” I have walked as a friend and confidant with a young doctor, barely into his forties, married and with small children, who would soon die of a virulent form of leukemia that he understood completely and that he knew full well would be both mortal and quick. I have accompanied couples at different ages, who once had pledged their love to each other “till death us do part,” as they now endured the pain and the embarrassment of public hearings in a domestic relations court prior to their being granted a divorce. I have sat with elderly people in their twilight years as they journeyed through stages of an illness that both they and I knew would soon bring their lives to an end.

Throughout these highs and lows of human experience, I have loved my priestly vocation, and I cannot imagine any other profession in which I could have found a more fulfilling, expanding or affirming life. If I had the chance to live my life a second

time, I would not change my journey in any appreciable way. I identify myself quite self-consciously with a man named Melchizedek, who was described in the book of Psalms as “a priest forever” (Ps. 110:4).

Yet I also live in despair when I see the state of the Christian church today. The Bible, a text that the Christian church claims to hold dear, is frequently an embarrassment in the way it is used and understood. The Bible reflects a worldview of an ancient, premodern time and holds as truth many things that no one believes today. I watch members of the church continuing to quote these literal texts as if they should still be authoritative. The Bible on almost every page depicts God as a supernatural, miracle-working deity who lives just beyond the sky of a three-tiered universe. I see the centuries of Christian history as a time when the literal words of the Bible have been used in such a way as to guarantee the development of killing prejudices. I see a biblically based anti-Semitism that has resulted in the beating, robbing, relocating, ghettoizing, torturing and killing of Jews from the time of “the church fathers” in the second century to the Holocaust in the twentieth century. I weep at the evil and the pain that we Christians have done to Jewish people in the name of God.

I watch representatives of a militant Islam beheading or burning alive their prisoners in televised murders in order to protest what they believe the Christian world has done to the followers of Muhammad throughout Western history. There were first the crusades of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, led by the Vatican, in which the murder of “infidels”—that is, Muslims—was made a virtue. Later, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Muslim nations were once again deeply violated by the industrializing “Christian” world’s thirst for oil. The nations of the West have placed the Islamic citizens of the Middle East into a state of constant turmoil, war and devastation.

I have seen how in our history, people of color have been enslaved by “Bible-quoting” Christians. When slavery was finally threatened with being relegated to the dustbins of history in America, it was that section of this country known as “the Bible Belt” that rose to defend the enslavement of black people in the bloodiest war of American history. When slavery finally died as a legal option on the battlefields of Gettysburg, Antietam and Appomattox, the Christians of the Bible Belt, once again quoting their scriptures for justification, instituted laws of segregation with the full support of the federal government. When those segregation laws finally began to fall in the 1950s and 1960s, I watched the Bible being quoted to justify the use of lead pipes, police dogs, fire hoses and even the bombing of black churches in which little girls in their Easter finery were killed—all in an attempt to preserve “white supremacy.” I notice that even today the political party in America that most claims to represent what is called “the Christian vote” is still working to impede the political process for black people, to make voting so difficult as to prevent them from casting their ballot.

I have watched women being denigrated, reduced to second-class citizenship, and denied education and access to the professions, while this life-destroying, prejudiced behavior was being justified time after time with quotations from the Bible.

I have watched a killing homophobia being promoted by the Christian churches of the world, both Catholic and Protestant, based on literal texts from an ancient Bible. I have heard Pope Benedict XVI refer to gay and lesbian people as “deviant.” I have

listened to the Reverend Pat Robertson, a television evangelist, interpret all sorts of natural disasters as God's punishment for our culture's toleration of homosexual people. I have listened to the Reverend Jerry Falwell, another of America's well-known evangelical personalities, blame the disaster of September 11, 2001, when terrorists struck the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, on the leaders of this nation for allowing legal abortions, encouraging feminism, giving public support to homosexual people and tolerating such organizations as the American Civil Liberties Union, because it was a known supporter of the rights of minorities. It is so often embarrassing to continue to identify oneself as a Christian and to see how the Christian church's holy book is used in the service of prejudice, hatred and oppression.

There is one other great challenge with which I struggle in order to pursue my continued loyalty to the Christian faith. This challenge is not new. Indeed it has been part of the life of our world for almost five hundred years. In those years succeeding generations have watched the incredible explosion of new knowledge and new understandings of how our world operates. Our discoveries have ranged from a startling sense of the enormity of the universe, to a new non-interventionist understanding of the weather and to new knowledge of the meaning of sickness that does not include divine punishment. A literal understanding of the Bible has been used as the weapon of choice in opposition to almost every one of these new discoveries. Galileo was condemned at a heresy trial in the seventeenth century for his challenge to the idea that the planet earth was the center of a three-tiered universe. The biblical text quoted to seal Galileo's fate was from the book of Joshua, a passage that described God as stopping the sun on its path around the earth so that Joshua could have more daylight in which to kill more of his enemies (Josh. 10:12–14). Later the work of Charles Darwin was attacked and ridiculed by Christians on the basis of the literal accuracy of the seven-day creation story in the book of Genesis (chapter 1) and on the biblical calculation made by Irish Bishop James Ussher that the world was created in 4004 BCE. There are artifacts that clearly refute his dating, such as a 27,000-year-old sculpture in a cave in the south of France that I have seen and which I know to be authentic, but which literalists dismiss as a forgery, since it does not fit into their biblical worldview. I have watched as local school boards, in the service of "biblical truth," seek to impose "creation science" or "intelligent design" on the science departments of local high schools as a way of providing equal treatment for what they absurdly suggest are "equally valid" theories.

When Louis Pasteur discovered germs, and when later generations discovered and learned to treat viruses, coronary occlusions, tumors, and leukemia, I watched as various Christian groups, quoting the Bible, opposed these breakthroughs in medical science because "they removed God from the arena of sickness and health."

I recall reading the charges made by the Reverend Dr. Timothy Dwight, a Congregationalist clergyman and the president of Yale University from 1795 to 1817, who railed against vaccinations because if God had intended to punish people by sending sickness upon the wicked, then those vaccinations were standing between God and the divine ability to punish sinners.

So this is my dilemma. At one and the same time, I have found the Bible and my study of it to be a deep resource to my life and my faith, but I have also been deeply

embarrassed by the way the Bible has been used over the centuries to justify one dehumanizing attitude after another. I cannot apparently have it both ways. I must either reject the Bible to live in a modern world or I must reject the modern world in order to cling to the Bible. That is a choice I cannot and will not make. So I am driven to find a different way to read the Bible that allows me simultaneously to be both a person of faith and a person thankful for and dedicated to the century in which I am privileged to live. For anyone to call the Bible the “Word of God” or to treat the words of the Bible as if they were words spoken by the mouth of God is to me not just irresponsible, it is also to be illiterate. To read from this book in a Sunday worship service and then to end that reading with some version of the phrase “this is the Word of the Lord” is, to me, little more than the perpetuation of religious ignorance and religious prejudice. To watch a church procession in which someone holds the Bible, or the book of the gospel readings, high above his or her head, as if to offer this book to the people as an object of worship, is repulsive to me. Yet I love this book. My life has been fed by this book, and I do not want to see it abandoned in an increasingly secular society. This is what drives me to search for an alternative way to read and to study the Bible. That is what compels me to go so deeply into this book that I can free it from the peril of literalism that has been imposed on it by well-meaning but uninformed “believers.” I feel called to free the Bible from those who read it literally, no matter how much they say that they are associated with either God or Jesus.

Can biblical ignorance be attacked and laid bare by one who is not an enemy of the Christian faith, but a committed practitioner of that faith? Can one who defines himself as a disciple of Jesus open people’s minds to see that biblical idolatry is not a virtue? Can I help to bring to the general public the kind of biblical knowledge that renders biblical fundamentalism inoperative, indeed that reveals it to be both ignorant and unlearned, and still present myself as a Christian, a believer and one who by conviction continues to walk the Christ path? That is my goal in this book, and I shall pursue that goal with passion.

In the process I will disturb many. That is not my desire, but I believe it is inevitable. The Bible has been misunderstood for so long by so many that overturning what most churchgoers have been taught to believe as “gospel truth” will inevitably destabilize their religious convictions. That will naturally bring distress and anger. I also expect that I will irritate many in academia who will suggest that all the things I say have been known for hundreds of years! They will conclude, therefore, that I am guilty of some unequivocal need for sensationalism. I only ask these people, who have lived their lives behind the ivy-covered walls of academia, to step out of their intellectual ghetto for just a minute, where they can see clearly that very few people seem to have heard the news that those academicians say is hundreds of years old. They will also see that people are today walking away from Christianity in droves because it seems so out of touch with the world in which they live. More importantly, these academic Christians need to face the fact that their work has never been successful in helping to define “popular” Christianity. That rather was the accomplishment of the biblical literalists. So in this book I will begin with a brief story of the Bible in general, which, if successfully conveyed, will inevitably destroy the unthinking assumptions of fundamentalism. I will not stop there, however. Then I will develop a very different way of reading the text of the Bible itself. When I get to this

second phase of this book, I will lean on one gospel as my guide. I will do that for two reasons. First, to do more than one gospel would make this book so long that no one would read it. Second, the principle I seek to show can be established and developed by using one gospel alone. Matthew is the gospel I have chosen, because it was the one that the early church placed first in the New Testament and it lends itself to a non-literal reading better than any other. I have loved my study in preparing to write this book. I hope my readers will love the results. More than that, I hope they will discover a way to worship God with their minds. I hope they will find themselves able to live inside the Christian story without denying the tenets of the world in which they are also citizens. I hope they will no longer have to twist their minds into a first-century pretzel in order to walk the Christ path.

So let the story begin.

CHAPTER 2

Setting Jesus into the Context of History

WE BEGIN OUR ANALYSIS of the Jesus story with some statements that contemporary men and women clearly no longer believe, no matter what the Bible says. Stars do not announce a human birth. Wise men do not follow a star that moves so slowly through the sky that these magi can keep up with it. Angels do not break through the midnight sky to sing to hillside shepherds. Virgins do not conceive. The skies do not open at the time of a baptism to allow the Holy Spirit to drop from heaven on the one being baptized, nor does a voice from behind a cloud in that sky proclaim that the one being baptized is really God's child. A multitude of people cannot be fed by the miraculous expansion of a lad's lunch of five loaves and two fish. No one can walk on water. A four-days dead and buried Lazarus cannot be called out of his grave to resume his life in this world. A man born blind cannot receive his sight. Water cannot be miraculously changed into wine. A man crucified and buried on Friday cannot be miraculously resuscitated and able to emerge from his grave on Sunday. No one returns to God's dwelling place by rising into the sky of a three-tiered universe.

I have not in this brief and limited set of statements covered all the unbelievable episodes in the literalized understanding of the gospel narratives, but these will serve as illustrations of what might be said about many other parts of the biblical story. The gospels, I am suggesting, were not meant to be read literally, and they become nonsensical and unbelievable if one seeks to do so. The gospels are not biographies of a man named Jesus of Nazareth. They do not contain tape recordings of the things that he actually said. They are not historical chronicles of the things he actually did. No one who knows anything about the gospels, such as when they were written, how they were written or the context of history in which they were written, could possibly believe these narratives to be literally and entirely true. What are they then? It will be the task of this book to discover that.

I start with some basic background material. Since the New Testament is above all else a witness to the life, the message and the meaning of a person who is called Jesus of Nazareth, perhaps it is appropriate to begin by setting his life into the context of history. To determine the dates during which Jesus lived, we draw on data available to us from two sources. First, there is the Christian written tradition, which sometimes, almost unconsciously, provides us with clues. These clues are then expanded by what we can discover from secular sources. The two together serve to corroborate each other better than we might imagine, building for us in the process something that can be termed at least a "high probability" that the life of Jesus is based on history, not

fantasy, even if many of the details that surround his life are surely mythological.

We have two narratives in the Bible that purport to describe events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Neither of these narratives, however, was written earlier than the ninth decade, and so they in and of themselves cannot be relied on with much confidence for accuracy. Both of them, however, do assert, as an internal dating guide, that Jesus was born during the reign of a king who was known in Judean history as Herod the Great. If that fact can be determined to be accurate, as it seems to be, then we can go to secular records, where we discover that King Herod died in the year 4 BCE. This means that if Jesus was born when Herod was king, he had to have been born in or before the year 4 BCE. There is further biblical corroboration of this date. The way the land of the Jews was governed by the Romans, as reflected in the adult narratives of Jesus, is consistent with the changes in government that Rome made following Herod's death. The Roman leaders at that time divided Herod's former realm on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea into three parts, placing one of Herod's three sons over each of the new jurisdictions. After a few years, however, the jurisdiction that included Jerusalem, having proved far more volatile than the others, was placed under direct Roman control. Herod's son was removed and replaced by an appointed prefect or procurator from Rome. That is the pattern that the gospels portray when they chronicle the Jesus story. These are the data that make us fully confident in dating the birth of Jesus in or just slightly before the year 4 BCE.

On the other end of Jesus' life, the gospel narratives are very clear that the crucifixion of Jesus occurred under the administration of the Roman prefect-procurator Pontius Pilate. Once again, armed with that gospel assertion, we can go to secular records, and there we discover that Pilate began his reign in Judea in the year 26 CE and ended it when he was recalled by Rome in 36 CE. So if the gospels are accurate in maintaining that the crucifixion took place under the reign of Pontius Pilate, it had to have occurred during the time span of his rule. We also know from Roman history some of the tensions and political problems endured by Pilate that caused him to be terminated by Rome in 36 CE. These events appear to have happened well after the crucifixion of Jesus, so the evidence points to the earlier years of his administration as the time of the crucifixion, with the years 28–32 CE being the best historical guess by those who have devoted the most study to this issue. I choose the midpoint of the time span and seek to fix our date of the crucifixion in or near the year 30 CE. I cannot be certain that this is the exact year, but I can be certain that it is close, indeed close enough to adopt it with some confidence, as the best bet for dating the end of Jesus' earthly life. So I set down our first time marker: The life of the man Jesus can be fairly accurately dated as having been lived between 4 BCE and 30 CE, which means that when he died he was around age thirty-four. With these dates fixed in our minds, we begin to build the case for dating the books that now constitute the New Testament.

If the crucifixion took place around the year 30, how long was it before the writing of the first book of the New Testament occurred? Scholars now believe that the earliest written part of the New Testament was Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians; and the consensus gained from internal evidence and from some autobiographical notes that Paul included in other epistles, especially Galatians, enables us to set the date of I Thessalonians in or near the year 51 CE.

The first conclusion we can draw from this dating process is, therefore, that we do