

Modern Era Marcionism: Critiquing *The Sins of Scripture* by John Shelby Spong

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Introduction

For almost two thousand years Christian theologians have attempted to harmonize the distinctive theological emphases of the two testaments. One of the earliest and most memorable attempts simply involved cutting the Gordian knot: Marcion of Sinope, unable to reconcile the benighted God of the Old Testament with Christ and the gospel, expelled the entire Old Testament and parts of the New from the Christian canon. Although Marcion was condemned as a heretic (A.D. 144), rejection of biblical passages and doctrines on ethical grounds is a pathology that continues to plague the church.

The latest such voice comes from John Shelby Spong, the highly controversial Episcopal bishop and tireless opponent of historic Christianity, especially evangelicalism. In his recent book *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* (HarperCollins, 2005), Spong continues in the tradition of neo-Marcionists like Friedrich Delitzsch (*Die grosse Täuschung*, 1921). But whereas Delitzsch thrashed the Old Testament by measuring it against the New, Spong outdoes him, and many others, by subjecting both testaments to a remorseless flogging when he finds them in conflict with his modern sensibilities. In fact, contemporary ethics (environmentalism, feminism, religious pluralism, etc.) so dominate his thinking and regulate his critique of the Bible that his book is organized into eight sections, most of which are governed by some facet of the popular wisdom.

The optimism generated by initial disclosures of his lifelong love for the Scriptures and dedication to Bible study (5-10) quickly evaporates amid a series of deeply condescending remarks against the Bible—amounting to cheap shots in many cases. For instance, he ridicules certain prophetic books simply because he finds them uninspiring and less than spectacular (273, see 145). Additionally, he denigrates the Bible or conservative Christians and their doctrines as either “boring” (214), “petty” (273), “simply wrong” (173, 176), “nonsense” (173), “frail, fragile and pitiful” (123), “bankrupt” (177), “overtly ignorant” (133), “neurotic” (167, 171, 176), “evil” (12, 133), idolatrous (217, 229), bigoted (11, 12, 133, 233), and even “demonic” (125, 217, 228, 276).

Hermeneutics

These scorching epithets—representative of the book’s overall tone—are the result of a programmatic hermeneutical approach to the Bible that is both transparent and often utterly predictable: if a biblical teaching comports with modern values, it is worthy of acceptance; if not, it must be scrapped. Hence, with scalpel in hand, Spong assaults text after text, extirpating the moral atrocities and repressive dogma, while preserving the useful morsels. At times his deconstructive agenda is plainly stated: “I insisted on filtering the biblical stories through the crucible of contemporary knowledge, so making them pertinent to our day” (xi); “I believe the Bible must be preserved, but not the Bible that people have used to enhance the pain and evil present in human history” (13); “Text by text I will seek to disarm those parts of the biblical

story that have been used throughout history to hurt, denigrate, oppress and even kill. I will set about to deconstruct the Bible's horror stories" (24, see 26); "If the Christian scriptures have been a primary source of negativity toward women throughout history, then those scriptures have to be either jettisoned or reinterpreted" (100, see 107); "The Christian ethic is ultimately a life ethic. When behavior enhances life, expands love and calls all parties involved into the experience of a new being, then it must be called good. But when behavior denigrates, uses, violates or diminishes one or more of the parties involved, then it must be called evil" (142); "The biblical texts that we Christians have used for centuries to justify our hostility toward the Jews need to be banished forever from the sacred writings of the Christian church" (209).

For example, Lev 18:22 and 20:13, which abominate homosexuality, are some of the "terrible texts" of the Bible that should be assessed as primitive and debased reactions to behaviors that the ancient mind could not comprehend or appreciate (121-126). In this particular case, Spong explains that these prohibitions were two in a long series of holiness strictures intended to preserve the national identity of the Jewish people from integration with their Babylonian captors (122). (This of course presupposes a very late, exilic date and priestly authorship for Leviticus.) But to Spong this putative historical context offers no excuse, since the condemnations are "clearly homophobic" and reflect "popular prejudices of their day" (122). Again, his guiding principle is modernity, in this instance what he considers to be "overwhelming scientific and medical knowledge" that "sexual orientation is not a moral choice" (125). That being the case he concludes: "The texts in Leviticus 18 and 20 are simply wrong. They are morally incompetent because they are based on ignorance. They should be viewed, as should so much else in Leviticus and the rest of the Torah, as stages in human development that we have outgrown, that we have been educated beyond and have therefore abandoned" (125-126).

The sections of the Bible worthy of commendation and reflection involve texts that advocate his particular worldview and theology. For example, both Spong's panentheism (see below) and advocacy of animal rights (37-38) are reinforced, according to his exegesis, by texts like Ps 104:10-30 (God's providential concern for nature); Gen 6:20 (God's plan to save the animals); and Eccl 3:19, 21 (man and animals share the same fate) (65-66). From the New Testament he summons Gal 3:26-28 ("there is neither male nor female"), which supposedly endorses unconditional egalitarianism (101-103). He is also attracted to Mark 15:39 ("Truly this man was the Son of God") because it suggests (somehow) that in his willingness to die Jesus shined as an avatar of the new consciousness, a concept very much like existential models of authentic existence (290). He applauds such passages as an underground of dissenting voices, far beyond their time, where individuals managed to escape their cultural prejudices and approach complete humanity (63, 101, 105, 293-295).

Beyond serving as textbook examples of anachronistic interpretation, abandoned of historical context, Spong's hermeneutic raises an important epistemological question: since Spong measures Scripture by some higher authority, the orthodox will at some point ask what serves as his ultimate authority. In other words, what is Spong's bible? Is it his moral intuition? Or does he claim special revelation from God, like Moses, to make categorical statements like "Jesus did not die for your sins or my sins. That proclamation is theological nonsense" (173)? Unfortunately, the answer is not available in any type of definitive statement, which leads to the suspicion that this enormously important question was never anticipated nor the issue

considered. The reader is forced to deconstruct *The Sins of Scripture* to discover Spong's basis for religious authority.

Though difficult to pin down at first, his measure of truth appears to be principles or laws that emerge, evolve, and change within the universal human consciousness, by which earlier principles are to be critiqued—in other words, the collective opinion of enlightened society (17, 18, 54-58, 126, 174, 218, 288). Along with this comes the presupposition that what is later is better and that the entirety of human history is propelled by the principle of moral improvement (18, 57, 80, 141, 174, 288, 293, 297).

The source of contemporary morality appears to be God, based not on direct revelation, but on what Spong calls “our experience of God,” which is supported by the occasional witness of Scripture (63-64, 66, 221, 274, 293). By “experience” he seems to mean how human beings comprehend God today (63, 66). This type of epistemology is also apparent when he appeals to the popular understanding of God as a one-dimensional God of love, sans wrath and partiality (126):

Do we really want to worship a God who plays favorites, who chooses one people to be God's people to the neglect of all the others? When we portray the God of the Bible as hating everyone that the chosen people hate, is God well served? Will our modern consciousness allow us to view with favor a God who could manipulate the weather in order to send the great flood that drowned all human lives save for Noah's family because human life had become so evil God needed to destroy it? (18)

The recourse to popular theology and common experience is again evident in the following statements: “Read again the words with which this section of this book began [Gen 2:18-23] . . . and judge for yourself their holiness: . . . Can anyone seriously argue today that these words are the ‘Word of God’?” (74-75); “If God could or would do that, would God be worthy of anyone's worship? Would God not be an ogre, a demon or something worse? . . . Is there any reason why anyone should believe that this convoluted and bizarre understanding of the tortured Pauline mind could ever be called the ‘Word of God’?” (136).

Assisting the burgeoning consciousness are the sciences, such as evolution, medicine, psychology, and even biblical criticism, all of which are venerated to near infallible status: “Overwhelming scientific and medical knowledge exists today pointing to an inescapable conclusion. Sexual orientation is not a moral choice. It is something to which people awaken” (125).

Nevertheless, when asked why the prevailing ethos is superior, Spong's response is that modern man knows that the divine is nothing like the loathsome God we meet in the “terrible texts” of the Bible, but is rather a God of love. If skeptics ask *how* they can determine whether or not Spong's depiction of God and his ways is authentic, Spong directs them to the progressive consciousness and man's experience of God today, which is really an appeal to some immediate, self-authenticating knowledge rather than extended argument. In other words it is completely circular. To put it plainly, “God is like this and not like that, because we know that God is like this and not like that.” This does not mean that Spong's version is false but simply that it is no more provable than any other claim for ultimate religious truth.

Furthermore, it is one thing to claim that the world has gradually changed in favor of homosexuality and religious pluralism; it is quite another to consider that change morally enriching. The first is an observation that is subject to empirical verification. The second is

entirely religious. So then, whether acceptance of homosexuality is evidence of evolution or devolution, progress or regress, is primarily a religious question, not a matter of demographics, consensus, or scientific data.¹ Spong, however, commits a serious error in conflating observation with ethic and human with divine, to the effect that human history appears to have a mind of its own, a self-consciousness that wills and achieves its own progress à la Hegel's World-Spirit: "[T]he new consciousness of today collides with the old and dying definitions of the past. There is no doubt about how this debate will come out: the new consciousness will not be defeated" (141); "It is the destiny of the human being to move into new vistas, embrace new realities, grow into new awarenesses and develop new levels of consciousness" (288); "The doctrines ... of our tribal religious past were a stage in our development. They were part of our religious childhood. Nothing more. . . . When they become lifeless, they should be allowed to die" (293); "Humanity is expanding in consciousness" (293).

Additionally, the developed consciousness, which Spong continually invokes, is by no means universal. The sensibilities that he champions throughout the book may be representative of large segments of the westernized world but they do not express the sentiments of all human beings today. Is it not, then, Eurocentrism on his part to assume the superiority of his ethical system? Under these conditions, Spong's appeal to "our" God-experience as his Archimedean point is as selective and culture-bound as it is subjective and circular.

Triumphalism

If the book suffers from a dearth of winsomeness, the same cannot be said for confidence. Consequently, despite insisting that it is "difficult to be triumphal and certain" about truth (218), Spong goes on to broadcast one victory speech after another: "The day of using the Bible to claim for your prejudice that it has 'the authority of the Word of God' is quite frankly over, and we should give thanks for that fact. The churches of the world must learn that truth or they will die. There is no alternative" (276).

Unfortunately, in this matter Spong proves to be a poor student of history and is therefore liable to repeat it. Previous religious perspectives and philosophies have made similar imperialistic claims only to be checked by reality. Hegel, for example, believed that World-Spirit had achieved its goal in his dialectical scheme of German Idealism, so that, to Hegel, the history of philosophy had come to an end in his day.

More striking, however, are parallels between the triumphalism of late nineteenth-century Protestant liberalism and Spong, who asserts with absolute certainty that in its battle with traditional Christianity "the new consciousness will not be defeated" (141) and that "ultimately the Bible quoters will lose. When they do, their religion will either change or it will die" (125, see 47, 58, 109, 178, 296).

Much like Spong, old liberalism supposed Jesus to be little more than a God-infused ethics professor who embodied the ideals of enlightened German society in the late nineteenth century: the fatherhood and universal love of God, freedom from guilt, the infinite value of the human soul, as well as the conviction that rational religion and ethics would gradually introduce a utopia.

Two events, however, brought this movement to a screeching halt. The first was the publication of Albert Schweitzer's magisterial *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), which meticulously demonstrated that the historical Jesus of liberalism was not historical at all, but

contemporary, a carbon copy of the nineteenth-century German intellectual. The second was World War I: the enthusiasm of the Enlightenment and its confidence in the ever-increasing goodness of man suddenly collapsed in the wake of over eight million dead.

For all his scolding of conservatives for creating God in their own image (63, 66, 294), Spong would do well to consider Schweitzer's caveat and revise his own portrait of Jesus as "God presence" (25, 180). When facing a theologian whose idea of the God-ethic and its manifestation in Christ (180) bears uncanny resemblance to the politically correct views he personally cherishes (290-292), there is every reason to suspect that he was conducting his research in front of a mirror instead of a Bible. This is exactly what has taken place in Spong's case. The renegade bishop straps Jesus of Nazareth to his Procrustean bed, amputating those characteristics that offend him (20, 21, 162, 173) but retaining and intensifying those that fall in line with his libertine outlook (25-26, 104-105, 174, 180, 293-294). It would not be an overstatement to complain that Spong's Jesus has more in common with the late Senator Paul Wellstone than the ancient apocalyptic figure described in the New Testament. Much like the historical Jesus of the nineteenth century, Spong reformulates Christ as the ultimate model of humanity in its fullness, who beckons us to divest our obsolete views and embrace the new consciousness (290-292, 298)—by which he means adopting the social agenda of progressives. Consequently, the level of self-deception and data manipulation present in Spong's low Christology trumps anything that Schweitzer rebuked in the bespoke Jesus of old liberalism.

Theology Proper

Many of Spong's readers who share his contempt for evangelical doctrine will nevertheless dismiss his concept of God in favor of more grassroots versions of theism, deism, or outright atheism, which is much easier to grasp and not all that distant from Spong's offering anyway. This is because Spong's doctrine of God is excessively immanent, nebulous, and ultimately irrational. Moreover, his theology is largely negative, a perpetual denial of traditional theism: God is neither transcendent, supernatural, omnipotent, omniscient, beneficent, just, nor comprehensible (60-63, 66, 289-290). As Spong sees it, the tragic condition of the world—its injustice, death, and misfortune—does not comport with the theistic illusion of a caring God who protects and rescues his creatures (62). This is reminiscent of Paul Tillich, whose conventional concept of God, "who would make everything turn out for the best," perished with many of his fellow Germans in the trenches of the Western Front.²

Again, with remarkable similarity to Tillich—whose influence Spong gladly acknowledges—it appears that the God Spong recommends is not even a person, only a force, albeit a life-force.³ Although Tillich did not consider God a person, he did consider him the ground, cause, or source of human personality. Spong also identifies God as Tillich's Ground of Being (66, 180, 295), namely that God is not *a* being among other beings, but "being-itself," or the power of being; for to exist, in Tillich's estimation, is to be finite and to deny God.

Also, what appears at first blush to be pantheism—as a description of Spong's hyper-immanent God—is probably better understood as panentheism: God is distinct from the world, yet fully infused in it, much like blood coursing through the arteries. This is evident when he states that God is a "life force" that permeates everything (64, 180, 295), or "the power that emerges within all of life" (64). Hence, God is "the sacred dimension in all of life," which "binds all creatures into the mutuality of interdependency" (66). Additionally, Spong writes that God is

the source of life and love (64, 297), who calls us “to love wastefully” and to be all that we can be (66, 297).

Quite apart from several other inconsistencies and difficulties in Tillich’s theology—which his critics have exposed⁴—if the Ground of Being is no more than a universal quality, power, or source then man as a sentient being is far superior to God, in that man can will, reason, imagine, create, feel, judge, sympathize, remember, and describe God, among other things.⁵

Further, an impersonal force is incapable of calling individuals to anything, including love, as Spong mistakenly feels it can. Neither can Spong draw principles of right and wrong—a task with which he is perpetually occupied—from an impersonal life-force. Ethical principles involve propositions that are inherently imperatival and so must be the consequence of minds, not impersonal forces. Tillich, in any case, insisted that a relationship with an impersonal God was possible but offered nothing better than an antinomy in support: “Our encounter with the God who is a person includes the encounter with the God who is the ground of everything personal and as such is not a person.”⁶

Anthropology

Given this it should come as no revelation that Spong’s anthropology is unapologetically Darwinist: “[H]uman beings are simply the self-conscious form of life that has emerged out of the evolutionary soup” (178-179, see 285-286). Further, human evil is a result of incompleteness, not a fallen nature, so that even corporal punishment is out of place (179)—a most remarkable statement in a post-9/11 world and its reaffirmation of human depravity. His antidote to the human predicament is completeness, “to be empowered to be something we have not yet been able to be” (179, see 177). Here strains of Bultmann’s existentialist anthropology are readily discernable in Spong’s exposition of man as emerging, developing, and in the process of attaining to a new humanity. Much like obtaining authentic existence, Spong’s ideal of full humanity and the new consciousness involves anxiety, decision, openness, risk, and unbridled altruism (101, 174, 177, 179, 289-294, 298). Yet Spong makes no attempt to account for genuine evil and universal, invariant laws of ethics out of the amoral worldview of Darwinism. That is, he spends a great deal of time on applied ethics, but none on meta-ethics (the foundations of morality). He also fails to explain how the cold-blooded and graceless process of evolution can be expected to produce “Homo spiritus”—mankind characterized by the deepest level of charity (297)—rather than war, euthanasia, infanticide, and ethnic cleansing.

Rewriting the Past

In several places throughout the book the reader encounters perspectives on history and the Bible so unconventional and avant-garde that an expedition for footnotes seems to be in order. The hope is that Spong’s discussions—which are usually brief—come with sufficient backing. That is, when attempting to radically revise almost two thousand years of interpretive tradition, there is reasonable expectation for rigorous research, credible evidence, methodological consistency, and sufficient interaction with alternative proposals. But this expectation is seldom realized. The reader who searches for the depth, balance, and documentation required for Spong’s adventurous proposals to succeed will be greeted rather with short, shallow, and sloppy arguments that sprint to preconceived conclusions. The fact that

Spong lacks the qualifications of an anthropologist or historian has not hindered him from drawing or endorsing the most exotic conclusions. In the end his numerous attempts at *tour de force* backfire into self-inflicted wounds and only serve to discredit the remainder of his work.

For example, in Spong's quest for the antecedents of overpopulation and subsequent destruction of the environment, the Bible ultimately bears the majority of the guilt, including the blame for the genetically engineered domestic turkey, that "misshapen, big-breasted creature so top-heavy it can barely stand up" (38, see 54-55). Elsewhere, he makes the ridiculous assertion that primitive weapons, as well as modern firearms, have functioned as "obviously phallic symbols," reinforcing the male notion of sex as conquest of the female (73). To this he adds the analysis that one of the causes of patriarchy is "that men suffer from menstruation envy" (98). By this he means that men have always envied women because they can bleed without dying, which also explains the origin of circumcision as a male attempt "to bleed from the genitals at puberty and not die" (99).⁷

Matters continue to deteriorate as Spong brings his armchair historiography to the Bible. In an attempt to secure the spectacular claim that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene (105-109), Spong heaps one fragile speculation upon another in order to arrive at his thesis.⁸ Though possibly receiving praise from Mormons and Dan Brown (*The Da Vinci Code*), who also teach that Jesus was married, most others are likely to be quite underwhelmed by his fast and loose handling of the evidence.

His deconstruction of the apostle Paul as a repressed homosexual may someday rank among the classics in revisionist history, alongside Erik H. Erikson's Freudian psychoanalysis of Luther.⁹ But whereas Erickson had at his disposal a sizeable body of material on Luther's life—incompletely and carelessly appropriated as it was—Spong bases his case almost exclusively on the limits of a truncated Pauline corpus and anecdotal evidence.¹⁰ Paul reminds him of a draconian Episcopal priest who had been repressing his homosexuality under his legalism. In the process of recovering from a nervous breakdown this priest came to accept his homosexuality (138-139).

With this experience as his guide, Spong reads "repressed homosexuality" into passages in Romans 7 that speak of Paul's struggle with the flesh. (This struggle is not limited to sexual orientation, thinks Spong, but also surfaces in the Pauline dialectic between patriarchy on the one hand and egalitarianism on the other [102].) Paul's repudiation of homosexuality in Romans 1 is then construed as a homophobic response to his own sexual orientation. He even exploits the term "nakedness" in Rom 8:35 as an inadvertent disclosure of Paul's homosexual urges (139)—ignoring the context of the passage, which dictates that it functions as a metonymy for deep poverty. On the grounds of this extremely feeble evidence he asserts, "I am convinced that Paul of Tarsus was a gay man" (140).¹¹ The irony of this entire exercise in long-distance psycho-speculation is that by applying the same calculus to isolated details of Spong's biography his opponents could identify him as a fundamentalist in denial, who violently suppresses what he knows to be true.

Judas and Anti-Semitism

His most extensive attempt at rewriting New Testament history involves his conviction that Judas Iscariot never really betrayed Christ but became a scapegoat and victim of anti-

Semitism, courtesy of the early Christians (199-204). Because this represents his most elaborate reasoning and exegesis, it deserves a closer look.

Spong argues that the earliest New Testament writings (Paul and perhaps the Q document) are silent about Judas. Paul's mention of what is commonly assumed to be Jesus' betrayal (1 Cor 11:23) was just a passing chronological reference, and nothing more. The word *paradidōmi*, contends Spong, has been mistranslated "betray," when its basic meaning, "handover," is more appropriate here (200). Moreover, 1 Cor 15:5 reveals that Paul appraised Judas as a faithful disciple even after the resurrection. This is because Paul reports that after appearing to Peter, Jesus appeared to the Twelve. According to Spong, "the Twelve" is a numerical reference indicating that all twelve disciples, including Judas, were present at Jesus' post-resurrection appearance on Easter Sunday. Hence, "Paul did not know about this tradition" (201). This is in contrast to Matt 28:16-20, written about thirty years after 1 Corinthians, which documents that Jesus appeared to the eleven, the excluded disciple being Judas. Ergo, the tradition of Judas as a recreant was neither early nor factual but late and entered the tradition sometime between the writing of 1 Corinthians (ca A.D. 50) and Matthew's Gospel (ca A.D. 80) (201).

Spong should not be faulted for questioning the translation "betrayed" for *paradidōmi* in 1 Cor 11:23. Rather, his reservations deserve consideration, in that there are at least two other legitimate possibilities, including "handed over (by God)" or simply "arrested," neither of which cast aspersions on Judas.¹²

From there, however, things decay quickly as his support from 1 Cor 15:5 and subsequent conclusion miscarry at critical points. In recording that Jesus appeared to the Twelve, Paul was not attempting a numerically precise statement; rather he was employing early Christian jargon for the disciples, "the Twelve."¹³ Paul probably had in mind Jesus' first appearance to the disciples recorded in Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-24—as Spong himself seems to agree (201)—where only ten disciples were present; both Thomas and Judas were missing. So then numerical accuracy was not Paul's intention at all, since he would have accounted for the absence of Thomas, making the number eleven, not twelve, even if he did include Judas.¹⁴

Moreover, this contention can be verified by John 20:24. What Spong has fatally overlooked is that John, the *latest* of the Gospels by almost everyone's account (and most anti-Semitic by Spong's), uses the same nomenclature for the post-resurrection gathering of the disciples as Paul, despite Judas' absence (whether actual or contrived). John writes, "But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came" (John 20:24). If Spong were correct, John should have said "one of the eleven," as Matthew did (Matt 28:16). Therefore, the evidence from 1 Corinthians is absolutely inconclusive, rather than "perfectly clear," as Spong argues (201).

In attempting to advance his case, Spong describes how Judas (whom he supposes to be the eponymous representative of Judaism) is vilified more and more with each successive Gospel beginning with Mark. According to Spong, the different accounts of Judas in the Gospels and Acts reveal a chronological escalation of anti-Semitism within the church (202-203).

Nevertheless, the possibility that the variations in the Gospel accounts about Judas may be due to the different emphases of the authors, rather than compounding anti-Semitism, is simply beyond his ken. For example, Matthew's account of Judas accepting and returning the blood money (Matt 26:15-16; 27:3-10) can be more plausibly explained within the framework of Matthew's tendency to ground the Christ event in Old Testament prophecy (Zech 11:12-13).

More so, he lists John 13:27, Satan's entry into Judas, as one indication of the Fourth Gospel's intensive smear campaign against Judas (203). He overlooks the fact, however, that Luke 22:3 makes reference to the same event. He also appears to have forgotten that in an earlier book he interpreted the data in exactly the opposite direction, claiming that the record of his demon possession actually made "Judas less responsible" for the act, not more!¹⁵ Thus, Spong himself demonstrates how easily the evidence can be manipulated in order to further the agenda of the revisionist.

Lastly, Spong introduces the motive for Judas-bashing by way of a fanciful conspiracy theory. He calculates that anti-Semitism in the New Testament was the direct result of the church's servile and cowardly acquiescence to the Jew-despising Romans. By also claiming to be victims of the Jews and truckling to Pilate, the Christians secured the favor and protection of the Romans (208-209). The primary difficulty with this conjecture, which is neither realistic nor original,¹⁶ is that just a few pages earlier Spong made quite a convincing case for the fact that opposition to Judaism in the New Testament can be traced to doctrinal rather than ethnic differences (194-197). In so doing, he assists his detractors by providing a much more believable narrative for the perceived anti-Semitism in the New Testament.¹⁷ This explanation—somewhat standard in evangelical circles—has the virtue of accounting for passages that oppose the Jews, as well as those that exalt them,¹⁸ without enslavement to a dubious chronological network and the complex series of prior assumptions involved in keeping it afloat.

Obscurantism

After strident criticisms of the church's tunnel vision, ignorance, and anti-intellectualism one would expect Spong to demonstrate superior awareness, interaction, and even respect for scholars who challenge his favorite critical methodologies. In fact, he guarantees the reader that he will examine his topics "honestly in the light of the best scholarship available" (5, cf. 10), even promising, "My pledge is only that I will seek the truth openly" (14). Further, his antipathy for the closed-minded disposition of religious fanatics (137, 289) assures his readers of a fair, evenhanded use of scholarly literature.

Regrettably, nothing of the sort happens. What materializes instead is either willful ignorance or crass obscurantism. This becomes abundantly apparent in Spong's unflinching confidence in critical theories originating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as his unwillingness to tolerate dissenting views. He is positive that "[n]o one today, outside the most rabid fundamentalists, thinks of Adam and Eve as real people" (92, see 165). Likewise, he knows of "no reputable biblical scholar in the world today who thinks that . . . [the virgin birth] ever happened in any literal way" (23). "Nor," he insists, "do scholars today believe that the prophets predicted things that Jesus actually did" (23). Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles is denied by "almost every New Testament scholar in the world" (141), and a literal interpretation of John 14:6 ("I am the way, the truth . . .") is only valid to those "profoundly ignorant of the New Testament scholarship of the last two hundred years" (233). When discussing the book on a radio interview, he went so far as comparing conservative scholars with the flat-earth society.¹⁹

Whether Spong is deliberately suppressing the opinions and accomplishments of evangelical scholars—assuming perhaps that religious biases disqualify them as academically reputable (see 214)—or he is simply unaware, it is clear that his assessment of current

trajectories in biblical scholarship is highly distorted and easily disproved.²⁰ Furthermore, Spong's repeated reliance on the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch reveals how dated his information tends to be (19-20, 33, 121-122, 250-266). For the last thirty years or so the documentary hypothesis and its permutations have been fighting for survival and have fallen far short of the consensus that Spong presumes. Apart from trenchant critiques by conservative scholars, a blue ribbon panel of critical scholars has rejected the theory either completely or foundational elements thereof. One immediately thinks of R. N. Whybray and his exposure of the highly speculative reasoning at the basis of the hypothesis.²¹ Even those committed to the diachronic underpinnings of the school, such as John Van Seters, Rolf Rendtorff, and Erhard Blum, have discredited much of the original methodology and in many cases radically revised the dates, order, and content of the sources.²² To be sure, variations of this fractured theory still hold sway in many liberal seminaries, but the hegemony is fragile and can only be credited to the life-support apparatus of sheer will and tenacious institutionalism.

Pluralism

Spong dedicates chapters 27 and 28 to debunking the long standing evangelical doctrine of religious exclusivism, in favor of pluralism (231-244). Before espousing his specific brand of pluralism, Spong rejects the popular reductionistic version, in which only doctrines that are positive and common to all religions are affirmed. Spong insists on the contrary that religions not abandon their idiosyncrasies simply to achieve a workable pluralism. Rather, while holding to religious distinctives—and for Christians this means Spong's version of Christianity—each brings to the other its “pearl of great price”:

I envision the adherents of these various faith traditions of the world all sitting in a circle of equals addressing one another. I, as a Christian, would say to the others, “This is the essence of Christianity that I have discovered on my journey; this is my ‘pearl of great price,’ and I want to offer it to you.” Then the Jew would say, “This is the essence of Judaism, my ‘pearl of great price,’ and I want to offer it to you” (243-244).

Nevertheless, Spong surely realizes that with regard to many critical doctrines the major religions of the world are simply irreconcilable. Muslims, for example, unequivocally reject Christ's divinity, crucifixion, and substitutionary atonement, all of which are essential to orthodox Christianity. Among Eastern religions, Zoroastrianism and Hinduism end up on opposite sides when it comes to the identity of at least one important deity: Indra is venerated as a god by Hindus but abased as a demon in sacred Zoroastrian literature.

Therefore, Spong's formula only prospers if each religion at last reverts to something like the lowest common denominator. Though each religion's “pearl of great price” must be different and unique, according to Spong it must also be complementary and edifying rather than antithetical and condemning. It must elicit an “aha” rather than an “oh never” from across the table, which brings him right back to the lowest common denominator approach that he depreciates: each religion offers a different facet of the same core truths. Consequently, Spong's pluralism displays only a semblance of equity and religious parity. Actually, all he has managed to do is manufacture a full-orbed partisan religion of his own, which imposes numerous restrictions upon the orthodox versions of each faith.

Conclusion

The Sins of Scripture is a three hundred page manifesto opposing traditional forms of Christianity—a bible against the Bible. Its recommenders hail it as brilliant, prophetic, original, and timely, indeed a rescue operation. Yet in the opinion of this reviewer, the book lives up to none of its accolades. It comes across rather as a clumsy series of pontifications and ultimatums held together with ersatz scholarship, sensationalistic revisionism, and dreadfully poor reasoning. In fact, much of it smacks of the retreads of a village atheist who argues that the chief cause of war is religion (see 217) or that prisons are filled with Christians but very few atheists.

Another salient defect of the book is its tendency to caricaturize evangelicalism by emphasizing fringe movements, isolated incidences, and outdated mores. Whether the issue is anti-intellectualism or anti-Semitism, the bishop—to borrow a line from Gordon Fee—is “jousting still with the windmills of his past.”²³ In other words, Spong leapfrogs from the fundamentalist orientation of his youth to twentieth-first century evangelicalism without recognizing the developments that have taken place in between. While there is no reason to believe that Spong would be impressed by a single one of these changes, he is nevertheless obligated to disseminate accurate information; instead, he spends much of his time constructing strawmen and reinforcing popular canards.

Without minimizing the severity of the forgoing deficiencies, perhaps the most transparent weakness of the book is its numerous contradictions. At times, the cognitive dissonance becomes so conspicuous that one is tempted to perform some type of source criticism to unearth multiple authors or redactional overlays. That is, Spong takes conservatives to task for a number of transgressions that he himself commits. I will highlight but four in closing.

First, Spong reprimands theists for attempting to harmonize attributes such as retribution, hate, and wrath with God’s love (126, 169-172), while *his* claims of love for the Bible are anything but monolithic: Spong insists that he loves the Bible, despite his contempt for its “terrible texts” and “horror stories” and his campaign to remove them from their status as the normative Word of God.

Second, he traces the divine attributes of theism to mankind’s propensity to think of God in human terms (66, 294), like the atheist cliché that if horses were to have a God, he would behave much like a horse. Yet he executes a sudden about face and elevates love as not only a divine attribute but the very essence of God (64, 66, 126, 290, 295-296). In what sense then is Spong free from the supposed problem that he detects in theism? How is it that love—a human and divine attribute—is immune from the criticism he levels against theism? Applying his own logic, it would seem that Spong has created God in his own image.

Third, although Spong rehearses a series of anti-Semitic sins committed by the church, his own relentless assault against the Jewish Bible (and customs) and reproach of the pre-scientific view of the Old Testament (20, 22, 23, 225) somehow manage to escape the charge of anti-Semitism.

Fourth, he reprehends the codifying of Christianity with creeds and doctrine as idolatry (216-217, 218, 226, 229, 237, 294). Nevertheless, his own book turns out to be nothing less than an ultra-liberal systematic theology in polemical trappings. On several occasions Spong redefines key Christian doctrines in both positive and negative terms (64-66, 237, 244, 290-291, 294-297), not with reserve but with the pugilistic vigor of any ax-grinding fundamentalist.

If *The Sins of Scripture* has a redeeming quality, it is in reminding the church of the continuing presence of Marcionism. It also serves as an excellent disclosure of the inner tribulation and animus of a modern religious reactionary and iconoclast, who often proves to be his own worst enemy. For in the final tally one learns a great deal more about John Shelby Spong in *The Sins of Scripture* than about Scripture.

Notes

In light of the approval of homosexuality within various ancient cultures (e.g., Greco-Roman), it is highly questionable whether the growing acceptance of homosexual behavior today should be considered a development of the human consciousness.

² Wilhelm Pauck and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 40.

³ “This God was not an external, personal force that could be invoked but rather an internal reality that, when confronted, opened us to the meaning of life itself.” John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 42.

⁴ For basic critiques see Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 114-130; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 306-309; Hendrikus Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology: Report of a Personal Journey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 282-284, 287-298; Robert L. Reymond, *Introductory Studies in Contemporary Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), 199-234; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, ed. *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 451-482.

⁵ Spong himself discloses that these attributes characterize beings that are superior to those that lack them (34, 65, 132, 173-174, 177, 178-179, 248, 285-286). His statement that in the process of our expanding consciousness “God becomes instead the ultimate consciousness in which our own consciousness participates” (293, see 298) is absolutely incoherent (vis-à-vis his rejection of theism) and not unlike numerous other contradictions in the book.

⁶ Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1955), 83, in Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 127.

⁷ Spong seems to have been influenced by an older book that imprudently connects isolated bits of historical and anthropological evidence into broad and universal applications concerning circumcision and menstruation. See Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), 221-227.

⁸ For an earlier discussion of the same hypothesis see his *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Virgin Birth and the Treatment of Women in a Male-Dominated Church* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 187-199. In this book Spong alerts his readers to the fact that Jesus’ mother behaved as a hostess rather than a guest at the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11), which suggests that Jesus was the groom (191-192). But must this qualify as the only conclusion? Is it not more plausible—if Mary indeed was the hostess—that one of her younger sons (Mark 6:3; Matt 13:55) would have been the groom, especially since their marriages can be verified by 1 Cor 9:5 (“Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?”)? Moreover, the same verse is accompanied by an unexplained silence, in the event that Spong is correct. In asserting his right to marry, by invoking the marriages of others, it seems strange that Paul would have overlooked the ultimate example of Jesus’ marriage and settled for his brothers’ instead.

⁹ Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1958).

¹⁰ Spong excludes the Pastoral Epistles and Ephesians from Paul’s oeuvre. See John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 93-94.

¹¹ Spong’s earlier writings do address the issue in greater detail, though not with greater success. This is because he forces Paul into the same interpretive straitjacket, which guarantees the desired outcome before the analysis ever begins. Consequently, after testing different paradigms to explain the cause of Paul’s intense battle with the flesh, and quickly dismissing them, he finds the homosexual grid

to be the most convincing—though there is not a scintilla of credible evidence for the claim. Like a number of his sensationalistic proposals, this one also appears to be the offspring of anachronistic thinking, free association, and selective reading, all blended with a fertile imagination and deeply-seated presuppositions. See Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, 107-127; *Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love, and Equality* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2000), 362-363. For another critique see Gordon D. Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 81-87.

¹² See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 869-870.

¹³ The actual device appears to be synecdoche, a figure of speech that uses the part to represent the whole or the whole for the part.

¹⁴ If Spong posits that Paul conflated Jesus' Easter appearance (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-24) with the one several days later, which included Thomas (John 20:26-29), in order to account for all of Paul's twelve disciples, then conservatives could just as easily ask him to accept the less speculative position that "the Twelve," in 1 Cor 15:5, functions as a synecdoche for the disciples, regardless of their actual number.

¹⁵ Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, 87, see 140.

¹⁶ See Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964); *Jesus and Israel*, English ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971).

¹⁷ His source appears to be Craig A. Evans and Donald A. Hagner, eds. *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

¹⁸ Romans 9, for example, is entirely ignored, along with John 4:22, "salvation is from the Jews," which immediately annuls Spong's remark that "Whenever the phrase 'the Jews' is used in John's gospel, there is a pejorative undertone" (185). Further, while arguing for a particular interpretation of John 14:6 ("I am the way, the truth . . ."), Spong himself demonstrates that the writer of the Fourth Gospel was quite *unashamed* of his Jewish heritage (235-236).

¹⁹ *The Michael Medved Show* (May 4, 2005).

²⁰ Evangelicals have taught or currently teach at prominent secular universities and regularly contribute to the full gamut of scholarly literature, whether academic journals, commentaries, critical editions of the Bible, monographs, or multivolume series. Others have gained recognition as pioneers in linguistic research or serve as officers in prestigious organizations such as *The American Oriental Society*.

²¹ R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study*, JSOTS, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, no. 53 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987).

²² See Gordon J. Wenham, "Pondering the Pentateuch: The Search for a New Paradigm," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold, 116-144 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999). Of equal importance was Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, which introduced a major paradigm shift that sought to interpret Old Testament narrative as a creative unity. The effect of this new and widely accepted discipline has been that many of the indicators of conflicting sources in the Pentateuch have been reassessed as expressions of ancient narrative strategy.

²³ Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*, 83.