

Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary

Marcus Borg

Harper San Francisco

Jesus is the book meant to distill the life work of Marcus Borg, one of the most accomplished and influential New Testament scholars of our time.

Let's start with what to expect of this book. If you've read (as I have) "Reading the Bible again for the first time" and "The heart of Christianity" you may be a bit disappointed if you're expecting a lot of new insights. This book covers a lot of what Borg has devoted his lifelong study to. Insightful is the remark that he wanted a different title for his book: *An emerging Jesus for an Emerging Christianity* (which his publishers rejected, but which possibly offers a better description of the content).

This is indeed a comprehensive book. Those who have not read any of his material before and those who would like to "get on board" with the more recent Jesus scholarship debate about the person, historicity and implications of Jesus' ministry, will not be disappointed.

It is worth mentioning that the book is clearly written from and for an American Christian perspective. Borg cites that 84% of Americans agree with the statement "Jesus is the Son of God" and he then tries to help his audience to explore a less literalist/fundamentalist understanding of Jesus and his message.

Some of the key concepts in the book are what he calls the three pillars of Jesus scholarship:

1) The gospels combine both memory and testimony. They combine Jesus remembered and Jesus proclaimed. This eventually leads to an understanding of it not being about *believing that Jesus* (*belief-centered*), but about *believing in/ walking the way of Jesus* (*way-centered*).

2) The second pillar is to recognise the difference between the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus as depicted in the New Testament.

Borg calls Jesus a Jewish mystic (mysticism refers for him to the "experiential knowledge of God"), a teacher of wisdom. Jesus' key message was not about himself, but about the kingdom of God.

3) The third pillar is the recognition that much of the language in the gospels is metaphorical. Borg redefines (and attempts to make more positive) the concept of metaphor. For him a metaphor is not "but a metaphor" but a "more than literal" meaning of Christian language. Metaphor is about the *surplus* of meaning that language can carry. He is less concerned with "whether something really happened" and more inclined to ask "what does it mean". He compares most New Testament stories about Jesus to his own parables (a parabolic reading), where asking if it really happened simply distracts the reader from the more important question of what the story really means to the reader.

In between it all there are **wonderful parts** where he uses the insights gained from recent studies to challenge the reader to re-think well known parts of the New Testament. Examples are: Insights into the imperial form of a pre-industrial agricultural domination system of the world in which Jesus lived (p79-92), life in a Jewish peasant village (p92-108), the possibility of John the Baptist being Jesus' mentor (chapter 6), the focus on justice (p185-190), a new take on nonviolent resistance (p247-251), the invitation to consider separating sacrifice and substitution (p267-276) and the very personal epilogue relating his life's work to the current USA of today.

There are also a **few unfortunate inconsistencies** (but don't we all have them?) like on p75 where he states that he treats the most spectacular stories in the gospels as metaphorical narratives and not as memory, but then goes on to explain that he believes that Jesus performed healings and exorcisms, but not that he fed a multitude of changed water into wine. A bit ad hoc, perhaps?

Overall it can be said that this is a very important book and well worth reading. It may be especially helpful to the reader who wants to catch up on the more recent Jesus scholarship and those who find traditional interpretations unconvincing or unsatisfactory. It may even be used fruitfully in conjunction with the DVD based material in "Living the Questions". As said before, it doesn't offer much new material in terms of his previous works, but it brings it all together. This book may also be quite unsettling to readers who have difficulty when the link between historicity (Borg call it: "public factuality") and authority is severed. Read at your own risk!

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