

A couple of people on the blog have suggested that as a feature of the blog, I periodically provide a Blast From the Past — that is, repost a blog post from a few years ago. I think it's a great idea. My guess is that most people on the blog haven't read everything from then, and if they have, if they're like me, they won't remember them! So I decided to go back from three years ago today (well, tomorrow) and see what I was saying. Here's the post. I don't remember it at *ALL*!!! But I still think now what I did then.

John Shelby Spong, former Episcopal bishop of New Jersey and highly controversial author (because of his skeptical views about the New Testament and traditional Christian doctrine) has just published a new book on the Gospel of John, called *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*. I have not read the book, but Spong has written an interesting article on it that appeared in the Huffington Post yesterday, at this address:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-shelby-spong/gospel-of-john-what-everyone-knows-about-t-the-fourth-gospel_b_3422026.html?ref=topbar

In the article Spong summarizes the conclusions he advances in the book, based on an "intensive five-year long study." He acknowledges that many of his findings are those that scholars have held for a long time. Spong himself is not trained as a biblical scholar but has made a very successful, and useful, career out of making scholarship known to a wider audience. So too, his goal in the book, in large measure, is to bring major scholarship to a general reader, a goal I obviously sympathize with deeply.

The following are the points that he stresses in his HuPo article. I will comment on them from my perspective - with the caveat, once more, that I haven't read what he adduces as evidence, only what he says in this article. I will respond to his views in two posts. Here are his first four major points.

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1) There is no way that the Fourth Gospel was written by John Zebedee or by any of the disciples of Jesus.

I absolutely agree; this is a common view among scholars.

2) There is probably not a single word attributed to Jesus in this book that the Jesus of history actually spoke

Well, that's a bit extreme. Jesus' first words in the Gospel (1:38) are "what are you seeking" - and I bet Jesus said that at some point in his life. □ In any event, Jesus surely said *some* of the things in the Gospel.

3) Not one of the signs (the Fourth Gospel's word for miracles) recorded in this book was, in all probability, something that actually happened.

Again, I completely agree. The seven "signs" are not historical records. John explicitly doesn't call them "miracles." It is striking that in the Synoptics Jesus refuses to do "signs" (that is, to show who he really is). In the Gospel of John, that's virtually *all* he does. Moreover, in the Synoptics he never teaches about himself. And in John, again, that's virtually all he does. So unlike the Synoptics, Jesus in John

teaches who he is (the one sent from heaven to provide eternal life) and does signs to prove it that what he says about himself is true (so he says he is the bread of life, and then he feeds the multitudes with the loaves; he says he is the light of the world, and then he heals a man born blind; he says he is the resurrection and the life, and then he raises a man from the dead; and so on.

4) Many of the characters who appear in the pages of the Fourth Gospel are literary creations of its author and were never intended to be understood as real people, who actually lived in history.

Now Spong is getting on tricky grounds. I don't think you can say that because someone is unhistorical that the author either *knew* that they were unhistorical or that he wanted you not to *think* they were historical. We don't know what the author "intended," but I don't see any reason to think that he wanted his reading audience to think that he was producing fiction. Moreover, just because Nicodemus in ch. 3, or the Samaritan Woman in ch. 4, do not appear in other Gospels (this is one of Spong's points) does not mean that the author wanted you to assume they didn't exist. For one thing, I don't think he assumes that you've read the other Gospels - so he himself would not be assuming a point of comparison. For another thing, it's not clear to me that these figures are inventions of the author of the Gospel; he may well have inherited these stories (and so, these narrative figures) from the traditions he had heard. If so, why wouldn't he think they were historical? And even if he did make them up himself (how would one show that??), I don't see any indications in the text to suggest that he wanted his readers to think that they were make-believe rather than figures that actually interacted with Jesus. In short, the fact (which I take to be a fact) that they were *not* historical figures who interacted with Jesus has no bearing, in my mind, on the question of what the author's intentions were in narrating his stories.

As you can see, this will be a controversial book not only for lay people who have never been introduced to Johannine scholarship before, but even among scholars who have worked long in the field.



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