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The Fourth Gospel: Tales Of A Jewish Mystic



Synopsis

Rescuing John's Gospel from Its Creedal Captivity John Shelby Spong, bestselling author and popular proponent of a modern, scholarly, and authentic Christianity, argues that this last gospel to be written was misinterpreted by the framers of the fourth-century creeds to be a literal account of the life of Jesus when in fact it is a literary, interpretive retelling of the events in Jesus' life through the medium of fictional characters, from Nicodemus and Lazarus to the "Beloved Disciple." The result of this intriguing study not only recaptures the original message of this gospel, but also provides us today with a radical new dimension to the claim that in the humanity of Jesus the reality of God has been met and engaged.

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Customer Reviews

No matter what your opinion about John Shelby Spong's ideas and theology, he sure writes in such a compelling and entertaining way that it's hard to put the book down! This book gives a brand new and fresh insight into the Gospel of John that will be especially attractive to those who have given up on Christianity. Spong's insights offer a new way to interpret the Christian story that will be compelling to many of us in the "Church Alumni Association, and give us a way to believe in the transformative message of the Christian story again. Spong goes way beyond his primary thesis that the Gospel of John is not to be read literally, but symbolically. He supports his arguments with excellent Biblical scholarship that also incorporates ideas from his earlier books into this treatise. He not only presents many of the characters in John as symbolic literary creations or developments,

but also finds new insights into history and theology by doing so. This book is compelling reading which will inspire those who have left the church because of the Church's adherence to dogmatic literalism. But the book will also disturb those who base their faith on the literal historical reading of the text. Either way, the book is never boring!! I have only one criticism. Spong makes a clear argument in favor of the resurrection of Jesus as a non-literal, non-physical event. But he also implies an objective reality to resurrection that is clearly more than the disciples subjective experience. But he does not elaborate too much on what that objective event could be. He mentions that resurrection "means something" but does not speculate further on what that "something" is.

John may be the world's most loved and feared book. There's no question that the Bible is the world's all-time best seller and Gallup polling of American readers shows John neck and neck with Matthew as the New Testament's two favorite books. John is proclaimed in signs at football games and splashed across billboards on rural roads. However, John also is packed with confusing and dangerous references to "the Jews" and has been singled out, within the Bible, to fuel deadly violence over many centuries. And the other John? John Shelby Spong certainly is one of the world's most loved and feared religious leaders. He's better known to readers around the world as the best-selling, controversial Episcopal "Bishop Spong." Why is he feared? Spong also is quite comfortable as a firebrand foe of Fundamentalism, the still widespread belief that the Bible's text is literally true. Fundamentalist critics fear that he is undermining Christianity itself. Now, in his 24th book, Jack Spong tackles his namesake book in the Bible--hoping to guide his readers in thousands of congregations to a greater appreciation of this sacred text while avoiding its lethal dangers. If you're looking for a great discussion series in your congregation, order a copy of *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* today from . As in many of his past books, the text here is welcoming as the retired bishop draws on his lifetime of Bible scholarship to teach about this beloved Gospel. This is a personal and even passionate book. How is this book welcoming in its teaching?

Spong has never warmed to the historicity of the Fourth Gospel. In fact, he never warmed to that gospel much at all, until the last few years, when he decided to make a study of it. I'm glad he finally did; I thoroughly enjoyed reading Spong's analysis. He begins his book by admitting that the older he gets, the more he believes, but the fewer beliefs he holds. I quoted Spong in my own book about John's Gospel (published just three months ago) as saying "I do not believe I can make a case for a single word attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel to be a literal word actually spoken by the

historic Jesus." Knowing that we were researching our projects simultaneously, I contacted him to make sure he hadn't developed a new "belief" about the Gospel before I printed that. Nope, he still doesn't believe Jesus said any of the words in John's Gospel, and more than that: Spong believes none of the miracle stories are real, few of the characters are historical people, and certainly the author wasn't an original apostle of Jesus. Nicodemus, Nathaniel, the woman at the well, the beloved disciple, the mother of Jesus (who remains unnamed in this Gospel)--all purely symbolic. The Gospel is a late-first-century mystical work, allegorically telling the history of the Johannine Community and the development of the Jesus movement, and it was never meant to be read like a history book. I can't go quite that far, yet it's fascinating to read the Gospel as a mystical lesson book. The "mother of Jesus" in John's Gospel, for example, was never a woman named Mary, but a symbol of Israel. The wedding of Cana was Jesus' own wedding. Not literally, of course, but symbolically.

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