Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism; A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture

By
John Shelby Spong.
HarperSanFrancisco,
San Francisco, 1991.

An Analytical Review

By
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Retired Anglican Bishop John Shelby Spong of New Jersey, USA, is unquestionably a very good communicator, in speech and in writing. His 1991 book, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism; A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture*[1] (later RBFF) became a national best seller and adequately conveys important aspects of his outlook on the Bible.

Though he provides helpful tidbits for the amateur and raises questions that can prompt a more mature approach to the Bible, some of Spong's radical views on the Bible are based on very questionable presuppositions, debatable premisses, weak argumentation, inadequate grasp of the original languages of the Bible and expressed in language that lacks epistemological content and clarity.

The burden of this paper is to justify these charges that are being levelled at Spong, through an analysis of RBFF.

We begin with one of Spong's major presuppositions — the late dating of the Pentateuch especially, as well as other sections of the Old Testament. This presupposition is articulated and utilized in chapters four and five of RBFF.[2]

While making the second of two points concerning Abraham, Spong informs, without troubling himself to document his claims,

> ... biblical scholarship today seems to

[1] The book, published by HarperSanFrancisco, New York, has 249 pages of text and a mere 3 pages of notes.

[2] Chapter 4, 'The Formation of the Sacred Canon', 37-55; chapter 5, 'Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, and Protest', 57-76.

> indicate that the earliest continuous written material contained in what we call the Old Testament is no earlier than the tenth century B.C.E. This does not preclude the presence in these continuous narratives of material that in isolated forms is much earlier. If this date is right, Abraham existed in solely word-of-mouth narration for some eight hundred to nine hundred years before stories about him achieved written form. For eight hundred to nine hundred years, the only things anyone knew about Abraham were passed on around camp fires from generation to generation. Who, knowing this, is willing to support the claim of inerrancy for a nine-hundred-year-old oral tradition?" (40)

Later, he reiterates the point of dating "the earliest written Old Testament material" and gives an approximate date of 960 B.C.E., after King David's death, and proceeds to say,

> If this is true, then even the escapades of Moses and the words of the Torah, the Jewish law, did not achieve written form until at least three hundred years after the death of Moses. The Torah as presented in the first five books of the Bible could thus hardly be material that Moses received directly from God at Mount Sinai. Yet this Hebrew tradition still feeds a lively Christian fundamentalism. (40-41)

In these two quotations, we find a mixture of the careful language of a scholar and the unfortunate choice of words, the ethos of logical reasoning marred by logical blunders. Most fundamental is the error of building a case on very shaky, if not completely demolished presuppositions and premisses.

Cautiously and commendably, Spong says of the 10th century B.C. documentation date proposed by the sources he reads, "If this date is right..." and "If this is true..." However, he goes on to abandon that caution, seemingly, in the first quotation, by moving from "If this date is right" to the following sentence, which is not clearly hinged on any conditionals, and follows up with "Who, knowing this..." as opposed to the more cautious "Who, *believing* this..."

In the second quotation there is a *non sequitur* between arguing that "the escapades of Moses and the words of the Torah" were documented three hundred years after Moses' death and pontificating that those words could hardly be the result of revelation from God. Spong's conclusion would follow only if he could prove that the oral tradition, *of necessity*, not just possibly, changed the material. But how could/would Spong or his sources know this for sure?

All that I have said so far in criticism could be treated as minor. What is fundamental is that a scholar of Bishop Spong's eminence, writing in 1991,

said that biblical scholarship at that time dated "the earliest continuous written material" (first quote) or "the earliest written Old Testament material" (second quote) at approximately 960 B.C.E. Why did Spong hold this view then and why, based on his recent lecture in Jamaica[3], does he still subscribe to this view?

Spong is still committed to the presuppositions of the 19th century school of thought called the Graf-Wellhausen documentary hypothesis or the "four-document theory" of understanding the Pentateuch. Spong explains:

> That theory brought into biblical scholarship the familiar symbols of J (Y), E, D, P. These symbols stand for the separate strands of biblical narration (Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomic, and Priestly), each with its own agenda that later came to be merged into one continuous biblical narrative. Although this theory is constantly being modified... it... continues to be affirmed almost incontrovertibly in its broad sweep. (43)

How did scholars come up with this JEDP formulation from reading the Pentateuch? J and E strands can be identified, they argue, by names for God; the Jehovist, writing 960-920 B.C.E., uses Yahweh while the Elohist writing about 850 B.C.E., uses Elohim. The book of Deuteronomy is the essential D material, penned in 620 B.C.E., while the Priestly material, dating to the early 6th century B.C.E., is all the material that seeks to give ancient prestige to Israel's traditions, like the giving of the law at Sinai and the creation accounts (43-55).[4]

Why were the documents of the Pentateuch given such a late written date by Wellhausen and company and is Spong's regard for the documentary hypothesis really justified from the world of biblical scholarship as late as 1991?

Archaeologist Sigfried H. Horn, writing in 1968, assists concerning the late dating up to 1914, "Scholars did not yet know that a Hebrew alphabetic script existed before the eighth or ninth century B.C.; therefore they thought that the Pentateuch could not have been produced any earlier than the period of the Hebrew kings" (Horn 1968, 13).

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[3] December 1, 2001.

[4] An extreme thesis, along these lines, is argued by Thomas Thompson in *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel*, (London: Basic Books, 1999). In a date-line/events/texts chart near the end of the book, Thompson has "Early beginnings of biblical traditions" at approximately 465 B.C.E. It is worth noting that in this 397-page book which argues such a radical thesis, all the footnotes if put together would not fill 2 pages!

But if these early scholars could be excused for a late dating of the Pentateuchal material because of a lack of information to the contrary, later scholars like Spong and his unnamed modern sources do not have that defence.

As Horn (1968, 14) goes on to inform, concerning tablets found at Mt. Sinai and later deciphered in 1917 by British Egyptologist, Alan Gardiner, "These inscriptions, written in a pictorial script by Canaanites before the middle of the second millennium B.C., prove that alphabetic writing existed before the time of Moses." But Horn is just one of many.

British Assyriologist, A.H. Sayce, writing in 1904, says,

> ...this supposed late use of writing for literary purposes was merely an assumption, with nothing more solid to rest upon than the critic's own theories and presuppositions. And as soon as it could be tested by solid fact it crumbled into dust... the art of writing in the ancient East ... was of vast antiquity. (Sayce 1904, 28)

The celebrated Cyrus Gordon, archaeologist and specialist in Ugaritic, was scathing in his 1959 article in *Christianity Today*, when he spoke of the commitment that some scholars had to a JEDP outlook.

> When I speak of a 'commitment' to JEDP, I mean it in the deepest sense of the word. I have heard professors of Old Testament refer to the integrity of JEDP as their 'conviction'. They are willing to countenance modifications in detail ... but they will not tolerate any questioning of the basic JEDP structure. I am at a loss to explain this kind of 'conviction' on any grounds other than intellectual laziness or inability to reappraise. (Gordon 1959, 3)

The esteemed archaeologist William Albright, by no means a conservative, writing in 1958 in *The New Century* and quoted by Horn declared,

> Thanks to modern research we now recognize its [the Bible's] substantial historicity. The narratives of the patriarchs, of Moses and the exodus, of the conquest of Canaan, of the judges, the monarchy, exile and restoration, have all been confirmed and illustrated to an extent that I should have thought impossible forty years ago.[5] (Horn 1968, 14)

[5] Note the contrary and strange views of Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel*, (London: Basic Books, 1999), 34, "The Bible's world does not belong to the discipline of archaeologists. It has never been found in any tell: not even Jericho or Megiddo...Of course, there was an Israel! The name itself is used already at the close of the Late Bronze Age on an Egyptian monument...But it is not this Israel that the Bible deals with...The Bible doesn't deal with what

One could go on to mention details of strange and dated customs, intimacy with Egyptian geography, archaisms in language that would be puzzles if passed on only by centuries-old oral tradition!

A few examples should be sufficient and we quote Horn and Kenneth Kitchen fairly fully.

Horn says,

> ... let us turn to some concrete examples of illumination and verification of the Old Testament by archaeological discoveries. First, in the patriarchal stories we find several strange accounts of a barren wife who asked her husband to produce a child for her by her maidservant. Sarah did this, and later also Jacob's two wives, Rachel and Leah. Today we know that this practice was not unusual during the patriarchal age. The laws of that period as well as ancient marriage contracts mention it ... *In no other period besides the patriarchal age do we find this strange custom* [emphasis added]. (Horn 1968, 14)

Horn, after mentioning several other strange biblical customs that find support in the Nuzi tablets concludes thus, "Such evidence shows clearly that these narratives were written soon after the events described had occurred, when these strange customs either still existed or had not yet been forgotten" (Horn 1968, 14).

Kenneth Kitchen (1966, 25) concurs,

> Through the impact of the Ancient Orient upon the Old Testament and upon Old Testament studies a new tension is being set up while an older one is being reduced. For the comparative material from the Ancient Near East is tending to agree with the extant structure of the Old Testament documents as actually transmitted to us, rather than with the reconstructions of nineteenth-century Old Testament scholarship—or with its twentieth century prolongation and developments to the present day.
>
> ...The valid and close parallels to the social customs of the Patriarchs come from documents of the nineteenth to fifteenth centuries B.C. (agreeing with an early-second-millennium origin for this material in Genesis), and not from Assyro-Babylonian data of the tenth to sixth centuries B.C. (possible period of the supposed 'J', 'E', sources). Likewise for Genesis 23, the closest parallel comes from the Hittite Laws which passed into oblivion with the fall of the Hittite Empire about 1200 B.C. The covenant forms which appear in Exodus, Deuteronomy and Joshua follow the model of those current in the thirteenth

happened in the past. It deals with what was thought, written and transmitted within an interacting intellectual tradition."

> century B.C.—the period of Moses and Joshua—and *not* those of the first millennium B.C.[6]

Where has Bishop Spong been and how broadly and critically has he really been reading? Building dogmatic pronouncements on a hypothesis, whose foundational presuppositions have been demolished, is not scholarship.

Another dimension of Spong's outlook on the Bible has to do with his castigation of the Bible's 'prescientific' assumptions.

> In the creation story...and in countless stories in the biblical drama, a nonoperative, pre-scientific, and clearly false view of the world is perpetuated. Those who seek to preserve these biblical understandings have to become anti-intellectual or must close off vast portions of their thinking processes or twist their brains into a kind of first century pretzel in order to maintain their faith system. It is no wonder they are afraid of knowledge. (26-27)

The indictment against the Bible contains several counts. We mention and respond to a few only, owing to space constraints.

The Bible is alleged to teach that the earth is flat and is the centre of the universe (26-27), and it advances an unscientific sequence of creation with the first human depicted as being recognizably Homo sapiens (28, 34).

Before responding to these specific scientific charges leveled against the Bible it must be observed that Spong views science not as a work in progress with diverse views but as almost constituting a monolithic, settled canon of information.

It is quite amazing that late in the 20th century any properly schooled person, would repeat the thoroughly debunked false charge that the Bible teaches or suggests that the earth is flat.

By making this claim Bishop Spong betrays ignorance of the Bible and of the literature pertaining to his false claim.[7]

Has the Bishop never read Isaiah 40:22? This text says with reference to God, "He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth..." The Hebrew word *khug*, translated as 'circle', is a rare word in the Hebrew Bible and can mean 'sphere or horizon'. In the Septuagint the word is *guron*, a circle or ring.

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[6] See also Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable & Relevant?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 84-89.

[7] How would a Spong respond to the news that some scientists, based on their research into the background radiation left over from the big bang, regard the universe as flat or nearly flat, in terms of its geometry? See Hugh Ross, "Predictive Power: Confirming Cosmic Creation" in *Facts For Faith*, Quarter 2, 2002, Issue 9, 33-39, especially 35, 38.

There is a general misconception in many minds that belief in a flat earth was widespread in ancient times and especially so in Bible-based cultures. People should read J.B. Russell's *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians* (1991), which not only puts the lie to the popular claim that Columbus had to disprove that the earth was flat but also shows that the vast majority of Christian scholars, prior to Copernicus, believed, consistent with the Bible, in a round earth.

The view that the earth is, spatially, the centre of the universe is not taught in the Bible but the *theological perspective, the literary vantage point* of the biblical writers is most definitely geocentric and anthropocentric. There is nothing unscientific here though.

Even Darwinists and Neo-Darwinists contend that human beings are the apex of the evolutionary scheme of life forms and increasingly, in the scientific world, research is tending more and more to the view that the earth is unique, among the celestial bodies, and is fine-tuned to sustain complex life.

This is the view of Michael Denton, Peter Ward and Donald Brownlee, none of whom professes Christianity. Their recent books, not only in content but also even in the subtitles, show the special place that earth occupies among the celestial bodies.[8]

Denton, while examining the fitness of light for life on earth, contends,

> That the radiation from the sun (and from many main sequence stars) should be concentrated into a miniscule band of the electromagnetic spectrum which provides precisely the radiation required to maintain life on earth is a very remarkable coincidence described as 'staggering' by Ian Campbell in *Energy and the Atmosphere*... Our amazement grows further when we note that not only is the radiant energy in this tiny region the *only radiation of utility to life* but that radiant energy in most other regions of the spectrum is *either lethal or profoundly damaging*. (Denton 1998, 53)

Christian Astronomer, Hugh Ross, has highlighted other aspects of the finely tuned nature of the earth and its unique fitness for life.[9]

Spong scoffs at the Genesis account of creation and seems to be mocking the creative sequence when he writes, "Then came the fish, the birds, the

[8] See Michael J. Denton, *Nature's Destiny: How the Laws of Biology Reveal Purpose in the Universe*, (New York: The Free Press, 1998) and Peter D. Ward and Donald Brownlee, *Rare Earth: Why Complex Life Is Uncommon in the Universe*, (New York: Copernicus, 2000).

[9] See his *The Fingerprint of God*, (Orange: Promise Publishing Co., 1991), 119-138, also his "Exotic Life Sites: The Feasibility of Far-Out Habitats, *Facts For Faith*, Quarter 4, 2001, Issue 7, 20-25.

animals, and the 'creeping things', and finally, when all things were ready, God created the man and the woman in the divine image" (28).

What Spong does not seem to know or appreciate is the amazing correspondence between the sequence of creative events in Genesis and what scientists theorize as the sequence of the appearance of the observable reality in the cosmos especially of life forms on earth. This is quite unique for all ancient creation stories! Hear a few scientists on the issue.

Geologist, John Wiester says,

> It is truly remarkable that Genesis 1 is written in virtually the same chronological order as geology textbooks which address the history of the Earth...all major explosive adaptive radiations occur at the same points in scientific history that there is a creation command in Genesis! (Wiester 1983, 205-206)

Scientist and theologian, E.K. Victor Pearce informs,

> Many doubters have been surprised when I have shown them the British Museum book, *The Succession of Life Through Geological Time*, by Oakley and Muir-Wood. I've put the chapter and verses of Genesis down the margin of this science book. They see that the order of events are the same...Genesis sets it out simply, starting with matter, light, then with green things, then marine creatures, next the land animals and, finally, man. (Pearce 1998, 27-28)

Astronomer, Hugh Ross, speaking of Genesis 1 and 2 after examining the scientific credentials of statements in the holy books of the world's major religions says,

> Instead of another bizarre creation myth, here was a journal-like record of the earth's initial conditions—correctly described from the standpoint of astrophysics and geophysics—followed by a summary of the sequence of changes through which Earth came to be inhabited by living things and ultimately by humans. The account was simple, elegant, and scientifically accurate. From the stated viewpoint of an observer on Earth's surface, both the order and the description of creation events perfectly matched the established record of nature. I was amazed. (Ross 1993. 15)

Spong, by blind faith or credulity, swallows the Darwinian view that human beings are derived from non-human or sub-human ancestors. So he argues,

> We say that God created human life to be good. But the assumption in our religious tradition is that this human life was created in a perfected, recognizably Homo sapien form. Our myth does not accommodate itself to a period of time

> of some one and a half million years in which the barrier between human and nonhuman or subhuman was indistinct...Is Homo erectus human? Or is that human definition to be reserved only for Homo sapiens? If so, at what stage in the development of Homo sapiens? ... If biologists cannot pinpoint the moment at which Homo erectus became Homo sapiens, except to say that it occurred over a period of one and half million years, can theologians dare to be more specific? (34)

The more research is done on human origins the more scientists are forced to reclassify fossils and modify their earlier theories concerning the alleged ancestors of human beings.

Regrettably, misleading pictures abound in textbooks, popular magazines like *Time*, *National Geographic* or *Newsweek* and even in Museums, of a series of ape-like creatures on knuckles and progressively becoming more upright in posture until we reach modern humans, walking on two feet. These pictures are misleading because the drawings of whole entities, on four limbs, partially upright or fully upright on two feet are done from a real skull or a jawbone or some other small piece of a section of the entity depicted *and not from whole skeletons*!

Biologist, Jonathan Wells in his devastating book, *Icons of Evolution: Science or Myth?* quotes specialists in the field of human origins to show the state of research in the field.

Constance Holden writing in *Science*, in 1981 avers, "The primary scientific evidence is a pitifully small array of bones from which to construct man's evolutionary history. One anthropologist has compared the task to that of reconstructing the plot of *War and Peace* with 13 randomly selected pages (Wells 2000, 220)."[10]

Henry Gee, Chief Science Writer for *Nature*, in 1999 advises,

> No fossil is buried with its birth certificate...the intervals of time that separate fossils are so huge that we cannot say anything definite about their possible connection through ancestry and descent...To take a line of fossils and claim that they represent a lineage is not a scientific hypothesis that can be tested, but an assertion that carries the same validity as a bedtime story—amusing, perhaps even instructive, but not scientific. (Wells 2000, 220-21)

Fazale Rana succinctly summarizes the views of several palaeoanthropologists.

[10] See also Marvin Lubenow, *Bones of Contention: A Creationist Assessment of Human Fossils*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), passim.

> *Homo erectus* and *Homo neandertalensis* are the two bipedal primates that have been most closely linked to modern humans. However, recent work has all but severed the link between modern humans and *H. erectus*, and has completely cut the connection between Neandertals and modern humans.[11] As with the australopithecines, a menagerie of *Homo* bipedal primates existed for most of the last 2 million years. Paleoanthropologists, unable to reach a consensus on the evolutionary relationships among the members of the *Homo* genus, have been unable to identify a direct ancestor to modern humans. (Rana 2001, 35)

Spong's glib repetition of the supposed age of the earth and of Homo sapiens gives the impression that the dating of terrestrial and celestial entities is a settled matter minus controversies except from fundamentalists. This is not so, controversies abound.

Date discrepancies abound when terrestrial objects are dated by different dating methods and everything depends on how one views the explanations offered. John Woodmorappe exploits this in his 1999 book, *The Mythology of Modern Dating Methods*, and concludes, controversially,

> The conundrum of discrepant results and special pleadings deprive isotopic dating of all credibility. It remains doubtful if there exists any other field of science where data could be so selectively manipulated at will. Therefore, pending a full understanding of isotopic systems in the light of the creationist-diluvialist paradigm, none of the results of these presumed dating systems should be taken as serious proof for the multimillion to multibillion year dates they indicate. (Woodmorappe 1999, 96)

Contrary to Woodmorappe's position, fellow Christian Roger C. Wiens, who wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on isotope ratios in meteorites, supports the reliability of radiometric dating methods (Wiens 2001, 11-18). One picks up though the occasional comment in Wiens that raises some questions of special pleading or circular reasoning.

While dealing with the issue of which dating method is appropriate, Wiens, says,

> As with other timepieces, radiometric-dating methods must be appropriate to the sample being dated. Though many people are familiar with carbon-14 dating, this technique dates organic material such as bones...and is not effective for determining the age of rocks. The best results are usually obtained if one uses a

[11] The literature he cites includes J.M. Bermudez de Castro et al., "A Hominid from the Lower Pleistocene of Atapuereca, Spain: Possible Ancestors to Neandertals and Modern Humans," *Science* 276 (1997), 1392-95; Ann Gibbons, "A New Face for Human Ancestors," *Science* 276 (1997), 1331-33.

> method whose half-life lies within a factor of ten of the sample's estimated age. In the rare case that prior clues are absent, trying more than one method in order to obtain the correct age may be required. [12] (Wiens 2001, 14)

Astronomical timescales too, provoke controversy. If the following quotations have not been superseded by very recent developments in the field they prompt scientific modesty.

Sir Bernard Lovell, responding to a question on quasars gave a shocking response.

> If you ask me how far away those objects are [and hence hold old], then the answer is the extraordinary one that you cannot calculate the distance unless you know what cosmological model applies to the universe. The distance is so much on the Big Bang model, so much on the Steady-State Theory, and it has another value if the constants in the cosmological equations are different and the universe is in a cyclical condition. (Lovell 1971)

Perhaps the oddest comment concerning dating in astronomy came from leading solar astronomer, John Eddy, in 1978, as reported by Raphael Katzmann in *Geotimes*.

> There is no evidence based solely on solar observations, Eddy stated, that the Sun is 4.5-5 x 10^9 years old. 'I suspect,' he said 'that the sun is 4.5 billion years old. However, given some new and unexpected results to the contrary, and some time for frantic recalculation and theoretical readjustment, I suspect that we could live with Bishop Ussher's value for the age of the earth and sun. I don't think we have much in the way of observational evidence in astronomy to conflict with that.' Solar physics now looks to paleontology for data on solar chronology, he concluded.
> He [Eddy] concluded that astronomy, as an observational science, can say nothing about chronology as far back as 4.7 x 10^9 [4.7 billion] years. (Lubenow 1992, 205)

In 1994, D. Russell Humphreys, introduced a young-Universe creationist cosmology based on Einstein's general theory of relativity, which resonates somewhat with Eddy's view.[13]

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[12] See also Wiens (2001, 18, no. 12) for a similar suspect section, as Wiens treats with a lab's inaccurate dating, by millions of years, of a rock from the Mount Saint Helens eruption of 1980.

[13] See his *Starlight and Time: Solving the Puzzle of Distant Starlight in a Young Universe* and a challenge to his thesis plus his response in *Creation Ex Nihilo Technical Journal*, Volume 12 (2), 1998; Samuel R. Conner and Don N. Page, "Starlight and Time is the Big Bang", 174-194 and Humphreys, "New Vistas of Space-Time Rebut the Critics", 195-212.

Spong, it should be noted, has a problem with reading the birth narratives literally, which is curious, especially if any of the writers indicates an intention to document history as Luke clearly does in 1:1-4 of his gospel.

Spong chides Matthew in 1:23 for using the Greek version of Isaiah 7:14, where *parthenos* appears, "to prove the virgin birth tradition" (213-14). Spong says the original Hebrew text has no connotation of virginity. Let the scholar speak for himself.

> The Hebrew word for 'virgin' was *betulah*. The word used in Isaiah is *'almah*, which means young woman. It does not mean virgin in any Hebrew text in the entire Bible in which it is used. (14)

Spong's strong assertion concerning the meaning of *'almah* is not quite accurate, as Gleason Archer and other specialists in Semitic languages have shown.

Archer advises that *'almah* is not as precise a word for virgin as *betulah* but contends that in the use of *'almah* in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Gen. 24.43; Ex. 2.8; Song of Solomon 1.3, 6.8; Ps. 68.25; Prov. 30.19), "...the word never refers to a maiden who has lost her virginity but only to one who is in fact unmarried and chaste — as in Genesis 24.43, where Rebekah the virgin [*betulah*, Gen.24.16] is also referred to as an *'almah*" (Archer 1982, 267-68).

Allan A. MacRae's views are similar, "There is no instance where it can be proved that [*'almah*] designates a young woman who is not a virgin...In Ugaritic the word is used in poetic parallel with the cognate of [*betulah*] (Harris et al. 1980, 672)."

Even the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, which disagrees with the use of *parthenos* in the Greek version of Isaiah 7:14, points out that *betulah* "... is in fact an ambiguous term..." and can be used interchangeably with *'almah* (Cecil Roth et al. 1972, 160-61).

Contrary to Spong's suggestion, Matthew did not simply use Isaiah 7.14 to prove the virgin birth tradition. It was the historical reality and strange phenomenon of a virgin girl having given birth which would have led Matthew to use Isaiah 7.14, in line with the Jewish technique of interpretation called *pesher*. The *pesher* technique ('this is that') examines an event in the writer's time ('this') and links it back to some other similar event in the Old Testament ('that'). Peter's appeal to Joel on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2.16) employs the *pesher* technique as well.

Spong's treatment of the 'Easter' story requires examination. Spong correctly says that for fundamentalists "... the events of Easter are absolutely crucial. There can be no compromise here, no watering down of the essential details" (217).

Spong has a major problem with the meaning of a physical, bodily resurrection especially since the resurrected Jesus "can appear and disappear as if out of or into thin air (Luke 24.15, 31)", and "walk through a door" (217). This prompts from Spong the inane query, "How can something be real and yet not physical?" (218).

For Spong the central problem for biblical literalists is "... the knowledge that the details in the narratives of the various Gospels are simply incapable of being reconciled one with another" (218).

It must be conceded that the resurrection narratives raise questions because of differences in the details given by the evangelists.[14] Nonetheless, much of Spong's problem has to do with faulty reading and faulty reasoning.

Spong raises the question of who went to the tomb at dawn on resurrection Sunday and responds to show the disagreements in the New Testament documents.

> Paul said nothing about anyone going. Mark said that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went (chap. 16). Luke said that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and some other women went (24:10). Matthew said Mary Magdalene and the other Mary *only* went (1:28 [sic.]). John said that Mary Magdalene *alone* went (20:11). (218; my emphasis)

By imposing the terms 'only' and 'alone' on the texts in Matthew (28:1) and John, Spong betrays faulty reading and reasoning. Mentioning a particular woman or women could be simply selective focus on the part of an evangelist and does not necessarily mean that what is selected for focus is the *only* reality.

John 20:2 and 13 bear out this simple point that Spong failed to see. In verse 2, Mary Magdalene says, "... *we* don't know where they have put him!" Though not absolutely certain, it is fairly certain that she speaks for and of the plurality of women with her. In verse 13, flowing from the context of verse 10 where the disciples "went back home", Mary is possibly now alone or personalizes in her grief and says, "...*I* don't know where they have put him."

[14] For a resolution of most of the problems see John Wenham, *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992).

Selective focus helps as well to resolve Spong's problems with the number of persons seen by the women at the tomb (218-219). There seemed to have been two persons though one is at times selected as the focal point for whatever reason, be it that he was the most articulate or just the spokesperson who dominated the scene (Poythress 1984, 373; Blomberg 1987, 151; Archer 1982, 325; Forster and Marston 1995, 79).

The geographical appearances of the risen Christ present problems for Spong but his problem is of his own making in his improper use of 'only', yet again. He says, "Matthew...[wrote] that *the only time* Jesus appeared to the disciples was in Galilee ... Luke ... asserted that *the only* resurrection appearances ... took place in the Jerusalem area" (219; emphasis added).

The mistake is treating what the writer selects as all that was, and puzzlingly, failing to appreciate that the evangelists and Paul document a plurality of resurrection appearances.[15]

Spong avers that the biblical text "does not support the first day of the week as the moment when the risen Christ was seen...careful reading also will raise questions about the length of time in which resurrection appearances were thought to occur" (220).

There is no question that the texts say that the resurrection and the first post-mortem appearances were on the first day of the week, a Sunday (Jn. 20:1, 14-17, 19; Lk. 24:1, 13, 21). Spong concedes this but creates a storm in a teacup by playing on the point that the "disciple band" did not see Jesus until the evening of the first day, which, says Spong, "was the beginning of the second day for them" (221). Apart from leaping over the two on the road to Emmaus who saw the risen Christ before evening on Sunday (Lk. 24:29), and a report of Peter's seeing the risen Christ (Lk. 24:34), Spong seems not to realize that the evening of a day for Jews need not necessarily be the start of a new day.[16]

From the closing section of chapter 13 through to the end of the book Spong delivers himself of a bundle of meaningless or dubious statements.

> The biblical literalist wants to claim inerrancy for what is in fact a narrative two steps removed from the reality it seeks to narrate. Behind the narrative is an unnarrated proclamation. Behind the proclamation is an intense life-giving experience. The task of Bible study is to lead believers into truth, a truth that is never captured in mere words but a truth that is real, a truth that when

[15] Spong's confusion is patent in the opening paragraph on 220.

[16] See on this Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), 1019-1020.

> experienced erupts within us in expanding ways, calling us simultaneously deeper and deeper into life and, not coincidentally, deeper and deeper into God. (225)

What could this possibly mean? How does one distinguish the movement through a narrative and a proclamation to a 'life-giving experience' from a journey to an illusion? This is subjectivism, plain, simple and meaningless.

You ponder in vain the possible epistemological point concerning truth in the above quotation and the following 'gem'.

> Human life alone could not produce that which we have experienced in Jesus the Christ. He is of God, so the Christmas story points to truth, but the words used to describe or capture that truth are not themselves true in any literal sense. The power of Easter is, for me, both real and eternal, but the words used by human beings to narrate that truth can themselves only point to that truth. They can never capture it. To literalize the biblical narrative in all cases is to distort and ultimately to destroy its truth. (225-226)

To literalize the biblical narrative *in all cases* is to distort and destroy truth, according to Spong. Even if the narrative is historical? So words can point to truth but *can never capture it.* What then is the defensible basis for the notion that words can even point to truth? If words can never capture — and by extension, never communicate — truth, the reader would always require Spong's uncanny skill of reading between and beyond the words of a text. For Spong and his kind the remark of C.S. Lewis is quite apt.

> These men ask me to believe they can read between the lines of the old texts; the evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves. They claim to see fern-seed and can't see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight. (Lewis 1975, 111)

The doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity prompt from Spong statements that use the unclear notion of 'the experience'.

> I am not interested in preserving the doctrine of the incarnation. I am interested in understanding the truth to which the doctrine of the incarnation points. I am eager to enter the experience out of which the doctrine of the incarnation emerged ...
>
> Similarly, I am not interested in preserving the doctrine of the Trinity .... I am passionately interested in understanding why the doctrine of the Trinity was a

> life-and-death issue ... I am eager to embrace the experience out of which the doctrine of the Trinity was forged.[17] (232)

What could a doctrine of the incarnation point to, that would be worth experiencing, if there was not a literal incarnation? 'To enter the experience out of which the doctrine of the incarnation emerged' could only sensibly mean what John and Peter said.

> The Word *became flesh and tabernacled among us* and we beheld His glory... (Jn. 1:14; emphasis added)

> We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but *we were eyewitnesses* of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory... *We ourselves heard this voice* that came from heaven when *we were with him* on the sacred mountain. (2 Pet. 1:16-18; emphasis added)

As the present writer raised with Spong in a radio discussion in Jamaica in 2001, one cannot evade the multipersonal suggestions concerning God in the Old Testament in the frequency of plural nouns, pronouns, adjectives etc. used by monotheistic writers. Even more significant is the fact that neither in Deut. 6.4, nor anywhere else in the Old Testament, does a writer describe God's 'oneness' with the Hebrew term *yachid* (suggesting singularity or digital oneness). The word used in the *shema* of Deut. 6.4 is *echad* (suggesting composite oneness).[18]

The witness of the New Testament concerning the trinity is quite clear. Father, Son and Holy Spirit appear in the New Testament as separate persons and each is called God. The Father is called God in Jn. 6:27, the Son is called God in Heb. 1:8 and the Holy Spirit is called God in Acts 5:3-4.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit are clearly distinguished from each other in passages where they *appear together*, like Mt. 3:16-17, which describes the baptism of Jesus, where Jesus, while coming out of the water sees the Spirit in dove-like form coming upon Him and hears the Father expressing approval of Him.

But additionally, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are clearly distinguished from each other in passages where they are mentioned together, like Jn. 14:16, 26.

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[17] For other similar uses of 'the experience' see 236, 245.

[18] See Robert Morey, *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues*, (Grand Rapids: World Publishing, 1996), 87-105.

'To embrace the experience out of which the doctrine of the Trinity was forged' could only sensibly mean what the biblical writers affirm – they encountered God as triune.

John Shelby Spong's attempt to rescue the Bible from fundamentalism may have been well-intentioned but ill-fated because Spong's worldview is completely at odds with the worldview of the biblical writers.

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