

RECLAIMING THE BIBLE FOR A NON-RELIGIOUS WORLD

A COMMENTARY By Michael Grammer

These notes were contributed by Michael Grammer of Toronto < msgammer@rogers.com >. Michael is a friend and correspondent to our Deb Charnuski. He is Jewish and so presents a unique view of Spong's book, all the more since one of Spong's main points, is that the early Christians were Jew's whose religious experience was in the synagogue, well before there were churches.

This one document is linked on each session page. Just compare the page references.

7-8, so he's intimating already that the "Word of God" usage was socio-political in origin, at least in part.

On the other hand, since God hasn't burned all these books out of existence, perhaps he/she at least passively approves

9, why?(do we allow ourselves to be tyrannized by nonsense) That's simple. The human integral need for categorization, consistency of knowledge and the adherence to tradition. The better question to ask is this---why did the names---Acts, Gospels, Revelations---originate as such in the first place?

9, I *have* posited in the past that sometimes I do wonder if war is a manifestation of God's anger.

11, now, at least in my synagogue, this treatment of the book is at some odds with how our books are set out and, in fact, with the exhortations of our rabbi who *encourages* us to read the commentaries, to read the additional materials and choose our forum for thought and discussion. Deb has seen a bit of this herself already. That does not diminish the sacredness of the readings when they are read and, perhaps, does not apply to the reader himself/herself, who is checked by "monitors" on either side of the dais to make sure that not a single word is mispronounced and even that the proper sequence of sung notes/tune is used when reciting---known as the "tropp", but it does speak to the desire to ensure people *understand* rather than follow words blindly.

11, we have some of that tradition too--the first reader of the bible each week, if possible, is of the priestly tribe and the second reader is of the tribe of Levi.

11 bottom. I don't know about peril--a bit of hyperbole there perhaps.

14--the "secular city". I can accept that. If he wants to extend his point to say that the narrow literal reading of the bible has "infested" the *practice* of religion, so that there is no place for individual customization or flexibility, then I can definitely concur. As Deb and I have discussed (and as I think has happened at St. David's), there *is* a middle ground where, e.g. the Creed can be adapted to change some of the words to reflect e.g. a gender-neutral God or other facets of what I'd call "modern belief". I must say that, for myself, I don't find myself "infected" with what one might characterize as the dogmatism that can come from

literal reading. Rather, the formality of the thees and thous centres me and focuses me on the ideas behind the words. I've seen plenty of versions of Psalm 23, but I will invariably substitute the formal wording every time for that one. I guess all this is to say don't necessarily throw out the Baby with the Bathwater. Instead, use it as a jumping-off point.

Look---at Yom Kippur, we atone for all our sins against God....a very great number of times, in the prayer known as "Al Het". Each line begins with "for the sin which we have committed by..." I plan to email my rabbi with my own version of this, where each of my lines begins with "I wish I was better at". I will still say the Al Het exactly as it is written. But I have also used the wording to think beyond the wording.

15-16, and how is that any different from what we read about and watch today? Dry bones don't have much juicy meat. It will be the lurid stories that people will glom onto. I don't disagree with his inferred statement of the parasite-host relationship between religion and its followers as it pertains to the bible, but it's somewhat self-evident....at least to me.

16, change from warlike tribal God to the manifestation of love, justice and universalism. Well, OK, that's a banner I can follow.

22, the story of Abraham. To be fair, there was plenty of ancient history that was transmitted orally for a long time, though claims of potential inaccuracy can easily be ascribed to that history as well

OK, now you see, "Abraham, for example, might well not even have been a Jew!", this does get under my skin. Of course he wasn't born a Jew! We accept that. He *became* one through the living of his life and through his journey to religion. Sigh.

22 bottom, now that *is* an interesting idea--almost a little more in the Islamic tradition maybe?

23 top, and hard as it is for me to get my head around, I'm willing to listen to that interpretation too and grant it validity.

23-24, these are all good questions

25, I haven't looked closely at this myself, but I believe that there is some significant dissertation on the meaning and use of each of the names of God in the bible---elohim, adonai, yihyeh---over and above what he's found here. I *can* tell you that "hashem" is the word used when we don't want to profane God's name in ordinary speech. This discussion of geographic roots is interesting to me.

27, one is obliged to point out that this "tradition" of multiple strands of authorship found its way into the 4 Gospels, no?

32, top, it is interesting, isn't it, how much younger sons play the important part in the old testament. Jacob, stealing the birthright. Joseph, most favoured of his sons. Moses is the younger son. David, youngest son of Jesse. I'm just saying...and a question---does anyone know who would have been the youngest apostle?

33, no doubt, and also there may have been a practical side---with the Temple built, there was a place to have a repository of written knowledge.

35, top. No argument from me, other than to say we were not unique in doing so.

37, footnote 1. Just so everyone knows, the Maccabees were part of the Bar Kochba rebellion and this is the context for the holiday of Hanukkah.

39, in our Passover liturgy, we also make mention of how “many and numerous” we had become, and that Pharaoh was afraid of a populace over which he did not have full control.

39-40, if we want to take this thinking further, it might be no stretch to say that the 12 tribes/sons of Jacob were not sons at all but instead fully different families with a common ethos. We could see where that takes us...I myself have done no reading into what made up the precepts of someone of the tribe of Reuben vs. the tribe of Issachar. But could we consider that, as the group accepted new, um, “immigrants”, they might align themselves with this or that tribe that most closely mirrored their own customs and beliefs?

40, so a thing to make clear for you----everything after Moses and Joshua, including Judges (Ruth, Miriam, etc.) is covered in what is known as the “Haftorah”. So that you understand, the Haftorah *should* be read but does not *have* to be read on Sabbath, and the “rules” are relaxed---as opposed to reading from a holy scroll, you read from a bound book which shows the vowels, vs. the Torah where you have to know it by heart. For Deb, this was the main portion of reading that my nephew did at his Bar Mitzvah, it would have been from the Haftorah. The haftorah has a selection that is matched up with every Torah reading and spans the time from, I think, Joshua, until Isaiah.

41 bottom. The current political irony is not lost on me. I would hasten to add that, in my own view, this ancient fragmentation (as might be suggestible from our last book) is NOT what is engendering resistance by Israelis to a two-state solution in the modern world

I would ask, after reading this section, how similar does this feel to you to the changes in the bibles which were issued following the reformation?

A bigger thing to think about---perhaps religion by its very nature is, rather than a unifying force, a force for divergence and conflict...that it becomes necessary to have opposing camps in order for a religion as a whole to flourish and grow.

47-48, let’s not lose sight of the fact that individual “adoration questing” has been a persistent part of Christian worship too. I’ve visited my share of cathedrals in France and Spain where side chapels, dedicated (and of course paid for) by family “X” include a religious scene painting where the patriarch or matriarch has a prominent place.

49, I knew the story of Armageddon when I visited Megiddo many years ago. If I can remember and get around to doing it, I will forward a picture.

53 (and 56), the beginning of the diaspora. In Jerusalem (I think it’s in the Israel Museum if memory serves) is a solid gold model of the third temple, should it ever come to be built. It

retains a huge amount of significance, and the holiday of Tisha B'Av in the summer commemorates the 2nd destruction by the Romans. It would be inaccurate to say that there wasn't *some* feeling and recognition of the historical displacement populating the mindset of those who returned to Israel in 1948.

54-55, really, it was an extraordinary accomplishment, when you think of the cultures who were subdued and how their religion vanished into the dust.

57, be sure not to forget this---embedded in the day of rest was the concept of physical rest only. The mind was definitely not to rest, but instead to devote itself especially on that day to worship, reverence and study. It is interesting, though, that the inculcation of habitual religious observance began with the hallowing of the *day* and not a place or a thing or whatnot. That was, of course, a reflection of the exile. His point is well-made. I would presume he means "cultural survival"

59, you *could* maybe say that our tradition of questioning and interpreting originates with the very fact that so many authors contributed to the Torah.

65, for those who haven't seen the river Jordan, there are places where it would not be a huge task to create dry space---a couple of beavers at work would manage nicely.

67-68, I'll admit, we don't spend a lot of time analyzing those chapters either. But do note the folktale/parable style which culminates in the Solomonic proverbs....and is a jumping-off point for the prophetic writings

68-69, I admit that for me, the analogy he draws here is thin, at least as far as the catalyzing forces he references

69. What I DO like is that he's coming close to touching on something I have talked about in more than one of these book studies---my belief that religions have something akin to a product life cycle and they have to go through things at certain times---the emergence of a second and third primary leader, a period of extreme violence, etc in order to grow.

69, Hannah. Let's remember Abraham's wife had this problem---and its solution---too.

71, it is very good of him to make this crystal clear for people who don't really know and may be misled by the term 'prophet' in its 'everyday' use.

72, I don't know who's read Isaac Asimov's Foundation series, but as an essay on calculated prophecy, it's awfully worth a look. Herbert in his Dune series also does a good job tackling the subject.

73-75, this is quite a delightful paraphrasing

I should add that, on Yom Kippur, at one of the most solemn points of the day (Martyrology) an almost identical scenario is recounted of a Roman who 'trapped' the Torah sages very similarly by citing a Jewish law and then stating that they were culpable (selling a kinsman into slavery---Joseph by his brothers)

76...and to be the culture's moral compasses, of course.

77. So that everyone knows, I Kings I concerns the impending death of King David when an upstart looks to claim the crown. Bathsheba and Nathan come to the king to ensure that he passes the royal birthright to Solomon, which he does. I read this passage some 35 years ago for my Bar Mitzvah (Deb, it was the similar 'type' of thing to what you witnessed with Gabriel in his long section) and have plans to reread it near the end of next year for the 'double-chai' 36th anniversary of my reading. In Hebrew, of course.

If I didn't make it clear earlier, every portion of the Haftarah is paired inextricably with the Old Testament reading for that week. That whole portion of the service all told usually takes about 45 minutes.

79, well, perhaps a divine human.

80. We are seeing, and he is setting up that, religion 'cleansing' is a very old and repeatable practice

80-81, well, of course. The best way to immortalize someone is to ground him in the miraculous heroic acts of his recognized forbears.

He *almost* tempts me to go back to the mythology studies of my very early youth. My memory of Egyptian is hazy, but Greek and Roman had plenty of anthropomorphism about them. Where were the sources for that? Could...could some of it have come from Alexander's interaction with Indian civilization? (we know, I think, that the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata were well and truly entrenched by then). Could...could some of it have come from *early* interaction with Jewish faith-culture? Whether this is an unreasonable line of thought or not, it kind of finds ultimate form in Josephus, who is the first combatant of anti-semitism and who rewrites the bible entirely to, while pleasing his Roman masters, accomplish in large the survival of at least some of the Jewish people and culture.

80-81, so, Elijah is the ONLY prophet granted a "seat at the table" at any major Jewish holiday (and I categorize those as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Simchat Torah, Hanukkah, Purim and Passover, and I'm leaving aside the Haftarah portions that are chanted on certain holidays). In the Passover narrative, we stop at a certain point (after the meal) to open the door to "the welcome stranger", Elijah, and invite him to drink his cup of wine. This is Spong doing this to me, but I now wonder---it may be that we do know for a fact that Jesus' crucifixion happened the night after the first Passover meal. But is it coincidence that it is tied to the one holiday with a prophet as part of the equation (I equally couldn't tell you when Elijah was included or introduced into the Passover observance).

86, granted the Quran is a book of beautiful poetry, some of the prophets' writings get there too. Isaiah in particular. On Yom Kippur (I think, I'll have to check!) we recite his writing as the Haftarah (it's 58) which goes in part "is this not the fast of affliction I have chosen? To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke and let the oppressed go free". This is almost the only time I will recite the translation of a Haftarah portion word for word (and that would include even if I was a better Jew and went to more Shabbat services) and it holds deep meaning and reverential impact for me every time.

86, bottom, no there isn't, but the persistent humanness of humanity will always provide a fertile field for one to grow and be heard---and probably, be needed.

88, and a new African American Museum opening in DC which is absolutely the hottest ticket in town right now.

90, it is, maybe, worth asking how often in history a “prophet” was followed by those not of his own origin vs. his or her “countrypersons”

90, middle, true enough. I might have read or heard Haggai once in my life. Nahum and Zephania, never.

So, here’s another thing you need to know and think about. *certain* prophets and their words were obviously “elevated” to a higher tier by another set of interpreters when the various prophetic excerpts forming the Haftorah ended up paired with biblical readings---particularly those on the high holidays. It was obvious, even in the days of yore, that those would be the days that saw the most worshippers. Food for thought.

92, not the first time---Samuel Ha-Levi in Spain during Pedro I’s reign. To a degree, the stature of Maimonides.

93, bottom—hmmm, that was a bit sharp, no?

94-95, it is stirring stuff, isn’t it? Particularly in exile, the Jews’ major cultural currency was hope

95 bottom. Yes indeed, I think I did know that.

97, Q.E.D. my comment to 95

99, bottom, hmm yes, a fair observation, a shucking off of any quest for power---physical and geographical, anyway

100, for me anyway, he’s saying, and not that subtly, that we’re back in that mode again today.

101, these passages probably *are* the origination of the “Al Het”, the list of sins that we state a number of times for expurgation at Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur---our once-a-year confessional

102, well, maybe, but isn’t it because religion has been pushed aside, as it were, instead of circumstances beggaring belief? Maybe this goes back to the question I asked in the last study, what IS “religion”?

126-133, unexpected humour. I like! Espec in Amos, he’s using the technique he describes in the story himself.

135, Bethel translates as 'House of the Lord' or 'House of the Almighty'

136, so he may or may not get to this later in the book, but for any of us who have spent a little time studying Torah, I would say this---that the words of commentary of any number of sages---Rabbi Gamliel, Rabbi Akiva of Tarfon, Rashi, Maimonides, even the Baal Shem Tov much later (founder of the Hasidic movement).

138 (and 141), 'worship' means 'the act of investing infinite worth in God'. That's not the worst definition I've seen. I'll think about it, though I'd add a slight gloss of 'and determining your place

and part in the grand design'. I really have some discomfort with a definition that appears to fully exclude any kind of self-reflection or self-determination. Subsuming of self is fine. Complete absence of self in the definition is not. That's adoration. The two terms have *never* been synonymous to me.

139--reminds me of the episode of Next Generation (Star Trek) when Q puts humanity on trial

141 middle, well, not quite. My own view is that our culture needed both to grow---there has always been a place for the priesthood and the observers of rites. Perhaps we can argue that the words of the prophets could not be properly heard without the priestly background/observances. The yin to the prophetic yang, I'm suggesting a kind of symbiotic relationship. Or...'it takes two to tango'. Disputational fervour needs two sides to get a dispute going.

144, as has happened again since 1948.

144, middle, alien influences to blame and purging of the land. I don't dispute this. BUT...this way of saying it, it's chillingly close to Nazi thinking, isn't it? Not in scale, obviously. But in intent...

145-147, ho-lee---he should do something like Godspell II. These are hilarious! We read the book of Jonah during the afternoon of Yom Kippur. I totally have to show this to my friends Andrea and Dave!

151 bottom. Or, the apostles had to go through this crucible of 'faithlessness' and/or disloyalty to rise to their higher heights.

153, hmmm yes. He's beginning to hit us over the head with his point, though.

156, 'malach', or 'melech' is, of course, 'king'

159 it was indeed a move of having the religion reach and contemplate beyond the tribal, familial borders. In this respect, the unyielding tradition that the priestly tribe could only descend from Aaron was indeed probably quite limiting

165-166, it's more than that---if you take his espoused time of its writing into account, it is a social commentary on Jewish values where they might have e.g. looked to the Greek and Persian models and found them wanting (the appeasement of the gods, the jealousy of the gods).

167, "religion at its core" - I perhaps agree with this in part, because it folds into my own definition of religion that I gave you last time---nothing more than a methodology for organizing human behaviour. BUT, I've had cause to think about that since then and that is not the whole definition for me. It is also, fundamentally, a vehicle for me to engage my faith and spirituality. And in doing so, at least for me, I begin to veer away from his core value that he ascribes to religion.

His is a gaspingly daring conclusion. I'm not sure I can agree fully with it.

173, not much to add here, I will only say that, at least for me, I always counted Ruth as one of the judges.

But, perhaps this is as good a place as any to talk at some length about Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur, our two holiest days. One of the essentials to understand is this—that while the Torah and Haftarah readings for Yom Kippur day are indeed important (they were selected out of the normal reading context, the bible portion dealing with Aaron, as high priest, choosing two goats, one a sacrifice to God and the other to be sent into Azazel with the sins of the people on its back and the Haftarah portion being Isaiah's call to the people---“is this not the fast I have chosen—to loose the bonds of wickedness....to deal bread to the hungry” etc.), they are NOT the focal point for me. The two holiest prayers for me—Kol Nidre itself and the Unetaneh Tokef, the book of life, were both written some 1000-1500 years later in the middle ages. Kol Nidre is chanted 3 times to open the night-before service. It is an “anticipatory forgiveness” where we say all vows shall not be vows, all oaths shall not be oaths and all bonds shall not be bonds. Personally, I use this most sacred prayer in three aspects—preparation, meditation and participation. In the first reading, preparation---I do not speak, but simply listen to our cantor and the few voices of the congregation that do choose to do the reading on that first time. I use that listening time to get myself into the mindset I want to bring to the holiest day. The second reading of it, I will always read the English—to be sure that I remember and understand and contemplate what it is I will be praying about. Only on the third reading do I shift to active participation, chanting in unison with the other 4,000 or so members of our synagogue in something that is always emotional and moving for me.

The Unetaneh Tokef (which we also recite at Rosh Hashanah) is the Book of Life and brings us to the cusp of the awe of the almighty. I will always read this in both Hebrew and English and then participate in the singing that is done to the words.

Now, while Yom Kippur centres on atonement for sins and confession, an equally important aspect is the formal religious historical, encapsulated in the Avodah service, which sets out the process whereby the high priest alone on this day alone enters the holiest of holies and asks forgiveness for himself, the priestly tribe and the people. That part of things is connected directly to the Torah portion and what Aaron is doing, being one of the more formal rites described in the Old Testament.

Jonah is read in the afternoon. Most of the confessional service, equally important, has no relationship to scripture....so....

All this is to say that, on these centrepiece days of our religion, a lot more is going on than just scripture and prophetic writings.

178 - it is interesting how much music is emphasized in the writings of our two religions, as opposed to any which came before

178, Shavuot, which I amended in my notes to include it as one of the major holidays---it is, indeed, the holiday probably most devoted to Torah study. To give a little indicator, Yizkor—the memorial prayer for the departed which all are to be in synagogue to say for lost parents, children, siblings---is recited four times a year---at Yom Kippur, on the day before Simchat Torah (which is coming up this week---the turnover of the bible story, where Genesis I is read after the last chapter of Deuteronomy), on the last day of Passover, and the second day of Shavuot. One has to think that a little bit of the timing was to keep the Jewish sheep somewhat in the fold of synagogue observance over the course of the year.

Between Passover and Shavuot is a period called the counting of the omer. It is distantly related to Lent, in a different sense than the “literal” connection he makes in Chap 25.

181, top, and yet still so many of the Psalms are attributed to David even today. For now, I will note that our faith and culture ended up putting its major emphasis of “pride” on our first king, not any of those who came afterward. In a rather curious way, it is almost as if the divinely anointed and the auspice of God ended with David and cultural secularization began with Solomon. I will talk about a different aspect of what he’s saying in a bit.

184, “in neither affirmation is history well-served”. And the fact that the proverbs appear to have been written 600 years after Solomon’s death. OK, this is the “in a bit”. In all these citations, I accept his point that authorship is mixed or not attributable to the supposed author. Up to a point. What he emphatically glosses over and what I have to emphatically state is the *fundamental* reliance in our faith tradition on oral recitation, memory and devolution to the next generation in this form. I am therefore NOT ready to consign Solomon to anonymity and mediocrity where all the Proverbs are concerned. I *am* willing to believe that his own words were to some degree maintained and carried down the generations. Just because they weren’t written down does not mean they weren’t said.

185, I haven’t done this and maybe I should, but I daresay you might find a foundation for most of the proverbs in either one of the commandments or one of the some 600 mitzvot---good deeds---that a Jew is to perform throughout the course of a year.

185, last paragraph---to the point I made above about secularization. I think where I am myself today is the statement he makes—or something close to it---searching for guidance through the life I choose to lead—with Jewish values, as it were. But, I also have left “room” and an “open door” for dialogue with God, so that I can listen to him/her and pray to him/her.

Reward in this life—indeed, a point I have made about our religion and the afterlife more than once 😊

186, I have to be uncomfortably honest and say a) I have spent zero time in my life with Ecclesiastes and b) I have myself actually considered it to be part of the Christian doctrinal as opposed to our own.

187, that is, indeed, how the Song of Songs is characterized by us. Further on, he continues inexorably with his main thematic presentation (at least as I am reading it)

187-188. Interesting. And maybe, since I often see in my religion a struggle based on wanting to find balance, there’s a counterpoint set up here, between female wisdom and the male-dominated concept of judgment and justice. His commentary on the footnote is acute and telling and worth saying.

189, bottom, of course not. It is dreadfully hard to create a whole new religion in a vacuum or out of whole cloth. This is an aspect of religion as a business that needs to be marketable and attractive.

190, good, he also makes reference to Tisha B’Av which I mentioned as a minor---and very sad—holiday. It is centred around the remembrance of the destruction of the first and second temples.

190, bottom, a fascinating observation, the difference being that lamenting on the death of Jesus looked at someone whose reference work happened in a shortish lifespan, where the Jewish Lamentations remembered a much longer period of destruction and oppression.

191, middle. I *want* to do the Milford Track myself someday. I've seen a slice of the bottom. It is God's country. Sorry for the aside. Yes, our synagogue came close to the opera idea with our last cantor and his wife, who would yearly put on a marvelous Purim musical. We had a ton of fun with it. This is not a "major" holiday in the religious sense, but draws a bunch of people, especially children, because they get to legally make a lot of noise. The evil Haman is booed and his name drowned out with noisemakers (I've come with a trumpet to synagogue on occasion, much to the amused consternation of my seat mates around me). The whole story reads like a parable, just as you are reading it here. We do fast for 3 days (well, I don't, but I'm not a model Jew!).

193, middle, fair enough. In the reading of the special Purim Scroll, the Megillah (which is written exactly as the Torah, with no vowels to guide the singer, and is in 7 parts), the part about the recitation of the dead, including the sons of Haman, is to be done in a whispered undertone and all in one breath, thus spoken very, very quickly. So it's not all about bloodthirstiness today.

195, indeed, with a capital "I".

196, middle, remember, Josephus will do the same thing a couple hundred years later.

196, bottom, as mentioned before, I am intimately familiar with this version, as it was my Bar Mitzvah portion.

197, I DO want everyone to remember to observe that there is precedent in our religion for this elevation of Solomon----the "stealing" of the Jewish birthright of Isaac by Jacob from his elder brother Esau.

199-200, he has (as anticipated), built up to this strong and direct statement of what he's doing and where he's going with this book.

204-205, some of this is not absolutely scripture's fault. I have I think talked before in this forum about the parasite-host relationship between a religion and its leaders and followers and how easy it is in the religious context to twist things.

205, all Jews, slavery, etc. Let's remember that, as he's just expounded, the Old Testament isn't always so gentle either, so it's not like this is new ground being ploughed.

206-207, women. I have zero knowledge of this, but is some of this at the root of the protestant schism in the 16th/17th centuries?

Now, this brings up the bigger context discussion and thought---in these first years, how Christianity wrestled with its background and context----he's specified (correctly, I think) that the Jewish religion survived in Babylon and the dispersal by consciously and obviously differentiating itself and its teachings and people from the community. Christianity was born

out of and wanted to continue that, I think. Yet at the same time, to gain adherents and not persecutors, one must not stray *too* far from societal norms. Thus slavery, diminished role of women---staples of the Roman civilization---have found their way in here. Also, there was “precedent” for the concept of the “son of God”---in Greek and Roman mythology and any of the many sons of Zeus that made it into mythology.

207, middle and bottom. So we have him bringing the Hammerklavier. I see in these statements what I term now his typical dramatism, but he has my attention. Let’s see where we go.

209, I know that some of you have been to Israel now. For the rest, I cannot encourage it enough. *that* is where you will gain so much more in contextual understanding. It permeates your every pore when you’re there.

210, the re-telling of the Moses story....I have never thought of that! Wonderful concept. Makes me want to read the gospels fully now to chart the story-lives---were there confrontations with Herod? Were there miracles and plagues? Don’t think so, but maybe some parallel stuff

212 I’m not saying this to be snide, but I don’t disagree with his conclusions---however, for, again, the reason that it would have been prudent not to stir the Roman hornet’s nest, else the early Christians might have gone the way of the Maccabees.

212, I did a whole book study on Josephus. Again, here, care is warranted. He wrote very much for his audience and authenticity may be questionable

213—destruction of the temple shaping the gospels. Yes, I can definitely subscribe to a theory along those lines.

214, he’s laid the groundwork very convincingly.

215, from a religious point of view, in a rather unusual way, there is precedent for this too. We rarely, in the old testament, hear from God directly. It is Moses who speaks and who is to say he speaks in the language in which God spoke to him. Then when you add Spong’s layers of how the old testament was written...

216, if Jesus is to be seen as a messiah, it would have to be a spiritual one only, because physically and materially, I don’t think one can say that the time of the messiah came to the people around him

217, I think I can be both clear and fair when I say that a) elevating the mundane to the miraculous is an art form, b) some necessary distortion of what really happened inevitably takes place and c) the miraculous becomes memorable

217, bottom, so in a way, he’s kind of alluding (for me, anyway) that Paul is the author of the Christian Talmud—the interpretation of the word instead of the word—except in this case it’s the interpretation of the man and what he meant and what his principles were. The idea that the stories could have been written backwards from and based on the interpretation is absolutely galvanizing. I expect him to make good on this very ambitious promise.

219, I don't know who's been to "the mount" but it's a very modest hill, with the emphasis on "very" (not that "Mount Zion" is any different!)

221, although he has his current "stature", of course, who is to know whether, back in the very time, Jesus' story was somewhat "commonplace" and not particularly noteworthy.

222, it would have been perhaps a challenge to 'knit together' something that could become the focus of a religion in the setting that they found themselves. Perhaps the *real* miracle is that from such humble beginnings, a religion that has shaped the world has come.

222, very bottom—quite

223, just what I was thinking about in the earlier chapters

223, bottom—yup, can't argue with that.

224, well, here I diverge from him, because that does *not* have to be the case. If somehow it was distilled into heads of houses, e.g., it *could* have been told at communal dinner tables, but that is admittedly unlikely

***** PAUL email 05/11/16

230—Paul was not a Christian and neither was Jesus. Well, OK for Jesus. But Paul? Now I'm going to go back to page 167 and his talk about religion at its core being based on the arrogance of humans believing that they can both discern the ways of God and act in a manner to control the actions of God. If we use that, how can he be so sure that the "religion" of Christianity only came into being after Paul and not with him? Didn't Paul, through his many speeches, seek to do just what he's talking about earlier in this book? Next question---what truly *was* the state of the Jewish "religion" at the time? I don't know that it is a fair thing to intimate that our religion at the time was a sort of "crystallized whole". Pharisees, Sadducees, Galileans and who knows how many other sects would have been active at the time.

231---the reference point back to Yom Kippur. OK, I'd better elucidate this. For whatever reason, I guess someone decided that "Hircus Dei" or "Caper Dei" didn't sound as nice as "Agnus Dei". There ain't no lamb of God in our world. The passage in question is Leviticus 16. Now, first---this is something we sometimes talk about---the context for this first 'observance' of the casting out of the people's sins only comes "after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the Lord". There is plenty of biblical speculation that it is Aaron's two sons who are the real sin offering---or at least the catalyst for the ability for there to be one. Now. What is described here in brief forms the basis of one of the beautiful parts of the Yom Kippur service, the Avodah service, where the process of the high priest going, on this one day only, alone, into the holy of holies and confessing *first* his own sins, *then* the sins of his household and *finally* the sins of the people of Israel---and begging forgiveness of God each time. So it is with Aaron.

Now. In the recitation, this has always been a little unclear to me, but first, there is also a bull which is sacrificed---this is Aaron's personal sacrificial animal. Then two goats are chosen, one "for the Lord" as a sin-offering and one to be sent into the wilderness **carrying**

the people's sins. What I read from the rest of the passage is that the goat which is slain as a sin-offering is a "gateway" sacrificial animal—slain in atonement for the sins. But the actual **transmission** and transference of the people's sins is done with the LIVE goat which is sent into the wilderness---Azazel. So the idea of anything "dying for our sins" is potentially misplaced.

231-232 bottom---I will maintain that we wouldn't know for sure whether the timing was such or whether it was conveniently made so in order to tie it to one of the critical Jewish nights and practices. I am glad that Bishop Spong addresses this.

232, um, well, not exactly. It was a sign that the angel of death was not to VISIT death on the firstborn of the Jews, not that death was "banished". That's a huge leap. Let's also remember that ONLY the firstborn sons of Egyptians were to have been killed.

Cross as symbolic doorpost---now that has an interesting appeal

Let us also now pause to make a note here. If what he says is so, and the connection with Passover needed to be so strong, what does this say about the Jewish religion at the time? Let us clearly understand something here. Passover was—and is---a *commemorative* holiday and it tells a story that mixes and mashes from Exodus. It is absolutely not strictly temporal, as in during the 8 days e.g. everything that the Passover story is about happened all during that one week. This in its own way is, again, a departure from the strict "holy word" of the old testament. We have many prayers and songs that are interweaved into the Haggadah reading that have nothing to do with the time period of events which the Passover commemorates.

235, it really is a fascinating question. Is Paul setting himself up as not quite an anti-Jesus? As someone or something deeply flawed and base that seeks to better itself? Let's see.

236, his sexuality. Yup, I'm fine with this line of questioning, and with the speculation that he wished to walk exactly the path that Jesus did, including being resurrected as a pure being.

237, that is rather an interesting way to look at fundamentalism---a very slightly different way than I have always seen it---as being fundamentally about exclusionism. Here, he's saying it derives from a threat to personal survival. And yet fundamentalists act to end their own lives. Food for thought.

239, freedom frightens people who are hiding from themselves. Yes it does.

240---it does make for a heck of a message and statement.

242. So. This begs the question of this Jewish boy. Why were they set as "letters"? Why not "The Words of Paul to the Romans" or "the Speech of Paul to the Romans" or "The Message of Paul to the Romans". For me, the process and existence of "letters" implies first a sense of distancing and objectivity, second a degree of calculation vs. passion of the moment and third and most importantly a sense of passivity. If he doesn't end up explaining it, I would ask everyone to consider their own thoughts on this. It is all the more odd if he is preaching to congregations where oral tradition and teaching holds such a strong pride of place.

243, synagogue attracting a variety of worshippers. OK. Perhaps part of this is because in the synagogue, I daresay there weren't armed guards telling you what to believe at swordpoint.

243, more ethically oriented religion—he's just reiterating his premise that he's built in the old testament discussion

243-244, this examination of the thrust and content of each of the epistles is really excellent scholarship

244-245, and Paul's brilliance was his ability to speak convincingly to these disparate groups of people, and his legacy of brilliance that all these disparate streams of thought did end up being coalescable into this enduring religion.

245 bottom, it could be that this is really the first time that acts and not words were put forth as the dominant aspect of a monotheistic religion. Isn't that some of it now? I think I can find support in that view when I look at the process of canonization. Aren't most saints canonized for their good works instead of their good words?

247, notice in this exposition the foundation for what many see as the role(s) of their respective ministers or priests. In this way, I guess *I* see for the first time the heritage side of the pastoral

But...and so...one thing that I think about at this point. I don't get the sense that Jesus tried hard to *persuade*. He just did and let people figure it out. With Paul, we begin the process of *persuasion* that imbues Christianity. Jesus maybe wasn't looking for followers. Paul and the standard-bearers of early Christianity definitely were.

249, rowdy behaviour of the Corinthians. Reflective of the relative debauchery that infested most of the cultures and religions of the area during that time?

250. This is a most unworthy thought I have. Could Paul---or some others aligned with him---have "spiced" his Corinthian congregation with this variety of misanthropes to seed the ground for his lectural harvest? It honestly might not have been the first time in human history a political-style move like this was made. Truly, how better to set the stage for the precept that God loves all than to people the stage with the appropriate denizens?

251—he does more than take antinomianism on directly. He takes orthodoxy on directly too.

251 bottom, the beautiful passage, but it would have to have been the most artful of wording to try to get this crazy message across---a message that breaks down the most precious human possession at the time....the human craving for hierarchy and standing and place. The remarkable part for me is that this universality message connects as much with Eastern religions as with these. It's quite the man who would have come up with this.

254, darkness---surely it should be possible to narrow down whether there was a 3 hour eclipse on the date in question? Ditto an earthquake maybe.

255, bottom—Jah so. I'd almost say "naturally" 😊 I definitely like his concluding sentence at the bottom.

256, top—and I say again, even if it was, that betrayal may have been a very necessary part of the formation of the religion and that was Judas' part to play. It does NOT make him any less holy or reverent or critical as a part of the religion. Heck, our own religion is peppered with “betrayers” and “stealers”---Joseph's brothers betrayed him by selling him into slavery. Jacob stole Isaac's birthright from Esau. Cain betrayed Abel by killing him. It is a *human* trait and honestly? For a religion to have any hope of succeeding, it must in some part be HUMAN and NOT divine.

257. Middle. Jesus' resurrection appearing to Paul. Sure, I can accept this. Why couldn't the resurrection have taken place multiple times to multiple people? Maybe it's only as a Jewish heretic that I can ask a question like that (grin)...leading though to 258

258---I support! And ask the pertinent question---WHY did it become this physical something? Did the nascent religion *need* that sort of certainty and ability to visualize the thing? Certainly it was dreadfully important from an artistic (painting, sculpture, etc.) standpoint. Physical symbolism and its role in early Christianity is worth bringing up here.

***** insert email 07/11/16

262--Enoch. It leads me to think about the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. Maybe, just maybe, this story is completely allegorical---note that it was set as a dream/sleep event---and Jacob was wrestling with who he was vs. who he knew he should be.

263--Elijah as 2nd hero. As the Messiah himself? Maybe. Otherwise, for me, no. David would be 2nd and I might put Joshua, Joseph and even Abraham and Isaiah (who might be our closest to Paul) above Elijah.

265--Paul--the first itinerant bishop?

267--it is a fair comment to say that Judaism is richly spiced with a sense of reluctance (as we saw in The Chosen). It has always been a part of our religious leaders and why might it not manifest itself as a reluctance to take Paul's words to heart? Prophetically speaking, there had already also been a history of this prophet-counter-people.

268, no distinction between Jew and Greek. Spong himself has set up the 'mindset' of Jewry at the time with his expounding on how they survived during the Babylonian times

268-269, well, Spong can certainly find support here for his assertion about the core of religion, as Paul himself seeks to say that he does understand God--by understanding that (s)he is inscrutable

269, living sacrifice. This has some relation to the Jewish 'code' of doing worthwhile things in the present life

272 top, it is indeed a solid task

Gamaliel was indeed one of the great thinking rabbis.

DO we have any earthly account of Paul's early years? How he came to the path of religious study?

273, it's kind of hard to read this actually and conceptualize that a major religion could have been so firmly based on one man's insecurities

274, bottom. Eek. That's a thunderous statement which I'm not sure is objectively accurate. I see Christianity thriving in a lot of places where I look--or at least holding its own.

275--all living things are survival-oriented. And, for humans, hierarchy-oriented.

275--or, maybe I can put it another way. It is for us to rescue ourselves--by getting ourselves to this new consciousness. We'll see where he takes this

278--it really bristles my fur to see, so many times, the pronouncement that religion and science cannot cohabitate. We're engaged in a speaking series on this in Toronto right now with the opposite thematic

279, I think it might have been the last book study that I thought about our writings and found God starting out as an elemental force and, as we proceed through Jewish history, become more accepting and forgiving of the imperfections of his/her creation. But this for me is a big message. Our ability to ACCEPT each other--to have the strength to accept someone else's weaknesses is the key to our growth and, perhaps, our survival as a species.

280, he embraced everyone just as he or she was. Hey! Maybe I'm the reincarnated Jesus. I do have the (sometimes dangerous) tendency to only see the good in people.

281, or--that he lived his last moments in the same way as he had lived the rest of his life.

***** insert email 14/11/16

312-313, so our family and friends move very quickly at Passover. We're never done in 3 hours and I've been to a couple of 6-hour affairs.

I actually think the 24-hour thing has more to do with synchronizing the importance of it with Jewish observance periods. Yom Kippur is a full day--sunset to sunset. Shavuot, as he's stated, is a 24-hr study vigil. The sabbath itself is strictly observed sundown to sundown.

More generally, it is in this section that I have some real issues with almost the 'fundamentalist' and 'exclusionary' approach he has chosen--particularly curious given the overall thrust of the book.

I do not agree that, just because Mark copied liberally from Isaiah, Psalms and other sources and just because Matthew rooted the story in synagogue terms, it does NOT by absolute inference exclude that they were eyewitnesses. There could have been many reasons why there was a delay in 'publishing' the gospels--money and materials perhaps not least. And there could have been very good reasons for using already and previously-proven persuasive language to 'clothe' the story of Jesus. 'he came, he taught, he had dinner, he was tried for crimes and killed' is a little spare. Maybe Mark, Matthew, Luke and John were not former-day Shakespeares. I know I'm being perhaps unnecessarily facetious, but consider this startling line of thought...could each of the gospel-writers simply have been a 'figurehead', lending their name only to their gospel with someone else writing it? In what would have been a frangible and highly charged and politicized environment, it's not unthinkable.

I just don't like him conclusively saying that because the gospels were written the way they were, there is no chance that these people saw the events.

A quick comment---I was visiting my friends Lisa and Andy yesterday and mentioned the book. Andy is my Anglican minister friend (who father Ralph (am I remembering the name?) very much reminded me of) who has served as a minister for over 20 years. He is appreciative of how Bishop Spong pushes the envelope and for the bold points of view he brings, but he is more dubious about the rigour to which Spong puts his factual bases.

***** email 19/11/16

320-324, so I keep coming back to that statement of his about the core of religion being us taking control of it, or of the story. I continue to find support as he keeps writing. If you want to look at it, the Jewish luminaries of the Old Testament, most of them were reluctant participants. They were also "passive" participants. Abraham, when told to sacrifice his only son, went and prepared to do it. He waited for the Lord to intervene. Joseph spoke through dreams. Moses said very little on his own account. Always "and God said to Moses". The change to "active" tense allegedly then would begin with David (and I agree with Bishop Spong that the attribution of so many psalms to this rude warrior king is probably nonsense) and, more to the point, with Solomon and the proverbs. It is the age of prophets for us that our leaders start to write their own stories, and this tradition is now continued through the gospels. They don't read as "the Lord spoke to Matthew". Matthew is telling his story.

325-326. Sigh. Where do I begin? It's not that I am poo-pooing his reasoning. I just take issue with his gospelization of it---as if it is the *only* explanation that can be accepted. Look. Joseph--Yosaif---has been and remains one of the most common Jewish names. Splitting the Jordan? Have you *seen* the Jordan river? In parts of it, I can assure you, it would take no miracle to stop its flow. I do take some of the points---Moses picked up by the Pharaoh's daughter (who I do believe was, at least at the time, a virgin---or characterized as such), the 40 days vs. 40 years, the parallels. I'm not saying he didn't set things up this way. I'm just saying that some of it might have been nothing new under the sun.

330-331, yes, that passage of Isaiah is quite prominent in the Rosh Hashanah services.

331, bottom, this is really fascinating.

334, this view of secularized Judaism as the birthright of Christianity is useful

335, so, while Bishop Spong is doing a fine, fine job of illuminating the differences in these gospels, it still does beg the question. **Why DID Christianity need four gospels---four different versions of the story?** Yes, it would provide lots of scope for a) artistic and musical interpretation and b) a source for beloved discussion and interpretation and arguing, but....it is curious that in the early years no one....strong enough?....came forth to unify all these accounts into one holy book. On the other hand, if we take the palatability of a changed story to different congregations and kind of align the gospels with the different letters of Paul and his intended audiences, that may have some play.

336 middle. Clearly there was.

336, this notion of an “important herald” is again not new.

336, this conclusion is fraught with peril, since a) OK, if Rebekah did find this out, she actively conspired to make it happen by assisting Jacob to steal Esau’s birthright and b) Esau ended up doing just fine for himself and when the brothers finally met after many years, it was Jacob who came subserviently and with fear of his welcome by Esau.

337, once again, some of these names would have been as common as any others in the community at the time.

340-341, well, there is another way of looking at this too in the liturgical cycle. In a way, the period of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is a period of serious penitence and fasting. But what follows is a period in which the people have, at least spiritually, been “cleansed”. Sukkot and Simchat Torah are almost wildly joyous holidays, with much dancing with the Torahs and much waving of lulav and etrog.

341, or, put another way, Luke is a bridge to Paul.

341-342, well, and reach its ascension in the lessons to be learned and applied.

342, again, I stress to add---it was *not* identified with Moses. Moses was very clearly the “conduit” and “deliverer”, but the law came directly from God.

342, now here he’s getting at something for me---that Jesus was a *combination* of Moses and Elijah (although not Elijah by way of anything conscious that he did or said). That bears some thinking. Also bearing some thinking---to my very limited knowledge, Jesus’ parables were not focused on “the time to come” and the “sins and redemption of the people” as a gigantic whole, but upon things people were to do in this life to better that life and the lives of those around them.

343 bottom, I have a chuckle, a little bit. Reaching the infinity of space may not be spiritually edifying to *him*, but who is to say it isn’t for some people what they would be looking for?

345, so, a “refined” Elijah, without the elemental, visceral, movie-effects stuff happening

347, this is a critical crux point for me---the greatest gift and just as arguably the greatest curse of Christianity. The gift? That people are not excluded, whatever their race, creed and colour, from being an accepted worshipper of this faith. I suppose Greek and Roman was there too in a way, but those “religions” were indifferent. Many others were about “the chosen people” and exclusionary in nature. The great curse? That all others must want to be part of Christianity, whether by page or by sword. Yeah, that listing by Luke? Not that he did it with Crusades in mind. But could have been the worst thing.

The galvanizing force of a martyr is another very old technique.

348 bottom, so here’s a thing in this interpretation. As he puts it, “Jesus is the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures”. Inter alia, Judaism is no longer needed. It has done its part and fulfilled its destiny. Right? And yes indeed---hadn’t thought about the 12 Apostles paralleling the 12 tribes. There’s so much of this commonality, isn’t there?

349, Peter's interpretation, the Torah *not* set aside. Just so re my thoughts above.

350, Christianity, then, has its "schismatic" history rooted in its very beginnings. Is it fair to say, then, that the reformation was inevitable? And that perhaps it was as violent, on all counts, as it was because it had been "bottled up" for 1500 years?

350, the Ethiopian eunuch. Now we have to question whether a gentile vs. one of the lost tribe.

So he's saying that Luke's narrative really is the bridge between the story of and life of Jesus and Paul's writings. If that is to be the case, then Luke's account almost by necessity has to have some differences because he really is acting as an interpreter.

350 bottom, that's a very fair and kind of subtle point. One has to think that, going back to the Noah story, all animals that made it on to the ark were worthy in the eyes of God. Why, then, did some of them "transmute" into unclean beasts not to be eaten or associated with or used?

354, is it way too far-fetched to speculate that Barnabas acted as Paul's "patron", providing the needed funding, stature and sustenance for this mission to proceed?

355, "bring a message"---how interesting!! I had no idea that this concept was encapsulated in the Christian scriptures. We call it a "dvar Torah" and, indeed, a humble and common member of the congregation can, and often does, come forward to give their own insight and interpretation into the Torah portion read that day and its applicability to the current state of events.

335. As you all know today, those three "sects"---orthodox, conservative and reform---remain the three observance-based separations of Judaism to this day. What you *should* know is that the conservative movement is in a kind of slow, dying decline, while both orthodox and reform populations are increasing.

357, too funny—the long sermons. And yes, this is almost remarkable---that the person who had the most effect on Christianity, his death details do not seem to be recorded---or made up, or important enough. That in itself may also have been a subtle change that entered with this religion....it disabused itself of the need to glorify its followers.

361, or as I put it. It's not about 'here's what's wrong, let's fix it' but instead 'you're what's wrong, we'll fix YOU'. This *is* my fundamental distillation of fundamentalism

362, top, and thus the religion has become "polluted" with the mores of hierarchical humanity.

362—Paul....as Moses? The description Spong gives here would work.

362, bottom, some themes are not exorcisable.

363, his footnote on gnostics has a certain parallel in our culture---the kabbalistic movement of mysticism

363, and thus, if this is true, a sad thing occurs---the religion closes down on itself and maybe, betrays its roots. It speaks to something. How hard it is to embrace change fully.

364 “Christianity probably would not have survived had it not become institutionalized and that it might not continue to survive because it did become institutionalized”. It’s an interesting and very fair observation that this person makes. Certainly it accords with my long-held-view of religion and followers in a parasite-host relationship, with each one sometimes being the parasite.

364, he comes back here to his “core of any religion” statement

364, bottom, but the thing of it is....they *are* a part of Christian history, and should be respected and learned from for that, no?

366, yet he still continues to walk his path. I do have abiding respect for him in doing so. And he states, on truth being captured by human words, “to claim that it can be is to admit to idolatry.”. THIS MAY BE THE MOST IMPORTANT SENTENCE IN THIS ENTIRE BOOK. We worship a false God. Ourselves. To believe we live by and because of the grace of God is good. To believe we *are* the grace of God? *that* is the ultimate and deadliest test of temptation. Because it roots itself in self-worth. And questing after self-worth is a quest very few humans can ignore. If I had the chance to ask him a question, it would be here. How does he himself manage the tightrope walk of finding and determining his place in the world and the meaning of his life without stepping off and into finding and determining his “pride of place” in the world? I’m not myself sure how to tackle this struggle between self-awareness and growth and the driving human need to know and set their place among others.

369, that part of his recitation about the two goats is accurate. It bears saying that part of the time we spend reflecting on that passage is appreciating the very substantial formalism and ritual of the whole process---and that part of the intent was to focus the congregation on the importance of ritualism

369, bottom. No, it’s not—as I’ve said earlier, it’s very clear that both offerings are goats (at least in my English translation of the Maschzor—the book read on the high holidays). “one” goat is slaughtered and the other goat is sent into the wilderness. Not 2 different types of animal

I’m glad that he got around to clarifying this story vs. his writings about it earlier in this book.

370—Yom Kippur. It would have to have been. With the possible exception of the festival honouring Dionysius, no other day would have been so strongly imprinted in the minds of a culture and its surrounding cultures.

370 bottom, I respect this stating of his understanding of the meaning of Hebrews and it is probably accurate. It is wholly inaccurate in terms of how I myself view Yom Kippur which is diametrically different---that yes, the yearning for change, but the *opportunity* to change, and then to come back and *continue* to change, and grow. As an absolute illumination of this, I am now going to give you my “I wish I was better at “ list that I sent to my Rabbi before this Yom Kippur, when thinking about the Al Het recitation (and which I referred to way back in my notes at page 14-16 or so). This is my first direct cut-and-paste for you this time

from my "Chronicles" and it is quite recent, the first one coming directly out of some discussions Deb and I had on our trip last spring.

"At Yom Kippur, instead of the usual "Al Het"s and "for the sin I have committed", I'll do this:

- *I wish I was better at having more empathy for what my friends want and need both for themselves and from me in our friendship*
- *I wish I was better at not being a slob and as messy at home*
- *I wish I was better at not spending too much money*
- *I wish I was better at working hard*
- *I wish I was better at being more of a leader*
- *I wish I was better at not getting annoyed when someone comes into my lane in the swimming pool or does something dumb while driving on the road*
- *I wish I was a better driver*
- *I wish I was better at sticking to a physical fitness regimen*
- *I wish I was better at returning people's emails and not letting messages slip through the cracks*
- *I wish I was better at listening*
- *I wish I was better at living a more Jewish life*
- *I wish I was better at dealing with and transmuting the worst in people*
- *I wish I was better at being a better son, a better brother, a more involved uncle*
- *I wish I was better at making fewer mistakes and not making them more than once*
- *I wish I was better at being better*

It is OK to want to be better at things. I'm not saying I'm particularly bad at any of 'em. I just wish I was better. And it is interesting, isn't it, that no one says "I wish I was worse at", even if you were to use it in a 'double negative' sense---"I wish I was worse at blaming people" or "I wish I was worse at passing off responsibility" or "I wish I was worse at eating the whole tub of ice cream". No one says that. It says something about us, doesn't it? We so avoid blaming ourselves and putting ourselves

*down. Hopefully I'll actually pick up my proverbial socks and *be* better at these things in the coming year(s)."*

371—"Melchizedek" ("mel-hee-tzed-ek") translates as "king of righteousness"

373, I take due note of his structure in this book and dealing with "small books of the prophets" and now "four small books" in the new testament.

373, let's not forget that in Jewish tradition, famous brothers did not always see eye to eye---Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Adonijah and Solomon---even Moses and Aaron at times.

377, I chuckle-snorted at that ending.

382 if it is, in fact, the last gospel, it has benefitted from what has come before and the "initial richness" of the faith and religion even as it has grown in these early years

387-391, a very interesting read

396-397, [Mike commented in the email "I do ask, though, that you have a look at what I have to say about pages 396-397 and the beloved disciple. I was quite bothered by the approach he took here."]

the beloved disciple as a symbol. While it makes sense in the context in which he's setting his whole discussion of John and while it is one possibility, this really ruffles my feathers, because he is, to me, intentionally ignoring the rest of his lead-up. Let us take Bishop Spong back in his book, to page 263. He tells the story of Elijah and Elisha. Spong has been at pains in this book to emphasize that the gospel writers (and perhaps Paul) rooted their writings in Jewish tradition and the Jewish heroes. So? How can it not be possible that the "beloved disciple" is a reference to Elisha, the chosen successor to Elijah and a further "grounding" of the new religion in identifiable Jewish religious history? The fact that we do not know the beloved disciple doesn't detract from this---instead, it is a reflection that the newborn religion was already somewhat fractured, which we can see in the variances in the 3 gospels before it....and now this one. Why could there not have been 3 competing sects and, if the John writer was this astute, why not leave the disciple's identity a mystery so as not to further fracture the faith? I submit this alternative interpretation---which I never would have considered without Spong's earlier writing in this book---as a possibility.

402, "when". Indeed it would have been at least a week's journey. For the 3 days, I'm not sure when this side of our tradition became a viable premise, but see this link

<http://peopleof.oureverydaylife.com/jewish-belief-spirit-lingers-three-days-9380.html>

there is some belief that the soul ascends to heaven only 3 days after death. So---if this was a concept back then, Jesus would have had *only* 3 days to physically return to life.

409. Shalom, and thank you Bishop Spong.

