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“Delightedly publishing another book as he nears 85, Spong returns to a main theme of his career, the Jewishness of Christianity....Informed by the many academic studies of Christian Jewishness, Spong makes their findings vibrantly accessible.” —*Booklist*

New Book by John Shelby Spong Calls Biblical Literalism a Gentile Heresy

A global and pioneering leader of progressive Christianity, retired bishop John Shelby Spong has challenged biblical literalism as a dangerous misreading of the text that obscures the meaning of Jesus. In fact, a literal reading of the Bible is so far removed from the original Jewish authors' intent that it is heretical, he says in his new book, **Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy** (HarperOne, \$26.99 hardcover, on sale 2/16/16). This mistaken notion entered the church once Gentiles had replaced all of the original Jewish followers of Jesus, fostering in that process an anti-Jewish bias that has kept the church locked inside “an anti-Semitic, Gentile exile,” since at least the year 150 CE.

It is the 25th book by the 84-year-old Spong, who was the Episcopal Bishop of Newark, NJ, for 24 years. A man who has consciously and deliberately walked the path of Christ, Spong has lived his entire life inside the Christian church. Known for his dedication to progressive social change, such as LGBTQ rights, his portrait hangs in the Hall of Honor of civil rights leaders at the Martin Luther King, Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse College.

In this volume Spong focuses on the gospel of Matthew, showing how the liturgical life of the synagogue is its organizing principle. Jewish culture, symbols, and storytelling tradition inform the gospel, which was written to provide Jesus stories for the Sabbaths and holy days of the Jewish liturgical year. Much of what Christians believe to be historical people and events are not, Spong says: Joseph, the “earthly” father of Jesus did not exist; Herod did not slaughter innocent infants; Jesus did not preach the Sermon on the Mount, nor did he compose the Lord's Prayer.

Matthew was painting an interpretive portrait of a “barrier-breaking Christ,” inviting all people into the meaning of God's life and love. His gospel “points to the experience of life expanded in the presence of Jesus. That experience is literal,” Spong says. “The story is not. It is not a call to believe in miracles, but a call to enter the one who makes all life whole.”

Among the book's themes are:

- Jesus' passion and death: “The death of Jesus by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans was history, an event that actually happened. The Bible's account of the crucifixion, however, was not.” The passion narrative is a liturgical interpretation, based on the Hebrew Scriptures and was never intended to be read as objective history.
- Universalism: To bring all people into oneness is a major theme in Matthew, one that is developed more fully in such later books as Luke, Acts, and John. It is to this day the major thrust of the Christian faith, Spong says.

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- Yom Kippur and Christianity: It is crucial that Christians understand Yom Kippur, which has influenced Christianity more than any other Jewish holy day, with its symbols such as “the Lamb of God” and the scapegoat. For Christians to say “Jesus died for my sins” is a complete misunderstanding and misappropriation of the symbols of Yom Kippur.
- Atonement theology: Christianity must, therefore, be freed from the “shackles of atonement theology,” which Spong calls “barbaric” and “a gigantic guilt trip.” It is not the pathway to life, he says: “The ability to give ourselves away to others in love is.”
- Holiness: Matthew’s gospel addresses the question of where holiness lies. It is not found in keeping religious rules, but rather in the vision of human wholeness.

“Extending the presence of the holy in every life is finally what being the messiah means,” Spong says. “Matthew has painted a portrait of Jesus who is so at one with God that he is beyond every sectarian boundary that religious people have ever tried to impose on him. That is why the Christian story must become a universal story. That was Matthew’s goal.”

JOHN SHELBY SPONG was the Episcopal Bishop of Newark, NJ, for 24 years. He has lectured at more than five hundred universities, colleges and theological seminaries around the world, including Cambridge and Harvard. His books have sold well over a million copies. His bestsellers include *The Sins of Scripture*, *Eternal Life: A New Vision*, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, and his autobiography, *Here I Stand*. His weekly online column reaches thousands of subscribers all over the world. Visit him online at www.JohnShelbySpong.com.

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