

Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992),

## 1. **ESCAPING BIBLICAL LITERALISM**

For most of the two thousand years of history since the birth of our Lord, the Christian church has participated in and supported the oppression of women. This oppression has been both overt and covert, conscious and unconscious. It has come primarily through the church's ability in the name of God to define a woman and to make that definition stick. It was grounded in a literalistic understanding of Holy Scripture thought of as the infallible word of God and produced in a patriarchal era. Patriarchy and God have been so deeply and uncritically linked to gender by the all-male church hierarchy that men have little understood how this alliance has been used to the determined of all women.<sup>1</sup>

It is quite easy to dismiss biblical fundamentalism on intellectual grounds. The Bible is full of contradictions. The same God who says in one place, "You shall not kill" (Ex. 20:13), in another place orders Israel to "slay the Amalekites, every man, woman and child" (I Sam.15:3ff). The God who seems to entertain a universal consciousness when heard to say, "My name shall be great among the gentiles" (Mal. 1:10) or "Every valley shall be exalted" (Is. 40:4), is also pictured as rejoicing over the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea (Ex. 15) and allowing the heads of the Edomite children to be "dashed against the rocks" (Ps. 137:7-9). An entire manuscript filled with similar contradictions could be gathered quickly.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus did not choose women to be his disciples and therefore, women cannot be disciples: Pope John Paul II has supported a document and an attitude that proclaims, "Women will never be priests in the Roman Catholic Church because Jesus did not choose any women to be his disciples." [Many Korean churches join in this prejudice on women.] Scholars claim that this is a literal misuse of the Holy Scriptures. In the social order and mores of the first century, a woman as a member of a disciple band of an itinerant rabbi or teacher was inconceivable. The female role was too clearly circumscribed for that even to be imagined. However, biblical literalism is eclectic rather than thoroughgoing.<sup>3</sup> [Spong would claim] that perhaps it has not yet occurred to the bishop of Rome that Jesus did not choose any Polish males to be disciples either, but this did not exclude from the priesthood the Polish boy Karol Jozef Wojtyla, who became John Paul II. [The same thing can be said about Korean male. Jesus did not choose any Korean males to be disciples but this did not exclude from the priesthood the Korean males to be pastors of the church].<sup>4</sup>

The woman was the property of the man. Lot, called righteous, by the Bible, offered his virgin daughters to the angry mob in the city of Sodom (Gen. 19:8). Who will step forward to support that part of "biblical morality"? In the biblical morality, the wife was listed after a man's house and before a man's ox, as a possession not to be coveted by another man (Ex. 20:17). Moralists who quote the seventh commandment prohibiting adultery (Ex. 20:14) fail to realize that polygamy was the style of marriage abroad when that commandment was given. Indeed, three hundred years after the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, says the Bible (I King 11:3). What does adultery mean when one man possesses one thousand women? In its literal context the seventh commandment really enjoined one man from violating the woman who was the property of another man.<sup>5</sup>

### Literalism is challenged:

According to Spong, Literalism masquerades under many forms - from the blatant to the subtle to the unconscious - but it is literalism nonetheless, and in every in every instance it is finally destructive to truth. Because the power of institutional Christianity has been assumed to rest upon the literal assertions of a fourth century creed, it is easy to understand why biblical literalism continues to possess its tenacious hold upon ecclesiastical leadership, including those academicians who teach the clergy of the future in some of the seminaries of this land, particularly the denominationally based seminaries. A literalized myth is a doomed myth. Its truth cannot be rescued. Literalism is not even a benign

<sup>1</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 1. (In a unique and intriguing sense, the parts of the Bible that have contributed most to this negativity have been the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. These stories, far more than is generally realized, assisted in the development of the ecclesiastical stereotype of the ideal woman against which all women came to be judged).

<sup>2</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 9.

alternative for contemporary Christians. It is, in the modern world, nothing less than an enemy to faith in Jesus Christ. It is a belief system built on ignorance, which acts as if God, the infinite mystery, can be defined in the words of any human being or in the thought forms of a particular era.<sup>6</sup> Literalism is a claim that God's eternal truth has been or can be, captured in the time-limited concepts of human history.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. **APPROACHING THE STORY FROM MIDRASH**

## 3. **BORN OF A WOMAN - PAUL'S WITNESS**

*But when the time had fully come, god sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.(Gal. 4:4, 5)*

They were written by Paul between 49 and 55 C.E., or some nineteen to twenty-five years after the events of Calvary and the experience of Easter and some sixteen to twenty-one years before the first Gospel was penned.<sup>8</sup>

## 4. **FROM THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS TO THE SCANDAL OF THE CRIB**

Paul wrote from approximately 47 to 64 C.E. His early letters midway between the life of Jesus and the First Gospel. His last letters were midway between the life of Jesus and the fourth Gospel.<sup>9</sup>

### Hebrew's Understanding of God:

Who is this? What is the meaning of his [Jesus] life? Whence does he come? First, they experienced his power. Second, they sought to understand his power. Third, they attempted to explain the origin of his power. That is a familiar process in human mental meanderings. The experience is always primary, the reflective understanding of the experience is always secondary, and the tales that illumine or explain the understanding are always tertiary. Even the word *God* was, and is, a culturally conditioned construct. The first-century world, and ancient people generally, thought of God after the analogy of a superhuman. The human image of the highest rank was a king. The king was male, sovereign over a single nation, and the most powerful person in the land.<sup>10</sup> God was pictured as a superking, very much male, with sovereignty over the whole world, with power beyond human comprehension. It was the power of light, darkness, wind, wave, thunder, lightning, flood, drought, life, and death. His throne- for all kings have thrones- was beyond the sky, where he reigned in majestic splendor. In the face of this divine power, people groveled in fear. They sought to win God's favor with sacrifices, offerings, and words of flattery and praise. They sought to win divine approval with behavior modeled on what they understood to be God's will, God's law.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus was interpreted by the early Christians in terms of their assumed and unquestioned concepts of God, modeled after the image of heavenly king. The focus was on the exalted Jesus seated at the right hand of the heavenly throne.<sup>12</sup>

Among Hebrew people there was a vast messianic expectation that took many forms, but Jesus did not fit any of them. The image of a crucified messiah, hanging limp and dead from a wooden cross, violated Hebrew messianic expectations. Only a man who had committed a crime punishable by death was to be hanged on a tree, said the Torah, and "you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God" (Deut. 21:22-23). Not only was he executed in a public place, but soldiers rolled dice for his only garment, hurled a spear into his side, and gave him to a petitioning group to be buried in a borrowed tomb. It was not a king-like portrait. His closest friends certainly did not understand him as a messiah. One of them betrayed him, another denied him, and all forsook him and fled. This ignoble group of disciples had acted in an ignoble manner. Would a real messiah

<sup>6</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 33.

<sup>11</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 34.

<sup>12</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 35.

have chosen so benign and lowbrow a group of disciples? When his words were remembered, he fit neither the mythic hero image nor the messianic image. He claimed no power. Rather he said things like: "Unless you become like little children [powerless children], you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).<sup>13</sup>

He said the "last shall be first" (Mark 10:31). He washed the feet of the disciples (John 13:1-11). "I am among you as one who serves," he stated (Luke 22:27). He exhorted them to decline power images, not to lord it over people as the kings of the Gentiles did (Luke 22:25). He identified his cause with finding the sheep that were lost (Luke 15:4) and welcoming home the prodigal who wasted his father's wealth in a life of debauchery (Luke 14:11ff). His teaching found him using Lazarus, a poor beggar whose sores were licked by the dogs of the street, as the sign of his kingdom rather than Dives, the rich man who dined sumptuously (Luke 16:20ff). He identified his cause with the half-breed Samaritan who went out of his way to alleviate suffering, not with the priest or the Levite who passed by on the other side (Luke 10:29ff). He said his disciples were to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39), to go the second mile (Matt. 5:4), and to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44). He placed his cause on the side of the "woman of the city" who washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, not on the side of the morally righteous Simon the Pharisee, in whose home he was guest when that woman arrived (Luke 7:36ff). He was not willing to fight for his rights or his life, to use compulsive power to achieve his objectives. He suggested that his disciples must forgive not once or twice but up to and beyond seventy times seven occasions (Matt. 18:22).

His strength, strangely enough, lay in his willingness to sacrifice himself to his enemies. His life was a call to reverse the standards of the world. In that world, importance was achieved by having power over others; serving others was thought to be demeaning. When this self-giving Jesus was crucified, he refused to defend himself. He accepted the whips and nails of his tormentors, and he died praying for them (Luke 23:34). His life was too vivid to be forgotten, too real to be ignored.<sup>14</sup>

He fit neither the messianic role of the of the Hebrews nor the mythic hero role of the Greeks. Hence Paul called him "folly" to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18) and suggested that Jesus represented a scandal. How does one take that life and fit it into the expectations of either the Greeks or the Hebrews? Yet how could they deny the power of the experience men and women had with this Jesus? His love was real. His sense of presence was vivid. His magnetic appeal to others was immense. Self-giving, suffering, powerlessness, and self-sacrifice were the marks of his human life. There was an undeniable beauty about this Jesus, who was in fact "a man for others. Conflict between experience and expectation reached a climax on Good Friday. Jesus died, and for his followers the darkness of that moment was almost physical."<sup>15</sup>

Easter broke, I believe, not so much with a supernatural external miracle but with the dawning internal realization that this life of Jesus reflected a new image of God, an image that defied the conventional wisdom, an image that called into question the exalted king as the primary analogy by which God could be understood. This life - selfless, broken, loving, given away, powerless- this life was the very life of God. To this life could come all who travail and are heavy laden. Here one would find rest and peace, and that was what was meant by God. It was a startling insight. A dead man became the means through which the living God was seen. A weak man, beaten and broken, was the symbol through which the triumphant God was perceived. An executed man became the one who made these disciples aware the meaning of a divinity to which their eyes had been closed or even blinded. That life was God's life. The first witnesses to what we now call Easter were invited to embrace the scandal, to transcend the foolishness, to open their eyes in wonder.<sup>16</sup> God was present in that life, was their inescapable conclusion. God was seen not as a king ruling life but as a power within life. God was not to be perceived after the analogy of a distant deity, who was both superhuman and isolated, but; rather as a divine essence not separate from and not identical with but incarnate within humanity, emerging from the heart of life in self-giving love and freely offered being. That was the revelation that lay behind the alleluias of that first Easter. That was the meaning of God disclosed in the person of Jesus that somehow challenged the regal images

<sup>13</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 37.

<sup>14</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 38.

<sup>15</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 39.

<sup>16</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 39.

of the past. That essence, consequently, had to be lifted theologically into being the essence and definition of God. The experience of those who perceived demanded it.<sup>17</sup>

The ancient content of the victorious messiah of the Jews and the mythic hero of the Greeks captured, tamed, and refined the essence of Jesus. The experience of self-giving love being elevated into the essence of God was thus interpreted in terms of a mythic king being exalted to a heavenly throne and of a messiah who received God's divine vindication.<sup>18</sup>

But he was "born of a woman." That became the Maginot line designed to preserve at least a vestige of his humanity. With the scandal of the cross removed, however, it was but a matter of time before the scandal of his birth became the focus of the battle to see Jesus in terms of mythic hero, divine savior. His origins were equally as scandalous as his means of death. He was a nobody, a child of Nazareth out of which nothing good was thought to come. No one seemed to know his father. He might well have been illegitimate. Hints of that are scattered like undetected and unexploded nuggets of dynamite in the landscape of the early Christian tradition. Once again the interpretive task went to work. He was not an illegitimate child, God was his father; he was born of the Holy Spirit. He was not a native of Nazareth, he was born in Bethlehem, the City of David. That Bethlehem birth had been foretold by the prophet Micah. He was not a nobody, he was of the royal house of David. We can trace his genealogy.<sup>19</sup>

God could be seen and experienced in the self-giving love emerging from the life and heart of a betrayed, denied, forsaken, executed man began to shift from the events at the end of Jesus' life to the events at the beginning of Jesus' life. The cross had to be "fixed" before the origins could be addressed. Paul had done his work and died the martyr's death before any of these issues began to be raised. Mark, the first Gospel, wrote his story of Jesus' life with no allusion whatsoever to Jesus' birth or origins. By the ninth decade of the Christian era, this issue was drawn and addressed in a variety of ways. The birth tradition about Jesus had come into being.<sup>20</sup>

## 6. MATTHEW'S STORY, PART 1

### IMMANUEL

For the author of Matthew's Gospel, Immanuel had appeared. He wrote to proclaim his conviction that in Jesus of Nazareth God had been experienced living in human history. This concept was expressed as a promise in the Gospel's opening verses when the angel said to Joseph, "His name shall be called Immanuel which means "God with us." Jesus claimed himself to be Immanuel, "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20).<sup>21</sup>

[The author's] his desire was to illumine the presence of the God he met in Jesus, to proclaim how this Jesus had fulfilled the yearnings of the ages, how Jewish hopes, traditions, expectations, and even folklore that found completion in this human life that he had come to acknowledge as Immanuel, Lord, and Christ.

### When Matthew wrote the Gospel:

When the Gospel was written ... the only objective data available to him was the impact of the life of this Jesus. That impact was so significant that the story of his life had been told and retold from life to life, from heart to heart, from faith to faith. By the time Matthew wrote, at least fifty years had passed since Jesus' earthly life was concluded, Perhaps as many as eighty five years had passed since his birth. Modern readers of Matthew's narrative must realize that his work is not history or biography, it is a proclamation of living faith. It cannot be read as literal history without turning its truth into either nonsense or fantasy.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 40.

<sup>18</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 40.

<sup>19</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 41.

<sup>20</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 42.

<sup>21</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 61.

<sup>22</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 62.

Since the physical life of this historical figure had come to an end, some difficult events of history had also occurred. A Jewish revolution had taken place against Rome and its political domination of their nation. It was a revolution based more on Jewish emotion than on the reality of Jewish power and was therefore crushed by the Roman legions. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed. The temple was razed, leaving only one wall remaining, which became the "wailing wall," and the Jewish nation ceased to exist.<sup>23</sup>

With the destruction of the Jewish nation came also the destruction of that Jewish center of this Jesus movement. The presence of Jewish people in the Christian movement was greatly weakened, and the Christian church's Jewish ties were loosened. Gentiles began to outnumber Jews among those called "the followers of the way."<sup>24</sup>

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So it was that sometime in the early to middle years of ninth decade of the common era, perhaps ten to fifteen years after the fall of Jerusalem, a Jewish member of the Christian community, probably in Syria, took upon himself the task of writing a story of Jesus. At least one other Gospel, known as *kata Markon* (according to Mark), had already been written, but Mark was simply not adequate to meet the needs of this anonymous person felt. This author felt that Mark was not so much wrong as in need of expansion and perhaps a different emphasis. From time to time he did change and correct Mark, but he was more eager simply to add things to the first Gospel. He did it well, for the common wisdom in the first few centuries of Christian history was that what we call Matthew was the original and most trustworthy Gospel and that Mark was simply a condensed account - a kind of *Reader's Digest* version of Matthew. This point of view, though all but abandoned by scholars today, accounted for the fact that Matthew was placed first in the canon of the New Testament that was adopted by the church in the second century.<sup>25</sup>

#### Author of the Matthew

About this author we have almost no personal information. The connection with the tax collecting disciple, called Levi Matthew, is a later and totally unsubstantiated assumption. Nothing about the Gospel suggests that the author was an eyewitness to the events he was describing, From internal sources we know that although he was Jewish, his primary language was Greek. We can presume that he was, in all probability, a Jew of the dispersion. He had certainly been shaped by the heritage of his Jewish worship tradition, He hold an enormous respect for the Jewish law, for only in this Gospel is Jesus heard to say, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5,18).<sup>26</sup>

Fiercest hostility ws directed toward those Jewish religious leaders who had opposed Jesus. P. 64.

The presence of Jewish Christians inside the structure of Judaism came to be regarded by he Jews as an abomination, a cancer that had to be removed. - Excommunication of Jewish Christians. The author of Matthew's Gospel appears to have been a member of a group of these excommunicated Jewish Christians. He was a Jewish member of a Christian community that included both Jews and Gentiles. P. 65.

#### Matthew's genealogy includes five women

One other fascinating item is buried in the genealogy. Matthew has inserted the names of five women, including Mary, who is identified as "the wife of Joseph of whom Jesus was born" (Matt. 1:16). It was first of all, unusual in this day to mention women in any genealogy; but, beyond that, these particular women present a special problem. All of them were tainted by some sexual impropriety. In addition to Mary, the genealogy presents Tamar, who played the prostitute to seduce her father-in-law, Judah' (Gen. 38: 1ff); Rahab, another prostitute, who assisted the spies in Jericho (Josh. 2: 1ff); Ruth, the Moabite lady who, by sleeping in his bed while he was inebriated, forced Boaz to exercise his filial responsibility to marry her (Ruth 3:6ff); and Bathsheba, who was identified in this genealogy not by name but as the wife of Uriah. David had violated this woman and arranged

<sup>23</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 62.

<sup>24</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 62.

<sup>25</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 63.

<sup>26</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 63.

for Uriah's death in battle after being smitten with her charms as he watched her bathing on the rooftop (2 Sam. II :2ff.). The inclusion of these women in this genealogy has intrigued and frustrated interpreters through the ages. Jerome, one of the early church fathers, suggested that since all the women were sinners, they foreshadowed Jesus the Savior of men. This bit of logic was typical of Jerome, who was never quite sure that women were fully human. The fact is, however, that in the Jewish piety of Jesus' time these women were highly esteemed and would not have been thought of as sinners by Matthew's readers, so Jerome's argument falters on other grounds.<sup>27</sup>

Luther appears to have been the first to suggest that all these women were foreigners and were included by Matthew to show that the Jewish Messiah was related by ancestry to the Gentiles. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites, Ruth a Moabite, and Bathsheba presumably was a Hittite. That argument may have some power, given Matthew's desire to uphold universalism. Mary, however, does not fit into this scheme. There is no hint anywhere that Mary was other than Jewish. One of the difficulties that renders this idea not fully supportable is that in Matthew's day these women were regarded by the Jewish tradition not as foreigners but as Jewish proselytes, and this status of proselyte was not the proposed status for the gentile Christians of Matthew's audience. Luther's interpretation, while not without merit, nonetheless has serious weaknesses.<sup>28</sup>

More modern scholars, including Herman Hendrickx, have dared to see in the inclusion of these four women a foreshadowing of Mary's compromised sexual status. Something is highly irregular about the union of each with her sexual partner or husband. Indeed, to the definers of public morality, each would constitute something of a scandal. Yet, each stood at a critical moment in the life of the covenant community, and by taking the action she took, each enabled the promise of God not to be thwarted. The line of the Christ came through the violation of Tamar, the prostitution of Rahab, the adultery of Bathsheba, and the grafting of Ruth's half-Moabite son into the sacred history of the Jewish people. This part of the genealogy, therefore, is startling, seldom noted, seldom read, seldom preached on but provocatively included by Matthew as a prelude to his story of Mary, woman pregnant before marriage by an unknown source that resulted in her betrothed's desire to put her away as "damaged good." These four women become examples to Matthew of how God could achieve the divine purpose despite the violation of moral norms.<sup>29</sup>

~~Matthew's Genealogy; The Birth of Jesus; the Birth of Mary's Child~~

When one sees the impact of the midrash tradition on the birth narrative of Matthew, this conclusion receives additional strengthening. In the midrash these four women not only kept alive the royal line and therefore the messianic hope, but each was said to have done so by submission to the Holy Spirit. «In the midrash the clue that linked these women to Mary in Matthew's mind becomes clear and even obvious. Irregular sexual activity initiated by the action of the Spirit has, in the past, enabled the promise of Israel to move forward." Mary's pregnancy, Matthew was, admitting also had about it a bit of scandal that cried out to be understood. To this intriguing note I shall return later.<sup>30</sup>

Jesus' heritage had now been described through the genealogy, Matthew's major themes revolving around Abraham and David had been established therein, and the ground had been laid to develop the Son of God motif. Matthew then turned to telling the story of the birth of Jesus. It took place in this way, he asserted, as he proceeded with his account of the virginal conception. First, Jesus' parents were introduced. Mary had been betrothed to Joseph. Betrothal in Jewish society had the legal force of marriage and was quite often entered into at age twelve or thirteen, even before puberty. The inauguration of married life as husband and wife might not occur until several years later, perhaps after the onset of puberty. Marital relations in the betrothal period were not absolutely conditioned in Judea, but they tended to be condemned in Galilee. In Matthew's narrative, Mary and Joseph lived in Bethlehem and were therefore under the less stringent Judean code that would not

<sup>27</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 69.

<sup>28</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 70.

<sup>29</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 70.

<sup>30</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 71.

have forbidden absolutely what might called betrothal visiting rights.<sup>31</sup> However, the intense tone of scandal found in Matthew's narrative fits far better the prohibitive Galilean tradition and constitutes another bit of data that casts doubt on the entire Bethlehem location for Jesus' birth.<sup>32</sup>

The Spirit of God and conception P. 72.

#### Women accompanied Jesus:

Yet here in the gospel record itself is clear evidence that the disciple band was accompanied both in Galilee and in Judea by a group of women. Indeed, the texts even state that these women provided for the disciples and for Jesus out of their means, a point one of our female bishops loves to make publicly. When we read the record of the presence of these women we cannot help but note in these texts the prominence given to the one called Mary Magdalene.

"There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome, who, when he [note the singular: Jesus] was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him; and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem" (Mark 15:40).

"Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid" (Mark 15:47).

"There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him; among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (Matt. 27:55-56).

"Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the sepulchre" (Matt. 27:61).

Describing the early Galilean phase of Jesus' ministry Luke writes: "Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means" (Luke 8:1-3 ).

"And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance and saw these things" (Luke 23:49).<sup>33</sup>

"The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and saw the tomb, and how his body was laid; then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments" (Luke 23:55-56).

Somehow our mental image of the early life of Jesus and the disciples needs to be expanded. The Gospel record seems to indicate that Jesus and the disciples were accompanied on their journeys by a group of women. I mean nothing suggestive in these comments, but I must note that given the rules governing "women in first century Jewish society a group of women who followed a male band of disciples had to be wives, mothers, or prostitutes. Paul's reference seems to suggest that the disciples, the brothers of the Lord, and especially Peter, were accompanied by wives. What then, we must ask, was the role of Mary Magdalene? In this context that becomes an interesting question for she is certainly given the priority position in every passage. In the first century a woman's status was directly related to the status of the man in her life. In the Gospels Mary Magdalene is always listed first, and that would seem to argue that she was related in some way to the one who clearly was the focus of each Gospel, Jesus of Nazareth.

When we embrace this picture of the women in Jesus' movement then the Gospel portrayal of the role of women in the resurrection story becomes less of a surprise. Somehow we have come to think that the women in the resurrection accounts arise out of no previous history. Clearly that is a misperception. In the resurrection tradition once again Mary Magdalene is the central figure. The Gospels vary as to which women went to the tomb at dawn at the first day of the week, but everyone of them includes the name of Mary Magdalene first (Mark 16:1; Matt. 28:1; Luke 24:10; John 20:1).

There are other hints in the fourth Gospel that might be explored. Only in John is the story told of the

<sup>31</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 71.

<sup>32</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 72.

<sup>33</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 190.

wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (John 2: 1-11).<sup>34</sup>

She is the only one to whom such a confession of faith in the not-yet-risen Lord is attributed. Or does this phrase on Mary's lips in this context mean "my lord" in the way a first-century Jewish woman would refer to her husband? Once again this is an interesting speculation based on data present in the text but hidden from blinded eyes for centuries.<sup>35</sup>

John's narrative does not stop there. Mary Magdalene turns, and through her tears, sees another figure in the early morning darkness that she takes to be a gardener. This figure repeats the angelic question, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" (John 20:15). Mary responds, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away" (John 20:15). Note these words! Mary is claiming the right to the body. In first-century Jewish society to claim the body of the deceased, especially for a woman to claim the body of a deceased man, would be totally inappropriate unless the woman was the nearest of kin! Mary Magdalene is the primary female figure in the gospel narrative. She is the chief mourner, she refers to Jesus as "my lord," and she is the one who lays claim to the body of Jesus. These data certainly raise questions about her relationship to Jesus.<sup>36</sup>

John's story moves on. Jesus, in this text says, "Mary." She turns in recognition and says, "Rabboni!" It is a familiar form of the Hebrew word for teacher. Those who use the familiar forms are expressing a relationship of intimacy. Then try to imagine what happens next. The text simply has Jesus say "Mary, do not hold me" or "do not cling to me." Clearly Mary embraced this figure. Women did not embrace or touch men in Jewish society unless they were married and even then it was done in the privacy of one's home. Reading these texts with a new consciousness brings new possibilities into the imagination.<sup>37</sup>

3. though he refers to it in chapter II. until chapter 1:2... ver~e

Mark also told a story of a woman in Bethany who anointed Jesus with "pure nard," pouring the oil over his head. In Mark the woman is not named but Jesus called this action "a beautiful thing" (Mark 14:6). There is no hint in either Mark or John that this was anything except a gesture of intimate love. Luke however tells a very similar story (Luke 7:37ff), and Luke makes the woman out to be "a woman of the city, who was a sinner." In the first century that was a common description of a prostitute. Jesus' detractors in Luke's narrative say, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39).<sup>38</sup>

Luke does not identify this woman with Mary the sister of Martha, as John does. But when Luke tells his story of Jesus visiting in the home of Mary and Martha, other interesting data emerge. Not only is Jesus a guest in their home but Martha is busy in the kitchen preparing for her guest while Mary is busy listening to Jesus. Martha comes and demands that Jesus order her sister Mary to assist her in the kitchen. What was the relationship between Jesus, a guest, and Mary, Martha's sister, that would cause Martha to assume that Jesus had the authority to command and that Mary would obey? That authority did exist in Jewish society in the first century in the marriage relationships.<sup>39</sup>

If this Mary can in fact be identified with Mary Magdalene, as many scholars suggest, then the intimate role of anointing Jesus' head with oil, kissing Jesus' feet, and wiping Jesus' feet with her hair would have been things done to Jesus by Mary Magdalene. These actions would be appropriate only in one of two roles; Mary was either his wife or she was a prostitute.

John and Mark treat this episode as an intimate moment inside a very close circle with no hint of impropriety. Luke treats this episode as if the woman is a woman of the street. At the same time, Luke treats Mary the sister of Martha very positively and does not identify Mary with the woman "who is a sinner." Indeed, the woman of the city in Luke is nameless. Do we have in Luke the first hint of the need

<sup>34</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 191.

<sup>35</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 194.

<sup>36</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 194.

<sup>37</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 194.

<sup>38</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 195.

<sup>39</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 195.



to push Mary Magdalene out of Jesus' life by tarnishing her reputation while slowly but surely elevating the virgin mother to the role of the primary woman in the Christian story? Luke does treat Mary the mother of Jesus kindly, indeed more kindly than does Mark. In Luke the mother of Jesus "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). She is also present at Pentecost (Acts 1:14). Furthermore, Luke has quite purposefully softened Mark's criticism of Jesus' mother (compare Mark 3:31-35 with Luke 8:19-21). Does this begin to fit a pattern? There is still more to consider.<sup>40</sup>

What does Magdalene mean? The common wisdom is that the word Magdalene comes from the village of Magdala. However, no one has ever been able to identify such a town. It is mentioned nowhere in the Hebrew scriptures or in the writings of Josephus. One scholar has suggested that Magdalene was derived by Mark from the Hebrew word *magdal*, which means great or large." If that is accurate then Mary Magdalene originally meant Mary the great, or the great Mary. If this Mary is the great Mary and the mother of Jesus is a secondary Mary, what must Magdalene's relationship to Jesus have been? Is not the role of wife the only female role that would rank above the role of mother?<sup>41</sup>

Obviously these data are not conclusive but they do constitute a cumulative argument that suggests that Jesus might well have been married, that Mary Magdalene, as the primary woman in the Gospel story itself, was Jesus' wife, and that this record was suppressed but not annihilated by the Christian church before the Gospels came to be written. Yet so real was this relationship that hints of it were scattered all over the Gospels and these hints now beg for explanations.<sup>42</sup>

The final piece of supporting evidence seems to me to be the way Mary Magdalene has come to be treated in Christian history. There is not one shred of biblical evidence that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Luke, who seems most prone to damage her reputation, says that Mary Magdalene was a woman out of "whom Jesus cast seven demons (Luke 8:2), but no other Gospel corroborates that tradition. Luke also portrays a woman who is a sinner coming to anoint Jesus in the home of a Pharisee in Bethany, but he does not identify her with a woman named Mary. John, however, says that this woman was in fact Mary but that this episode took place in her own home, with her sister Martha and her brother Lazarus. When John tells the story there is no hint of sinfulness in that act. Even Luke has no negativity whatsoever when he relates the account of the two sisters, Mary and Martha, portraying them rather as close friends of Jesus.<sup>43</sup>

By the turn of the first century there was in the life of the Christian church a clear need to remove Mary Magdalene, the flesh and blood woman who was at Jesus' side in life and in death, and to replace her with a sexless woman, the virgin mother. The record of history is that this was accomplished by portraying Magdalene as a prostitute and thus assassinating her character. I am led to wonder why it was that Mary Magdalene became such a threat to the church.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 196.

<sup>41</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 196.

<sup>42</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 197.

<sup>43</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 197.

<sup>44</sup> Spong, John Shelby. *Born of a Woman* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 197.