

MARCUS BORG: A NEW VISION OF JESUS

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I. Biography

Marcus J. Borg was born in Fergus Falls, Minnesota on March 11, 1942. He earned his Bachelor of Arts at Concordia College and both his Masters of Theology and Doctorate of Philosophy at Oxford University. Teaching at universities across the nation, Borg spent his longest tenure at Oregon State University, where he taught for over twenty years and retired in 2007 as the Hundere Distinguished Professor. The author of dozens of books on Jesus, Christian theology, and other religions, Borg is a fellow of the Jesus Seminar and has lectured throughout the nation. Currently, Borg lives in Portland, Oregon, where he is Canon Theologian at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral and continues to write and lecture.¹

Evolving throughout his lifetime, Borg's faith today stands in stark contrast to the faith that he was born into. Raised in the Lutheran church in a small town, Borg was exposed to mainstream evangelical Christianity at the time, and readily accepted it.² As he moved through adolescence and his teenage years, Borg was thrown into personal turmoil and doubt over his faith as he discovered a conflict between science and faith. Overwhelmed with guilt, he went to college and then a liberal seminary, where his guilt wore off and he became first an agnostic and then an atheist. However, Borg continued to be fascinated by Jesus as a historical and political

¹ Marcus J. Borg's Public Website, "Marcus J. Borg: Biography," <http://marcusjborg.com/bio.html> (accessed October 19, 2009).

² Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 3-6. Borg defines this early stage of belief as precritical naiveté, or "that childhood state in which we take for granted that whatever the significant authority figures in our lives tell us to be true is indeed true" (6).

figure. While in his thirties, Borg returned to a semblance of Christianity after experiencing a series of mystical occurrences. According to Borg, these experiences “gave me a new understanding of the meaning of the word *God*.”³ Personally, Borg is self-described as a nonliteralistic and nonexclusivistic Christian who is committed to the Christian tradition.⁴

II. Exposition

Borg’s scholarship covers a wide variety of topics, including eschatology, mysticism, Christian living, Christmas, Jesus, the content of the Bible, and world religions. Due to the limited scope of this paper, only Borg’s view of Jesus—the area of scholarship for which he is best known⁵—will be examined. First, the portrayal of Jesus in the Bible through the Gospels will be discussed. Second, Borg’s vision of God will be touched upon. Third, Borg’s understanding of Jesus will be expounded upon. For, if we are to understand the basis of Borg’s faith, we must first understand the type of Jesus that it is centered on.

Borg’s Bible: A Historical-Metaphorical Document

Borg explains, “I see the Bible as a human response to God. . . . the Bible thus tells us about how *they* saw things, not about how *God* sees things.”⁶ Borg’s quest for the historical Jesus thus centers around peeling away the layers of human response to find the true Jesus portrayed in the Gospels. Therefore, an understanding of the Jesus Seminar and its work on the

³ Ibid., 14.

⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), x.

⁵ Marcus J. Borg, “Re-visioning Christianity,” in *The Once and Future Jesus*, by the Jesus Seminar (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2000), 45.

⁶ Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, 22-23.

Gospels is vital to understanding the foundations of Borg's understanding of the Bible and Jesus. The Jesus Seminar consists of seventy-five scholars, and their most influential work to date is *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. It contains a new translation (called the Scholars Version) of the four traditional Gospels, as well as the Gospel of Thomas. Using a color-coding system, the scholars voted on the historical accuracy of the sayings of Jesus, ranging them from "Jesus undoubtedly said this" to "Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective of a later or different tradition."⁷ The Jesus Seminar postulates that both Matthew and Luke are largely derived from Mark, and that other common material in Matthew and Luke came from a now-lost document labeled Q. Other hypotheses entertained by the Jesus Seminar include other lost documents, labeled M (for content in Matthew) and L (for content in Luke).⁸

The scholarship of the Jesus Seminar is rooted in the techniques of higher criticism originally outlined by German higher critics of the nineteenth century, such as Graf, Kuenen, and Wellhausen. Emphasizing source criticism, the Jesus Seminar is part of a long line of quests for the historical Jesus. The First Quest occurred in the early nineteenth century, and was characterized by a rational approach to the life of Jesus.⁹ Rudolf Bultmann was an influential critic during the latter part of the First Quest; he claimed that almost nothing could be known

⁷ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁹ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 560.

about the life or personality of Jesus.¹⁰ The Second Quest (also called the New Quest) began in 1953 with the scholarship of Ernst Kasemann, who argued that it was important to establish continuity between the historical Jesus and the Jesus of faith,¹¹ while retaining much of the methodology of Bultmann.¹² The most recent Third Quest, which includes the Jesus Seminar, “lacks a unifying theological agenda”¹³ and is often influenced by theoretical models on the socio-political context in which Jesus operated.¹⁴

In addition to this foundation of Third Quest higher criticism, Borg adds his own criticism. He urges that the Bible be approached with a historical-metaphorical reading, in which some passages are historical memories while others are metaphorical narratives.¹⁵ He declares something to be metaphorical if it falls into one of two broad categories. First, if there are “signs within the story suggesting that it is to be read symbolically,”¹⁶ the passage is purely metaphorical. Second, if the incident falls outside the limits of the spectacular (or “beyond what we commonly think to be possible”¹⁷), the event is also purely metaphorical.

¹⁰ Briger A. Pearson, “The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar,” *Religion* 25, (1995): 319.

¹¹ McDowell, 561.

¹² Pearson, 319.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁴ Due to the limited scope of this paper, the original arguments of the German higher critics and the First and Second Quests will not be discussed. However, arguments from scholars who refuted higher criticism or other quests will be utilized in the critique portion of this paper when applicable to the arguments of Borg and the Jesus Seminar.

¹⁵ Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, 44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

What does this foundation of the Jesus Seminar coupled with Borg's historical-metaphorical narrative leave us with? According to the Jesus Seminar, only eighteen percent of the words¹⁸ and sixteen percent of the deeds¹⁹ attributed to Jesus in the Bible were actually spoken or done by Him. John's Gospel contains no actual words of Jesus, while Mark's contains only one sentence attributed to Jesus.²⁰ Although Borg believes that Jesus did perform some paranormal healings, he specifically categorizes such events as the virgin birth, multiplying of loaves, changing water into wine, and walking on water as solely metaphorical incidents that did not actually occur in history.²¹ In the end, Borg's division of the Bible into history and metaphor results in two distinct visions of Jesus, which will be discussed after a brief exposition of Borg's view of God.

Borg's God: A Panentheistic Vision

Borg's vision of God claims that "the word *God* refers to the sacred at the center of existence, the holy mystery that is all around us and within us."²² He defines this view of God as panentheism (not to be confused with pantheism). Panentheism "affirms both transcendence . . . and immanence. . . . God is all around us and within us, and we are within God."²³ Panentheism

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹ Craig L. Bloomburg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 16.

²⁰ James R. Edwards, "Who Do Scholars Say That I Am?" *Christianity Today* 40 (March 4, 1996): 15.

²¹ Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, 47, 205-212.

²² Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 14.

²³ Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 32.

is Borg's response to the view of God that he calls "supernatural theism," which, according to Borg, is the traditional view which paints God as a distant being who only occasionally intervenes in the world.²⁴ Additionally, Jesus (who Borg considers to be only a spiritual man) is not the only way to God. Rather, Borg explains that "it seems clear that manifestations of the sacred are also known in other religions in addition to Judaism and Christianity."²⁵ Thus, Borg urges his readers to shift from a supernatural, theistic view of God to a panentheistic understanding; for, "It matters not because God wants us to get our theology right, but it matters to us. It will affect our sense of the reality of God."²⁶

Borg's Jesus: Two Visions

Borg's Jesus is framed within the context of two visions: the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. The pre-Easter Jesus is the "figure of history before his death."²⁷ This view of Jesus is composed of the things that Borg believes Jesus actually said and did. The second Jesus is the post-Easter Jesus, who is "the Jesus of Christian tradition and *experience*."²⁸ Thus, in contrast to the historical Jesus, the post-Easter Jesus was created by the disciples of Jesus and the other authors of the Bible, and is still being created today in Christian experience.

According to Borg, various attributes are found in the post-Easter Jesus that were added in the tradition created by his followers and disciples. Most importantly, according to Borg,

²⁴ Borg, "Re-visioning Christianity," 52.

²⁵ Borg, *The God We Never Knew*, 84-85.

²⁶ Borg, "Re-visioning Christianity," 53.

²⁷ Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 15.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

Jesus was nonmessianic. Borg explains, “We have no way of knowing whether Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah or as the Son of God in some special sense. According to the earliest layers of the developing gospel tradition, he said nothing about having such thoughts. They were not part of his own teaching. His message was not about believing in him.”²⁹ Rather, Jesus sought only to point away from Himself to God. Thus, Borg claims that all incidents or statements recorded in the Bible that indicate Jesus’ belief in His own deity were added by His followers after His death.

But then who was the real, historical Jesus? Borg explains that his vision or sketch of Jesus contains four broad strokes, or characteristics: Jesus was a spirit person, a teacher of subversive wisdom, a social prophet, and a transformer of Judaism. According to Borg, spirit persons have “vivid and frequent experiences of another level or layer of reality,” which Borg terms “mystical experiences.”³⁰ Spirit persons are found throughout different cultures and religions. Likewise, Jesus was a teacher of wisdom, or, as Borg calls it, a “subversive sage.”³¹ Through parables and aphorisms (memorable short stories), Jesus taught a type of wisdom that was alternative to that of His time. Additionally, Jesus was a social prophet who criticized issues He saw in the Jewish culture. Borg explains that Jesus’ criticism was concentrated on the purity system of His time. Jesus attacked the system of Israel under Old Testament law, “a purity system that created a world with sharp social boundaries between pure and impure, righteous and

²⁹ Ibid., 29.

³⁰ Marcus J. Borg, “Portraits of Jesus,” in *The Search for Jesus: Modern Scholarship Looks at the Gospels*, from a symposium at the Smithsonian Institution, September 11, 1993 (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology, 1994), 96.

³¹ Ibid., 97.

sinner.”³² Instead, Jesus urged a politics of compassion and community. Finally, Jesus sought to transform the social world of Judaism, not create a new religion.³³ Through increased working of the Spirit of God and a new order of compassion and community, Jesus wanted to transform the nation of Israel.

According to Borg’s understanding of the resurrection, the Easter stories should be viewed as parables; however, he argues, “Seeing the Easter stories as parables need not involve a denial of their factuality. The factual question is left open.”³⁴ He does believe that Jesus appeared to His followers after the resurrection, but doubts that outside observers could have seen these appearances; thus, the resurrection appearances did not occur in space or time. However, the disciples continued to have experiences of Jesus after His death, and continued to feel His presence with them.³⁵ To follow this risen Jesus today, Borg advocates a vision which “is deeply centered in God, the sacred. So it was for Jesus. So it is in all the enduring religions of the world. What makes Christianity Christian is centering in God *as known in Jesus*.”³⁶ Essentially, for Borg, Jesus showed us the way to live a fuller life of the Spirit of God, and, if we chose to follow it, we will be better people creating a better world.

³² Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 53.

³³ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision; Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), 125.

³⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989), 280.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 289.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 308.

Thus, as outlined in this brief exposition, Borg's Bible is radically different than that of orthodox Christianity, which leads to radically different views of God and Jesus. But, is there any merit in Borg's theology? What is the quality of his critical and historical methodology? In view of answering these questions, this paper will now move into a criticism of Borg's ideas.

III. Criticism

The Jesus Seminar and Borg's Bible: Critique on Presuppositions and Method

For the purposes of this paper, the criticism of Borg's Bible will be directed against the Jesus Seminar, and will be divided into three sections: presuppositions, historical method, and likelihood of intentional deception. First, although it claims to be composed of objective scholars, the Jesus Seminar often starts from distinctly modern ideas, working towards its own goals. Catholic theologian Luke Timothy Johnson, who (although he does not support the complete inerrancy of the Bible) rightly critiques the Jesus Seminar's presuppositions and methods, argues, "It does not take an exceptionally discerning eye to detect more than a little of the 'dominant consciousness' of yet another sort at work in this analysis, namely, the cultural assumptions of the contemporary American academy."³⁷ According to Johnson, the Jesus of the Jesus Seminar is in actuality a mouthpiece for their modern agenda to promote "a 'politics of compassion' that is committed to freedom and equality and inclusion."³⁸ Likewise, the Jesus Seminar inherently holds the presupposition of anti-supernaturalism, rejecting both supernatural events and the idea that Jesus could have been more than a man. John Warwick Montgomery explains that "we have no right to begin with the presupposition that Jesus can be no more than a

³⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 43.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

man. For then, obviously, our conclusions may simply reflect our preconceptions instead of representing the actual content of the documents.”³⁹ Knofel Staton argues that the Jesus Seminar’s rejection of the supernatural “prejudge[s] reality using a purely empirical scientific method. But not all reality can be so evaluated. . . . Today, science affirms reality whose source cannot be proven.”⁴⁰

Similarly, the Jesus Seminar does not follow sound historical method. Craig Bloomberg explains that good Biblical critics—whatever their bias—must “immediately recognize an important presupposition that guides most historians in their work. Unless there is good reason for believing otherwise, one will assume that a given detail in the work of a particular historian is factual.”⁴¹ Thus, the burden of proof is on the scholars who seek to disprove the historical accuracy of ancient documents. Instead, the scholars of the Jesus Seminar violate good historical method and assume that the work of the authors of the Gospels is primarily fictitious. In truth, the Gospels have strong outside historical verification, thus passing the external evidence test, one of the three primary tests of historiography.⁴² H. Alen Brehm explains, “Scholarly ‘criteria for authenticity,’ when judiciously applied, actually confirm the historicity of much of the Gospel materials. The historical information in the Gospels regarding first-century life in

³⁹ John Warwick Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1971), 48-49.

⁴⁰ Knofel Stanton, “Answering the Scholars,” *Christian Standard* 140 (June 12, 2005): 376.

⁴¹ Bloomberg, 304.

⁴² McDowell, 33. According to McDowell, the three basic tests of historiography are the bibliographical test, the internal evidence test, and the external evidence test.

Palestine is generally accurate.”⁴³ On an archeological level, Dr. Edwin Yamauchi concurs, claiming, “There are a number of striking cases where specific passages have been doubted . . . and have been directly confirmed”⁴⁴ by archeology. Because of their historical assumptions when dealing with the external evidence test, the work of the Jesus Seminar is often tainted in relation to the Gospel texts.

Members of the Jesus Seminar likewise argue that the New Testament contains various internal contradictions in the different Gospel accounts. William Arndt responds to critics that argue against the internal consistency of the Bible, saying that such critics refuse to give the New Testament documents the benefit of the doubt that is given to other ancient authors, such as Plato. Arndt concludes, “The *a priori* assumption must always be that the author has not contradicted himself. . . . Let but the same amount of good will be manifested in the treatment of the difficult passages in the Bible, and the charge that it contains irreconcilable discrepancies will no longer be heard.”⁴⁵ Brehm adds that “the four Gospels report many of the same events and for the most part confirm one another.”⁴⁶ Even the much-contested Gospel of John presents a Jesus that is not fundamentally different from the Jesus of the Synoptics; as F. F. Bruce expounds, “Most readers of the Gospels in all ages have been unaware of any fundamental discrepancy between the Christ who speaks and acts in the fourth Gospel and Him who speaks

⁴³ H. Alan Brehm, “Will the Real Jesus Please Stand?: Evaluating the ‘Third Quest of the Historical Jesus,’” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 38, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 13.

⁴⁴ Edwin M. Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972), 20.

⁴⁵ William Arndt, *Does the Bible Contradict Itself?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1976), vii.

⁴⁶ Brehm, 13.

and acts in the Synoptics.”⁴⁷ Thus, the Gospels meet external and internal evidence tests of consistency, which make them, at the very least, reasonably reliable on a historical level.⁴⁸

Yet another flaw in the scholarship of the Jesus Seminar is its unwarranted claim that the followers of Jesus created the majority of the material in the Gospels, attributing it to Jesus. Clark Pinnock rebuts this claim, saying that “it is far more likely that Jesus’ understanding and use of the Scriptures conditioned the writer’s understanding and use rather than the reverse. The originality with which the Old Testament is interpreted with respect to the person and work of Jesus is too coherent and impressive to be secondary.”⁴⁹ This point will be developed further when Borg’s distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus is discussed. In summary, the Jesus Seminar manifests weak scholarship by holding unjustified presuppositions, misapplying historical method in the external and internal evidence tests, and providing no rational reasons for intentional deception on the part of the disciples.

Borg’s God: Logically Undermined

Borg’s view of God is likewise problematic in two areas: his acceptance of pantheism and his belief in the legitimacy of various religions. First, Borg advocates pantheism. However, instead of rooting his belief in empirical evidence or logical deduction (which he champions), Borg’s understanding of his pantheistic God is wrapped up in Borg’s personal

⁴⁷ F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 60-61.

⁴⁸ The bibliographical test is not discussed here, due to the fact that Borg and other members of the Jesus Seminar seem to believe that what the disciples wrote (or, according to their hypothesis, compiled) in the first few centuries after the death of Christ has been reliably transmitted to us today. Their argument against the Bible centers on their attack on the external attestation and internal consistency of the New Testament documents.

⁴⁹ Clark H. Pinnock, “The Inspiration of Scripture and the Authority of Jesus Christ,” in *God’s Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Newburgh, Indiana: Trinity Press, 1974), 45.

experiences. His mystical, spiritual experiences are the actual basis of his faith in God. Unfortunately, Borg thus applies a totally different standard when judging his own conception of God than when critiquing the mainstream Christian understanding of God. Additionally, on a broader level, panentheism cannot be logically sustained. John Warwick Montgomery explains that panentheism “refuse[s] to begin with, or to employ as a fundamental category, an absolute point of reference.”⁵⁰ Since “all arguments must have a starting point,”⁵¹ a logical, grounded argument for panentheism is impossible, and Borg once again undermines his own commitment to facts and reason.

Additionally, Borg’s acceptance of a multiplicity of ways to God is fundamentally flawed. Essentially, Borg accepts that various religions of the world are compatible. Montgomery rebuts this statement, explaining, “The characteristic most fully shared by the religions of the world is their incompatibility with each other. This fundamental incompatibility is at root logical, not sociological.”⁵² He goes on to explain the various areas in which different world religions are incompatible, due to differing views of the human person, evil, the way of salvation, human drama, basis of authority, ethics, and morality.⁵³ Montgomery concludes, “Expressed logically, if J represents the proposition that Jesus Christ is the sole source of human salvation, then it cannot be the case that both J and ~J are true.”⁵⁴ Thus, Borg’s view of a

⁵⁰ John Warwick Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus* (Bonn, Germany : Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2003), 51.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16-18.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

panentheistic God who is accessible through various religions is incompatible with the rules of logic.

Borg's Jesus: A Creation of His Own Desire

Borg's distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus is also logically and evidentially flawed. In this critique, the paper will outline reasons why it is highly unlikely that the apostles invented the majority of Jesus' life, including His deity. Then, the paper will move to a discussion on Jesus' self-understanding and a brief discussion of the resurrection.

Borg's argument that the disciples created the deity and actions of Jesus is unfortunately very poor. He provides no reasons why the apostles would have created a false system of belief about Jesus and then endured terrible hardships and died for their faith. In essence, he claims that because the disciples were emotionally wrapped up in their faith, their historical accounts of Jesus were automatically flawed by their faith. Craig Evans responds, arguing, "Faith and truthful history are not necessarily at odds."⁵⁵ Also, there were various cultural bars that would have prevented creation of spurious Jesus stories by the disciples. James Edwards explains, "Many eyewitnesses of Jesus were still alive when the Gospels were written. These witnesses functioned as gatekeepers and custodians of 'the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (Jude 3)."⁵⁶ Johnson concurs, arguing that authors such as Borg reject good historical method when they ignore Pauline and other New Testament evidence that supports the portrayal of Christ in the Gospels.⁵⁷ He adds that "non-narrative New Testament writings datable with

⁵⁵ Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 233-234.

⁵⁶ Edwards, 18.

⁵⁷ Johnson, 117.

some degree of probability before the year 70 testify to traditions circulating within the Christian movement concerning Jesus that correspond to important points within the Gospel narratives. . . . [T]hey indicate that memories concerning Jesus were in fairly wide circulation. This makes it less likely that the corresponding points in the Gospels were the invention of a single author or group.”⁵⁸ Thus, the numerous eyewitnesses (many of them hostile eyewitnesses, including orthodox Jews and groups such as the Pharisees and Sadducees) would have prevented false teachings about Jesus—especially those of huge proportion, such as His resurrection and deity—from arising.

Other facets of the Gospels indicate that the disciples were accurate in their portrayals of Jesus. Intriguingly, the authors of the Gospels included embarrassing and problematic facts about themselves in the Gospels (such as Peter’s denial of Christ in Mark 14:71), which the authors would have easily dispensed with if they were creating a revisionist history.⁵⁹ Perhaps one of the most convincing supports for the argument that Jesus’ followers did not create His teachings is the fact that Jesus’ statements do not directly respond to the issues faced by the early church. Edwards explains, “No passage from Paul (or any of the other New Testament letters) can be found in the Gospels or on the lips of Jesus. . . . This is a strong argument against the assertion that the Gospels are the early churches’ stories projected onto Jesus: If the early church were avidly and indiscriminately putting words into the mouth of Jesus, we should expect to find at least some of the material from the Epistles in the Gospels or on the lips of Jesus.”⁶⁰ Indeed,

⁵⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁹ Edwards, 19.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

C. S. Lewis aptly sums up why the disciples had a better understanding of Jesus in their own day than Borg and other modern-day critics: “The idea that any man or writer should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture, spoke the same language, shared the same habitual imagery and unconscious assumptions, and yet be transparent to those who have none of these advantages, is in my opinion preposterous. There is an *a priori* improbability in it which almost no argument and no evidence could counter-balance.”⁶¹

If, therefore, the Bible is reasonably historically accurate, and the disciples did not substantially change the portrayal of the Jesus who lived and breathed in history, what happens to the pre-Easter Jesus of Borg? Borg’s pre-Easter Jesus becomes synonymous with his post-Easter Jesus; the Jesus of Christian experience and the Jesus of history are one. Yet Borg claims that Jesus did not view Himself as God, and that Jesus did not bodily rise from the dead. This paper will conclude with a brief analysis of Jesus’ claims to deity, and His bodily resurrection.

Contrary to Borg’s claims, Jesus viewed Himself as God. Besides direct claims to His deity,⁶² He demonstrated His deity through various actions. N.T. Wright explains that Jesus’ actions and parables were highly-symbolic; He understood Himself as fulfilling prophecy, and His vocation consisted of being “called to do and be what, in the scriptures, only Israel’s God did and was.”⁶³ Yet perhaps the clearest manifestation of Jesus’ self-understanding is found in the responses that others made to His claims. In Matthew 14:61-62, Caiaphas asked Jesus, “Art thou

⁶¹ C.S. Lewis, “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism” in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 158.

⁶² See John 10:25-33, John 5:17-18, Matthew 5:20.

⁶³ N. T. Wright, “The Biblical Formation of a Doctrine of Christ” in *Who Do You Say That I Am?*, ed. Donald Armstrong (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 64.

the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” Subsequently, Caiaphas tore his clothing and accused Jesus of blasphemy. Explaining that God’s throne is actually a chariot (as described in Daniel 7:9), Craig Evans concludes, “What apparently shocked Caiaphas was not only that Jesus boldly affirmed his messianic identity, but that he dared to assert that he would sit on God’s throne.”⁶⁴ Ultimately, Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin insisted upon Jesus’ crucifixion; McDowell explains, “These claims were regarded as blasphemous by the religious leaders, and according to Hebrew law and custom were punishable by death.”⁶⁵ Indeed, Jesus’ trial and crucifixion place the ultimate stamp of truth on the fact that Jesus believed Himself to be God, and that even His enemies recognized this claim.

Yet, while accepting the actual, bodily death of Jesus, Borg doubts His bodily resurrection. According to McDowell, however, “Since Jesus Himself pointed to the physical nature of His resurrection body as evidence that He had risen from the dead, and since by implication this proved His claims to be God incarnate, the assertion by critics that His body was merely immaterial undermines the deity of Christ. . . . The truth of Christianity is based on the bodily resurrection of Christ.”⁶⁶ The bodily resurrection of Christ was attested to by over five hundred witnesses; this was no mass vision, hallucination, or experience as indicated by Borg. Thomas J. Thorburn explains, “It is absolutely inconceivable that as many as (say) five hundred persons, of average soundness of mind and temperament, in various numbers, at all sorts of

⁶⁴ Evans, 229.

⁶⁵ McDowell, 141.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 204.

times, and in divers situations, should experience all kinds of sensuous impressions—visual, auditory, tactual—and that all these manifold experiences should rest entirely upon subjective hallucination.”⁶⁷ Wilbur Smith adds, “The very kind of evidence which modern science, and even psychologists, are so insistent upon for determining the reality of any object under consideration is the kind of evidence that we have presented to us in the Gospels regarding the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus, namely, the things that are seen with the human eye, touched with the human hand, and heard by the human ear. This is what we call empirical evidence.”⁶⁸ Indeed, because Jesus’ resurrection was bodily and not merely spiritual, it ultimately disproves Borg’s arguments against the deity of Jesus, for, as Montgomery explains, “Two possible sources of explanation, and two only, are available for Jesus’ resurrection once it has been established as a fact: *his own* explanation or an explanation deriving from *someone else*. The great advantage to accepting Jesus’ own explanation is that he, and he alone, had the experience. . . . Jesus’ explanation was that he is God almighty, come to earth to die for the sins of the world, and that the resurrection is the proof that he is the very person that he claimed to be.”⁶⁹

Borg’s Strengths

Yet, Borg’s scholarship has some strengths, which must be kept in mind when evaluating his legacy. While his analysis of Jesus as merely a gifted spirit person is not upheld by different evidence and logic tests, his emphasis on certain aspects of Jesus is beneficial. For example, he

⁶⁷ Thomas James Thorburn, *The Resurrection Narratives and Modern Criticism* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1910), 158-159.

⁶⁸ Wilbur M. Smith, *Therefore Stand: Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), 389-390.

⁶⁹ Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus*, 109.

emphasizes that Jesus did not seek to found a new religion. Modern-day Christians often tend to forget the continuity between Old Testament Judaism and the New Testament Jesus, which Borg rightly emphasizes. Additionally, his analysis of the impact of Jesus' moral teachings on society, while not entirely correct, is important to keep in mind; Jesus' teachings do have an enormous impact on the secular sphere as well as the religious sphere.

IV. Conclusion

However, despite these strengths, Borg's understanding of the Bible, God, and Jesus is fundamentally and tragically flawed. His Bible is undermined, his God is logically insupportable, and his Jesus is a creation of his own desire. Yet his ideas have influenced hundreds of thousands of people through his books, articles, and lectures. As defenders of the faith, we must be willing to grapple with the questions posed by Borg. We, too, must grapple with the Bible from various angles—historically, logically, internally, externally, and from the aspect of faith. Doing so will help prevent us from falling into the pitfalls of Borg and other critics like him. As N.T. Wright aptly explains, “Let me be blunt. Unless we do business with these texts, we have not really begun to consider what it might mean for God to become human. To marginalize or minimalize them because they do not conform to our idea of what God . . . ought to be like is not only to be deeply unbiblical or even antibiblical; it is to insist on learning the meaning of the word *God* from somewhere other than Jesus himself.”⁷⁰

⁷⁰ N. T. Wright, “In Grateful Dialogue: A Response” in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsityPress, 1999), 276-277.