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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time was written by Marcus J. Borg and was first published in 1994. Much of the information and theories found within the book came from an annual lecture Borg gave at the Northern California Conference of the United Church of Christ at Asilomar, California in 1992. The main idea of Borg's novel is that "there is a strong connection between images of Jesus and images of the Christian life, between how we think of Jesus and how we think of the Christian life "(Howard 1-2)."

A Review of Marcus Borg's *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*

Sean P. Connors

Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time was written by Marcus J. Borg and was first published in 1994. Much of the information and theories found within the book came from an annual lecture Borg gave at the Northern California Conference of the United Church of Christ at Asilomar, California in 1992. The main idea of Borg's novel is that "there is a strong connection between images of Jesus and images of the Christian life, between how we think of Jesus and how we think of the Christian life" (Howard 1-2).

Borg is a self-described historical Jesus scholar and a Christian who is the Hunderer Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture in the Philosophy Department at Oregon State University. Borg earned his doctor's degree from Oxford University and has been the national chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature. Also Borg was a Fellow of the Jesus Seminar that was organized in hopes of determining the authenticity of Jesus' words within the gospels in an attempt to find out more about the historical Jesus (Howard 1-2).

Along with *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Borg has also written ten other books starting with *Jesus: A New Vision* in 1987 and they have been translated into seven other languages. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* is the best-selling book by a contemporary Jesus scholar and **The New York Times** described Borg as "a leading figure around the new generation of Jesus scholars" (Howard 1-2).

The first page of *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* has a space dedicated to the praise of the actual novel. The first quote is from Walter Wink, from the Auburn Theological Seminary, which sets high expectations for the book. Wink said that

"In every generation there is a handful of writers of whom it can be said, 'Read everything they write.' Marcus Borg is one of these today: a writer of rare lucidity, original scholarly insights, profound

spirituality, and the unusual capacity to connect it all to life in the present. He might just change your mind—or life.”

This quote draws attention because in order for a scholar to voice that a book could change a life in such a way, then it must have greatly affected him in some particular way. With this in mind it must be pointed out that it is necessary to go into reading this book with an open mind hoping to be changed, and although disagreements may arise with everything Borg claims, it must be stated that he is offering some very thought provoking arguments.

As stated previously, the main idea of Borg’s novel is about the connection between images of Jesus, and images of the Christian life. Starting in chapter one Borg is quick to jump right into this idea and display two different images of Jesus. The first is the more popular image and that is Jesus as a divine savior. This image seems to answer the classic questions of Jesus, which are: Who is he? What was his mission? What was his message? The image of Christian life that piggybacks this image of Jesus is one of believing and faith. The second image of Jesus that Borg writes about is the image of Jesus as a teacher. This leads to the image of Christian life that people should act just as Jesus instructed them to(2). Although these are both popular views of the image of Jesus, Borg finds them both to “lead to incomplete images of the Christian life. That life is ultimately not about believing or about being good. [...] It is about a relationship with God that involves us in a journey of transformation” (2-3). More specifically Borg writes, “a Christian is one who lives out his or her relationship to God within the framework of the Christian tradition” (17). The relationship with God that Borg writes about is based in the “alternative image of Jesus that [Borg] develop[ed] in this book” (3).

The next topic that is covered within chapter one is about your own personal awareness. Borg shines light on this topic by discussing his own childhood, adolescence, college, and seminary experiences. By breaking down his life in such a manner it makes it easy to follow how his experiences changed his understanding of God, and how it affected how he sees Jesus now. It is important to keep in mind that much of religion is based on experience anyway. The writers of the Bible wrote what they saw, heard, felt, and most importantly experienced. Experience’s affect people in diverse ways and lead them to interpret things differently. This is why all four gospels are different from each other. They were written by four different people and at four different times in history. Although they each tell the story of Jesus, there

accounts all vary due to the fact that the story of Jesus affected them differently. They each had different experiences. It is important for Borg to bring up his own personal experiences and how they brought him to the place he is today, because as a reader you must be aware of your own experiences and how they will affect you during the study of such a personal topic.

Chapter two gives an introduction to the pre-Easter Jesus and how this image of Jesus affects the life of the Church. Most of our knowledge of Jesus comes from the gospels, which were written, by Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. It is important to point out that these writings were not composed until after Jesus' death. Mark was the earliest gospel written and that is traced to around 70 C.E. This means it was written many years after the time that Jesus was crucified. Since all of the gospels were written after Jesus' death, the actual writings "contain both their memories of Jesus of Nazareth and their ongoing experience of the post-Easter Jesus" (20). The gospel writers were heavily influenced by the post-Easter Jesus community, in which they lived, that it is very difficult to sort out the difference between the images of the pre and post-Easter Jesus.

Borg finds it necessary to point out the fact that Jesus was a Jew. This is important because "some Christians are apparently unaware of the Jewishness of Jesus, or, if they are aware, do not give it much weight" (22). This idea is surprising to Borg because everything Jesus taught was based on the Hebrew Scriptures and raised in the Jewish faith. Jesus' moral code of ethics was based in his belief in Judaism. Mary, his mother, was considered a model Jew her entire life. Stories say that she prayed regularly so it can only be assumed that she raised Jesus in the same tradition. Not only did Judaism influence Jesus, but it was never his intention to start a new religion. Rather he was fulfilling a "mission within Judaism"(22). Christians often misunderstand this statement, but it is important to keep in mind that the God of the Jews is the same exact God that is worshiped by Christians.

Christians find it necessary to place a lot of importance on the birth of Jesus, even though the story of Jesus' birth and childhood are largely based on story and not fact. For example Paul, who was earliest New Testament author, never "mention[s] Jesus being born in a special way. Neither does Mark, the earliest gospel [author]" (23). In fact we do not know much about Jesus until he was about 30 years old (25). Christians are dead set with having December 25 be the exact date that Jesus was born as well. Again there is no documented truth to this statement. Historians can guess and estimate approximately the

date and the year that Jesus was born, but it is impossible to know for sure. In fact we do not know much about Jesus until he was about 30 years old (25). This is when Jesus starts to come into his own and preach the word of God. In many cases people are stunned to hear that the celebration of Christmas on December 25 may not be the day of Jesus' birth. People are even more surprised to hear that the classic story of Mary giving birth in a manger, and the three kings, and the little drummer boy are all undocumented. The Bible either does not say anything about these ideas, or the writers of the gospel disagree. For example, some of the gospel writers include that the magi bring gifts to Jesus, but others "forget" to include that point. This does not mean that all of the "classic Christmas images" are untrue, it simply shines a larger light onto the fact that there are no documents dating back to the birth of Jesus, and therefore forced the writers of the gospels to interpret the birth of Jesus as best as they could.

Chapter one explained different images of Jesus, and in chapter two Borg moves onto describing his own pre-Easter image of Jesus that is based on four broad strokes. In his opinion Jesus was a spirit person, a teacher of wisdom, a social prophet, and a movement founder (30). Based on this Borg states that the image of Jesus as having "radical social and political edge to his message and activity" as well as being, "a remarkable healer" (31). Borg sees the pre-Easter Jesus as someone who had an experiential relationship with God. Based on his four strokes he describes a man that was not God, rather a Jesus that was an individual that was more than "a person who believed strongly in God, but one who [knew] God" (37). This is where Borg bases his theory that the "Christian life moved beyond believing in God to being in relationship to God" (39).

One of the most common themes about Jesus that people hear about is one of compassion. Borg breaks down this topic in chapter three by placing it along side the topic of politics. The concept of God being compassionate can be found in the Hebrew Bible since it "speaks frequently of God as compassionate, with resonances of 'womb' close at hand" (48). However it can be argued that the God of the Old Testament was a vengeful one. In one of the earliest stories, the Bible describes Adam and Eve going against God's word. After God finds out that they had disobeyed him, he reacts by banishing them out of the Garden of Eden. Here it is obvious that God will get revenge on those who go against him. Another example of God's vengefulness in the Old Testament is in the story of Noah's Ark. In a sense God flooded the earth to rid it of evil, and only saved Noah and his family because he felt they were worthy.

Although it may be true that God is frequently referenced as being compassionate, it is not totally correct. However, when talking about Jesus the idea of compassion within religion begins to change.

During the time that Jesus lived, individual purity was structured into the Jewish social world. A person's status depended on his birth, religious practices, physical deformities, and behavior (51). For example, "the chronically ill, lepers, eunuchs, and so forth – were on the impure side of the spectrum" (51). Social classification such as this was not uncommon, but universally led to social boundaries. Jesus did not adhere to the social world in which he lived. Jesus had a vision of a society that was based on compassion, rather than purity differences (53). To expand and prove his point on a more personal level, Jesus commonly had dinner with the poor and sick, thus breaking the mold in which his fellow man lived (56).

The Bible is filled with these stories of Jesus sitting down with all kinds of "untouchables." Borg points out that during this time "sharing a meal represented mutual acceptance. [...] Rules surrounding meals were deeply embedded in the purity system" (55). Not only was Jesus offering an alternative image regarding people with whom to dine, but also he was offering a completely different view on the social makeup of the world. The Jesus movement allowed everyone to take part in this new faith including "women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized" (56). With this in mind it is understandable why Borg puts compassion and politics together in the same chapter. During Jesus' life being compassionate to the "impure" was in fact a political statement and Jesus broke all of the political norms of the time.

Borg transitions onto the topic of wisdom in chapter four for two different reasons. The first one is because Jesus taught wisdom, and the second is that Jesus embodies divine wisdom. Wisdom ties into the concept of compassion because they both teach about how to live one's life (69). Jesus was an oral speaker who used aphorisms and parables to teach about these topics. By speaking in such a way he kept listeners on their toes and sparked their imagination (71). This is considered the "how" of Jesus' teaching. Borg points out that the idea of conventional wisdom is a major problem when teaching about wisdom. In a sense it is a "culture's most taken-for-granted understandings about the way things are" (75). Jesus thus had to break down the conventional wisdom of the time and replace it with his own alternative wisdom (80).

Through using aphorisms and parables during Jesus' public lectures, he was able to "attack the central values of his social world's conventional wisdom: family, wealth, honor, purity, and religiosity" (81). In the religious sense the conventional wisdom of the time leads to an image of God as a lawgiver and judge. Jesus attempted to replace this idea by presenting God as being gracious and compassionate (78-82). Borg puts it best by saying, "the image of God at the center of Jesus' teaching undermines the dynamic of requirements and rewards at the core of conventional wisdom" (85). The alternative wisdom that Jesus presents about God revolves around two main ideas. The first idea is that God is gracious, and the second is that followers should live a life more centered in God. In terms of the alternative wisdom Jesus saw "the religious life as a deepening relationship with the Spirit of God, not as a life of requirements and reward[s]" (86). This is why the Christian movement started off slow and took time to develop. It simply takes time to break people of the ideas they have thought for their entire lives, especially when it comes to changing their religious views.

In today's society Jesus is commonly seen as the Son of God, both among Christians and non-Christians. Chapter five points out that this realization did not happen during the New Testament period, rather Jesus was seen as the "embodiment or incarnation of 'the wisdom of God'" (97). The idea of wisdom started within the Jewish faith. Within their tradition wisdom meant a variety of things including, a literary genre, the collected teachings of sages, and the wisdom of God. In regards to the third meaning of wisdom, within "Jewish wisdom literature, wisdom is often personified in the female form" which is similar to how men today refer to their cars in the female sense. The name used for this personification in the Old Testament is Sophia (98). Within the New Testament there are four gospels. Three out of the four are considered synoptic gospels because they are similar to each other. Mark, Matthew, and Luke are the authors of the synoptic gospels and it has been found that they commonly "associate Jesus with the figure of Sophia" (102). The authors of the synoptics do this to show that Jesus was more than just a teacher of wisdom; he was also the personification of wisdom.

Paul and John were also important writers in the New Testament and they both touch on the important comparison between Jesus and Sophia. Paul even goes as far as saying that Jesus was "the Sophia of God" (103). Paul's language about Jesus is obviously very similar to the language of the Old Testament used about Sophia because the Jewish tradition influenced him (107). Another important

element of Paul's writings was that "we are made right with God by grace" and that the post Easter Jesus is important to his theology (104). John's use of wisdom language is considered by Borg to be very striking (107). Instead of using the word "wisdom," as the authors of synoptic gospels use, John uses the word "Word." The use of the "Word" by John is extremely similar to the use of Sophia in the Jewish tradition (108). The comparison between the Jewish use of Sophia, the synoptic use of Sophia, and the use of Word by John all portray the same idea that the early Christian movement saw Jesus similarly to how the Jews saw Sophia as seen in the Old Testament.

In the beginning of *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Borg states that there is a connection between the image of Jesus and the image of the Christian life. In chapter six Borg summarizes the image of Jesus he has created. Jesus was "a spirit person, subversive sage, social prophet, and movement founder who invited his followers and hearers into a transforming relationship with the same Spirit that he himself knew" (119). Borg goes on to state that the image of Jesus also forms the image of scripture. For example, we know that Jesus was Jewish, and because of that it must be realized that what Jesus spoke was shaped by his Jewish beliefs (122).

In terms of the scripture as a whole Borg argues that there are three "macro-stories" that shape the Bible. These three stories that Borg is talking about are the exodus story, the story of exile and return, and the priestly story. The story of exodus is one of the most important stories in the Jewish faith. After all the holiday of Passover is dedicated to this exact story. It is important because it actually saved the people of ancient Egypt and proved that God is able to liberate (122-123). The story of exile and return that Borg writes about is very similar to the exodus story because they are both rooted in historical experiences and are both journey stories (125). The priestly story is different because it is grounded in the "institution of ancient Israel – namely, the temple, priesthood, and sacrifice." The priestly story molds our image of sin and forgiveness in a way that makes us believe that the priest makes things right with God on our behalf (127). During Jesus' life this would have been in reference to the animal sacrifice that was practiced in ancient Judaism. The authors of the New Testament find the "meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrections based on the imagery drawn from all three stories" (128). Borg finishes this chapter by looking at the large-scale use of imagery even when looking at how the original New Testament writers

were influenced by the imagery of the Old Testament. This relates to Borg's theory on how images of Jesus affect the images of Christian life only on a larger scale.

Borg concludes his novel by emphasizing how "believing" changes over time, and how it gets more difficult to believe as you grow older. However, as you grow older you are able to develop a much deeper belief due to your own intellectual capabilities. In fact, Borg believes that you must "give [your] heart [...] to the post-Easter Jesus who is the living Lord," because "believing in Jesus in the sense of giving one's heart to Jesus is the movement from secondhand religion to firsthand religion" (137). This is what Borg truly means by "meeting Jesus again for the first time." By moving into a more personal relationship with Christ, and committing yourself at the deepest level possible, and you will rediscover your faith and your relationship with Jesus.

After finishing the entire book, I was left a bit confused about what Borg was actually trying to accomplish. His thesis was that there was a connection between images of Jesus and the images of Christian life did not seem like an earth shattering idea, nor did it seem that difficult to prove. In fact when I first read this idea in the first chapter I took as a simple fact. I thought it was obvious that the Bible was made up of images of Jesus and that they would affect the way people lived their life, as well as how they viewed the Bible. This concept is similar to the idea that different experiences shape people in different ways. How I react to certain stimuli is different than how others would react based on the fact that we have different backgrounds. The deeper I got into Borg's book, the more I realized that attributing the connection between the imagery of Jesus and the imagery of Christian life to the simple explanation of experience was entirely too simplistic. In fact, Borg does a masterful job of tying the concept of this connection throughout the entire book, and putting it all together into a larger context in the final chapter.

Borg writes that the story of Jesus is even more robust when looking at it within the context of the three "macro stories" that shape the Bible. By building up to this larger framework that Borg has developed you are able to see how his theories grow with each additional reference he uses. For example Borg starts with his own personal history and ends with how he now sees Jesus. In this case Borg gave a step-by-step account. Borg then moves on to describe the man known as Jesus. Following this Borg then elaborates on Jesus' viewpoints, teaching methods, and image within the context of both the New and Old

Testament in order to backup his argument. This technique is done so systematically that often as a reader you are left simply believing what you read because all of the facts have built on top of one another.

As a scholar, I would argue that taking other people's word, and accepting things at face value is a recipe for ignorance. In *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* Borg makes sweeping statements in order to keep the backup for his arguments intact. Since Borg writes in such a way that each statement builds on top of the other it makes sense, as well as makes the book easier to read in certain cases simply because he does make these generalizations. Within the study of religion there are disputes and controversies over basically every different interpretation because it is impossible to know what is fact and what is simply made up. Although Borg makes the book easier to read by not including many of the contrary viewpoints that would inevitably manifest in response to his writing, he limits the validity of his arguments by not actually defending them against the oncoming onslaught of criticisms. It would have made for a much longer and more challenging book if Borg were to address some of the inevitable objections, but I believe that it would have made for an even more solid thesis.

Although I touched on this topic before, I am tempted to bring it up again in an attempt to prove that Borg is guilty of throwing around sweeping generalizations. Borg states that the "Hebrew Bible speaks frequently of God as compassionate" (48). Although this is true, Borg does not fully explain the entire picture of the type of God that is written about in the Old Testament. Previously I used the example stories of Adam and Eve, and Noah's Ark. Both of these stories paint a picture of God much different from the one Borg describes. The God in these stories is vengeful rather than compassionate. Although this is one small example of how Borg sometimes over generalizes his arguments, this book deserved a good reading and a willingness to acknowledge criticism.

Works Cited

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*** Second Prize Winner