

Living in the Bible

by [William Brosend](#) in the [May 2, 2001](#) issue

Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally by Marcus J. Borg

Conflict about how to see and read the Bible is the single greatest issue dividing Christians in North America today," writes Marcus Borg. His new book, both an introduction to reading scripture and a reading of scripture, stakes a large claim: "We need a new set of lenses through which to read the Bible. . . . The older way . . . has made the Bible incredible and irrelevant for vast numbers of people."

The three short chapters of the book's first part, "Foundations," will attract the most attention. In these Borg argues that the differences between the old and new ways of reading the Bible parallel the old and new ways of seeing the world and Christian faith. He contrasts "natural" and "conscious" literalisms (Tillich), the former possible in a prescientific era, the latter "aware of problems posed by a literal reading of the Bible but insist[ing] upon it nevertheless. Whereas natural literalism is effortless, conscious literalism is effortful. It requires 'faith,' understood as believing things hard to believe."

Literalists consider the Bible a divine product deriving its authority from its origin, so that a "literal-factual" interpretation is the only possible reading. Analogous to this way of reading scripture is a way of seeing Christianity that Borg describes as literalistic, doctrinal, moralistic, patriarchal, exclusivistic and afterlife-oriented.

The breakdown of this way of seeing Christianity necessitates a new way of reading. "The way of seeing and reading the Bible that I describe . . . leads to a way of being Christian that has very little to do with believing. . . . Being Christian, I argue, is not about believing in the Bible or about believing Christianity. Rather, it is about a deepening relationship with the God to whom the Bible points, lived within the Christian tradition as a sacrament of the sacred."

Borg maintains that the Bible is a human, not a divine, product, the response of "two ancient communities to their experience of God." He argues that "the Bible thus tells us about how they saw things, not about how God sees things." Borg views biblical

authority as a result not of sacred origin but of sacred status. "Rather than being an authority standing above us, the Bible is the ground of the world in which Christians live. . . . To be Christian means to live within the world created by the Bible." Borg offers three metaphors to illumine the relationship between Christians and the Bible: the Buddha's image of a "finger pointing to the moon," the Bible as a lens and the Bible as a sacrament.

History and metaphor are the poles of Borg's approach. He asks first, "What did this text mean in the ancient historical setting in which it was written?" Yet he wants to know more than the "literal, factual, and historical meanings" and so also asks, "What does this story mean as a story, independent of its historical factuality?" Metaphorical narratives either metaphorize history or are purely metaphorical. Borg's emphasis is on the meaning the stories have for our understanding of the divine-human relationship--and "these stories are not just about the divine-human relationship in the past. They are about the divine-human relationship in the present."

In the rest of the book, Borg broadly examines the scope of scripture, looking at individual verses only on occasion and then mostly as illustration. His writing on the prophets, wisdom and Paul is especially compelling. He sees the prophets as "among the most remarkable people who have ever lived."

Borg's reading is autobiographical--as a child he understood the prophets as "predictors of the messiah" whose prophecies, offered hundreds of years before the events they spoke of took place, "not only proved that Jesus was the messiah; they also proved the truth and supernatural origin of the Bible." When, in college, he read the prophets again, he was awed by their commitment to social justice, resistance to authority and dramatic action.

But it was a religionless reading, and later Borg realized that the prophets cannot be understood apart from God. "I have become convinced that experiences of the sacred were the source of their sense of mission, their passion for justice, and their courage to challenge the established power of domination systems."

The chapter on wisdom treats Proverbs and Job, but the reading of Ecclesiastes excels. Ecclesiastes, Borg reports, is almost uniformly popular with his students. Appreciating it requires no knowledge of Israel's history. Its language speaks immediately to life. Borg concentrates on the central metaphors of the book--"Vanity

of vanities, all is vanity" and "chasing after wind." As Qoheleth contemplates life, the inevitability of death emerges as an unshakable reality. "For Qoheleth, the certainty and randomness of death drive an arrow into the heart of conventional wisdom." What is wisdom, then?

How should we live? There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil (Eccl. 2:24). "But," Borg writes, "is this really wisdom, or is this the way the world looks when someone has given up on life?"

In answer Borg offers three readings of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, the passage beginning "To everything there is a season." First he recalls the folksong "Turn, Turn, Turn," with its clear preference that the present be the season of birth, planting and peace. Then he asks us to "imagine this passage as read by a depressed Swedish Lutheran pastor in an Ingmar Bergman movie." Unbearably bleak. Finally, imagine the passage as read by the Dalai Lama. "Not 'this versus that' and not 'everything is meaningless.' Rather: live fully, whatever time it is. Be present to what is." Borg compares Qoheleth to Lao-tzu, and finds striking similarities between Ecclesiastes and the Tao-te-ching, similarities that grow out of "similar experiences of the sacred."

Borg's reading of Paul is also impressive. Acknowledging the difficulty many have with Paul, Borg takes an experiential rather than a theological approach, understanding Paul as a "Jewish Christian mystic." He emphasizes Paul's encounters with the divine, experiences at the heart of his ministry and writings: "When we take seriously Paul's own religious experience, the historical context of his letters, and the central metaphors that shaped his message, we find an apostle whose teaching and passion stand in considerable continuity with Jesus."

In this confessional book, Borg's experience of the sacred and relationship with God run as twin themes throughout. It is also an accessible book, almost entirely devoid of scholarly jargon but filled with scholarly insight. While Borg addresses the "conflict about how to see and read the Bible" he does not try to resolve it. In fact some of his opinions may widen the divide for many. But Borg is not interested in winning arguments over inspiration, authority or methodology. His concern is to gain a hearing from among the millions who find such questions, if not the Bible itself, entirely irrelevant.