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Rescuing the Bible from Bishop Spong

In recent years, it seems, there has been a change in strategy by those who reject the Bible as a message from God. For most of the century, attacks on Scripture in the US were confined to atheist publishers like Prometheus Press, or to scholarly religious books, and neither of these usually reached the general public. True, the leaders of mainline denominations typically held similar views, but they tended to lay low for fear of arousing the ire of their conservative parishioners, who might just leave the denomination and take their money with them. Or worse, they might wake up and take the denomination back, as has now happened in the Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. So theological liberals had been content to keep a low profile, depending on the growing secularization of society and introductory religion courses in their colleges to bring more and more people around to their way of thinking.

But no more. Whether it has been the increasing radicalism in parts of society, or the growing effectiveness of conservative responses, the lay-low strategy has been abandoned and the culture wars are heating up. One example of this is the much-hyped Jesus Seminar, which seeks to share the "assured results of religious scholarship" with the average Joe and Mary.

Another is John Shelby Spong, Episcopal Bishop of Newark, NJ and one of the most outspoken and liberal clergy in America today. In 1991 he wrote *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, which sold enough copies to go into paperback the following year, and now has reached its 17th printing. Spong is concerned that the only lay people who take the Bible seriously are the fundamentalists C with whom he lumps evangelicals and anyone else who believes in the inerrancy of Scripture. Spong wants to convince his readers that the Bible is filled with errors, but that behind and beneath its text is a powerful message and experience which modern people need and will accept if it can be freed from the shackles of an ancient worldview.

In fourteen brief and readable chapters, Spong raises most of the objections to accepting the Bible as literally true that I have seen. He even has a number of new ones that most scholars would be embarrassed to suggest, e.g., he rebukes TV meteorologists for speaking of the sun rising when we now know that it=s really the earth that rotates, and he claims the Bible teaches that stars are peepholes to heaven through which God watches us! He gives deft sketches of the content of many of the biblical books, sharing some genuine insights with his readers while ridiculing miracles, Satan, hell and creation C the worldview of the Bible. At the same time, he claims a love for the Bible and a desire that others could share with him in liberating experiences of love, life and being, which he feels are precluded by a literal reading of Scripture.



If we as Bible-believing Christians are to be effective in reaching out to an increasingly diverse and secular society, we need to know what the attacks against the Bible look like, and Spong is as good as any for stating such objections quickly and pungently. Not only do atheists and theological liberals use these arguments, but so do Muslims and new agers, all to turn people away from Christianity and to win them over to their own religion.

Like many of our students here at Biblical, most Christians raised in an evangelical or fundamental environment have been very much sheltered from this material, and as a result do not take it seriously. I, too, was raised in a Christian home and attended a (not very conservative) Southern Baptist Church growing up, but I did not really run into attacks on the Bible until I took the required courses in religion at Duke University in the early '60s. Providentially, the Lord provided the works of C.S. Lewis to help me in that time, and later Herman Eckelmann at Cornell, and then Allan MacRae. As a result, instead of coming to reject the Bible, I now appreciate its truth and power more than ever.

But of course, we need to know more than just the objections to the Bible and biblical Christianity. We need to know how to answer them. Such material can seem very academic unless we have been in the trenches ourselves, and if we lay low in our Christian ghettos we can probably avoid facing it. But God has not called us to hide in caves and fortresses while the enemy takes over the land; he wants us to join in raising up a banner against them. What we need to do is to genuinely reach out to our secular neighbors, and then try to help them by answering objections they may have to the Bible and Christianity.

Allan MacRae was a big help to me when I came to seminary. His lectures responding to the claims that the first five books of the Bible don't really go back to Moses (or God) have now been published in a very readable form and are available at Biblical (JEDP: Lectures on the Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch). Hugh Ross has written some excellent books that show how modern scientific discoveries point to the infinite, eternal, personal God of the Bible as the creator of the universe (see his website at www.reasons.org). Craig Blomberg has written an excellent work *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (InterVarsity, 1987), which shows that they look very good indeed unless one has already assumed that miracles cannot occur. In addition, a fair amount of material responding to attacks on the Bible has been produced by our group IBRI, the Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute. It can be downloaded free from the IBRI website www.ibri.org.

Theological liberalism is not only a threat; it is a tragedy. How many young people have gone off to college only to have their faith shaken or destroyed by teachers who had passed through a similar experience years before? It even sounds like this happened to John Spong. Indeed, the foundations of Western society have been eaten away; we accepted the hasty assumption of scientism that miracles could not occur, and thus concluded that the narratives of the Bible could not be reliable. The result has been a moral meltdown and a loss of vision. If death ends it all, what is left but to eat, drink, and try to be merry?

Spong tries to save something by extracting the ideas of love, life and being from their biblical

matrix. But how does he know that this is the real message beneath and behind the Scriptures if the Bible is filled with error? Isn't he just engaged in wishful thinking? If we do not have the light of Scripture, then indeed we walk in darkness.

I praise God that he has given us excellent evidence that the Bible is not the guesses of ancient men. Indeed, it is the one extraterrestrial message that can save us, if we will interpret it carefully and act upon what it says.