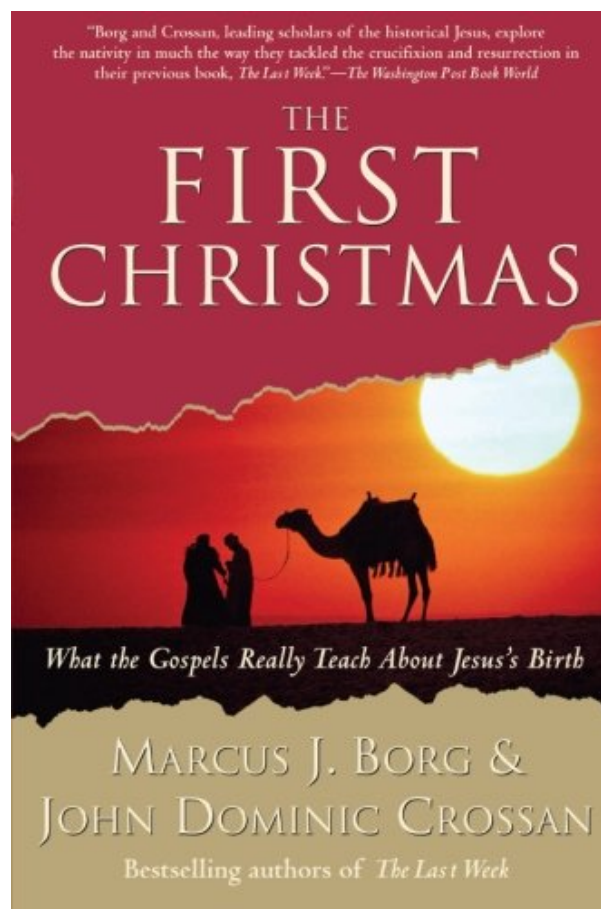


THE FIRST CHRISTMAS: WHAT THE GOSPELS REALLY TEACH ABOUT JESUS'S BIRTH BY MARCUS J. BORG, JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN



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"Borg and Crossan, leading scholars of the historical Jesus, explore the nativity in much the way they tackled the crucifixion and resurrection in their previous book, *The Last Week*."—*The Washington Post Book World*

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS



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MARCUS J. BORG &
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

Bestselling authors of *The Last Week*

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“Who could argue with the message the authors draw from the Bible’s Christmas stories? Light in the darkest time of the year, hope in a period of creeping despair—these are powerful and universal themes that can give everyone a stake in Christmas.”

—USA Today

In *The First Christmas* Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan—top Jesus scholars and authors of *The Last Week*—help us see the real Christmas story buried in the familiar Bible accounts. Basing their interpretations on the two nativity narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Borg and Crossan focus on the literal story—the inner truth rather than the historical facts—to offer a clear and uplifting message of hope and peace. With *The First Christmas* readers get a fresh, deep, and new understanding of the nativity story, enabling us to better appreciate the powerful message of the Gospels.

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Most helpful customer reviews

34 of 35 people found the following review helpful.

How is Christ in Christmas?

By Robert Cornwall

It is nearing the Christmas season, we say we want Jesus to be in Christmas, but in what way is this true? This book came out a few years ago, which is when I first read it, but it's in paperback now, and has something to say to us about Christmas.

In the popular mind the Christmas story as symbolized by the crèche involves Joseph, Mary, and the little baby Jesus lying in a manger (feeding trough), surrounded on one side by shepherds and by three kings on the other. Of course there are the requisite barnyard animals standing around like movie extras. Above this scene flies the tiny cherubic angel. That such a scene is at best a conflation of the gospel texts doesn't seem to matter. It is what we think Christmas is about.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan offer to the general reader a different reading of the Christmas story, one that is rooted in their earlier works on Jesus. In fact, if you've been reading any of their recent books you will hear strong echoes (especially of Crossan's *God and Empire* -- HarperSanFrancisco, 2007). A companion piece to their earlier - and in many ways stronger - *The Last Week* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), Borg and Crossan offer a "parabolic reading" of the two Christmas stories (infancy narratives). They use the term parable here as an alternative to factual and fable - the two usual understandings of these two overlapping but in so many ways very different stories of Jesus' birth. Factualism focuses on historical veracity, while fable implies that these are simply fairy tales that can be easily dispensed with. By speaking of them as parables, they suggest that the focus is not on factuality (which for the most part they discount) but on the meaning of the stories. And meaning they do have. Indeed, these are by their very nature subversive stories - subversive in that they challenge the reigning paradigm (Herod is "King of the Jews" and that Caesar is "Son of God" and Savior and Light of the World).

The authors speak of the infancy narratives as "parabolic overtures," by which they mean that the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke (the only two canonical infancy stories) contain in miniature the full gospel story. In this retelling of the story of Jesus, we discover the parallels and the contrasts. In many ways Matthew portrays Jesus as the New Moses - the new law giver, for like Moses Jesus is rescued from the murderous king. In Matthew Jesus goes down to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath; in Exodus Moses leads the

people out of Egypt. But in both cases the lead actor is spared so as to save his people from the hand of the tyrant. Luke on the other hand, sees Jesus in contrast to Caesar Augustus, who also is acclaimed as son of God (Apollo) and Savior. We also see in these first two chapters many of the emphases of Luke's gospel - his emphasis on women (Mary, Elizabeth, and Anna figure prominently), an emphasis on the poor and the marginalized (the shepherds), and on the Holy Spirit.

Central to understanding these stories is their historical context - both their Jewish and their Roman context. Thus imperialism figures prominently (see Crossan's *God & Empire*). This is a story of contrasting kingdoms - that of Rome and that of God. Both promise peace, but one is by way of victory (violence) and the other through justice (non-violence). As such it is also the story of messianic expectations - the belief that a son of David would one day appear.

Part two of the book moves from contextual issues to the deeper issues inherent in the stories - the genealogies, which are themselves parabolic, the visitation by angels, birth in Bethlehem. Each of these aspects of the story is more theological than historical and is meant to cement the messianic role of Jesus. Again, the contrast here has political and subversive connotations - although Matthew and Luke have different audiences in mind.

Finally, in part three we come to the theological reflections - three images: Light, fulfillment, joy. Whether it is the star guiding the magi to Bethlehem or the glories of heaven that fill the sky when the angels appear to the shepherds, light is a central theme, and at the heart of this usage is the belief that Jesus is the light to the nations/gentiles. Jesus is also fulfillment of the Old Testament. In Matthew it is a prediction-fulfillment formula, whereas in Luke it is more thematic - echoes and reflections in hymns such as the Magnificat where Old Testament language and themes resonate. And finally, as the hymn so resplendently proclaims - the Christmas story is about "Joy to the World."

As one might expect from a book by these two authors, the focus is not on fact but on meaning, with the political implications being paramount. Both writers are concerned that the gospels be seen as a word of warning and a word of hope to a world that is in danger of self-destructing. It is a warning about the dangers of imperialism - whether Roman or American. Most of all it is an attempt to reach out to the lay person - Christian or not. Clergy and scholars will find little that is new here, but this will prove to be useful fodder for even the well informed about scholarly trends.

Whether one agrees with all that is here, the tone is to be appreciated. The love that these men have for the stories is in evidence. Even when they "demythologize" the stories and reveal the fictional side, they don't do so gloatingly, but with a view to helping people better appreciate the meaning of the stories. In this, one hopes they will be successful.

71 of 86 people found the following review helpful.

Bor4g and Crossan Publish Another Winner

By H. Alan Elmore

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan are famous for taking current biblical scholarship and making it readable for the general public. *The First Christmas* is an excellent example. It is an easy to read version of current belief about the Birth Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. It is not a devotional book. Few Bible academics even imagine that the Birth Narratives are historical. However, to use the word "myth" has too many connotations. Borg and Crossan use the term "parables" for these accounts. Although there is some similarity, the differences are great. Christmas combines the two accounts, and nobody is aware of it. This book calls the Birth Narratives "parabolic overtures," meaning that they are intentional parables, intended to tell the general approach to Jesus that is taken in each Gospel, Matthew and Luke. The

comparison is excellent reading.

36 of 42 people found the following review helpful.

Christmas Riches

By Scott Elliott

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan explore Matthew and Luke's Christmas narratives in this provocative-can't-put-down book. They place the stories in historical context and then thoughtfully explore the rich symbolism and meaning of the Gospel accounts of events surrounding the birth of Jesus. The results are new and powerful meanings to the Christmas stories for the modern ear-- stories that for two-thousand years have beckoned humankind away from the pursuit of peace through violence and toward God's call to the pursuit of peace through non-violence and justice for all. **THIS A GREAT BOOK THAT IS WELL WORTH THE READ!**

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