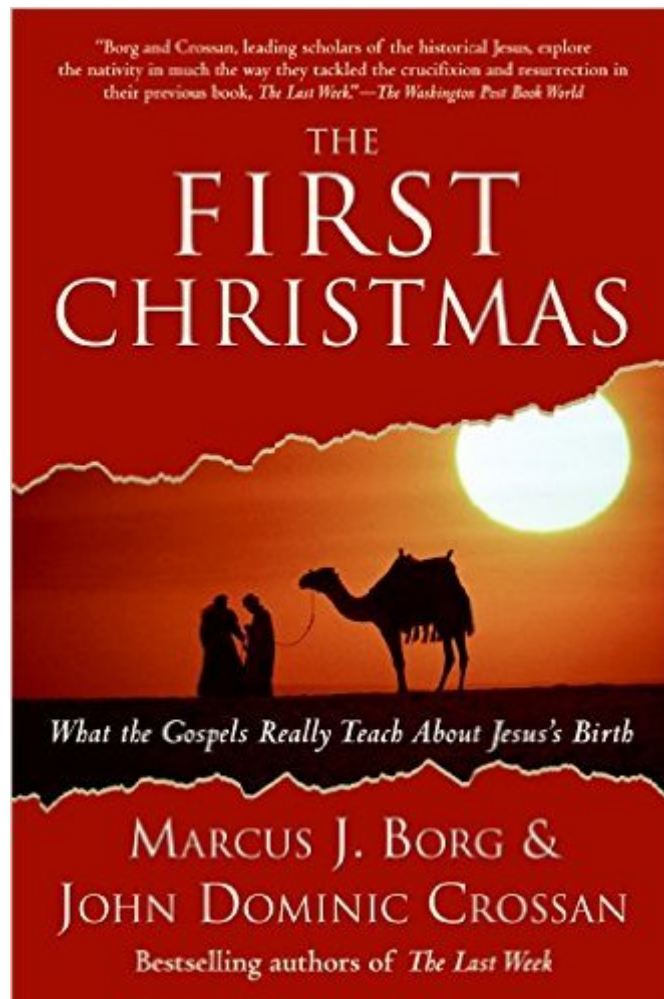


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# The First Christmas: What The Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth



## Synopsis

“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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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.

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.

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 though violence and toward God's call to the pursuit peace though non-violence and justice for all. THIS A GREAT BOOK THAT IS WELL WORTH THE READ!

The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are so familiar, heard every Christmas in church and on the radio, that I wasn't sure there was much more I could learn about them. How wrong I was! Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan's book started brilliantly; within the first chapter I was hooked on what they unfolded. They approach the birth narratives as parables/metaphors, not particularly addressing modern-day ideas of historicity but instead looking at the narratives and their structure in terms of what the gospel writers might have wanted to say. It becomes clear that Matthew and Luke are very different, with Matthew presenting Jesus as the New Moses, reflecting many images and ideas from Jewish writings, and Luke's emphasis on the stories as an overture to his larger themes of women, the marginalised and the Holy Spirit. The book goes step-by-step through some parts of the nativity stories, explaining the historical context for many of the events, showing the parallels and the differences between the gospels, relating parts to historical or metaphorical events. I found the book began slightly to drag by the end but I was really taken by much of what they said, particularly the links Matthew makes between Jesus, Moses and Caesar. Some more conservative Christians will probably find the liberal tone of the book too much to stomach which is a real shame as there are some real gems in here, but for those with an open mind and an interest in understanding more about the world of the time of Jesus this is an unmissable book.

A wonderfully researched and complete look at the biblical accounts of the first Christmas stories - and their place in our faith journeys today. A bit tedious in spots, and redundant in others, but overall very informative, interesting, and enlightening. Some in our study group found the language a bit academic at times, but all found it worth reading, and discussion was lively and exciting.

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