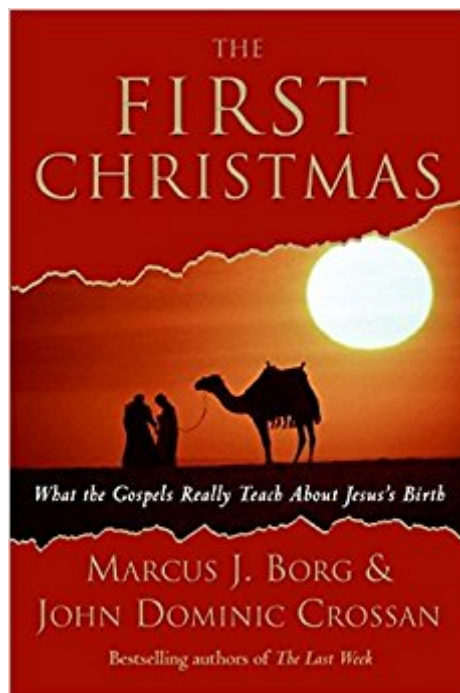




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# The First Christmas: What The Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth



## Synopsis

“Who could argue with the message the authors draw from the Bible—these are 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’s 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

“With meticulous scholarship and accessible language, The first Christmas... uncover(s) the genuine meaning of...the Birth of Jesus. (The Progressive Christian)

In The First Christmas, two of today’s top Jesus scholars, Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, join forces to show how history has biased our reading of the nativity story as it appears in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. As they did for Easter in their previous book, The Last Week,

here they explore the beginning of the life of Christ, peeling away the sentimentalism that has built up over the last two thousand years around this most well known of all stories to reveal the truth of what the gospels actually say. Borg and Crossan help us to see this well-known narrative afresh by answering the question, "What do these stories mean?" in the context of both the first century and the twenty-first century. They successfully show that the Christmas story, read in its original context, is far richer and more challenging than people imagine.

After the first chapter, it was hard to keep my attention. Reads like a boring thesis paper, rambling on and on trying to fill pages while trying to prove the Christmas story is just another biblical parable. Sorry I spent the money!

If you know Borg and Crossan's other work and their general perspective, this book will provide a helpful and relatively quick overview of the Christmas narratives that unpacks the devices used by the authors of Matthew and Luke in order to make particular theological points. It's good stuff; a little repetitive at times but the advantage of this is that you can pick a chapter that interests you and it will be well explained without much reference to material previously covered. It's a handy resource to have on-hand. For those not familiar with the authors, this book may contain some challenging perspectives. They gently debunk common popular approaches to the story as factual history in favour of pointing to the biblical authors' theological intentions. The writing is clear and concise; it is scholarly but not expressed in deeply academic language. Why only four stars? While I recognise that this isn't designed to be an academic textbook, the authors are serious scholars; I'd have appreciated an appendix of references so I could explore their conclusions in a bit more depth. There are more than a few times that they make a point that could use some more backup than this book's format allowed for.

Borg and Crossan look at the birth stories in Matthew and Luke is finely detailed, almost too much so. Because of their liberal approach to Biblical exegesis, they spend several pages explaining the historical-metaphorical approach and why they don't see the birth stories as factual. That detail alone will make even moderate Christians want to throw away the book, and conservative fundamentalist may just experience their heads exploding while reading those pages. I don't always agree with Borg, especially on his opinion on the factual nature of events described in the New Testament. But that is his opinion, and I respect his deep insight into the layers of meaning behind the stories, and he is the best at putting the stories into their historical context. I don't feel like I have

to agree with a writer's every theological point in order to learn something, nor do I fear that reading "heresy" is somehow going to banish me to the flames of hell. What I do learn from Borg is insight into what the authors of Matthew and Luke were trying to communicate about Jesus, the Son of God. If you side-step the happened-or-not argument and instead dive into the deeper spiritual truths of the stories, you will come out with a better understanding of not only the New Testament, but also how first century Christians viewed Jesus through their cultural and historical lenses. At times I wished that Borg would just get to the point, but I think it's because I'm well-acquainted with his approach and reasons behind it, having read several of his books, including the excellent *Two Visions of Jesus* that he co-wrote with N.T. Wright. Those new to Borg's writings will need to read those passages to understand the foundation of his interpretation. As you read the vicious reviews here, keep in mind that they are probably written by the inerrant, literal, dictated-word-for-word-by-God crowd. They can't fathom a Bible that might actually contain metaphor and allegory, which was a very common form of communicating spiritual truth in ancient times.

This may be a weird book for an atheist to read. But despite my beliefs, I am quite interested in religious ideas. Having read the authors' *The First Paul*, which I found to be quite intriguing, a very interesting take on Paul's theology, I was curious how they would approach the birth stories of Jesus. They definitely didn't disappoint. I found them to be quite honest about the historical situation. Their main point was that the stories were to be read as parables. The important thing was to investigate their meaning. The main emphasis was on the contrast of the peace of Rome (peace through victory) versus the peace of Jesus (peace through justice). Another aspect of their analysis was that Jesus was about the here and now, and not about some future in heaven. For them Christmas was to be understood about the past, present and future. As such my take away was that they would call upon us to work for peace now and use advent as a period of reflection. This is to be done in a participatory way with Jesus, not just having Jesus bring peace with out us having to do anything. A final point I would add is that taking this time of year to reflect on our past, present and future of our actions concerning peace and justice, which does not have to be such a big national or global action, but how we can improve are little part of the world. This I would judge can be done whether or not you believe in Jesus or any kind of god, or not.

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