



## **A Tribute to John Shelby Spong By Rabbi Brian**

**\*\*JACK\*\***

I'm walking, excitedly, from the Hall of Philosophy, past Chautauqua's 3,000 person amphitheater, holding my cell-phone next to my ear talking to Larry, my BFF.

"I'm very jealous of you," Larry tells me.

"You should be," I tell him.

We both laugh.

I follow Morris Avenue in this "model train village come to life" village to the Tally-Ho Hotel, where we are staying for the week. I need to rest and prepare my thoughts. I'll be meeting with Jack in a little over an hour.

Jane's most memorable childhood summers are set here at the Chautauqua cultural arts institution in Upstate New York.

Since our kids were little, she wanted our family to summer here. This year, she got me to agree to the trip as John Shelby Spong was to be the speaker hosted by the department of religion and I would be able to hear him lecture five times!

Jack—as he tells people to call him—is a larger than life figure to me and progressive religious folk the world over. As the Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, he supported same-sex unions, ridiculed simplistic notions of God, and passionately decried Biblical literalism.

"John Shelby Spong really wants to meet with you?"

I love when my BFF the minister teases me.

"Tell me exactly how it happened."

I blather.

"Well, I was at his morning lecture. He was talking about the history of when people started to take the Bible literally. And, then he asked for questions at the end. And, the person who asked before me mentioned something about how perhaps a rabbi would have something different to add. And then, he turned towards me. Spong did. I let him know that I am a rabbi and then asked him, 'Why is it that nobody seems to take any of the Greek myths literally?' He didn't answer. He laughed and said, 'Rabbi, might you be able to join me for a longer discussion on the veranda outside the department of religion at 2pm?'"

In 2007, Larry's Christmas present to me was Spong's book *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes*. His old fashioned Palmer script is still on the book's inside cover: This book helped me to see the Jewish Jesus better. It makes me feel so much closer to you. — Shalom, Larry.

My eyes were forever changed.

Spong's premise in the book was — and it's so obvious once you know it — that the Gospels were written by Jews, for Jews, in the style of Jewish writing. For example, in Chapter Four, Spong explains how the basis of the Gospel of Mark is the Jewish liturgical year from Rosh Hashanah to Passover. Brilliant stuff.

Who thought to read the New Testament like Mishnah or Talmud?

I was too excited to remember much of the meeting.

I know I told him that his book helped me to fall in love with Jesus. I know that I told him that his writing freed me from reading the New Testament as a foreigner—needing to lean on pastors to tell me what the stories meant. And, I know that I thanked him.

Of all the quotes by Spong, the one that most speaks to me today is this:

*"If God is a source of love, then the only way I can worship God is by loving, loving wastefully ... It is love that loves not because it has been earned. That's where I think God is made visible."*

~ Rabbi Brian



**Rabbi Brian Zachary Mayer** resides in Portland, Oregon. He is the founder and dean of students of Religion-Outside-The-Box [rotb.org](http://rotb.org), an internet-based, global group of 3K+ digital-age seekers. ROTB produces excellent spiritual content.