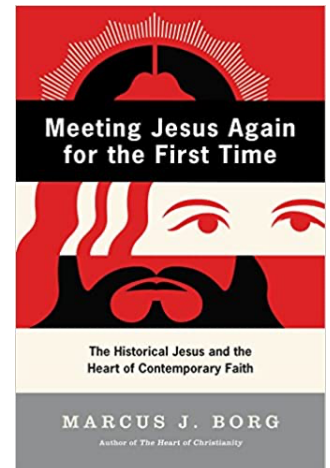


Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time

by Marcus Borg

Study/Preparation Guide: Session 3



1. Read the following pages from *MJAFT*
 1. Chapter 3: “Jesus, Compassion, and Politics” (pp 46-68)
—or—
 2. Summary on reverse – if you don’t have the book
2. Check out this on-line reference for a biography of Borg, a list of his books, as well as some supplementary information for our discussions:
<http://www.aportraitofjesus.org>

Focus Questions for our discussion:

1. What is new for you in Borg’s discussion of Jesus and the meaning of “compassion”? [pp 46-49]
2. What do you make of the notion of “purity was(is) political”? [pp 50-53]
3. Discuss the significance of Jesus’ attack on the purity system. [pp 53-58]
4. Discuss the parallels which Borg draws with contemporary purity systems. [pp 58-61]
5. What does “politics of compassion” look like to you?



Summary: Chapter 3

- Most central to Jesus: *Spirit* and *compassion* – what was most important to him.
- Last chapter was about Spirit; this chapter about compassion: the summation of his teaching about God and ethics
- “For Jesus, compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centered in God” (46)
- *Imitatio dei* - the imitation of God = crystallization of Jesus’ message

The Meaning of Compassion

Hebrew word translated “compassion” is plural of noun that, in singular, means “womb”. So, *compassion* is both a feeling and a way of being that flows out of that feeling.

Compassion means to “feel with” – feeling the feelings of somebody else in a visceral way – at a level below the head

Compassion is NOT mercy, mercy implies a sort of superior/subordinate relationship

“To paraphrase William Blake, mercy wears a human face, and compassion a human heart” (48)

Compassion, God, and Ethics

Hebrew Bible speaks frequently of God as compassionate, with resonances of “womb” close at hand.

Jesus’ statement “Be compassionate as God is compassionate” is rooted in Jewish tradition. To say that God is compassionate is to say that God is “like a womb” is “womblike,” or “wombish”

What does it suggest to say that God is “womb-like”?

- Gives birth
- God loves us like a mother
- Nuances of giving life, nourishing, caring, perhaps embracing and encompassing

Imitatio dei: “to be compassionate as God is compassionate” = be like a womb as God is like a womb. To feel as God feels and to act as God acts: in a life-giving and nourishing way.

Compassion, Social World, and Politics

“Compassion” central to Jesus, but not Jesus’ social world. “Be holy as God is holy” was the center to that world. Different *imitatio dei*’s

This distinction is at the root of the conflict in Jesus' ministry – two different social visions: social vision centered in holiness vs. social vision centered in compassion

For Jesus compassion was a social paradigm, the core value for life in community. Compassion for Jesus was political

The Purity System of the Jewish Social World

“Purity was political because it structure society into a purity system” (50).

As a system built on holiness, Israel had to be separate from anything that was “unclean” to be “faithful to God”.

A purity system “is a cultural map which indicates ‘a place for everything and everything in its place’ (50). That include people, things, times and social groups.

There was a range from REALLY pure people to REALLY impure people. Defined by birth, but also by behavior

The “righteous” were those who followed the purity system; “sinners” were those who didn't

Physical wholeness attached to purity; lack of wholeness with impurity

Purity system associated with economic class (popular wisdom equated wealth with God's favor)

Male and female were similarly classed

Jew/Gentile similarly classed

Purity system created a world with sharp social boundaries

At center of the purity system was temple and priesthood; and temple and priesthood had economic interest (“pure offerings”) as well as religious interests in the purity system

Politics of purity was the ideology of the dominant elites—religious, political, and economic

Purity central to two subgroups: Pharisees (purity in everyday life); Essenes (withdraw to be pure)

Jesus' Attack upon the Purity System

Jesus offered a different vision: a community shaped not by ethos and politics of purity but by ethos and politics of compassion (53)

Jesus replaced core value of *imitatio dei* that had been holiness with compassion

Examples of Jesus' critique of purity system:

Tithing mint and cumin, but neglecting justice

Pharisees characterized as "unmarked graves" (corpses were impure)

Purity on the inside more important than outside

"Blessed are the pure in heart"

Parable of Good Samaritan

Healing stories shatter the purity boundaries of social world

touching lepers and corpses

entering graveyard

Table fellowship with "questionable" people: meal-time was microcosm of system. Jesus' table fellowship cast a NEW vision

challenged purity system – real meal with real outcasts

Jesus' inclusiveness embodies a radically alternative social vision

Role of women in Jesus' movement deeply threatening to system; women part of "discipleship of equals"

Jesus' *imitatio dei* was boundary shattering.

"Whereas purity divides and excludes, compassion unites and includes" (58)

Spirit, Compassion and Us

Intra-Jewish battle between Jesus and advocates of purity system – battle between two different ways to interpret Scripture – two lenses through which to interpret the tradition – battle about the "shape of the world"

There are similarities in our world – even with questions of purity. Borg points to questions surrounding homosexuality

Questions of rewards for culturally valued forms of achievement and penalties for failing to live up to those standards – sharp social boundaries.

Borg wonders what a "politics of compassion" would look like

Borg relates "boundary-shattering experience of the Spirit and the boundary shattering ethos of compassion. Spirit and compassion go together" (61)

Growth in compassion is the sign of growth in the life of the Spirit.