

# Foreword

Marcus Borg

I am pleased that this book of readings from Walter Wink's work is being published, for both personal and more than personal reasons. He was a close friend, beginning almost thirty years ago when we met at a professional meeting of Jesus scholars. Because of our friendship, I will refer to him as Walter in the rest of this foreword.

The more than personal reason is that he was one of the foremost American New Testament scholars of the last forty years. His many books and articles not only reflect thorough historical and interdisciplinary research but are filled with passionate applications to our lives today. The title of one of his earliest books, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, expresses the conviction that animated his vocation: the Bible has transforming power for individuals, communities and the world.

Walter's passion for the transforming power of the Bible flowed into his life. He lived much of what he wrote about. He never succumbed to the scholarly temptation to become a curator of a museum of ancient texts. More than most of his academic colleagues in the study of Christian origins, including me, he lived his life as a Christian intellectual who moved from thought to *praxis*. In workshops around the world, he trained people about *praxis*—practical means for changing the world. He engaged in perilous practice himself, including entering South Africa illegally during the decades of apartheid in order to encourage and equip black South Africans in the methods and goals of nonviolent resistance to oppression—methods and goals grounded in Walter's perception of God as revealed in Jesus.

Though I met him only in the 1980s, I had known about him since the fall of 1969 when I was in the first year of my doctoral program at Oxford. I had just embarked on three years of reading everything I could about the historical Jesus. I began with Jesus' relationship with John the Baptizer, his mentor. I read everything I could find on him, including Walter's 1968 book on John the Baptist. I was impressed. Indeed, I regarded him as the world's leading authority on John. Little did I know that he was only about thirty when he wrote the book, just a few years older than I was. But he was a "big name" for me "way back" in 1969.

In the decades since, my respect and admiration for Walter and his work continued to grow. Indeed, he was one of the two or three colleagues in New Testament scholarship from whom I have learned the most. In my life as an itinerant lecturer, I recommend his books wherever I go (and that's now almost two million miles).

My personal favorites are *Engaging the Powers* and his small book, *Jesus and Nonviolence*. I used both in courses that I taught for many years in a public university. Students loved them—and found them provocative, as Walter's books always are.

Not only have I learned much from him, so has the discipline of New Testament scholarship as a whole. Several of his major themes have become widely shared by mainstream scholars. Without trying to be comprehensive, I mention the following notions that have now become part of the “accepted wisdom” of many scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity:

- **The concept and language of “domination systems.”** More than anybody else in New Testament studies, Walter has given us language for the most typical form of political and economic organization in the ancient world, and its importance for understanding Jesus, early Christianity, and, by extension, the Bible as a whole. And he makes it clear that domination systems continue in the modern and postmodern world.
- **“The claim that Jesus advocated nonviolent *resistance*.”** Jesus resisted the domination system of his time and did so through nonviolent protest and advocacy: protest against oppression and advocacy of a domination-free order brought about through nonviolence. In Walter's exegesis of the familiar sayings in the Sermon on the Mount about loving enemies, turning the other cheek, going the second mile, and giving up your shirt as well as your cloak, he argues that these are counsels to and examples of active nonviolent resistance. Moreover, he takes the argument for nonviolence beyond the first century by describing the many times that it has succeeded as a significant means of social change in human history. Thus he counters the common notion that a commitment to nonviolence is unrealistic and argues that it is practical, wise, and right.
- **His work on “the principalities and powers.”** This is connected to his emphasis on domination systems, of course. But it deserves separate mention as another of his distinctive contributions. Indeed, he wrote a trilogy on “the powers” as a crucial element in the early Christian understanding of the world. He then wrote a fourth book

on “the powers” in which he summarized in one volume his understanding of “the powers that be.” He not only highlighted this theme in the New Testament, but helped to make us aware that “systemic evil” is bigger than any of us as individuals. Whatever we think ontologically of “the powers,” they are real. Walter, more than any other New Testament scholar of our generation, helped us to see this.

It has been a privilege to write this foreword. Walter was a brilliant New Testament scholar, a valued colleague, a passionate Christian, and a dear friend. I commend to you not only this reader, but everything he wrote.

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