

THE JESUS SEMINAR, JESUS, AND HIGHER CRITICISM—PART TWO

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What is the Jesus Seminar?

The so-called Jesus Seminar (JS) illustrates the fraudulent nature of liberal biblical scholarship generally. According to the *Los Angeles Times* of November 25, 1978, when the Jesus Seminar was first organized it had only several members and hoped to enlist 12 to 15 biblical authorities to vote on every word of Jesus to decide which were the most authentic and which were “put into his mouth” by early church tradition. Project organizer Robert W. Funk, a former president of the Society of Biblical Literature, said the purpose of the seminar was to determine “what did Jesus *really* say?”

Harvard Divinity School's George MacRae, one of the first members of the group, said that the real question the scholars would be asking was this: “What can we say Jesus said after 60 years of form criticism, of analyzing individual miracle stories and sayings?”

The *Times* pointed out that some evangelical scholars would be added to the Seminar (back then it was simply a committee) “but only those who use modern critical methods” according to MacRae. Eight years, later the impact of the JS was beginning to be felt.

An article in the April 27, 1985 *Los Angeles Times*, Part II, p. 8, by John Dart, “Skepticism of Many New Testament Scholars Clashes with Laymen's Faith and Traditional Beliefs on Jesus” pointed out, “So far as the biblical historian is concerned, there is scarcely a popularly held traditional belief about Jesus that is not regarded with considerable skepticism” according to the chairman of Stanford University's religious studies department, Van Harvey.

Harvey implied that the layman, i.e., the average Christian, really isn't qualified to understand the Bible or assess its various claims! “The Stanford professor said that New Testament scholarship has become so specialized and requires so much preparation that many scholars feel ‘the lay person has simply been disqualified from having any right to a judgment regarding the truth or falsity of certain historical claims.’”

That's like saying the average American has been disqualified from, and has no right to judge the truth of, certain specialized political claims.

Further, the author of the article, John Dart, reported, “The lay person unacquainted with New Testament research is no more in a position to have an informed judgment on the historical reliability of gospel accounts than a non-specialist would about ‘the Seventh Letter of Plato, the relationship of Montezuma to Cortez’ or other historical matters.” So, most Christians really aren't qualified to say anything about the words of Jesus. Only the liberal scholars are so qualified. (No scholarly papalism here!)

What Did the Jesus Seminar Conclude About Jesus and His Teachings?

How did the Jesus Seminar vote on the words of Jesus? In the most scholarly manner possible. They voted on the authenticity of the words of Jesus by dropping colored balls into a box. A red ball meant Jesus made the statement or something very like it; a pink ball meant He probably said something like this; gray meant He did not say it but the ideas were close to His; a black ball meant Jesus never said it.

Only about 18% of Jesus' words “pass” the test and are colored red or pink; however,

even a good number of these statements come from the pseudepigraphal, gnostic, *Gospel of Thomas*, which JS members consider a fifth “gospel.”^{8a} Thus, Jesus never really believed He would die for the world’s sins despite His clear statements in Matthew 20:28, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,” and Matthew 26:28, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins,” and John 12:27, “And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.”

Nor did He think He was the Messiah despite John 4:25-26. Here, in response to the woman at the well who said, “I know that Messiah is coming,” we read, “Then Jesus declared, ‘I who speak to you am *He*.’” And before the high priest himself, under oath, Jesus declared He was the Messiah, “The high priest said to him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied. ‘But I say to all of you: in the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven’” (Mt. 26:63-64).

In addition, He never really claimed to be God despite claims like the following, “Before Abraham was born, I am” (Jn. 8:58); “I and the Father are one” (Jn. 10:30); and “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9).

Jesus never spoke of heaven or hell despite Matthew 25:46, “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Jesus was not virgin born and did no miracles despite Matthew 1:22-23. In the former verse we read that the virgin birth of Jesus “took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son....’” That Jesus did miracles is also obvious. In fact, when John the Baptist was in prison, apparently discouraged, and heard about all the miracles Jesus was doing, he sent his own disciples to ask Jesus whether or not He was the Messiah. Jesus’ reply was that the miracles He did *proved* He was the Messiah. “At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses, and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, ‘Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me’” (Lk. 7:21-23).

Finally, the Jesus Seminar asks us to believe that Jesus never called for anyone to repent of their sins and, of course, He never rose from the dead, despite the unanimous testimony of all four Gospels and the verdict of history.

In fact, only about 15 actual sayings of Jesus are colored red—and even then not necessarily in each Gospel.⁹ This reduces Jesus’ “authentic” words in the Gospels to less than 6 per cent. In other words, 94 per cent of what we read Jesus saying in the Gospels is doubtful or wrong. The Gospel of Mark, for example, had only one single verse!! of over 280 verses spoken by Jesus colored red—Mark 12:17. This means that according to traditional authorship, Mark (or Christian tradition) misquoted or invented the words of Jesus some 300 times for every time he quoted Jesus correctly. And worse yet (if that were possible), virtually everything in the Gospel of John was voted black! The beloved Apostle John actually had a worse record of accurately recording Jesus’ words than Mark. Everyone can now relax. We know the truth that the Gospels are worthless. (To make certain we know it, the JS is now spending its time determining what Jesus never *did* in the Gospels.)

Should Liberal Theologians Be Trusted?

If what these scholars say is true, Christianity is not just a false religion, it is a worthless religion and a fraud of the worst sort. One is tempted to think that having us arrive at such a conclusion is perhaps the real motive underlying the work of many of these scholars. One also wonders about scholars who spend so much of their time and effort attempting to disprove the Bible when to them it is so obviously a falsehood to begin with. (Hint: Maybe it's because they think it really might be true but really don't want it to be—kind of like the TV commentator we saw last night who said, “Perhaps the most fearful thing about the Christian hell is that it might be true.”)^{9a}

The kind of arrogance displayed in the Jesus Seminar, which actually votes on the accuracy and reliability of Jesus' statements—Jesus was, after all, God incarnate!—or the assumption that only the scholars have the right to judge New Testament reliability represents the height of insolence. In his knowledge of New Testament reliability the informed Christian laymen is actually better educated than these “scholars” whose rationalistic, skeptical assumptions leave them speaking nonsense or in a hopeless muddle, uncertain what to believe. As one commentator noted, “If a vote were taken on the usefulness of the Jesus Seminar, is there any doubt what the outcome would be?”¹⁰

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to determine from the New Testament accounts that Jesus claimed to be God and that He said His words would never pass away. Nor does it take a Nobel Prize winner or a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies from Stanford to ascertain with a relatively small amount of study that the New Testament documents are historically accurate and that Jesus rose from the dead. What is noteworthy is the tremendous amount of legitimate scholarship the rationalistic theologians, liberals and skeptics will completely disregard in order to maintain their own biases.

We think that liberal biblical scholars generally, who have done so much to damage the cause and credibility of Christianity in the eyes of both the church and the world, can hardly be seen as objective theologians honestly searching for the “real” Jesus. After all, the real Jesus has been clearly present in the Scriptures for 2,000 years. Instead, these liberals should be viewed as self-serving ideologues at best—indeed, hypocrites, if they claim to be Christian—and at worst as enemies of the Christian faith. No other perspective would seem to do them justice. Discontent to keep their destructive views to themselves, they actively seek to persuade others not to trust in the biblical picture of Jesus. And they are highly successful—their “new view of Christ that denies His supremacy is gaining followers all over the world.”¹¹ Indeed, why do you think the “Jesus Seminar” releases its “findings” just before Easter and Christmas? Obviously, this is a calculated attempt to target the public at the best possible time to secure maximum exposure for their radical views.

However, this liberal quest for “the historical Jesus” can only terminate as theological road kill along the path to, presumably not heaven. Even *Newsweek* commented, “After 150 years of scholarly search, there are signs that the quest for the ‘historical’ Jesus has reached a dead end. There have been no new data on the person of Jesus since the gospels were written.”¹² The major reason such a critical search exists at all is because many people don't want to believe what the gospels clearly state. The real problem, then, is that the critics don't want to believe in Jesus. The problem is not the quality of the evidence to substantiate biblical Christianity and its documents as historically reliable. After all, the gospels were long ago proven accurate, historical reporting. That evidence to substantiate this is available to everyone. When one looks at the quality of evangelical scholarship in, e.g., the six volume *Gospel Perspectives*

(Sheffield,, JSOT Press 1986) or a critique of the JS like Michael Wilkins and J. P. Moreland's, eds., *Jesus Under Fire*, one finds a clear and unambiguous refutation of what the liberals are doing as well as an objective defense of New Testament Christianity. But because critics prefer unbelief to a reasoned faith, they literally spend years and thousands of hours inventing and weaving theories to support their personal biases.

When the harmful conclusions of the Jesus Seminar are broadcast nationwide, and indeed worldwide, it's not difficult to understand why Christians who believe in the Bible are so upset by these so-called biblical scholars' approach to Scripture. Their poison is being disseminated everywhere. Again, in the past decade the Seminar participants have "actively sought to publicize their view."¹³ Indeed, "It would be hard to find a newspaper in America that hasn't done a story on the Seminar over the past decade."¹⁴

But just who are the members of the Jesus Seminar? Are they the unbiased scholars who have dealt honestly with conservative biblical scholarship and found it wanting as they want us to believe? No, mostly they are liberal theologians with an agenda to ignore or discredit New Testament teachings.

Overall, the Jesus Seminar is composed of Protestants, Catholics, and atheists, professors at universities and seminaries, one pastor, three members of the Westar Institute in California which sponsored the project, one filmmaker, and three others whose current occupations are entirely unidentified. Of the 74 there are three women and two Jews. Thirty-six, almost half, have a degree from or currently teach at one of three schools—Harvard, Claremont, or Vanderbilt—with some of the most liberal departments of New Testament studies anywhere.¹⁵

The bias and, in fact, unscholarly approach of the Jesus Seminar and liberal biblical criticism generally is evident. They assume *a priori* that the gospel writers were so over-laden with "Christianizing" propaganda, their writings are useless for determining who Jesus really was, and, therefore are essentially worthless as historical documents. As we noted, according to the Jesus Seminar book, *The Five Gospels*, at most, 18 percent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the gospels were actually spoken by Him. The book of John was entirely eliminated!! And only one sentence of Jesus in Mark survived their tests of authenticity. What bold arrogance! One can only wonder what Jesus Himself would think of all this—especially since He was the one who promised us, "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will *never* pass away" (Mt. 24:35).

Not surprisingly, the head of the Jesus Seminar, Robert Funk, says that the goal of the seminar is to "set Jesus free" from the "scriptural and creedal prisons in which we have entombed him."¹⁶ So the historic creeds of Christianity and the Scriptures themselves are to be considered "prisons" that keep the "real" Jesus locked away! Funk also sees the role of the Seminar in laying the foundation for a new "Reformation." "Christianity as we have known it is anemic and wasting away." Thus he thinks it is time to "reinvent Christianity," from the top down, complete with new story symbols and understandings of Jesus.¹⁷ Burton Mack, a prominent JS spokesman, says, delightedly, "It's over... Christianity has had a two-thousand year run, and it's over."¹⁷ No bias against historical orthodoxy here.

NOTES:

8a. Robert W. Funk, et. al., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (NY: Macmillan, 1993), p. 5.

9. Craig L. Blomberg, "The Seventy Four 'Scholars': Who Does the Jesus Seminar Really

- Speak For?", *Christian Research Journal*, Fall 1994, p. 34.
- 9a: "Mysteries of the Bible: Heaven and Hell," A & E Network Oct. 3, 1996.
10. "Who Was Jesus? Reflections on The Jesus Seminar," *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin*, Feb. 1994, p. 3.
11. Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ*, p. 19
12. Kenneth L. Woodward, "Rethinking the Resurrection," *Newsweek*, April 8, 1996, p. 70.
13. Van Biema, p. 54.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
15. Blomberg, p. 34.
16. Sheler, *Newsweek*, *ibid.*, p. 48, emphasis added.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 49; *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 1996, p. 67.