

# Jesus and the Jesus Seminar

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**In its attempt to translate Jesus' life and mission afresh and make it available to the general public, the Jesus Seminar has drawn sharp criticism for its principles and methods. Honest critical work that unearths the historical Jesus is relevant to the church's faith and practice, but it calls for wider accountability and responsibility.**

Robert Funk, in his inaugural address before some thirty scholars gathered from March 21–24, 1985, at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, issued the following charge:

I am proposing that we conduct our work in full public view. . . . And we must begin to sell a product that has some utilitarian value to someone. . . . At all events, we must begin earnestly to report on our work to a wider public and then to engage that public in conversation and conference.

Thus started what has come to be known as *The Jesus Seminar*. He gave a twofold reason for such publicity and salesmanship. First, “the religious establishment has not allowed the intelligence of high scholarship to pass through pastors and priests to a hungry laity.” As elucidated further on the Jesus Seminar website ([www.jesusseminar.com](http://www.jesusseminar.com)), “Many scholars, fearing open conflict or even reprisal, talked only to one another. The churches often decided what information their constituents were ‘ready’ to hear.” Second, Funk explained that “the radio and TV counterparts of educated clergy have traded in platitudes and pieties and played on the ignorance of the uninformed.” Televangelists seemed to hold a monopoly on Jesus, infecting the general public with an apocalyptic Jesus who preached the

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end of the world and his coming again soon in judgment. Funk was sure that “a rude and rancorous awakening lies ahead,” but the public disclosure of the seminar’s work was part of the seminar’s commitment to public accountability. There is thus an agenda in the seminar’s work, namely, to challenge the confected Jesus of dogma and popular piety with the “real” Jesus and thus effect a necessary confrontation between popular faith in Jesus and the results of scholarship on the man as he lived and taught.

In pursuit of this goal, the Westar Institute was founded in Santa Rosa, California, in 1986 to raise funds for the Jesus Seminar and organize its work. Its twofold mission as given on its home site is “to foster collaborative research in religious studies and to communicate the results of the scholarship of religion to

a broad, non-specialist public.” The goal is religious literacy, for “religion is the fourth ‘R’ of basic knowledge.” Such literacy will among other things aid in “comprehending cultural dissent . . . liberation from religious bullies . . . inoculation against fanaticism.” It will also sensitize one to the potential for violence of certain religious perspectives.

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The Jesus Seminar set itself to translate afresh and make widely available a *database* for the historical Jesus—the full range of evidence on which decisions are made in this area. Such texts are now amassed in *The Complete Gospels* (Miller 1994) and others. It is the view of the seminar that “canonical boundaries are irrelevant in critical assessment of the various sources of information about Jesus” (Funk et al. 1993, 35). Fellows of the seminar are among the foremost in current research on the Gospel of Thomas and the so-called Q Gospel, among others.

The seminar meets every six months in a different city of the United States. These roving sessions are heavily advertised in the vicinity, and journalists are always invited. The debates are done in the open and with the participation of the public, even if only the fellows of the seminar vote. The sessions are followed by sound bites in the press and on television. Publication of the results follows speedily; for example, *The Five Gospels*, the fifth gospel being the Gospel of Thomas (Funk et al. 1993), and *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (Funk et al. 1998), to name a few. The journal *Forum* is the academic outlet of the seminar, while *The Fourth R* magazine is published six times a year for associates and the general public. A publishing house called the Polebridge Press prints and markets

the publications of the seminar. Some fellows have published their own accounts of the historical Jesus, the best known being Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.

### *The Jesus Seminar in Session*

Membership is open to all who have a Ph.D. or equivalent in Bible, theology, or cognate disciplines; these are the fellows of the seminar. Associates are those who support the work through tax-deductible contributions to the Westar Institute and/or sponsor *The Fourth R* magazine. Papers are distributed in advance and discussed in the seminar. Only the fellows may vote, though the others may join in the discussion. A roster of seventy-six fellows appears in *The Five Gospels* (533–41); however, only about 30–40 fellows attend each session. No two meetings have had identical participant rosters (Miller 1999, 59).

The seminar early decided to arrive at decisions by voting—a vote for each fellow no matter how renowned. Some fellows uncomfortable with this eventually left, but the seminar insisted that weight be given to the argument, not the person. Voting on isolated sayings was through color-coded ballots with varying points: red = 3, pink = 2, gray = 1, and black = 0. Two sets of meanings are given for the colors (*Five Gospels*, 36–37):

<b>Option 1</b>	<b>Option 2</b>
<p><b>Red:</b> I would include this item unequivocally in the database for determining who Jesus was.</p> <p><b>Pink:</b> I would include this item with reservation (or modifications) in the database.</p> <p><b>Gray:</b> I would not include this item in the database, but I might make use of some of the content in determining who Jesus was.</p> <p><b>Black:</b> I would not include this item in the primary database.</p>	<p><b>Red:</b> Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it.</p> <p><b>Pink:</b> Jesus probably said something like this.</p> <p><b>Gray:</b> Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own.</p> <p><b>Black:</b> Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a different tradition.</p>

Since the same color can mean different things, these two sets of options already skew the results. The results are expressed in a “weighted average,” the points in each ballot being added up and divided by the number of votes (*Five Gospels*, 37):

red, 0.7501 and up; pink, 0.5001 to 0.7500; gray, 0.2501 to 0.5000; and black, 0.0000 to 0.2500. Fellows may appeal the results and call for reconsideration. The results are published with a concise discussion of the voting. It turns out, in their deliberations, that 82 percent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels were not actually spoken by him (*Five Gospels*, 5). No saying is authentic in the entire Gospel of John. Only Mark 12:17, “Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and God what belongs to God,” garnered a red in the whole of Mark; of pink, there were 18 sayings in all. The entire passion narrative of Mark 14:1–16:8 scored black for all the sayings of Jesus.

### ***The Rules of Evidence***

The seminar set itself to establish cumulative tradition about Jesus. As Funk (1985) explained, “Cumulative is defined in law as evidence that gives greater weight to evidence previously introduced.” Hence the seminar works by first building a probable portrait of Jesus in his times, then using it to assess other material about him. After considerable debate, Rules of Evidence (Written and Oral Evidence) were agreed upon (see *Five Gospels*, 16–34, and *The Acts of Jesus*, 6–36). Some of these are trite; for example, “The evangelists often revise or edit sayings to make them conform to their own individual language, style, or viewpoint” (*Five Gospels*, 21), or that it must be remembered that Jesus was not the first Christian (*Five Gospels*, 24). Others are more problematic. For example, “Only sayings and parables that can be traced back to the oral period, 30–50 c.e., can possibly have originated with Jesus” (*Five Gospels*, 25). Even more problematic is the assertion that “the first written gospels were the Sayings Gospel Q and possibly an early version of the Gospel of Thomas” (*Five Gospels*, 26). Many scholars regard Q (agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark) as hypothetical and are not sure it was written or can be called a “gospel”; a majority of scholars still regard the Gospel of Thomas as dependent on the Synoptic Gospels. A rule of evidence to which recourse is often made is that only short, pithy sayings are memorable; hence, “the earliest layer of the gospel tradition is made up of single aphorisms and parables that circulated by word of mouth prior to the written gospels” (*Five Gospels*, 28). Two rules proved decisive for the seminar’s portrait of Jesus. The first is distinguishing *Jesus* from *the Christ* (*Five Gospels*, 6–7). The second is that of Jesus as the laconic sage—he does not initiate dialogue or debate, does not offer to cure people, rarely makes pronouncements or speaks about himself in the first person, makes no claim to be the Anointed, the Messiah (*Five Gospels*, 32). The distinctive voice of Jesus is to be found where he differs from other ordinary speakers and sages in his day and time (*Five Gospels*, 30). Jesus did not quote Scripture; every dialogue of his with the religious leaders on points of religious law is inauthentic. Here the seminar grapples with what other scholars call the criterion of dissimilarity, which has come in for much criticism precisely because of the way the Jesus Seminar applied it. Raymond Brown had this to say:

Yet a rigorous application of such criteria would leave us with a monstrosity: a Jesus who never said, thought, or did anything that other Jews said, thought, or did, and a Jesus who had no connection or relationship to what his followers said, thought, or did in reference to him after he died. (827)

### *Some Illustrations of the Jesus of the Seminar*

Matthew 4:17, “Change your ways because Heaven’s imperial rule is closing in,” is scored black. What is usually translated “the kingdom of Heaven” becomes “Heaven’s imperial rule.” The notes show the fellows as agreeing that Jesus spoke frequently about God’s imperial rule (*Five Gospels*, 136–37). However, the apocalyptic view of the kingdom of God as referring to the future, something connected with the end of the world and Last Judgment, is attributed to John the Baptist and the early Christian community. Jesus is said to have had a poetic sense of time in which future and present merged, God’s rule being viewed as all around him but difficult to discern. When Sanders considered this question, he examined the hope in the immediate return of Jesus in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 that derived from Paul’s preaching and concluded that a plausible explanation of the early church’s hope in God’s imminent kingdom would be because Jesus led followers to believe in a kingdom to be established soon (95).

Mark 1:16, “Become my followers and I’ll have you fishing for people!” is scored gray. The accompanying note agrees that Jesus certainly had followers but that the fellows dispute whether he actively recruited them. For many fellows the template for Jesus is that of an itinerant sage without institutional goals, who certainly did not intend to found a church like the one that eventually came into being. The metaphor of fishing for people may go back to Jesus, but in its present form it “is not the sort of aphorism to have been repeated during the oral period.” The words suit this particular story, for only few of Jesus’ followers were fishermen. The vocabulary is typical of Mark “which suggests that Mark both created the story and the saying” (*Five Gospels*, 41).

In Mark 1:41, Jesus’ saying to the leper, “Okay—you’re clean!” is scored black. It is seen as part of the storyteller’s craft, creating dialogue for the characters in the narrative suitable for the occasion (*Five Gospels*, 43). As stated in *The Five Gospels*, xiii, “The translators agreed to employ colloquialisms in English for colloquialisms in Greek.” So in Matthew 23:25 (scored black) Jesus tells the scholars and Pharisees, “You impostors! Damn you!”

Matthew 19:12 shows that sometimes the seminar considers a saying authentic and vice versa for reasons completely other than the traditional. The text is coded pink: “There are castrated men who were born that way, and there are castrated men who were castrated by others, and there are castrated men who castrated themselves because of Heaven’s imperial rule.” The fellows of the seminar were

overwhelmingly of the opinion that Jesus did not advocate celibacy; in fact, a majority doubted that Jesus himself was celibate. However, 77 percent of the fellows read the saying as an attack on a male-dominated, patriarchal society, and possibly as undermining the depreciation of yet another marginal group. There were no black votes, leading to the score of pink (*Five Gospels*, 220–21).

### ***The Jesus Seminar and Its Critics: Timothy Johnson versus Robert Miller***

In his inaugural address, Funk already warned that

the result will be a compromise: not a sacrificing of integrity, but an acquiescence in the best informed common judgment. Our end product may look like a horse designed by a committee, that is, like a camel, but at least it will be a beast of burden tough enough to withstand the desert heat of powerful adverse criticism.

If he only knew how sharp the criticism would be in some quarters, especially on the part of conservative Evangelicals! It is said that one fellow was fired from his teaching position at a conservative Christian college for participating in the seminar, another lost his position at an evangelical Christian college; one ordained minister was formally tried for heresy by his church and was acquitted. Many are being pressured by their institutions to resign from the seminar (Miller 1999, 19–20). In a very careful study, Pearson evaluated the work of the seminar as “an approach driven by an ideology of secularization, and a process of coloring the historical evidence to fit a secular ideal.” He comments on the un-Jewish Jesus of the seminar as follows: “In robbing Jesus of his Jewishness, the Jesus Seminar has finally robbed him of his religion.” Perhaps the critique of Luke Timothy Johnson and the response by Miller may serve to focus and clarify some issues.

For Johnson, the Jesus Seminar is a self-selected group, “a ten-year exercise in academic self-promotion,” and “a far better example of media manipulation than of serious scholarship” (1). The roster includes no present faculty at Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Duke, Union, Emory, or Chicago (Johnson, 3). The entire project is misconceived since truth is not decided by voting; besides, the seminar can in no way claim to “represent anything like a consensus view of scholars working in the New Testament” (Johnson, 2). In televangelists and fundamentalists one encounters the “unique combination of religion and marketing” by people who “make claims about inerrancy and noncontradiction in the gospels, because they have never actually engaged the texts in a way that would enable some basic critical issues to emerge” (Johnson, 63). The Jesus Seminar is not much better, for “it matches the media appropriation by the conservatives with a media manipu-

lation of its own” (Johnson, 66). The fellows are “eager to reform Christianity on the basis of a reconstructed Jesus” (Johnson, 39). Whether implicit or explicit the shared premise of books on Jesus by fellows of the seminar is that “*historical knowledge* is normative for faith, and therefore for theology” (Johnson, 55). Yet Christian faith has never been based “on *historical reconstructions of Jesus* . . . rather on religious claims concerning the present power of Jesus . . . Christianity in its classic form has not based itself on the ministry of Jesus but on the resurrection of Jesus” (Johnson, 133–34). The point is, “The writings of the New Testament are too few, too fragmentary, and too lacking in chronological and geographical controls to enable a truly comprehensive reconstruction of Christian origins” (Johnson, 172). Historical information is not what the Gospels do best; rather, “they can be appreciated as witnesses and interpretations of religious experiences and convictions.” The crucial question is: do the pattern and meaning the Gospels give to Jesus correspond to the experience of “the real Jesus” in the church (Johnson, 152–53)? In light of this, a major flaw in the approach of the Jesus Seminar is to study the Gospels in total isolation from the Pauline letters, as though there were no links among the earliest Christian communities (Johnson, 117). “There is a ‘real Jesus’ in the texts of the New Testament as they have been transmitted to this generation” (Johnson, 167).

Miller (1999, 79–108) rightly asserts that it is unfair to call the seminar “self-selected” since it is open to all who have the requisite qualifications. Translation committees vote to decide texts, and no one is upset because this is done privately. The seminar has never claimed to speak for a scholarly consensus; in fact, not all fellows agree with specific findings or even with all the methods. However, the seminar believes that its fundamental views about the Gospels are shared by scholars, although *it is news to the American public*, namely, that some words attributed to Jesus were not spoken by him, that the Gospels blend historical memory and religious interpretation, such that to discover the historical Jesus there is need for a critical sifting of the evidence rather than theological assurances (Miller 1999, 67). Most fellows of the seminar believe that the Gospel of Thomas represents an independent tradition and that some of its sayings are earlier than the Synoptics. However, only two sayings particular to Thomas (the empty jar [Thomas 97] and the assassin [Thomas 98]) are colored pink (Miller 1999, 17); so, in effect, the Gospel of Thomas serves mainly as independent

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witness for Synoptic sayings otherwise unattested. The seminar does not reject the canonical Gospels as reliable sources for our knowledge of Jesus; rather, the historical reliability of their narrative framework. But then Johnson himself (Johnson, 124) also rejects the use of the parables to reconstruct Jesus' teaching, even arguing that the New Testament writings can yield only few biographical facts about Jesus (Miller 1999, 83).

It is largely true that the seminar reconstructed the historical Jesus without reference to other canonical sources, but then these other sources add little extra. After a tour de force, Johnson (1996, 121–22) culled 17 items from these sources, but these are only basic facts that provide no information not more amply illustrated in the Gospels (Miller 1999, 84). The fellows are accused of having a theo-

logical agenda, of wanting their understanding of Jesus and Christian origins to have an impact on Christians—so does Johnson (Miller 1999, 85)! The seminar is criticized for assuming that historical knowledge is normative for faith and thus for theology, and that the origins of Christianity define its essence. Johnson himself also assumes that origins define essence, only that he locates the origin not in the historical Jesus but in the risen Christ of the theological tradition (Miller 1999, 86). Johnson believes that though we can garner some facts about Jesus, we cannot know what they mean, because we lack a framework that confers meaning on the facts; for him, the only framework that conveys meaning to the Gospels is the pattern supplied by the canon and the Creed, which is for him the authoritative framework for interpreting the Gospels (Miller 1999, 89). The historical Jesus is thus seen as irrelevant for Christian belief and practice, the Resurrection being the necessary and sufficient cause of the rise of early Christianity, though the Resurrection itself is reality beyond history (Miller 1999, 90).

This appears to be a circular argument: “the resurrection is myth of origin *in* the New Testament texts that is used as explanation for the origin *of* the New Testament” (Miller 1999, 90). The Gospels present Jesus in a diversity of patterns that are themselves interpretations; Johnson has to work very selectively to derive the same pattern from all four Gospels, and this only by suppressing contrary evidence (Miller 1999, 105). The most criticized position of the seminar is that its “real” Jesus was not an apocalyptic figure. Miller admits that in some places *The Five Gospels* gives the impression that apocalyptic

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sayings were assumed to be inauthentic; also, most of the members who championed the apocalyptic Jesus eventually left the seminar (Miller 1999, 72). However, many fellows merely tended to attribute the apocalyptic color of some sayings to the literary context or the interpretive stance of the evangelist.

Miller gives some clarifications to help understand the work of the seminar (1999, 47–60). The method runs into difficulties when Jesus and the early church share the same perspective or a saying is considered common lore (Miller 1999, 49). He cites a case in point. Did Jesus cite Scripture? Because the early church used Scripture to validate its belief in Jesus as the Messiah, all cases, except four, where Jesus used Scripture are scored black (Miller 1999, 51). The “weighted averages” sometimes lead to anomalies. The parable of the sower in Luke 8:5-8 turned out gray even though it received no gray votes, but 21 percent red, 43 percent pink, and 33 percent black. An egregious case is cited by N. T. Wright: The voting on the parable of the two sons (Matt 21:28-31a and 21:31b) was as follows: 58 percent of fellows voted red or pink for the parable, and 53 percent for the saying in verse 31b, but a substantial number of gray and black pulled the weighted average into the gray category. How could a majority vote for authenticity in each case turn out to be “probable authentic”? Gray is thus the most difficult to interpret (Miller 1999, 52). Some scholars used gray to register indecision, especially about whether the literary setting of the Gospel has altered the meaning of the saying. Miller himself considers that the “gray area” used with care can be useful for reconstructing the teaching of Jesus because it contains ideas close to him. The phrase, “the Seminar believes,” covers over much diversity of opinion. No two meetings have had identical participant rosters—some very close votes would be altered were some fellows present or absent (Miller 1999, 59). No votes were taken on the meaning of the sayings; hence, the concise explanations that accompany the text only seek to convey the general sense of the seminar. A full accounting of the reasons for the votes is chimeral—“only God knows the full reasons for every member’s vote” (Miller 1999, 60). In sum, the work of the seminar should be seen only as opening the door and pointing the way for each one to enter the room and set out on their own way (Miller 1999, 60).

### *Authentic Quest for Jesus*

**T**he Jesus Seminar is not to be faulted for marketing its view of Jesus as long as it is clear whose voice it represents and to whom it is accountable. It is important to Christianity that it is not a myth; hence, any critical effort to delve into its historical origins and the physiognomy of its founder has value, as long as the results are presented as historical reconstruction and the degree of probability clearly outlined. Many scholars outside the Jesus Seminar are equally engaged in this task and use similar methods. Whereas faith is not grounded in

history, it cannot be said that what honest critical work unearths about the historical Jesus and what he lived for is irrelevant for faith and practice. Even Paul searched for words of the Lord that he obviously considered authoritative (1 Cor 7:10, 12, 25). This writer does not agree with the template of Jesus as laconic sage or with the exclusion of miracles and the apocalyptic from that template, but then not all members of the seminar agree with it either. For example, Borg presents him as a spirit-filled charismatic. This writer also believes that the “weighted average” is part of the problem. The problem at the heart of the matter is the tension between popular beliefs about the Gospels and the findings of responsible critical scholarship—and this needs be faced in some form or another. Because faith seeks understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*), “Christian belief has nothing to fear from solid, careful, scholarly research” (Brown, 828).

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