

FIVE GOSPELS BUT NO GOSPEL JESUS AND THE SEMINAR

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LOOKING FOR JESUS

People have been looking for Jesus for a long time, but never quite like this. The “Quest of the Historical Jesus” has been proceeding, in fits and starts, for two hundred years. Its story has often been told;¹ in recent years there has been a flurry, not to say a flood, of writing about Jesus, and debates of all sorts, about every aspect of the evidence, and every conceivable reconstruction of Jesus’ life, teaching, work, and death, have been running to and fro.²

Most of this writing has been produced by individual scholars, working independently. But in the last few years a new corporate venture has emerged, attempting by a process of discussion and voting to arrive at an answer to the question: “What did Jesus really say?” This group has called itself “The Jesus Seminar,” and among its many recent publications one stands out as a kind of flagship: *The Five Gospels*, published late in 1993 by Macmillan (though emanating from the Seminar’s own publishing house, Polebridge Press). This is the subject of the present chapter.

No doubt there are at least as many opinions about the “The Jesus Seminar” as the Seminar itself holds about Jesus. Passions, in fact, already run high on the subject, and may run higher yet before the storm abates. Some of the Seminar’s members treat any questioning of its work like a slap in the face—though not with the turning of the other cheek, as one might have thought considering that that saying received the rare accolade of a red vote (meaning authentic; see below).³ In other quarters, one only has to mention the Seminar to provoke a wry smile, or even guffaws of laughter. At a packed and high-profile meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature’s “Pauline Theology” seminar in 1991, the person in the chair—one of the most senior and respected of North American biblical scholars—rejected a call for a vote on the subject that had been under discussion by simply saying, “This ain’t the Jesus Seminar.” This was greeted with laughter and applause in about equal measure.

So what is the Jesus Seminar up to, and what should we think about it? It has now completed many years of detailed and painstaking work, and, though it may well all deserve discussing, there is no space here to go into its many products, with all their presuppositions, methods, decisions, and results.⁴ I have, in any case, written about all that elsewhere.⁵ I want in this essay to concentrate on *The Five Gospels*, the book towards which all else was preliminary.

The “Five Gospels” in question are (in case there was any doubt) Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and *Thomas*. The inclusion of the last of these will still raise one or two eyebrows, through it is by now well known that the Seminar takes kindly to *Thomas*, not

least because of its apparent similarity with (some reconstructions of) the hypothetical source “Q”—and, as we shall see, the portrait of Jesus which it appears to support. More striking is the technique with which the Seminar’s results are displayed. The old “red letter testaments” picked out all the words of Jesus in red; this one accords that status to the favored few among the sayings, those which the Seminar voted as highly likely to emanate from Jesus himself. The rest of Jesus’ sayings are set in pink, gray, and black, on a rough sliding scale of the probability and improbability of their coming from Jesus; I shall discuss the precise nuances of the colors presently. Each saying, story, or group of sayings/stories is then commented on, and the reasons for the voting are explained, sometimes briefly, sometimes up to a few pages. The text is broken up from time to time by “cameo essays” on key topics (the kingdom of God, the son of man, and so forth). The text is attractively laid out, with diagrams and occasional pictures. Everything is presented about as clearly as it could be; nobody, from high school student upwards, could fail to see what was being said. All in all, it is a substantial product, and whatever one thinks of the actual results, it clearly represents a great deal of hard labor.

A New Translation

Six features of the book call for general comment right from the start. First, it uses what the Seminar has called “The Scholars Version” [sic]—its own translation of the four canonical Gospels and *Thomas*. This is an attempt to represent, in colloquial American English, the original flavor of the Greek. Now it is our turn to be slapped in the face:

Although Jesus was indignant, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and says to him, “Okay—you’re clean!”⁶

The king came in to see the guests for himself and noticed this man not properly attired. And he says to him, “Look, pal, how’d you get in here without dressing for the occasion?”⁷

When Jesus noticed their trust, he said, “Mister, your sins have been forgiven you.”⁸

I have no objection to colloquial translations—though one might have thought this would be the People’s Version, not the Scholars’. What I do find somewhat objectionable is the dismissive tone of the introduction, which explains that other versions are “faintly Victorian” and set a context of “polite religious discourse suitable for a Puritan parlor.”⁹ The New Revised Standard Version comes in for particular criticism; one suspects that its main fault in the eyes of the SV translators is that it is a lineal descendant, on one side of the family at any rate, of the old King James Version, which, as we shall see, represents all that Seminar abominates by way of American religion. The authors make great play of the fact that, unlike most Bible translations, this one both includes the non-canonical *Thomas* and is not authorized by any ecclesiastical or religious bodies. Instead, pompously, “The Scholars Version is authorized by scholars.”¹⁰

Present and Absent Friends

But, second, which scholars? Seventy-four names are listed in the back of the book, and there have been other members, quite influential in earlier stages of the debate, who are not explicitly mentioned here.¹¹ Some of them are household names in the world of New Testament studies: Robert Funk himself, the driving force behind the entire enterprise, whose earlier work on the Greek grammar of the New Testament is universally recognized as authoritative; Dominic Crossan, whose combination of enormous erudition, subtlety of thought, and felicitous writing style have rightly ensured him widespread respect; James Robinson, whose work on the Nag Hammadi texts has placed the entire discipline in his debt; Marcus Borg, Bruce Chilton, and Walter Wink, all of whom have made distinguished and distinctive contributions to the study of Jesus in his context (and to much else besides); Ron Cameron, whose forthright and provocative writings on *Thomas* and related topics are rightly famous; John Kloppenborg, one of the leading specialists on the hypothetical source “Q.” In any list of contemporary North American biblical scholars, all these would find a place of honor.

But one could compile a very long list of North American New Testament scholars, including several who have written importantly about Jesus, who are not among those present, and whose work has had no visible impact on the Seminar at all. The most obvious is Ed Sanders, whose work, massive in its learning, and almost unique in its influence over the present state of scholarship worldwide, seems to have been ignored by the Seminar—except for one tiny particular, and that precisely where Sanders is at his weakest.¹² Another figure whose work has been totally ignored is Ben F. Meyer, who has more understanding of how ancient texts work in his little finger than many of the Jesus Seminar seem to have in their entire word-processors, and whose writing on Jesus is utterly rigorous, utterly scholarly, and utterly different in its results from anything in the volume we are considering.¹³ So, too, one looks in vain for members of the teaching faculties of many of the leading North American colleges and universities. There is nobody currently teaching at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Duke, McGill, or Stanford. Toronto is well represented; so is Claremont (not least by its graduates); several Fellows of the Seminar have doctorates from Harvard. But where is the rest of the guild—those who, for instance, flock to the “Historical Jesus” sessions of the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature? They are conspicuous by their absence.

No doubt some within the Seminar would suggest that this comment is academic snobbery, but they cannot have it both ways. The Jesus Seminar is in something of a cleft stick at this point. On the one hand, the members are determined to present to the general public the findings which “scholars” have come up with. Away with secrecy, and hole-in-a-corner scholarship, they say: it is time for scholars to come out of their closets, to boldly say what no one has said before. They must, therefore, present themselves as the pundits, the ones in the know, the ones the public can trust as the reputable, even the authorized, spokespersons for the serious tradition of biblical scholarship.¹⁴ But, on the other hand, they lash out at the “elitism” of their critics within the broader academic world¹⁵—while saying on the next page that attacks on members of the Seminar have tended to come from “those who lack academic credentials.” Sauce for the goose and sauce for the gander: either academic credentials matter, in which case the Seminar should listen to those who possess them in abundance and are deeply critical of their

work, or they don't matter, in which case the Seminar should stop priding itself on its own, over against the common herd. 'The attitude to critics expressed in this book reminds me of John 7:49: in the Scholars Version, it reads: "As for this rabble, they are ignorant of the Law! Damn them!" It becomes apparent that the work we have here does not represent "scholars," as simply as that; it represents some scholars, and that mostly (with some interesting exceptions) from a very narrow band among serious contemporary readers of the Gospels worldwide.¹⁶

These comments about the make-up of the Seminar highlight a point which must be clearly made before we go one step further. Though this book claims, on every page, to speak for all the Fellows of the Seminar, it becomes increasingly apparent that it comes from the Seminar's Chair, Robert W. Funk (R. W. Hoover is named as co-author, though there is no indication of which author drafted which parts). Dissident voices are, of course, recorded in the reporting of voting patterns. But it would be a mistake to saddle all, perhaps even most, of the Fellows with the point of view, and the arguments, that we find on page after page. Only occasionally is this really acknowledged. In the bibliography, for instance, one of Marcus Borg's books is listed, with the comment "It goes almost without saying that he didn't vote with the majority on every issue."¹⁷ One suspects that that is something of an understatement. In the present essay, therefore, I am discussing the work of Funk and Hoover, not necessarily that of other Fellows; we may note, though, that the whole layout and intent of the book predisposes the reader—not least the non-academic reader, who is clearly in view—to assume that the verdicts reached are those of "scholars" in a much broader sense.

A Driving Agenda

There is, thirdly, a further agenda involved at this point, which is, one may suspect, the major force which motivates the project in general and several (though by no means all) of its members. They are fundamentally antifundamentalist. Listen to these wonderfully objective, value-free, scholarly comments, taken from the book's introduction:

Once the discrepancy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith emerged from under the smothering cloud of the historic creeds, it was only a matter of time before scholars sought to disengage [the two] ... It is ironic that Roman Catholic scholars are emerging from the dark ages of theological tyranny just as many Protestant scholars are reentering it as a consequence of the dictatorial tactics of the Southern Baptist Convention and other fundamentalisms.¹⁸

With the council of Nicea in 325, the orthodox party solidified its hold on the Christian tradition and other wings of the Christian movement [sic] were choked off.¹⁹

There are only two positions allowed, it seems. One must either be some kind of close-minded fundamentalist, adhering to some approximation of the historic creeds of the Christian church; one notes that this lumps together Athanasius, Aquinas, Barth, Pannenberg, and Moltmann along with the TV evangelists who are among the real targets of the polemic. Or one must be non-judgmentally open to the free-for-all hurly-burly of

Gnosis, Cynicism, esoteric wisdom, folklore and so on represented by various groups in the first three centuries—and to the baby-and-bathwater methodological skepticism adopted by the Seminar.²⁰ The strange thing is that there are several members of the Seminar itself who represent neither point of view; has the author of this introduction forgotten who some of his colleagues are? Unfortunately, as we shall see, this either-or has so dominated the landscape that a great many decisions of the Seminar simply reflect a shallow polarization which has precious little to do with the first century and, one suspects, a great deal to do with the twentieth, not least in North America. One suspects that several members of the Seminar do not actually know very many ordinary, non-fundamentalist, orthodox Christians. Would it be going too far to venture the supposition that more than one leading member of the Jesus Seminar is doing his (or her) best to exorcize the memory of a strict fundamentalist background? Unfortunately, the attempt to escape from one's own past is not a good basis for the attempt to reconstruct someone else's.

This question has another aspect to it which must be noted carefully. It is now endemic in North American Biblical Studies that very few practitioners have studied philosophy or theology at any depth. Such study, indeed, is sometimes regarded with suspicion, as though it might prejudice the pure, objective, neutral reading of the text. Leave aside for the moment the impossibility of such objectivity (see below). The real problem is that if one is to discuss what are essentially theological and philosophical issues, in terms both of the method required for serious study of Jesus and of the content and implications of Jesus' proclamation, one really requires more sophistication than the Seminar, in this book at least, can offer. This will become apparent as we proceed.

Which Gospels?

The fourth introductory point concerns the treatment of the different "Gospels." As I said, it is now commonplace to treat the book known as the *Gospel of Thomas* alongside the canonical Gospels. If we are studying the entire Gospel tradition, this is clearly mandatory. The Seminar is to be congratulated for pushing this fact into the public eye (and for the marvellous work of producing texts of a large number of relevant documents which had not been easily available hitherto). But, when all is said and done, huge questions remain about the relevance of *Thomas* for the study of Jesus. By no means all students of it agree with the majority of the Seminar in placing it early and independent of the canonical Gospels.²¹ If members of the public are interested in knowing what "scholars" think, they ought to be told fair and square that diagrams in which a hypothetical first edition of *Thomas* is placed in 50s of the first century are thoroughly tendentious, and belong out on a limb of current scholarship.²²

In particular, we should not accept without question the assumption that *Thomas*, and for that matter fragments like the Egerton papyrus, are (or belong to) gospels. It all depends on what you mean. *Thomas* does not call itself a "gospel." Nor, for that matter, do Matthew, Luke, and John; and the opening note in Mark ("The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ") may well refer, not to the book which then follows, but to the events which it purports to record. The meaning of the word "gospel" in the first two

centuries of the Christian era is, in fact, quite controversial;²³ sufficient to note here that to call *Thomas*, and for that matter “Q,” “gospels” is to make quite a far-reaching decision. It is to say that these works are to be regarded as proclamations about Jesus, of the same sort as the four better-known “gospels,” despite the fact that they do not narrate the story of Jesus, do not (for the most part) proclaim him as Messiah, do not tell of his death and resurrection—do not, in fact, do the very things which seem, from the Pauline evidence, to be what the earliest Christians regarded as “gospel.” Bringing Paul into the picture at this point is of course itself controversial, but not nearly so much as making *Thomas* contemporary with him.²⁴

I suggest that nothing would be lost, and a good deal of clarity regained, if, instead of referring to *Thomas*, and indeed “Q,” as “gospels,” and thereby supposing that they record the theology of an entire group within very early Christianity, we see them as what they are (supposing for the moment that “Q” ever existed): collections of sayings. Calling them “gospels” obscures the obvious difference of genre between them and the four ordinarily so called. In an attempt to gain a hearing for different supposed presentations of Jesus, the current fashion distorts precisely that sort of literary analysis that “scholars” ought to favor.

In fact, although *The Five Gospels* prints all of John as well as the others, it is clear that John is regarded a priori as having little or nothing to do with Jesus himself. This, indeed, is one of the Seminar’s vaunted “seven pillars of scholarly wisdom.”²⁵ But here we see quite sharply, what we shall observe in more detail presently: the Seminar’s method has not been to examine each saying all by itself and decide about it, but to start with a fairly clear picture of Jesus and early Christianity, and simply run through the material imposing this picture on the texts.

All Cats Are Gray in the Dark

A note, next, on the color-coding of the sayings. This is clearly meant to convey a definite and precise meaning. The “ordinary reader,” browsing through *The Five Gospels*, picks up quite quickly that red or pink is a quite rare accolade, that black is common, and that gray, close enough (it seems) to black, also dominates at several points. The book’s cover reflects something of this balance, with a small red box on a large black background, and in the small red box the words “WHAT DID JESUS REALLY SAY?” It seems fairly clear that red denotes what Jesus said, black what he did not, and that pink and gray are softer variants on these two.

Not so simple, however. The voting system was quite complex.²⁶ There are two cumbersome sets of “meanings” for the four colors, and an intricate system of numberings for the votes, which were then averaged out. This means that in any given case, especially in relation to pink and gray, the color on the page does not represent what “scholars,” even the small selection of scholarly opinion represented in the Seminar, actually think. A pink vote almost certainly means that, on the one hand, a sizeable minority believed Jesus actually said these words, while a substantial minority were convinced, or nearly convinced, that he did not. Most, in fact, did not vote pink; yet that

is what appears on the page. (I am reminded of the notorious fundamentalist attempts to harmonize how many times the rooster crowed when Peter denied Jesus. One of the only ways of doing it is to say that the rooster crowed, not three, but nine times. Thus a supposed doctrine of scriptural inerrancy is “preserved”—at the enormous cost of saying that what actually happened *is what none of the texts record.*) Thus, the Jesus Seminar could print a text in pink or gray, *even though the great majority of the Seminar voted red or black.* The colors, especially the two middle ones, cannot be taken as more than an averaging out of widely divergent opinion. It is perfectly possible that the color on the page, if gray or pink, is one for which nobody voted at all.

In particular, the gray sayings conceal a very interesting phenomenon. Spies on the Seminar report that in some cases the gray verdict could be seen as a victory—for those who, against the grain of the Seminar, think Jesus might well have said the words concerned. Take Luke 19:42-44 for an example. This stern warning about the coming destruction of Jerusalem fits with an “apocalyptic” strand of teaching which, in almost all other cases, the Fellows of the Seminar voted black by a substantial margin. But on this occasion a paper was given arguing that the words could indeed have been spoken by Jesus. Enough Fellows were persuaded by this to pull the vote up to gray—a quite remarkable victory for those who voted red or pink. Seen from within the Seminar, where a good number start with the assumption that virtually no sayings go back to Jesus himself, gray can thus mean “well, maybe there is a possibility after all . . .” Seen from outside, of course—in other words, from the perspective of those for whom the Seminar’s products, particularly this book, are designed—it conveys a very different message, namely “probably not.”

Another example of this occurs in the summary account of the vote on Matt 18:3 (“If you don’t do an about-face and become like children, you will never enter Heaven’s domain”). The following is typical of literally dozens of passages:

The opinion was evenly divided. Some red and a large number of pink votes, in favor of authenticity, were offset by substantial gray and black votes. The result was a compromise gray designation for this version and all its parallels.²⁷

Or again, in dealing with the Parable of the Two Sons, and the subsequent saying (Matt 21:28-31a and 21:31b):

Fifty-eight percent of the Fellows voted red or pink for the parable, 53 percent for the saying in v. 31b. A substantial number of gray and black votes pulled the weighted average into the gray category.²⁸

Without using a pocket calculator, I confess I cannot understand how, if a majority in each case thought the saying authentic or probably authentic, the “weighted average” turned out to be “probably inauthentic.” A voting system that produces a result like this ought to be scrapped. The average reader, seeing the passage printed as gray, will conclude that “scholars” think it is probably inauthentic; whereas, even with the small company of the Seminar, the majority would clearly disagree.²⁹

In evaluating the color scheme, therefore, it is important not to think that consensus has been reached. The Seminar's voting methods and results remind one somewhat of Italian politics: with proportional representation, everybody's votes count to some extent, but the result is serious instability. Gray and pink sayings are like the smile on a politician's face when a deal has been struck between minority parties; the informed observer knows that the coalition is a patch-up job, which will not stand the test of time. The reader, particularly the reader outside the scholarly guild, should beware. This volume is only a snapshot of what some scholars think within one particular context and after a certain set of debates. But even the snapshot is out of focus, and the colors have been affected by the process of development. This may be fine if what one wants is an impressionistic idea of the state of play. But the Seminar promises, and claims to offer, much more than that. It claims to tell the unvarnished truth. And therein lies the sixth and final point for comment at this stage.

Jumping on the Bandwagon after the Wheels Came Off

Perhaps the deepest flaw in terms of apparent method is that this book appeals constantly, as does all the literature of the Jesus Seminar, to the possibility that by the application of supposedly scientific or "scholarly" criteria one will arrive at a definite answer to the question as to what Jesus actually said. This jumps out of the very cover of the book: the subtitle ("The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus") has the word "authentic" underlined, and the sub-subtitle, "What did Jesus Really Say?" is clearly intended to emphasize the "really." The whole enterprise seems to offer the possibility of objectivity certainty, of methods which will produce results as water-tight as $2 + 2 = 4$.

The puzzle about this is that it buys heavily into exactly the sort of positivism that is now routinely abandoned by the great majority of scholars working in the fields of history and texts—including by several members of the Jesus Seminar themselves. The idea that by historical investigation one might arrive at a position of unbiased objective certainty, of absolute unconditioned knowledge, about anything, has been shot to pieces by critiques from a variety of points of view. All knowledge is conditioned by the context and agenda of the knower; all reconstructions are somebody's reconstructions, and each "somebody" sees the world through their own eyes and not their neighbor's. This is so widely acknowledged that one would have thought it unnecessary to state, let alone to stress. The positivistic bandwagon got stuck in the mud some time ago, and a succession of critics, looking back to Marx, Nietzsche and Freud but now loosely gathered under the umbrella of postmodernism, has cheerfully pulled its wheels off altogether. This, of course, has not filtered through to the popular media, who still want to know whether something "actually happened" or not. The Jesus Seminar, in its desire to go public with the results of scholarship, has apparently been lured into giving the public what it wants, rather than what scholarship can in fact provide. As the previous discussion about voting and color-coding makes clear, the one thing this book cannot offer is an answer to the question on its front cover. All it can do is to report, in a manner that will often mislead the ordinary reader, what some scholars think Jesus may have said.

At this point some members of the Seminar will want to protest. They know very well that positivism is a dead-end street. They fully appreciate that most of the color-codings, especially the pink and gray, are compromise solutions hiding a good deal of debate and uncertainty. Unfortunately, such subtleties were totally lost on whoever wrote the blurb on the back of the book, which encourages the average reader, for whom the book is designed, to assume that the colors in the book provide certain, objective, copper-bottomed, positivistic answers:

Did Jesus really give the Sermon on the Mount? Is the Lord's Prayer composed of his authentic words? *THE FIVE GOSPELS* answers these questions in a bold, dynamic work that will startle the world of traditional biblical interpretation ... In pursuit of the historical Jesus, [the scholars] used their collective expertise to determine the authenticity of the more than 1,500 sayings attributed to him. Their remarkable findings appear in this book . . .

Only those sayings that appear in red type are considered by the Seminar to be close to what Jesus actually said . . . *According to the Seminar, no more than 20 percent of the sayings attributed to Jesus were uttered by him . . .*³⁰

Underneath the rhetoric about making the results of scholarship generally available, therefore, we find a new form of an old divide between the scholars and the simple folk. The introduction to this book castigates those scholars who “knew” of the problems about finding the historical Jesus (not to mention the Christ of the church's faith), but who kept these “findings” from the public, who wanted to have their fragile faith confirmed. The Seminar claims to have bridged this divide. But then the Seminar, whose members clearly know that their own work is culture-conditioned, and that the color-coding system repeatedly hides compromise and serious disagreement, keeps these facts from its own public, which wants to have *its fragile faith in positivism* supported and confirmed. At this meta-level, encouraging the reading public to think that the old Enlightenment bandwagon is still rolling along, when in fact the wheels came off it some time ago, is just as irresponsible as the preacher who hides from the congregation the fact that there are serious questions to be faced about the origin and nature of early Christianity.

This is not to say, of course, that all “results” of Jesus-scholarship are tenuous and uncertain. There is such a thing as genuine historical knowledge, and it does allow us to make definite claims about Jesus. But it is not to be attained by the route of positivism, still less by the dubious method of vote-taking within a small circle of scholars. It is to be attained by the route of critical realism—a historical method which proceeds, not by atomistic discussion of isolated elements, but by the serious process of hypothesis and verification, during which the perspective of the historian is itself taken into account. I have written about this elsewhere.³¹ A good many scholars are pursuing this path to a lesser or greater extent. The Jesus Seminar has chosen not to do so.

TOWARDS A NEW PORTRAIT

The introduction to the book contains a lengthy section (pp. 16-34) setting out the “rules of written evidence” and “the rules of oral evidence” which the Seminar

formulated and adopted for use in its work. There are thirty-six of these “rules.” But again and again throughout the book, the “rules” boil down to three guiding principles which are wheeled out almost ad nauseam as the justification for accepting, or more usually for rejecting, a particular saying or set of sayings.

These three actual guiding principles may be formulated as follows. First, the Seminar in fact presupposes a particular portrait of Jesus. Second, the Seminar adopts a particular, and highly misleading, position about eschatology and apocalyptic, particularly about the kingdom of God; this too was presupposed. Third, the Seminar assumes a particular picture of the early church, especially its interest in and transmission of material about Jesus. In each case there is every reason to reject the principle in question. We must look at each in turn.

Jesus the Distinctive Sage

As we just saw, the explicit intention of the Seminar was to examine all the sayings and vote on them one by one, allowing a portrait of Jesus to emerge slowly and bit by bit. Thus, for instance, the editors can speak of Matt 7:16b, which was voted pink, as being placed “into the red/pink database *for determining who Jesus was*” (p. 157, emphasis added). But what has in fact happened is exactly the reverse. For the majority of Fellows at least, what comes first is an assumption about who Jesus really was, which is then used as the yardstick for measuring, and often ruling out, a good many sayings.

This assumption focusses on the portrait of Jesus as a “traveling sage and wonder-worker” (p. 128). Sayings can be assessed according to whether they fit with this.³² The Fellows, or at least their spokespersons in this volume, somehow know that Jesus is a “reticent sage who does not initiate debate or offer to cast out demons, and who does not speak of himself in the first person” (p. 265). On this basis they feel able to make judgments about sayings which, since they make Jesus do some of these things, cannot be his. As a reticent sage, Jesus “did not formally enlist followers” (p. 284); he used secular proverbs, having “perhaps acquired his knowledge of common lore from itinerant philosophers who visited Galilee while he was growing up” (p. 287). He does not, however, quote the Hebrew scriptures very often (pp. 376, 380), so that when we find such quotations attributed to him, they almost certainly come from the early church, which, unlike Jesus, was very concerned to understand his work in the light of the scriptures.

As a reticent sage, Jesus did not, of course, predict his own death (pp. 94, 208, and very frequently); still less did he refer to himself in any way as Messiah or Son of God (pp. 75, 312, and regularly). Among the reasons given for this latter assumption is the remarkable argument:

Jesus taught that the last will be first and the first will be last. He admonished his followers to be servants of everyone. He urged humility as the cardinal virtue by both word and example. Given these terms, it is difficult to imagine Jesus making claims for himself. . . unless, of course, he thought that nothing he said applied to himself.³³

What the writers seem to ignore is precisely that Jesus taught these things. By what right? Even at the level of teaching, Jesus' words carry an implicit self-reference. When we put even a small amount of his teaching into its first-century Jewish context (see below), it was inevitable that questions should be asked about who he thought he was; and virtually inevitable that he would reflect on such a question himself. Instead of this context, however, the Seminar's spokespersons offer one that may perhaps be thought just a little anachronistic:

Like the cowboy hero of the American West exemplified by Gary Cooper, the sage of the ancient Near East was laconic, slow to speech, a person of few words. The sage does not provoke encounters . . . As a rule, the sage is self-effacing, modest, unostentatious.³⁴

Jesus, then, was not aware that he had a specific mission to carry out (p. 70). He did not organize "formal missions" (p. 311). He was not "given to institution building" (p. 213). The older liberalism was right after all: Jesus' teaching was about being nice to people, not about warning them of punishment in store for the wicked (pp. 170, 181, 289-90, 320, and frequently).³⁵

In particular, when Jesus did speak it was almost always in pithy, subversive, disturbing aphorisms. (This, of course, was the presupposition for the Seminar's whole enterprise, of breaking up the text into isolated sayings and voting separately on them.) Thus, in rejecting Luke 22:36-37, the editors comment: "there is nothing in the words attributed to Jesus that cuts against the social grain, that would surprise or shock his friends, or that reflects exaggeration, humor, or paradox . . . [thus] nothing in this passage commends itself as authentically from Jesus" (p. 391). Proverbs that "are not particularly vivid or provocative" or which "do not surprise or shock" "belong to the stock of common lore and so are not of Jesus' invention" (p. 157). It is admitted that Jesus could have used such proverbs, but again and again they attract a gray or black vote.³⁶

The Seminar claims, then, that a portrait of Jesus "begins to emerge" from their work at certain points (p. 340). Not so. The portrait was in the mind all along. It is, for the most part, a shallow and one-dimensional portrait, developed through anachronistic parallels (the laconic cowboy) and ignoring the actual first-century context. Its attractive and indeed sometimes compelling features, of Jesus as the subversive sage, challenging the status quo with teasing epigrams and parables, has been achieved at the huge cost of screening out a whole range of material which several of the leading Jesus-scholars around the world, in major, serious, and contemporary works of historical reconstruction, would regard as absolutely central. By far the most important of these is the material often designated "apocalyptic"; and, within that, Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God—or, as the Seminar often puts it, "heaven's imperial rule." The rejection of this material is the largest and most central presupposition that the Seminar brings to its entire work, and it deserves a separate section.

The Resolutely Non-Apocalyptic Jesus

The most thoroughgoing way in which the Seminar applies the criterion of dissimilarity, according to which Jesus stands out from his surrounding context, is in

relation to apocalyptic. Here this reader at least had a strange sense of *deja vu*. Nearly three decades ago Klaus Koch wrote a book describing, among other things, what he called “the agonised attempt to save Jesus from apocalyptic.”³⁷ Albert Schweitzer, at the turn of the century, had described Jesus as an apocalyptic visionary; many theologians after Schweitzer found this too much to stomach, and neatly extracted Jesus from his surrounding Jewish, and apocalyptic, context. This was normally done for apologetic motives: if Jesus predicted the end of the world, he was wrong, and this has serious implications for Christology.

The Jesus Seminar, of course, harbors no such motive. Instead, it has a different one, no less all-pervading: Jesus must not in any way appear to give sanction to contemporary apocalyptic preaching, such as that on offer in the fundamentalist movements against which the Seminar is reacting so strongly. Jesus must not, therefore, have supposed that the end of the world was at hand, or that God was about to judge people, or that the Son of Man (whom the Seminar persists in misleadingly calling the Son of Adam) would shortly “come on the clouds.” All these things form the scriptural basis for much stock-in-trade fundamentalist preaching; the Seminar therefore wishes to rule them out of court.³⁸ The older flight from apocalyptic was designed to save orthodox Christianity; the newer one is designed to subvert it.

But, though the motive is different, the effect is the same. Although John the Baptist is described as “the precursor and mentor of Jesus” (p. 128), Jesus’ own ministry and message were utterly distinct. John pronounced apocalyptic-style warnings of impending judgment; Jesus did not. Likewise, the very early church (though not the Seminar’s hypothetical early Q, and not *Thomas*) reinterpreted Jesus’ sayings in an apocalyptic style which distorted Jesus’ own intention. Thus Matt 10:7, in which Jesus tells the disciples to announce that “Heaven’s imperial rule is closing in,” is an “apocalyptically oriented summary,” which “was not, however, the point of view of Jesus” (p. 168). So, too, the warnings of judgment on cities that rejected the disciples are “alien to Jesus, although not to the early disciples, who may have reverted to John the Baptist’s apocalyptic message and threat of judgment, or they may simply have been influenced by apocalyptic ideas that were everywhere in the air” (p. 169).

Stated as baldly as this, the agenda is exposed for what it is: a further agonized attempt to rescue Jesus from contamination with the dreaded “apocalyptic.” By what means does the Seminar know, *a priori*, that Jesus so firmly rejected something which was “everywhere in the air,” which was absolutely central to the work of John, who is acknowledged as Jesus’ “precursor and mentor,” and which was fundamental, in some shape or form, to all forms of early Christianity known to us—except, of course, to the *Thomas* collection? (We had better leave the doubly hypothetical “Early Q” out of account, since the only reason for inventing a non-apocalyptic “Early Q,” when so many “apocalyptic” sayings are in the Matthew/Luke parallels upon which the Q hypothesis rests, is the very assumption we are examining, that Jesus and one strand of his followers did not make use of this world of thought.) If almost everyone else thought and spoke like that, how do they know that Jesus did not?³⁹ The answer is that they do not. This “conclusion” was, in their phrase, “in the air” from the inception of the Seminar. It was a

starting point, not a result. It may even, we may suspect, have been one of the reasons why the Seminar came into existence in the first place.

But this view of apocalyptic, and of Jesus' participation in it, can be controverted again and again by serious study of the first-century phenomenon which goes by that name. I have argued in detail elsewhere, in line with a fair amount of contemporary scholarship, that "apocalyptic" is best understood as a complex metaphor-system through which many Jews of the period expressed their aspirations, not for other-worldly bliss, nor for a "big bang" which would end the space-time world, but for social, political, and above all theological liberation.⁴⁰ This enables us to affirm that Schweitzer and others were absolutely right to see Jesus as part of apocalyptic Judaism, while denying Schweitzer's unhistorical notion (shared, of course, by fundamentalists) that apocalyptic language was designed to be taken literally. The Seminar is fighting a shadow.

In particular, the language of the Kingdom of God has been studied in great detail by scholars with far more awareness of the first-century Jewish context than is evident in the present book.⁴¹ There is no sign that this scholarship has been even noted, let alone taken seriously, by the Seminar. Instead, there is a persistent and muddled repetition of outdated and/or naive points of view:

Mark 13 is an apocalypse (an apocalypse tells of events that are to take place at the end of history. In Mark's version, the end of history will occur when the son of Adam appears on the clouds and gathers God's chosen people from the ends of the earth). This and related themes make Mark 13 sound much like the Book of Revelation . . .

A notable feature of early Christian instruction is that teaching about last things (termed eschatology) occurs at the conclusion of the catechism or manual of instruction. Paul tended to put such matters toward the close of his letters, for example, in 1 Thess 5:1-13 and 1 Corinthians 15. In the second-century Christian manual known as the Didache, instruction in eschatology also comes last, in chapter 16.

Mark thus appropriatedly makes Jesus' discourse on last things his final public discourse . . .⁴²

An apocalypse is a form of literature in which a human agent is guided on an otherworldly tour by means of visions. On that tour, the agent learns about a supernatural world unknown to ordinary folk, and the secrets of the future are also revealed . . .

The so-called little apocalypse assembled by Mark in chapter 13, and copied by Matthew and Luke, is not actually an apocalypse in form. But it has the same function . . .⁴³

The comment about Paul shows, as clearly as anything else, the shallow and largely spurious level of analysis employed here. Paul is just as capable of talking about (what we call) "the last things" at other points in his letters (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5). And the whole statement—it is hardly an argument—is designed to minimize the role of "apocalyptic" in the Gospel accounts, isolating Mark 13 and its parallels from the rest of the text, in a way which, as the last comment quoted tacitly admits, does great violence both to that chapter and to the rest of the synoptic tradition.⁴⁴

It is with discussion of the Kingdom of God (or whatever it is to be called; “Heaven’s Imperial Rule” does have the virtue of jolting or confronting a contemporary reader in a way that “Kingdom of God” has largely ceased to do) that the problem is focussed most clearly. The “cameo essay” on the subject (pp. 136-37) is extremely revealing; and what it reveals is a string of misunderstandings, prejudices, and false antitheses.

The essay sets out four categories. First, there is the preaching of John the Baptist. Second, there are sayings of Jesus which speak of God’s rule as future. Third, there are sayings of Jesus which speak of God’s rule as present. Fourth, there is a passage from Paul. Already there are problems, (a) The passage quoted from John the Baptist (Matt 3:7, 10) does not mention the Kingdom of God, and in any case would be regarded by many as a later formulation, not necessarily giving us access to John himself, (b) The main passage quoted as an example of sayings of Jesus about God’s future rule is Mark 13:24-27 and 30, which again does not mention the Kingdom of God, but speaks instead of the son of man coming on the clouds, (c) One of the passages quoted as illustrating sayings of Jesus about God’s rule as present in Luke 11:2, which is the petition from the Lord’s Prayer, here translated as “Impose your imperial rule.” If this indicates that the kingdom is already present, why is one commanded to pray for it as though it were not yet here? (d) The single passage quoted from Paul is 1 Thess 4:15-17, which says nothing about the Kingdom of God, but speaks of the dead rising, the Lord descending, and the living Christians being caught up in the air. There are, of course, passages in Paul which speak explicitly about the Kingdom of God, and in some that kingdom is a present reality (e.g. Rom 14:17). The only reason I can imagine for quoting 1 Thessalonians 4 in this context is that the author of the essay is assuming an equation between “future Kingdom of God” and “end-time apocalyptic events,” and taking passages about the latter, which fundamentalists have interpreted in a particular way (e.g. the “rapture”) as expressions of this “apocalyptic” view of the kingdom. But each stage in this line of thought is quite unwarranted. Indeed, the author of the essay more or less agrees with the fundamentalist interpretation of the key texts, in order then to dismiss them as indices of Jesus’ mind.

The discussion which follows the citation of these texts poses an utterly spurious either-or:

Does this phrase [Kingdom of God] refer to God’s direct intervention in the future, something connected with the end of the world and the last judgment, or did Jesus employ the phrase to indicate something already present and of more elusive nature?

The first of these options is usually termed apocalyptic, a view fully expressed in the book of Revelation, which is an apocalypse.⁴⁵

Here we have it: “apocalyptic” is, more or less, “that which fundamentalists believe about the end of the world.” The author seems to imply that the fundamentalists have actually read some of the texts correctly. So much the worse for the texts; clearly the Seminar is going to take a different view, which will involve ditching those wicked “apocalyptic” ideas and setting up its own alternative. But if this loaded argument functions like a

shopkeeper putting extra weights onto the scales, what follows is the equivalent of leaning on them with both elbows:

Did Jesus share this [apocalyptic] view, or was his vision more subtle, less bombastic and threatening?

The Fellows ... are inclined to the second option: Jesus conceived of God's rule as all around him but difficult to discern ... But Jesus' uncommon views were obfuscated by the more pedestrian conceptions of John, on the one hand, and by the equally pedestrian views of the early Christian community, on the other.⁴⁶

As we saw before, Jesus seems to have been radically different from his "predecessor and mentor," and was radically misunderstood by almost all his followers from the very beginning. In particular, despite the other passages (e.g. p. 7) in which the authors regard Paul as the great Hellenizer, or gnosticizer, of the gospel, they wheel him out this time as another representative of Jewish-style apocalyptic:

The views of John the Baptist and Paul are apocalyptically oriented. The early church aside from Paul shares Paul's view. The only question is whether the set of texts that represent God's rule as present were obfuscated by the pessimistic apocalyptic notions of Jesus' immediate predecessors, contemporaries, and successors.⁴⁷

"Apocalyptic," then, is unsubtle, bombastic, threatening, obfuscatory, pedestrian, and pessimistic—and shared by everybody from John the Baptist through to the early church, apart from Jesus himself. This picture is then fitted into the broader old-liberal agenda, as follows: future-kingdom sayings are about judgment and condemnation, while Jesus instead offered forgiveness, mercy, and inclusiveness.⁴⁸ The evidenced adduced to support this astonishing piece of rhetoric—and this remarkably old-fashioned, almost pre-Schweitzer, view of Jesus—is the existence of texts about the Kingdom as a present reality, such as Luke 17:20-21, 11:20, and *Thomas* §113. In addition, the parables are supposed to represent the kingdom as a present, rather than a future, reality. The Jesus Seminar therefore voted "present-kingdom" sayings pink,⁴⁹ and "future-kingdom" sayings black. It was as easy as that.

I have to say that if I had been served up this "cameo essay" by a first-year undergraduate, I would quickly have deduced that the student, while very ingenious, was unfamiliar both with some of the basic secondary discussions of the topic,⁵⁰ and, more damaging still, with the meaning of the primary texts in their first-century context. The determination to rule fundamentalism off the map altogether has so dominated the discussion (if not the Seminar itself, at least in this apparently authoritative interpretation of its work) that texts of great subtlety and variety have been forced into a tight and utterly spurious either/or and played off against one another. It would be one thing to find a student doing this. When two senior academics do it, after having gone on record as saying that "critical scholars practice their craft by submitting their work to the judgment of peers," while "non-critical scholars are those who put dogmatic considerations first and insist that the factual evidence confirm theological premises,"⁵¹ the uncomfortable suspicion is aroused that it is the latter description, not the former, that fits the work we

have in our hands. Sadly, this suspicion can only be confirmed by the bombastic, threatening and utterly pedestrian nature of the discussion itself.

There is, of course, a good deal more to be said about the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus. There is need for much discussion and careful reconstruction. This, however, cannot be the place for it. We conclude that, when it comes to the central theme of the teaching of Jesus, the Seminar, at least as reported in this volume (and with dissentient voices drowned out by the voting averages and by those who voted black for everything on principle), allowed itself to make its key decisions on the basis of an ill-informed and ill-advised disjunction between two ill-defined types of kingdom-sayings. The entire history of debate this century on the subject of Jesus and eschatology goes by the board. It is one thing to disagree with the line of thought running, broadly, from Schweitzer to Sanders. It is something else to ignore it altogether. Eschatology and apocalyptic, and “Kingdom of God” within that, has here been misunderstood, misanalyzed, and wrongly marginalized.

Two tail-pieces to this discussion: first, the effect of the Seminar’s portrait of Jesus at this point is to minimize his Jewishness. The authors claim, of course, that Jesus was “not the first Christian” (p. 24) — that is, he does not belong to the Christian movement, but (presumably) to Judaism. But only minimally — if the Seminar’s analysis of “Kingdom of God” were to be accepted. Quite unintentionally, of course, the Seminar has reproduced one of the most dubious features of the older liberal picture of Jesus. Judaism only appears as the dark backcloth against which the jewel of Jesus’ message — not now as a Christian message, but as a subversive, present-kingdom, almost proto-gnostic, possibly-Cynic, laconic-cowboy message—shines the more brightly. We do not actually know anything about wandering pagan philosophers whom Jesus might have met in the days of his youth. There is no evidence for them. But they are brought in of necessity; otherwise one might have to admit that Jesus’ language about the Kingdom of God was thoroughly Jewish, and belonged within the Jewish setting and aspirations of his day.

At the same time, the authors are clearly anxious not to play Jesus off against “Jews.” They are very much aware that some allegorical readings of Jesus’ teaching have produced tragic consequences for Jewish-Christian relations (p. 234). They are so coy about using the word “Jew” that they insist on saying “Judean” instead—even, amusingly when the Jews in question are mostly Galileans, not Judeans at all (eg p. 168). But they seem unaware that, within our own century, the attempt to paint Judaism as dark, pessimistic, bombastic, pedestrian religion, expecting a great and cataclysmic final judgment, and to paint Jesus as having countered this by offering (the supposedly unJewish message of) mercy and love and forgiveness, has itself generated tragic consequences.

Second there are all sorts of signs that the authors, representing some but surely not all of the Seminar, simply do not understand how first-century Judaism, in all its plurality, works. The discussion of “hallowed be your name” in Matt 6:9 implies that there is a paradox in Jesus using the form “Abba” and then asking “that the name be

regarded as sacred” (p. 149). There may, no doubt, be a paradox there, but not at that simplistic level. The point of asking that the divine name be hallowed is, as has very often been pointed out, that the name is hallowed when the people of God are vindicated, rescued from their enemies. This discussion is sadly typical of many points where quite basic perspectives on central texts seem to be ignored altogether. Thus, for instance, we read that Luke 23:31 (“if they do this when the wood is green, what will they do when it is dry?”) is enigmatic, which is undoubtedly true. But then, when the authors say “no one knows what it means, although it, too, must have something to do with the fall of Jerusalem” (pp. 395-96), one wonders if they bothered to check any of the major commentaries.

In particular, the authors offer (p. 242) a brief discussion of first-century Pharisaism, in order to substantiate the Seminar’s decision to cast black votes for most of the sayings in Matthew 23. They repeat uncritically the line which Sanders took from Morton Smith, though there was never much evidence for it and always plenty against it: the Pharisees were based in Judea, not Galilee, so Jesus may not have come into contact with them or even known much about them (pp. 242, 244).⁵² This is backed up in a way which neither Sanders nor Smith suggests: “The teachings of the rabbis in Jesus’ day were all circulated by word of mouth; it was not until the third century C.E. that rabbinic traditions took written form in the Mishnah.” This last statement is of course true, but totally irrelevant, implying as it does that word-of-mouth circulation would be a casual, inefficient, uncertain thing, so that, lacking written texts, Jesus would not have known much about Pharisaic teaching. As we shall see presently, however, in a substantially oral culture, oral teaching will have circulated far more widely, and far more effectively, than written texts.

The authors further suggest that the Pharisees became the dominant party after the fall of Jerusalem, and that “at the council of Jamnia, in 90 C.E., the Pharisees laid the foundations for the survival of Judaism in its modern form—rabbinic Judaism.” Meanwhile, even in the last quarter of the first century, the “emerging church, in its Palestinian and Syrian locales, was still largely a sectarian movement within Judaism.”

All this comprises so many half-truths and inaccuracies that one is tempted to wonder whether it is worth reading further in a book supposedly about the first century.⁵³ It is highly likely that the Pharisees were already very influential, quite possibly the most influential group, within the pluriform Judaism of the pre-70 period. The group that became dominant after 70 was one variety of Pharisees, namely the Hillelites, over against another variety, the Shammaites. But even this was not achieved overnight; it was only with the collapse of the second revolt, in 135, that the shift of influence was complete. In addition, our knowledge of the council of Jamnia is very nebulous; its date and achievements are very uncertain. The later rabbinic traditions about it are, most likely, far more heavily overlaid with subsequent reinterpretations than almost anything we find in the Gospels. To use it as a fixed point for establishing early Christian material is like a hiker taking a compass bearing on a sheep. Finally, we do not actually know very much at all about the church in Palestine and Syria in the last quarter of the century. What we do know is that a sharp division between the church, precisely in Palestine and Syria,

and Pharisaic Judaism of the more zealous (i.e. Shammaite) variety had already taken place *in the first five years after Jesus' death*. We know this because of Saul of Tarsus, alias the apostle Paul, who, for neither the first nor the last time, puts a spoke in the wheel of the Jesus Seminar's speculative reconstructions of early Christianity.

Lest all these criticisms be misunderstood, I should stress: there is nothing wrong with trying to popularize the results of scholarship. Quick overviews of complex issues are necessary in such work. But popularization sometimes reveals crucial weaknesses which a more high flown and abstract language would have masked. So it is in this case. Serious contemporary research on first-century Judaisms by no means rules out the possibility, which must then be decided (and interpreted) on quite other grounds, that Jesus did come into sharp confrontation with the Pharisees. What the discussion tells us is that the Seminar, or at least its spokespersons in this book, are not to be trusted to know their way around the details of the first century, which they are supposed to be describing.⁵⁴

Oral Culture, Storytelling, and Isolated Sayings

The third driving principle behind a great many of the Seminar's decisions can be stated quite baldly.⁵⁵ It is assumed that only isolated sayings of Jesus circulated in the earliest post-Easter period. Unless a saying can be conceived as having enough intrinsic interest and, as it were, staying power to survive being passed on by word of mouth, all by itself and without any context, we can assume that it cannot be original to Jesus. Words of Jesus which fail this test, and which occur within more extended narratives, are simply part of the storyteller's art, or of the evangelist's theology.⁵⁶ This is, at its heart, an assumption about the nature of early Christianity.

Examples of this principle in operation could be picked from almost anywhere in the book's 500 and more pages. Here are some taken at random:

The words ascribed to Jesus in this story [rebuking winds and wave; Mark 4:35-41] would not have circulated independently during the oral period; they reflect what the storyteller imagined Jesus would have said on such an occasion.⁵⁷

The stories Mark has collected in chapter five of his gospel contain words ascribed to Jesus that are suitable only for the occasion. They are not particularly memorable, are not aphorisms or parables, and would not have circulated independently during the oral period. They cannot, therefore, be traced back to Jesus.⁵⁸

The words ascribed to Jesus [during the healing of the blind man in Mark 8:22-26] are the invention of the evangelist. Because they are incidental dialogue and not memorable pronouncements, they would not have been remembered as exact words of Jesus.⁵⁹

Jesus' public discourse is remembered to have consisted primarily of aphorisms, parables, or a challenge followed by a verbal retort. Matt 4:17 does not fall into any of these categories.⁶⁰

The remarks quoted from Jesus [in Matt 8:5-13] are intelligible only as part of the narrative and could not have circulated as a separate saying apart from this narrative context. They were accordingly voted black.⁶¹

The words attributed to Jesus in the story of the feeding of the crowd all belong to the narrative texture of the story. They cannot be classified as aphorisms or parables and so could not have circulated independently during the oral period, 30-50 C.E. As a consequence, they cannot be traced back to Jesus, but must have been created by the storyteller.⁶²

The basis for these judgments is found in the extended discussion of oral memory and tradition in the introduction (pp. 25-29). It is impossible, without quoting the entire section and discussing it line by line, to show the extent of the misunderstandings it reveals. Though the authors regularly refer to oral cultures, the only actual examples they give come from a very non-oral culture, that of their own modern Western world.⁶³ Referring to what Thucydides says about making up speeches to suit the occasion (p. 27) is not to the point; the speeches in question tend to be longer by far than any of Jesus' reported discourses, even the Sermon on the Mount and the Johannine "farewell discourses." In any case, Thucydides was a man of learning and letters, and to that extent less representative of a genuinely oral culture.

The theory that sayings, aphorisms, memorable oneliners, and sometimes parables are the things that survive, whereas *stories* about Jesus, with his words embedded within them, do not, is clearly promulgated with one eye on the results. "It is highly probable," we are told—this, recall, at the introductory level, before we have examined a single saying!—that the earliest layer of the Gospel tradition was made up almost entirely of single aphorisms and parables that circulated by word of mouth, without narrative context—precisely as that tradition is recorded in "Q" and *Thomas*.⁶⁴

With the evidence thus well and truly cooked in advance, it is not surprising that the portrait of Jesus-the-quizzical-sage "emerges" from the subsequent discussion. It could not help doing so. The theory about what sort of material survives in oral tradition, I suggest, was designed to produce exactly this result.

Against this whole line of thought we must set the serious study of genuinely oral traditions that has gone on in various quarters recently.⁶⁵ Communities that live in an oral culture tend to be *story-telling* communities. They sit around in long evenings telling and listening to stories—the same stories, over and over again. Such stories, especially when they are involved with memorable happenings that have determined in some way the existence and life of the particular group in question, acquire a fairly fixed form, down to precise phraseology (in narrative as well as in recorded speech), extremely early in their life—often within a day or so of the original incident taking place. They retain that form, and phraseology, as long as they are told. Each village and community has its recognized storytellers, the accredited bearers of its traditions; but the whole community knows the stories by heart, and if the teller varies them even slightly they will let him know in no uncertain terms. This matters quite a lot in cultures where, to this day, the desire to avoid "shame" is a powerful motivation.

Such cultures do also repeat, and hence transmit, proverbs and pithy sayings. Indeed, they tend to know far more proverbs than the orally starved modern Western world. But the circulation of such individual sayings is only the tip of the iceberg; the rest is narrative, narrative with embedded dialogue, heard, repeated again and again within minutes, hours and days of the original incident, and fixed in memories the like of which few in the modern Western world can imagine. The storyteller in such a culture has no license to invent or adapt at will. The less important the story, the more adaptation may be possible; but the more important the story, the more the entire community, in a process that is informal but very effective, will keep a close watch on the precise form and wording with which the story is told.

And the stories about Jesus were nothing if not important. Even the Jesus Seminar admits that Jesus was an itinerant wonder-worker. Very well. Supposing a woman in a village is suddenly healed after a lengthy illness. Even today, even in a non-oral culture, the story of such an event would quickly spread among friends, neighbors and relatives, acquiring a fixed form within the first two or three retellings and retaining it, other things being equal, thereafter. In a culture where Storytelling was and is an art-form, a memorable event such as this, especially if it were also seen as a sign that Israel's God was now at last at work to do what he had always promised, would be told at once in specific ways, told so as to be not just a celebration of a healing but also a celebration of the Kingdom of God: Events and stories of this order are community-forming, and the stories which form communities do not get freely or loosely adapted. One does not disturb the foundations of the house in which one is living.

What about detached aphorisms, then? Clearly, a memorable saying is a memorable saying, and could circulate independently. But what about sayings which sometimes have a context and sometimes not? I suggest that the following hypothesis is far more likely than that proposed by the Seminar.⁶⁶ It was only later, when the communities had been scattered through external circumstances (such as sundry persecutions, and the disastrous Jewish War of 66-70), that individual memorable sayings, which might very well have enjoyed a flourishing earlier life *within various narrative settings*, would become detached from those settings and become *chreiai*, isolated pithy sayings with minimal narrative context, such as we find (of course) in *Thomas*, and also to some extent in *Luke*. It is heavily ironic that the reason often given for supposing *Luke's* version of "Q" to be earlier than *Matthew's* is that *Luke's* versions of "Q" sayings are more *chreia*-like, while *Matthew's* are more embedded in Jewish, and often in narrative, contexts. Unless one had been fairly well brainwashed by the idea that Jesus-traditions consisted originally of non-Jewish, detached sayings, and only in the second generation acquired a Jewish setting, complete with scriptural overtones and so forth, the most natural historical hypothesis here would have been this: that Jesus' earliest hearers, being Jews, eager for their God to act in their present circumstances, would have told stories about Jesus in a thoroughly Jewish way, with scriptural echoes both deliberate and accidental. Then, later on, the church which was leaving the tight Storytelling communities, and going out into the wider Hellenistic world, would find it easier to detach sayings from their original

narrative context and present them, like the sayings of wise teachers in the Greco-Roman world, as isolated nuggets of wisdom.

The Jesus Seminar's view of oral tradition is thus based, not on the most likely historical hypothesis, but on the same view of the distinctive Jesus that we have seen to dominate their whole picture. Jesus would not have quoted Scripture;⁶⁷ he did not share, or address, the aspirations of his contemporary Jews; he did not even follow the line taken by his "precursor and mentor." Nothing much memorable ever happened to him, or if it did we do not know about it. He was not involved in incidents which made a deep impression on the onlookers, causing them to go at once and tell what they had seen over and over again, with the anecdote quickly fixing itself into a pattern, and the words of Jesus, including incidental words, becoming part of that regularly repeated story. He never spoke about himself (the more one thinks about this suggestion, the more absurd it becomes); his conversation consisted only of subversive, teasing aphorisms. He must, in short, have been a very peculiar human being (as one Fellow of the Seminar pointed out to me, a Jesus who always and only uttered pithy aphorisms would start to look like some of the less credible cinematic Jesuses). Such a person would in fact be quite maddening. More importantly, as a historian I find it incredible that such a Jesus could have been a significant historical figure. It is not at all clear why people would have followed him, died for him, loved him, invented rich and powerful stories about him, and (within an almost incredibly short time, and within a context of continuing Jewish monotheism) worshipped him.⁶⁸

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the whole construct lies just here. In order to sustain their home-made view of Jesus, the authors of this book, and presumably a fair number at least of Fellows of the Jesus Seminar, have had to invent, as well, an entire picture of the early church out of not much more than thin air. Sometimes they have borrowed other people's inventions, but they, too, are based on little or nothing. Paul, as we have seen, is the one major fixed point in early Christianity; we know that he was active, travelling, preaching and writing in the 40s and 50s, but we do not know anything at all, with the same certainty, about almost anyone else. We do not know that "Q" even existed; notoriously, there is a growing body of opinion that it did not (though one would never guess this from reading *The Five Gospels*), even as there is a growing body of opinion, represented strongly within the Jesus Seminar, that expounds ever more complex theories about its origin, development, historical setting, and theologies.⁶⁹ Of course, once scholars are allowed to invent whole communities at will, anything is possible. Any jigsaw puzzle can be solved if we are allowed to create new pieces for it at a whim. But we should not imagine that historical scholarship built on this principle is of any great value.

CONCLUSION

Let me be quite clear, in bringing the discussion to a close, on several points at which misunderstanding of what I have said might perhaps arise.

First, I have no quarrel with the enterprise of publishing as much of the early Jesus-material as possible, from both the canonical and non-canonical sources, and bringing every scrap of possibly relevant evidence into full play. Indeed, I am deeply grateful for the immense labor and effort that members of the Seminar have expended to enable all of us involved in the search for Jesus to study these texts more easily. But, as with recent controversies about the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Seminar should be wary of suggesting that those who find the canonical material to be more reliable than the non-canonical are part of a conspiracy of silence, inspired by thoroughly non-historical motives, that is, by the desire for some form of closed-minded traditional Christianity. Frankly, *both* the desire to “prove” orthodoxy *and* the desire to “disprove” it ought to be anathema to the serious historian. The first of these is, of course, the way to what is normally called fundamentalism; the second, taken by at least some (and they are clearly influential) in the Jesus Seminar, is no less closed-minded, and in fact fundamentalist, in practice. Hatred of orthodoxy is just as unhistorical a starting point as love of it.

Second, I have no quarrel with popularization. I totally agree with Robert Funk that the results of scholarship are far too important, on this of all questions, to be confined to the classroom and library. I will go further. The Jesus Seminar, in this and in several other of its publications, has done as good a job of popularization as any scholarly group or individual I have ever seen. Its charts, diagrams, tables, layout, and so forth are exemplary. I am not, in short, in any way a scholarly snob, who wants to keep the discussion within a charmed circle. My problems lie elsewhere. The thing which is thus being often brilliantly communicated, especially in *The Five Gospels*, is not the assured result of scholarship. It is a compromise of pseudo-democratic scholarship, based on principles we have seen good reason to question, employing methods that many reputable scholars would avoid, ignoring a great deal of very serious (and by no means necessarily conservative) contemporary scholarship, making erroneous and anachronistic assumptions about the early church and its cultural context, and apparently driven by a strong, and strongly distorting, contemporary agenda. There was no point in popularizing all this. One should only popularize scholarship when it has passed the test this book itself suggests: submitting work to the judgment of peers (p. 34). For what it is worth, my judgment is that *The Five Gospels* does not pass the test. Any non-scholar reading this book is likely to be seriously misled, not only about Jesus, but about the state of serious scholarship. This is culpably irresponsible.

Third, I repeat what I said early on: I have no quarrel with the scholarship of many members of the Seminar. Some I am privileged to count as friends, and I trust that what I have said here will not put that friendship in jeopardy. From within the Seminar, as we saw, several of the discussions, not least some of the votes that ended up gray, must appear as highly significant, points of potential advance in understanding. Several Fellows have done sterling work in persuading others within the Seminar to adopt, or at least to allow for, views other than their original ones; pulling votes up from black to gray may indicate, for many, an opening of an otherwise closed mind. From within certain circles in the North American academy, this is quite a significant achievement. From outside the Seminar, however, the present volume cannot but appear as a disaster, for which the individual Fellows cannot and must not be held responsible, since they did

not write it. The two authors of this book are men whose work in other fields I admire and have used a good deal: Funk's Greek grammar is always close at hand, and Hoover's work on a key Greek term used once by Paul is foundational, I am persuaded, for the correct understanding of a much controverted and hugely important passage.⁷⁰ But they, as the named authors, must unfortunately bear responsibility for this, the flagship work of the Jesus Seminar. It does them no credit. Indeed, it obscures any good work that the Seminar itself may have done.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly of all: I agree completely with the Seminar that the search for Jesus in his historical context is possible, vital, and urgent. I am as convinced as they are that if the church ignores such a search it is living in a fool's paradise. What is more, my own study of Jesus leads me to think that "conservative" and "orthodox" Christianity, in the twentieth century at least, has often, indeed quite regularly, missed the point of Jesus' sayings and deeds almost entirely. But the way to address this problem is not, and cannot be, the way taken by the Jesus Seminar. One cannot tackle serious historical problems by taking them to bits and voting on the bits one by one. The only way forward must be the way of genuine historiography; and one may search *The Five Gospels* from cover to cover in vain for such a thing. There are a good many people engaged in serious historical study of Jesus at the moment, but the Seminar in its corporate identity (as opposed to some of its individual members) cannot be reckoned among their number.

Fifth, in conclusion, I question whether the Jesus proposed by *The Five Gospels* constitutes, or offers, good news, i.e. "gospel," at all. The main thing this Jesus has to offer, it sometimes appears, is the news that the fundamentalists are wrong. Some of us believed that anyway, on quite other grounds. Aside from that, Jesus becomes a quizzical teacher of wisdom, to be ranged alongside other quizzical teachers of wisdom, from many traditions. No reason emerges as to why we should take this teacher any more or less seriously than any other. It is not clear why even a sustained attempt to follow his maxims, his isolated aphorisms, should offer hope in a world threatened by ecological disasters, nuclear holocausts, resurgent tribalisms—and, for those insulated from such things in certain parts of the Western world, the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of materialism. The whole point of calling Gospels "Gospels" was, I suggest that they did contain reason for hope, good news to a world that badly needed it. *The Five Gospels*, in other words, systematically deconstructs its own title. If this book gives us the truth about Jesus, about the early church, and about the writing of the five books here studied, there is no gospel, no good news. There is only good advice, and we have no reason for thinking that it will have any effect. Many members of the Jesus Seminar would disagree strongly with this conclusion, but this book does not give us any means of seeing why. In any case, those who persist in seeing the Seminar's portrait of Jesus as somehow good news are bound to say, as the book does on almost every page that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John got it all wrong, producing their own variations on the pedestrian, bombastic, apocalyptic, and essentially fundamentalist worldview. If the Seminar insists on retaining the word "Gospels" in the title, then, it is the word "five" that is deconstructed: all one is left with is *Thomas* and, of course, the doubly hypothetical "Early Q."

From a historical point of view it might of course be true that there is no good news to be had. Christianity as a whole might simply have been whistling in the dark for two thousand years. Subversive aphorisms may be the only comfort, the only hope, we have. But this question must be addressed precisely *from a historical point of view*. And, when all is said and done, *The Five Gospels* is of no help whatever¹ in that task. There is such a thing as the serious contemporary search for Jesus in his historical context. This particular book makes no contribution to it.

¹ N. T. Wright, "Quest for the Historical Jesus," ABD 3.796-802.

² We may note, for instance W. R. Farmer, *Maccabees, Zealots, and Josephus: An Enquiry into Jewish Nationalism in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956); G. B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (London: Athlone Press, 1965); G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); idem, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM, 1983; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); idem, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979); idem, *Christus Faber: The Master-BUILDER and the House of God* (PTMS 29; Allison Park: Pickwick, 1992); idem, "Jesus Christ," in D. N. Freedman et al. (eds.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 vols., New York: Doubleday, 1992) 3.773-96; A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History: The Bampton Lectures, 1980* (London: Duckworth, 1982); M. J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (SBEC 5; New York and Toronto: Mellen, 1984); idem, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); idem, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London and New York: Penguin, 1993); G. Theissen, *Der Schatten des Galiläers. Historische Jesusforschung in erzählender Form* (Munich: Kaiser, 1986); ET: *The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); R. A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); S. Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); J. H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1988); B. Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (ABRL 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991); idem, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume Two: Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (ABRL 9; New York: Doubleday, 1994); J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); B. Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program within a Cultural History of Sacrifice* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1992); idem and C. A. Evans, *Jesus in Context: Temple, Purity, and Restoration* (AGJU 39; Leiden: Brill, 1997); C. A. Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (AGJU 25; Leiden: Brill, 1995).

³ Matt 5:39; cf. R. W. Funk and R. W. Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (Sonoma: Polebridge; New York: Macmillan, 1993) 143-45.

⁴ See, for instance, R. W. Funk, B. B. Scott, and J. R. Butts (eds.), *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition. A Report of the Jesus Seminar* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1988); R. J. Miller, *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1992); and the Seminar's journal, *Forum: Foundations and Facets*.

⁵ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 28-82.

⁶ Mark 1:41; Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 43. There is a hint here that the transaction between Jesus and the leper was not a healing, but simply Jesus' declaration that he should no longer be treated as an outcast.

⁷ Matt 22:12; Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 234.

⁸ Luke 5:20; Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 283.

⁹ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, xiii-xviii, here at xiv.

¹⁰ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, xviii

¹¹ For example, Burton Mack, author of *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988) and other works which have had a profound impact on the work of the Jesus Seminar. Over

200 members are reported to have belonged at one stage or another; Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 34.

¹² Cf. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, remarkably absent from the bibliography of *The Five Gospels*; cf. too Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. E. P. Sanders and M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), is listed in the bibliography of *The Five Gospels* as “an excellent guide,” though anyone taking it seriously would be forced to reject a good deal of the Jesus Seminar’s methods and results. See below.

¹³ Cf. esp. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*; idem, *Christus Faber*; idem, “Jesus Christ.”

¹⁴ For example, see Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 34-35, whose triumphalism is as breathtaking as it is unwarranted: “Critical scholars practice their craft by submitting their work to the judgment of peers. Untested work is not highly regarded. The scholarship represented by the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar is the kind that has come to prevail in all the great universities of the world.” Only in the most general terms is the last sentence true; the present essay is a response to the invitation of the previous sentences.

¹⁵ For examples, see Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 1: the present book is “a dramatic exit from windowless studies”; 34: “we have been intimidated by promotion and tenure committees ... It is time for us to quit the library and speak up . . .”; the Seminar’s methods have been attacked by “many elitist academic critics who deplored [its] public face.”

¹⁶ There is, for instance, a good deal of important work on Jesus emanating from Latin America; but one would not guess it from reading the Seminar’s publications.

¹⁷ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 540, referring to Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*.

¹⁸ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 7-8.

¹⁹ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 35.

²⁰ It is interesting to compare the Seminar’s work with the comment on the Gospels made by a leading secular historian, J. M. Roberts: “[the Gospels] need not be rejected; more more inadequate evidence about far more intractable subjects has often to be employed” (*History of the Word* [2nd ed., Oxford: Helicon, 1992] 210).

²¹ In favor: S. J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1993), noted in the bibliography as being influential in the Seminar. Against: C. M. Tuckett, *Nag Hammadi and the Gospel Tradition: Synoptic Tradition in the Nag Hammadi Library* (Studies of the New Testament and its World; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986); idem, “Thomas and the Synoptics,” *NovT*30 (1988) 132-57.

²² See Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 18, 128.

²³ For example, see H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), on which see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 1; London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 371-443; and, for some comments on Paul’s meaning of the term, N. T. Wright, “Gospel and Theology in Galatians,” in L. A. Jervis and P. Richardson (eds.), *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker* (JSNTSup 108; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 222-39.

²⁴ The suggestion (Funk and Hoover [eds.], *The Five Gospels*, 500-501) that the Gnosticism in Thomas is very like what we find in John and Paul would be laughable if it did not reveal culpable ignorance of the entire drift of Pauline studies in the last forty years. The brief sketch of how Thomas got its name (p. 20) reveals an astonishing naivety, speaking of the apostle being “revered in the Syrian church as an apostle,” and giving as evidence for this Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13; John 11:16; 20:24; 21:2. The attribution to Thomas, we are told, “tells us nothing about the author,” but “may indicate where this gospel was written.” In which of the above texts do we find evidence for Thomas in Syria? If the writers applied the same skepticism to claims about Thomas as they do, on the same page, to claims about the other four (the evidence of Papias, for instance), it would quickly become clear how little evidence there is for an early date, or a Syrian provenance, for the Thomas collection.

²⁵ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 3. The sayings of Jesus in John are voted almost uniformly black, with 4:43 a solitary pink (“a prophet gets no respect on his own turf), 12:24-25 and 13:20 a lonely pair of grays (“unless the kernel of wheat falls to the earth and dies . . .” and “if they welcome the person I send, they welcome me . . .”).

²⁶ Described in Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 34-37.

²⁷ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 213.

²⁸ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 232.

²⁹ See also Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 250, on Matt 24:32-33: 54 voted either red or pink, but a 35 black vote resulted in a gray compromise (for which, apparently, only the remaining 11 had voted).

³⁰ The emphasis is in the original.

³¹ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 81 -120.

³² For example, see Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 326, on “daily bread” in the Matthean and Lukan versions of the Lord’s Prayer.

³³ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 33.

³⁴ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 32.

³⁵ The Seminar nevertheless held, we are told, that the judgmental sayings in Matt 11:21-14 (for example) were uttered by a Christian prophet “speaking in the spirit and the name of Jesus” (Funk and Hoover [eds.], *The Five Gospels*, 181; cf. 320). We are to assume, it seems, that the prophet in question misunderstood that spirit, and misused that name, quite drastically. “Jesus . . . would not have told Capernaum to go to Hell after instructing his disciples to love their enemies” (p. 320). This touching naivety is rightly questioned at 214: “prophetic anger does not entirely contradict the injunction to love one’s enemies. It is possible for the two to be combined in one person.”

³⁶ There seems to be an added confusion at this point. According to all the Seminar’s literature, the voting was supposed to be on the question of whether Jesus said things, not on where he was the first to say them. But frequently the votes seem to have reflected the latter point instead: e.g. Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 106, 168, 176, 240, 298-99, 337 and elsewhere. This produces a strange heads-I-win/tails-you-lose situation. The secular, non-Jewish sages who (according to the Seminar) may have influenced Jesus in his early days provide us, we are told, with the model for how he spoke. But if a saying looks as though it came from such common stock, it still does not attract a pink or red vote.

³⁷ K Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic: A Polemical Work on a Neglected Area of Biblical Studies and its Damaging Effects on Theology and Philosophy* (SBT 2.22; London: SCM, 1972 [German original, 1970]).

³⁸ Any who think this analysis over-suspicious should spend half a day reading through the Seminar’s journal *Forum: Foundations and Facets*, and the work of Burton Mack in particular, which was heavily influential on the Seminar’s decisions at this point; cf. B. L. Mack, “The Kingdom Sayings in Mark,” *Forum* 3 (1987) 347; idem, *A Myth of Innocence*.

³⁹ See also Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 112, where the comment (on Mark 13:14-20) that “almost anyone could have formulated these warnings” is followed at once by the report of near-unanimity among the Fellows that “Jesus was not the author of any of these sayings.” In place of the distinctive Jesus of some traditional Christology, who stood out from everyone else because of his divinity, we have the distinctive Jesus of the Seminar, who was certainly incapable of saying things that almost anyone else at the time might have said. This is almost a secular version of the Docetic heresy.

⁴⁰ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 280-338.

⁴¹ For details, see e.g. (among a great many) B. Chilton (ed.), *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (IRT 5; London: SPCK; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); idem. *God in Strength: Jesus’ Announcement of the Kingdom* (SNTU 1; Freistadt: Plochi, 1979; repr. BibSem 8; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987); G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); R. S. Barbour (ed.), *The Kingdom of God and Human Society: Essays by Members of the Scripture, Theology and Society Group* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993); and the discussions in the other works about Jesus referred to above in n. 2.

⁴² Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 107.

⁴³ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 246.

⁴⁴ See Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 394-95.

⁴⁵ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 37.

⁴⁶ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 137.

⁴⁷ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 137.

⁴⁸ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 157

⁴⁹ For example, Thomas § 113: the explicit reason given for the vote is that this saying provides “a counterweight to the view that Jesus espoused popular apocalypticism” (Funk and Hoover [eds.], *The Five Gospels*, 531). Here, no doubt, is one of the real reasons for the Seminar’s long-running love-affair with Thomas: the collection offers apparent historical grounds for dumping apocalyptic.

⁵⁰ For example, G. E. Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (London: SPCK, 1966); Chilton (ed.), *The Kingdom of God*; idem, *God in Strength*; Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom*; Barbour (ed.), *The Kingdom of God*; and the many recent discussion of the parables, e.g. M. Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study* (CBQMS 6; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1977); K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant/Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); J. Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels: History and Allegory* (London: SPCK, 1985). The major earlier discussions, involving such magisterial figures as Dodd and Jeremias, might as well not have happened.

⁵¹ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 34.

⁵² See Sanders, Jesus and Judaism; M. Smith, "Palestinian Judaism in the First Century," in H. Fischel (ed.), *Essays in Greco-Roman and Related Talmudic Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1977) 183-97. Sanders (*The Historical Figure*) has toned this right down, perhaps as a result of his further researches reflected in his *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, 63 BCE-66 CE (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992). For discussion, see Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 181-203; on this point, see esp. 195-96.

⁵³ On all of the following, see Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 145-338.

⁵⁴ Compare Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 362-63, where we are blithely told that "people in the ancient world" (which people? all people? Jews?) "though that the sky was held up by mountains that serve as pillars at the edge of the world." No doubt some people thought that. To offer it as an interpretative grid for a text in the Gospels (Luke 17:6, which is in any case about trees, not mountains) is rather like trying to interpret a Mozart opera by means of nuclear physics.

⁵⁵ See Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 25-29, discussed below.

⁵⁶ Even at the level of reporting what is in the text, the Seminar's spokespersons here leave much to be desired. In Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 210, commenting on Matthew's Transfiguration narrative (17:1-9), they declare that, by contrast with Matthew, "in Mark's version, Jesus says nothing at all," and say that in this respect Luke has followed Mark. However, in Mark 9:9 we find a saying of Jesus, parallel to that in Matt 17:9, but simply in indirect speech: "He instructed them not to describe what they had seen to anyone, until the son of Adam rise from the dead." Funk, as a grammarian, would surely acknowledge that *oratio obliqua* is still *oratio*.

⁵⁷ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 60

⁵⁸ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 62.

⁵⁹ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 75.

⁶⁰ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 134. Procrustes would have been proud of this one.

⁶¹ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 160.

⁶² Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 205, compare with 199-200.

⁶³ "We" rephrase jokes and witticisms, such as those of Oscar Wilde (Funk and Hoover [eds.], *The Five Gospels*, 27); "we know" that oral memory "retains little else" other than sayings and anecdotes that are short, provocative, and memorable (p. 28); "recent experiments with memory" have reached various conclusions about the capacity of memory, emphasizing that, though people remember the gist of what was said, they do not recall the exact phrases. All of these examples are 100 irrelevant when we are considering a genuinely oral culture, such as still exists in certain parts of the world, not least among peasant communities in the Middle East. On the whole topic, see K. E. Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991) 34-54.

⁶⁴ Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 28.

⁶⁵ For example, see H. Wansbrough (ed.), *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), referring to a large amount of earlier work; Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition," 34-54. The following discussion depends on these and similar studies, and builds on Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 418-43; and idem, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 133-37.

⁶⁶ Sometimes the absence of narrative context in the Thomas collection is remarked on (e.g. Funk and Hoover [eds.], *The Five Gospels*, 122) as though this were of great significance—which it clearly is not, since Thomas never has any such contexts. Waving Thomas around (e.g. p. 102), as though its detached sayings somehow prove that the saying first circulated independently and only subsequently acquired its synoptic context, constitutes an empty celebration of a circular argument.

⁶⁷ For example, Funk and Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels*, 174, where the reference to Micah in Matt 10:34-36 is given as a reason for inauthenticity. Compare p. 201, where we are told that "scholars believe

that most, perhaps all, quotations from scripture attributed to Jesus are secondary accretions.” This is quite breathtaking, both in its ignoring of serious and well-known scholarly traditions in which Jesus is seen as a major expositor of Scripture, and in the extraordinary nonJewishness of the portrait which emerges.

⁶⁸ On the worship of Jesus and Jewish monotheism, see N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 18-136; Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 457.

⁶⁹ The problematical nature of this aspect of “Q studies” is treated by C. A. Evans in his chap. on assumptions and methodology (in *Authenticating the Words*).

⁷⁰ R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (5th ed., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973); R. W. Hoover, “The *harpagmos* Enigma: A Philological Solution,” *HTR* 64 (1971) 95-119; see Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 56-98.

The Jesus Seminar is a small organization of scholars assembled by former University of Montana professor Robert Funk for the purpose of finding what they considered the real, historical Jesus Christ through an investigation of the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John of the New Testament, plus the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas. Their conclusions of what Jesus said and did - arrived at through "scholarly consensus" from a liberal perspective - were published in 1993 as *The Five Gospels: The*