

# Rediscovering the Historical Jesus: Presuppositions and Pretensions of the Jesus Seminar

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## SUMMARY

In this first part of a two-part article, the presuppositions and pretensions of the Jesus Seminar are explicated and assessed. It is found that the principal presuppositions of (i) scientific naturalism, (ii) the primacy of the apocryphal gospels, and (iii) the necessity of a politically correct Jesus are unjustified and issue in a distorted portrait of the historical Jesus. Although the Jesus Seminar makes a pretension of speaking for scholarship on the quest of the historical Jesus, it is shown that in fact it is a small body of critics in pursuit of a cultural agenda.

## REDISCOVERING THE HISTORICAL JESUS: PRESUPPOSITIONS AND PRETENSIONS OF THE JESUS SEMINAR

In 1985 a prominent New Testament scholar named Robert Funk founded a think tank in Southern California which he called the Jesus Seminar. The ostensible purpose of the Seminar was to uncover the historical person Jesus of Nazareth using the best methods of scientific, biblical criticism. In Funk's view the historical Jesus has been overlaid by Christian legend, myth, and metaphysics and thus scarcely resembled the Christ figure presented in the gospels and worshipped by the Church today. The goal of the Seminar is to strip away these layers and to recover the authentic Jesus who really lived and taught.

In so doing, Funk hopes to ignite a revolution which will bring to an end what he regards as an age of ignorance. He blasts the religious establishment for "not allowing the intelligence of high scholarship to pass through pastors and priests to a hungry laity." [1] He sees the Jesus Seminar as a means of disabusing laymen of the mythological figure they have been taught to worship and bringing them face to face with the real Jesus of history.

The degree to which the gospels have allegedly distorted the historical Jesus is evident in the edition of the gospels published by the Jesus Seminar. Called *The Five Gospels* because it includes the so-called Gospel of Thomas along with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, their version prints in red only those words of Jesus which the fellows of the Seminar determine to be authentic, actually spoken by Jesus. As it turns out, less than 20% of the sayings attributed to Jesus are printed in red.

The real, historical Jesus turns out to have been a sort of itinerant, social critic, the Jewish

equivalent of a Greek cynic philosopher. He never claimed to be the Son of God or to forgive sins or to inaugurate a new covenant between God and man. His crucifixion was an accident of history; his corpse was probably thrown into a shallow dirt grave where it rotted away or was eaten by wild dogs.

Now if these conclusions are correct, we who are Christians today are the victims of a massive delusion. To continue to worship Jesus today in light of these conclusions would be either idolatry or mythologyidolatry if you worship the merely human figure who actually lived, mythology if you worship the figment of the Church's imagination. Now I don't know about you, but I don't want to be either an idolater or a mythologizer. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to assess whether the claims of the Jesus Seminar are *true*.

Today, therefore, I want to talk about the presuppositions and pretensions of the Jesus Seminar.

#### Presuppositions of the Jesus Seminar

Let's talk first about presuppositions. What is a presupposition? A presupposition is an assumption you make prior to looking at the evidence. Presuppositions are crucial because they determine how you interpret the evidence. Let me give you an example. Did you hear about the man who thought he was dead? This guy firmly believed he was dead, even though he was a living, normally functioning human being. Well, his wife persuaded him to visit a psychiatrist, who tried in vain to convince him that he was in fact alive. Finally, the psychiatrist hit upon a plan. He showed the man medical reports and scientific evidence that dead men do not bleed. After thoroughly convincing the man that dead men do not bleed, the psychiatrist took out a pin and pricked the man's finger. When the man saw the drop of blood trickle down his finger, his eyes grew wide. "Ha!" he cried, "Dead men do bleed after all!"

The man's belief that he was dead was a presupposition that determined how he interpreted the evidence. He held so strongly to that presupposition that it skewed how he looked at the facts. Now in the same way, the Jesus Seminar has certain presuppositions which determine how they look at the evidence. Fortunately, the Jesus Seminar has made some of its presuppositions abundantly clear.

#### Naturalism

The number one presupposition of the Seminar is *antisupernaturalism* or more simply, *naturalism*. Naturalism is the view that every event in the world has a natural cause. There are no events with

supernatural causes. In other words, miracles cannot happen.

Now this presupposition constitutes an absolute watershed for the study of the gospels. If you presuppose naturalism, then things like the incarnation, the Virgin Birth, Jesus' miracles, and his resurrection go out the window before you even sit down at the table to look at the evidence. As supernatural events, they *cannot* be historical. But if you are at least open to supernaturalism, then these events can't be ruled out in advance. You have to be open to looking honestly at the evidence that they occurred. In fact, if you don't presuppose naturalism, then the gospels come out looking pretty good as historical sources for the life of Jesus.

R. T. France, a British New Testament scholar, has written,

At the level of their literary and historical character we have good reason to treat the Gospels seriously as a source of information on the life and teaching of Jesus.... Indeed many ancient historians would count themselves fortunate to have four such responsible accounts [as the Gospels], written within a generation or two of the events, and preserved in such a wealth of early manuscript evidence. Beyond that point, the decision to accept the record they offer is likely to be influenced more by openness to a supernaturalist world view than by strictly historical considerations. [2]

In other words, skepticism about the gospels is not based on history, but on the presupposition of naturalism.

And, in fact, the Jesus Seminar is remarkably candid about its presupposition of naturalism. The Introduction to *The Five Gospels* states:

The contemporary religious controversy turns on whether the world view reflected in the Bible can be carried forward into this scientific age and retained as an article of faith . . . the Christ of creed and dogma . . . can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope. [3]

But why, we might ask, is it impossible in a scientific age to believe in a supernatural Christ? After all, a good many scientists are Christian believers, and contemporary physics shows itself quite open to the possibility of realities which lie outside the domain of physics. What justification is there for antisupernaturalism?

Here things really get interesting. According to the Jesus Seminar, the historical Jesus *by definition* must be a nonsupernatural figure. Here they appeal to D. F. Strauss, the 19th century German

Biblical critic. Strauss's book *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* was based squarely in a philosophy of naturalism. According to Strauss, God does not act directly in the world; He acts only indirectly through natural causes. With regard to the resurrection, Strauss states that God's raising Jesus from the dead "is irreconcilable with enlightened ideas of the relation of God to the world." [4]

Now look carefully at what the Jesus Seminar says about Strauss:

Strauss distinguished what he called the 'mythical' (defined by him as anything legendary or supernatural) in the Gospels from the historical . . . . The choice Strauss posed in his assessment of the Gospels was between the supernatural Jesus the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus. [5]

Anything that is supernatural is *by definition* not historical. There's no argument given; it's just defined that way. Thus we have a radical divorce between the Christ of faith, or the supernatural Jesus, and the real, historical Jesus. Now the Jesus Seminar gives a ringing endorsement of Strauss's distinction: they say that the distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith is "the first pillar of scholarly wisdom." [6]

But now the whole quest of the historical Jesus becomes a charade. If you *begin* by presupposing naturalism, then of course what you wind up with is a purely natural Jesus! This reconstructed, naturalistic Jesus is not based on evidence, but on definition. What is amazing is that the Jesus Seminar makes no attempt to defend this naturalism; it is just presupposed. But this presupposition is wholly unjustified. As long as the existence of God is even possible, then we have to be open to the possibility that He has acted miraculously in the universe. Only if you have a proof for atheism can you be justified in thinking miracles are impossible.

This raises the very real question of whether the fellows of the Jesus Seminar even believe that God really exists. In a debate with John Dominic Crossan, the co-chairman of the Jesus Seminar, I raised this very question. Listen carefully how he responds:

**Craig:** This distinction between statements of faith and statements of fact that you make troubles me. I would like to know, for you, what about the statement that 'God exists'? Is that a statement of faith or fact?

**Crossan:** It's a statement of faith for all those who make it.

**Craig:** So on your view, then, factually speaking, it is not true that God exists.

**Crossan:** That would not be a nice way to put it. Let me put it this way to you. What I'm saying

here is to try to take faith seriously. Understand that Dr. Craig wants to equate faith and fact. There are people in the world who do not believe God exists. I understand that. I happen to think they're wrong, but that does not make it any less an act of faith. They are making an act of faith in something else. . . .

**Craig:** But if the existence of God is a statement of faith, not a statement of fact, that means that God's existence is simply an interpretive construct that a particular human mind—a believer—puts onto the universe. But in and of itself the universe is without such a being as God. That is, that's simply an interpretation that a believer puts on it. It seems to me that on a level of reality, independent of human consciousness, your worldview is actually atheistic and that religion is simply an interpretive framework that individual people put on the world, but none of these is factually, objectively true. . . .

**Crossan:** No, I would say what you're trying to do is imagine the world without us. Now unfortunately, I can't do that. If you were to ask me (which is just what you did) to abstract from faith how God would be if no human beings existed, that's like asking, me, 'Would I be annoyed if I hadn't been conceived?' I really don't know how to answer that question.

**Craig:** Sure you do!

**Crossan:** Wait a minute! We only know God as God has revealed God to us; that's all we could ever know in any religion.

**Craig:** During the Jurassic age, when there were no human beings, did God exist?

**Crossan:** Meaningless question.

**Craig:** But surely that's not a meaningless question. It's a factual question. Was there a Being who was the Creator and Sustainer of the universe during that period of time when no human beings existed? It seems to me on your view that you'd have to say, 'No.'

**Crossan:** Well, I would probably prefer to say 'No' because what you're doing is trying to put yourself in the position of God and ask, 'How is God apart from revelation? How is God apart from faith?' I don't know if you can do that. You can do it, I suppose, but I don't know if it really has any point. [7]

It seems pretty obvious that Dr. Crossan wouldn't even affirm that there really is a God who exists outside of the human imagination. Well, if God is just a projection of human consciousness, if there really isn't anybody out there, then of course it's impossible that God has acted supernaturally in

the world, as the gospels claim. So the first presupposition of the Jesus Seminar, a presupposition which they make no attempt to justify, is naturalism and maybe even atheism. Reject this presupposition and the whole construction collapses.

#### Primacy of the Apocryphal Gospels

Now if the historical Jesus is not the Jesus of the gospels, the supernatural Jesus, then how do sceptical scholars figure out who the historical Jesus really was? Well, that leads to the second presupposition which I wanted to discuss, namely, sceptical critics presuppose that our most primary sources for the life of Jesus are not the Gospels, but rather writings outside the New Testament, specifically the so-called apocryphal gospels. These are gospels forged under the apostles' names, like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Philip, and so forth. These extrabiblical writings are said to be the key to correctly reconstructing the historical Jesus.

Professor Luke Johnson, a distinguished New Testament scholar at Emory University, points out that all of the recent spate of books claiming to uncover the real Jesus follow the same, predictable pattern:

1. The book begins by trumpeting the scholarly credentials of the author and his prodigious research.
2. The author claims to offer some new, and maybe even suppressed, interpretation of who Jesus really was.
3. The truth about Jesus is said to be discovered by means of sources outside the Bible which enable us to read the Gospels in a new way which is at odds with their face value meaning.
4. This new interpretation is provocative and even titillating, for example, that Jesus married Mary Magdalene or was the leader of a hallucinogenic cult or a peasant cynic philosopher.
5. It is implied that traditional Christian beliefs are therefore undermined and need to be revised. [8]

If you hear of books following this familiar pattern, your critical antennae ought to automatically go up. You are about to be duped. For the fact is that there is no source outside the Bible which calls into question the portrait of Jesus painted in the gospels.

Let me take just a couple of examples which are favorite sources of the Jesus Seminar. First, the so-called Gospel of Thomas. The Jesus Seminar considers this such an important source that they

include it along with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in their edition of *The Five Gospels*.

Now what is the Gospel of Thomas? It is a writing which was discovered in Egypt just after World War II. It was part of a collection of Gnostic documents. Gnosticism was an ancient neareastern philosophy which held that the physical world is evil and the spiritual realm is good. Salvation comes through secret knowledge of the spiritual realm, which liberates the soul from its imprisonment in the physical world. The so-called Gospel of Thomas is shot through with Gnostic philosophy. It was no doubt part of the literature of a Gnostic Christian cult, much like New Age cults in our own day. Greek fragments of the Gospel of Thomas as old as AD 200 have been found, and most scholars would date the original to have been written in the latter half of the second century after Christ. One evidence of this fact is that the Gospel of Thomas uses vocabulary that comes from second century translations and harmonies of the four gospels.

Thus, the vast majority of scholars today regard the Gospel of Thomas as a derivative source from the second century after Christ which reflects the view of Christian gnosticism.

Incredibly, however, fellows of the Jesus Seminar regard the Gospel of Thomas as an early, primary source concerning Jesus and use it to revise the portrait of Jesus found in the Gospels. Now what reasons do they have for dating the Gospel of Thomas so early? Amazingly, their whole approach to this question is reasoning in a circle. It goes like this:

1. The Gospel of Thomas is an early, primary source.

“How do you know?”

2. Because no apocalyptic sayings are found in the Gospel of Thomas.

“Why is that evidence of an early date?”

3. This is evidence of an early date because Jesus wasn't into Apocalyptic.

“How do you know he wasn't?”

4. Because the Gospel of Thomas proves he wasn't.

“Why believe what the Gospel of Thomas says?”

1. The Gospel of Thomas is an early, primary source.

Thus, Howard Clark Kee of Boston University hails this procedure as "a triumph of circular reasoning!" [9] British New Testament scholar Thomas Wright says it's like Winnie the Pooh following his own tracks in the snow around a clump of trees and each time he sees more tracks

he takes this as evidence that his quarry is even more numerous and more real than he thought before! [10] No wonder that the fellows of the Jesus Seminar haven't been able to convince very many of their colleagues by means of arguments like this!

A second example is the so-called Gospel of Peter. Although this writing was condemned as spurious by early Church Fathers, the actual text was unknown to us until a copy was discovered in an Egyptian tomb in 1886. Like the Gospel of Thomas it bears the marks of Gnostic influence and uses uniquely second-century vocabulary, so that scholars unanimously regard it as a second-century writing.

Nevertheless, John Dominic Crossan, the Jesus Seminar's cochairman, bases his entire reconstruction of Jesus' death and burial on his claim that the Gospel of Peter actually contains the oldest primary source about Jesus and that the four gospels are all based on it. Therefore, he says, the gospels have no historical value because they have no source of information about Jesus' death other than the account in the Gospel of Peter. Even though the Gospel of Peter itself does describe Jesus' resurrection, Crossan's naturalism prevents him from believing in that event. But with the biblical gospels out of the way, Crossan can claim that the Gospel of Peter is just legendary and that there is no confirming testimony to Jesus' resurrection.

One of the strangest aspects of Crossan's reasoning is that he seems to have completely forgotten about the Apostle Paul. Even if Crossan were right about the Gospel of Peter's being primary, its testimony would still be independently confirmed by the writings of Paul, who refers to Jesus' burial and even lists the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection appearances. Thus, even if the account of the resurrection in the Gospel of Peter were foundational to the four gospels, there's no historical reason to deny the resurrection.

But in fact Crossan's theory about the primacy of the Gospel of Peter's account is virtually universally rejected by New Testament scholars. The prominent Canadian scholar Ben Meyer has called Crossan's arguments "eccentric and implausible." [11] Even Harvard University's Helmut Koester rejects Crossan's reasoning as "seriously flawed." [12] There are no signs of literary dependence of the four gospels on the account in the Gospel of Peter. The obvious conclusion is that the Gospel of Peter is based on the four gospels, not the other way around. Thomas Wright sums up by stating that Crossan's hypothesis "has not been accepted yet by any other serious scholar" and the date and origin suggested by Crossan "are purely imaginary." [13]

What I've said about the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter could be said about all the

other apocryphal gospels as well. According to John Meier, a prominent American New Testament critic, the idea that the apocryphal gospels offer us new information about Jesus is "largely fantasy." [14] The fact is that these writings are later, derivative writings shaped by the theology of the second century and later. What this means, in the words of Professor Johnson, is that despite all the hoopla, "The writings of the New Testament remain our best historical witnesses" to the life of Jesus. [15]

### Politically Correct Religion

The third presupposition of the Jesus Seminar is that religion in general and Jesus in particular must be politically correct. In our day of religious relativism and pluralism it is politically incorrect to claim that one religion is absolutely true. All religions have to be equally valid ways to God. But if you insist on being politically correct, then somehow you've got to get Jesus out of the way. For his radical, personal claims to be the unique Son of God, the absolute revelation of God the Father, the sole mediator between God and man, are frankly embarrassing and offensive to the politically correct mindset. The Jesus of the gospels is not politically correct!

The desire to have a politically correct religion and in particular a politically correct Jesus skews the historical judgement of the Jesus Seminar. They dismiss as unhistorical any aspect of Jesus which they find to be politically incorrect. Historical judgments are thus being made, not on the basis of the evidence, but on the basis of political correctness.

Nowhere is this procedure more evident than in the work of Marcus Borg, one of the Seminar's more celebrated members. As a teenager Borg lost his faith in God, Christ, and the Bible. But a few years after graduating from seminary, he had a number of mystical experiences which gave him a new concept of God. He says, "I realized that *God* does not refer to a supernatural being 'out there' . . . . Rather *God* refers to the sacred at the center of existence, the holy mystery that is all around and within us." [16] Now if you intone these words the right way, they might sound very meaningful and profound. But really this is pretty thin soup as an understanding of God. What does Borg mean when he says, "God is more than everything and yet everything is in God"? [17]

At any rate, Borg then reinterprets Jesus in light of his own mystical experiences. Jesus becomes a crosscultural religious mystic. If we imagine Jesus in this way, says Borg, it "undermines a widespread Christian belief that Jesus is unique, which is commonly linked to the notion that Christianity is exclusively true and that 'Jesus is the only way.'" [18] Here it seems very obvious that Borg's desire to have a politically correct religion determines his reconstruction of the historical

Jesus. As Douglas Geivett points out, Borg's rejection of the traditional picture of Jesus has "less to do with historical research about Jesus and more to do with Borg's own beliefs about God." [19]

The result of allowing political correctness to dictate what is and is not historical is that you wind up creating an anachronism: a politically correct, late twentieth century Jesus who is just a reflection of yourself. Thus, Borg's Jesus turns out to be a social liberal, driven by a "politics of compassion" to champion the rights of women and the poor against an oppressive social establishment. Jesus' ethos of compassion, says Borg, also implies the advocacy of gay rights and the provision of universal health care now! It's hard to disagree with Howard Kee's verdict: the fellows of the Jesus Seminar have succumbed to the temptation to create Jesus in their own image. [20] They have looked down the long well of history and seen their own faces reflected at the bottom. [21]

In summary, the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar are based, not so much on evidence, as on the presuppositions of naturalism, the primacy of the apocryphal gospels, and politically correct religion. There is no justification for any of these presuppositions. Reject them and their whole reconstructed Jesus collapses in ruin.

#### Pretensions of the Jesus Seminar

Now at this point, you might be asking yourself how in the world New Testament scholarship could be based on such flimsy underpinnings as these. Well, in fact it's not. That leads me to my second main point: the pretensions of the Jesus Seminar.

The Jesus Seminar portrays itself to the media as *the* representative voice of New Testament scholarship today, going over the heads of the clergy to tell unsuspecting laymen, who have been duped by the Church, what Jesus was *really* like. They claim some 200 participants in the Seminar, who are supposed to be the embodiment of a scholarly approach to the New Testament. Just one evidence of this pretension is that they have named their translation of the gospels "The Scholar's Version" as though the teams of linguists and experts who produced such translations as the RSV, NEB, or NIV were not scholars! They are very anxious to portray themselves as disinterested historians, not theologians. This is the media image of the Jesus Seminar: a large body of objective historians, representative scholars, speaking the unbiased truth. These are the pretensions. What is the reality?

Well, the reality turns out to be much different. Their claim to have 200 scholars in the Seminar is grossly inflated: that figure includes anybody who in any way was involved in the Seminar's activities, such as being on a mailing list. The real number of regular participants is only about 40.

And what about the scholarly credentials of the members? Of the 74 listed in their publication *The Five Gospels*, only 14 would be leading figures in the field of New Testament studies. More than half are basically unknowns, who have published only two or three articles. Eighteen of the fellows have published nothing at all in New Testament studies! Most have relatively undistinguished academic positions, for example, teaching at a community college. According to Johnson, "The numbers alone suggest that any claim to represent 'scholarship' or the 'academy' is ludicrous." [22]

Indeed, it is the Seminar's claim to represent the consensus of scholarship that has really burned New Testament scholars. And I want to emphasize I'm not talking about the reactions of conservatives or evangelicals: I'm talking about the broad spectrum of New Testament scholars. For example, Howard Kee denounces the Jesus Seminar as "an academic disgrace," and says that its conclusions are "prejudicial" and "peripheral," not "a substantive development in responsible scholarly study of the historical Jesus." [23]

According to Johnson, the real agenda of the Jesus Seminar is not academic, but social. He states,

The agenda of the Seminar is not disinterested scholarship, but a social mission against the way the church is dominated by evangelical theology that is, a theology focused on the literal truth of the Gospels. It is important to note from the start that Robert Funk does not conceive of the Seminar's work as making a contribution to scholarship but as carrying out a cultural mission. The Seminar's declared enemies are not simply fundamentalists or the Southern Baptist Convention, but all those who subscribe to any traditional understanding of Jesus as Risen Lord and Son of God. [24]

It is this sociocultural agenda that determines in advance the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar. Far from representing the consensus of New Testament scholarship, the Seminar actually represents the views of a radical minority of the leftwing fringe of Biblical scholarship. No wonder Jacob Neusner, one of the most prominent Jewish theologians of our day, has said that the Jesus Seminar is either the greatest scholarly hoax since the Piltdown Man or else represents the bankruptcy of New Testament studies! [25]

## Conclusion

Fortunately, the main stream of New Testament scholarship has been moving in a much different direction than the leftwing fringe represented by the Jesus Seminar. Gone are the days when Jesus was treated like a figure in Greek and Roman mythology. Gone are the days when his

miracles were dismissed as fairy tales based on stories of mythological heroes. Gone are the days when his empty tomb and resurrection appearances were written off as legends or hallucinations. Today it is widely agreed that the gospels are valuable historical sources for the life of Jesus and that the proper context for understanding the gospels is not mythology, but Palestinian Judaism. It is widely agreed that the historical Jesus stood and spoke in the place of God Himself, proclaimed the advent of the Kingdom of God, and carried out a ministry of miracleworking and exorcisms as signs of that Kingdom. I find it tremendously gratifying to see that the movement of New Testament scholarship as a whole is in the direction of confirming the traditional understanding of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels. In particular, my own research concerning Jesus' resurrection has convinced me more than ever that this was a historical event, verifiable by the evidence. The Christian can be confident that the historical foundations of his faith stand secure. You can bet your life on it.

#### **Footnotes:**

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