

The Corrected Jesus

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The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus. Edited by Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar. Macmillan. 576 pp. \$30.

The message left on my answering machine by my brother-in-law, an attorney, sounded a tone of skeptical cross-examination: "I heard on my car radio today an interview with a New Testament scholar named Robert Funk. He's publishing a new version of the gospels that claims to distinguish what Jesus *really* said from what the gospel writers reported. Funk says it's based on the work of a group of leading Bible scholars. Are you involved in this? How can they claim to know what Jesus really said or didn't say? I have enough trouble proving in a court of law what somebody said six months ago! Should I take this book seriously?"

I

Indeed, a new book called *The Five Gospels*-the fruit of the labors of the much-publicized "Jesus Seminar"-claims to provide definitive new answers to the question, "What did Jesus really say?" A panel of New Testament scholars, meeting over a period of several years, has given us a new red-letter edition of the four canonical gospels plus the Gospel of Thomas, with the words adjudged by a poll of these scholars actually to have been spoken by Jesus printed in red type. Other colors reflect their shadings of judgment about the historical reliability of the other sayings attributed to Jesus: pink for possibly authentic, gray for probably inauthentic, and black for certainly inauthentic. The introduction to the book suggests breezily that an "unofficial but helpful interpretation of the colors" would be as follows:

Red: That's Jesus! Pink: Sure sounds like Jesus. Gray: Well, maybe. Black: There's been some mistake. The results are offered up in a fresh translation-dubbed the "Scholars Version"-that seeks to "produce in the American reader an experience comparable to that of the first readers" by approximating "the common street language of the original."

The grandiose dedication page of *The Five Gospels* invokes the names of three historic figures who hover as presiding genii over this ambitious work:

This report is dedicated to GALILEO GALILEI who altered our view of the heavens forever
THOMAS JEFFERSON who took scissors and paste to the gospels DAVID FRIEDRICH
STRAUSS who pioneered the quest of the historical Jesus

Unnamed, however, is the one figure who might most appropriately symbolize the public face of this project: P. T. Barnum. The co-chairmen of the Jesus Seminar, Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan,

have demonstrated an ingenuity for promotion that would surely have warmed the heart of that master American showman.

For the past seven years, the popular press has from time to time published eye-catching progress reports on the work of the Jesus seminar under headlines such as "Most of Jesus' words ghostwritten," "Jesus probably didn't recite Lord's Prayer, scholars say," "Is the Bible the gospel truth?" and "Scholars compiling new Bible." And much humorous controversy has surrounded the Seminar's practice of voting on the authenticity of individual Jesus-sayings by casting colored balls into a box. The publication of *The Five Gospels* was heralded by a feature story on National Public Radio (the broadcast heard by my brother-in-law), and the charismatic Crossan has broken through to a mass audience by appearing on "The Larry King Show." Such publicity has been actively courted by members of the Seminar, who have from the beginning of their work explicitly aimed to disseminate their results as widely as possible in the public media.

Of course, the knack for attracting popular attention is not necessarily to be despised. If indeed there were significant new findings, broadly accepted by leading New Testament scholars, concerning the historical facts about what Jesus taught, such findings would indeed be newsworthy. The basic questions to be asked about this project, therefore, concern not the Seminar's voting procedures or means of communicating its findings but rather the substance of its claims. What methods have been used to produce the results here proffered? What image of the historical Jesus emerges from these multicolored pages? (Actually, the pages are mostly black: more on this below.) To what extent are these methods and results genuinely representative of informed scholarly consensus? For reasons that I shall summarize briefly here, I must conclude that the operative methodology of the Seminar is seriously flawed, that it therefore inevitably produces a skewed portrait of Jesus' teachings, and that—contrary to the impression fostered by the book—the findings reported here represent the idiosyncratic opinions of one particular faction of critical scholars.

The aims of the Jesus Seminar are generally consonant with the work of historical scholarship since the Enlightenment: the participants seek to reconstruct the history of earliest Christianity. This project entails a critical interrogation of the gospels as source documents, distinguishing, insofar as possible, the various streams of tradition and interpretation that underlie the canonical texts. The quest of "the historical Jesus"—as distinct from the Church's subsequent representations of him—has engaged the efforts of New Testament scholars for the better part of two hundred years. Scholars have published hundreds of monographs on this subject, and every student who has taken a New Testament course in a college or seminary has been exposed to the complex problem of recovering a clear picture of the Jesus of history. Thus it is somewhat disingenuous for the editors of *The Five Gospels* to assert that the publication of this volume "represents a dramatic exit from windowless studies and the beginning of a new venture for gospel scholarship." The only new angle here is the decision to publish a complete edition of the gospels that seeks to represent schematically a scholarly consensus about the authenticity of each individual sentence attributed to Jesus. In theory, the project could produce an interesting freeze-frame shot of the status of gospel scholarship near the end of the twentieth century: not exactly the epoch-making scientific breakthrough of a Galileo, but a modestly worthwhile survey of opinion.

The difficulty arises, however, in the execution of the plan. The participants in this poll were those who chose to take part over a span of eight years in a seminar sponsored, not by one of the major scholarly societies such as the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* or the Society of Biblical Literature, but by Funk's maverick entrepreneurial venture, the Westar Institute, located in Sonoma, California. This self-selected group, though it includes several fine scholars, does not represent a balanced cross-section of scholarly opinion. Furthermore, the criteria for judgment that are employed in *The Five Gospels* are highly questionable.

II

For the sake of brevity, I shall note just four ways in which the methodology of the project is problematic.

First, there is the problem of the selection and dating of sources. The members of the Seminar determined—quite properly—that sayings attested in the earliest extant sources have the greatest claim to authenticity. But what are these earliest sources? The Jesus Seminar adopts the standard two-source theory as a solution to the synoptic problem: Mark is the earliest of the three synoptic gospels; in composing their gospels, Matthew and Luke used Mark along with a hypothetical common source Q (short for the German *Quelle*: "source"), consisting primarily of sayings of Jesus. One would think, then, that this analysis ought to put the two synoptic sources, Mark and Q, on roughly equal footing as sources for authentic Jesus material. However, the Jesus Seminar dates the Q material earlier than the traditions found in Mark, during the period 50-70 a.d. Mark, dated around 70 a.d., in fact fares poorly in the Seminar's judgment as a source for Jesus-sayings. Only one sentence in this entire gospel receives the red-letter treatment: "Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and God what belongs to God" (Mark 12:17).

On the other hand, the extracanonical Gospel of Thomas is dated—for reasons never explained in the book—to the same early period as Q. This extraordinarily early dating of Thomas, along with the judgment that it is literarily independent of the synoptic tradition, becomes a crucial factor in the Jesus Seminar's weighting of evidence:

The first written gospels were Sayings Gospel Q and *possibly an early version* of the Gospel of Thomas. The Gospel of Mark was not composed until about 70 a.d. For these reasons alone, it is understandable that double attestation in the early independent sources Thomas and Q constitutes strong *documentary* evidence [emphasis added].

This valuing of Thomas as an early and independent source is, however, a highly controversial claim. The traditional opinion among New Testament scholars has been that the Gospel of Thomas—a text known to us through a fourth-century Coptic text discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt—was composed in the second century, perhaps containing some independent tradition but heavily shaped by Gnostic teachings. Many scholars regard it as literarily dependent on the canonical gospels, though this remains a debated issue. No hint of these debates, however, is allowed to appear in the pages of *The Five Gospels*, which unhesitatingly treats the hypothetical Q and a hypothetical "early version of Thomas" as the crucial sources for locating authentic Jesus tradition. Here some suspicion begins to arise concerning the candor of the editors of this book. They claim that they want to make the results of the best critical scholarship available to the public, but their working method trades upon a controversial and implausible early dating of Thomas, without offering the reader any clue that this is a shaky element in their methodological foundation.

The second major methodological issue is the Seminar's use of the criterion of dissimilarity for assessing the authenticity of Jesus tradition. This criterion posits that sayings material may be judged certainly authentic only when it is *dissimilar* both to antecedent Jewish tradition and to subsequent Christian tradition. Thus it is argued, for example, that Jesus probably did not say at his final meal with his disciples, "Have some, this is my body" [*sic*] (Mark 14:22). Why? Because the Church's liturgical tradition reports that he did; therefore, we cannot be sure that this saying was not read back into the story. On the other hand, Jesus almost certainly said, "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44a). Why? Because it allegedly "cuts against the social grain" of Judaism—and presumably it isn't anything the early Church would have invented, either.

The strict application of the criterion of dissimilarity has two immediately evident results. First, almost all the material in the Gospels is excluded as being either too Jewish or too Christian; this criterion is largely responsible for the fact that "82 percent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the gospels were not actually spoken by him, according to the Jesus Seminar." (If one counts the possibly authentic sayings printed in pink type, the percentage of inauthentic material is significantly reduced.) Indeed, one is surprised that 18 percent remains untouched by this criterion, and one suspects that a more rigorous application could eliminate even more. For instance, the early Church *did* teach love of enemies in a way that reflects direct dependence upon the Old Testament rather than upon Jesus (cf. Romans 12:20-21, quoting Proverbs 25:21). Perhaps the Jesus Seminar was not sufficiently "critical" at this point. The second consequence is that the "Jesus" who emerges from this procedure is necessarily a free-floating iconoclast, artificially isolated from his people and their Scripture, and artificially isolated from the movement that he founded.

As Nils Dahl rightly observed more than forty years ago, the criterion of dissimilarity must be applied in order to identify "a critically assured minimum," which must then be supplemented by other criteria and evidence. Indeed, Jesus becomes comprehensible *precisely as a historical figure* only when he is placed in historical continuity with first-century Judaism and with emergent Christianity. As Dahl insisted,

In no case can any distinct separation be achieved between the genuine words of Jesus and the constructions of the community. We do not escape the fact that we know Jesus only as the disciples remembered him. Whoever thinks that the disciples completely misunderstood their Master or even consciously falsified his picture may give fantasy free reign.

The work of the Jesus Seminar exemplifies the fantasy that Dahl prophesied.

The third major methodological problem, closely related to the second, is the Jesus Seminar's tendentious insistence on finding a "non- eschatological Jesus." The members assert repeatedly that Jesus did not proclaim a message of God's future intervention in history and final judgment. Instead,

God was so real for him that he could not distinguish God's present activity from any future activity. He had a poetic sense of time in which the future and the present merged, simply melted together, in the intensity of his vision. But Jesus' uncommon views were obfuscated by the more pedestrian conceptions of John [the Baptist], on the one side, and by the equally pedestrian views of the early Christian community, on the other.

Jesus' "poetic sense of time" was lost on the disciples, however: "Jesus' followers did not grasp the subtleties of his position and reverted, once Jesus was not there to remind them, to the view they had learned from John the Baptist." Consequently, according to the Seminar, nearly all the earliest Christian writings are infected by an eschatological perspective-including Q (thus the apocalyptic material in Q must be assigned to "late Q"!). But now, at last, the Jesus Seminar has come along to rescue "traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth- traces that cry out for recognition and liberation from the firm grip of those whose faith overpowered their memories."

This must be deemed a "methodological problem" because the Jesus Seminar employs its conviction that Jesus was a non-eschatological thinker as a stringent criterion for sorting the authenticity of the sayings material. Everything in the gospels that smacks of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology is firmly consigned to black type. A "cameo essay" explains the reasons for this decision roughly as follows: the gospels contain sayings proclaiming God's rule as both present and future; Jesus could not have said both things; the future eschatology appears "bombastic and threatening"; therefore, Jesus must have spoken of God's rule only as present reality. This is confirmed by the fact that the major parables of Jesus "do not reflect an apocalyptic view of history." This bizarre claim can be supported only by screening the parables critically in such a way that their obviously apocalyptic elements are judged inauthentic. For example, one of the "major parables" said to illustrate Jesus' non- apocalyptic view of history is the parable of the corrupt judge (Luke 18:1-8). The Jesus Seminar deems vv. 2-5 to be possibly authentic (pink) but vv. 6-8 to be inauthentic (black). Why? Because the latter verses speak of God's eschatological vindication of his elect and of the future coming of the Son of Man; therefore, they must have been composed by Luke. The same sort of circular reasoning is applied to pericope after pericope in the gospels to exclude future eschatology from Jesus' teaching.

In contrast to this arbitrary procedure, consider the following statement of the mainstream critical consensus by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, a scholar who can hardly be accused of traditionalist bias: "Exegetes agree that it is the mark of Jesus' preaching and ministry that he proclaimed the *basileia* of God as future and present, eschatological vision and experiential reality." Characteristic of early Christian preaching is its *proleptic* eschatology, its conviction that God's coming kingdom has already begun to impinge upon the present in such a way that God's final justice is prefigured-but hardly fully realized-now. (For an elegant extended example, see Romans 8.) The gospel tradition offers us strong reasons to believe, as Schussler Fiorenza indicates, that a similar proleptic eschatology characterized Jesus' own proclamation.

Only flat-footed rationalists could deem it impossible for both the present and future Kingdom sayings to be held in Jesus' mind at the same time.

Finally, the attempt to assess the authenticity of Jesus' *sayings* in isolation from a more comprehensive reconstruction of the events of his life, ministry, and death is methodologically problematic. The Jesus constructed by the Jesus Seminar is a talking head, whose teachings bear no intelligible relation to his death on a cross. If Jesus said only the sorts of things judged authentic by the Seminar, it is very difficult to see how he could have been mistaken by Jewish and Roman authorities as a messianic pretender who needed to be executed. Again, Dahl made the point clearly:

One point in the life of Jesus is unconditionally established: his death. A historically tenable description of the life of Jesus would be possible only in the form of a description of his death, its historical presuppositions, and the events preceding and following it.

More recently, E. P. Sanders' important book *Jesus and Judaism* takes a methodological path similar to that which Dahl had recommended, building its account of Jesus upon the events and actions of Jesus' career that can be most securely ascertained, rather than upon the tradition of his sayings, insisting that "a good hypothesis about Jesus' intention and his relationship with his contemporaries . . . should offer a connection between his activity and his death." The result is a Jesus whose central concern was the hope of God's eschatological restoration of Israel—a theme that is emphatically consigned to black type in *The Five Gospels*. Indeed, though *Jesus and Judaism* was published in the year that the Seminar began its work (1985), the Seminar inexplicably ignores Sanders' methods and conclusions.

By contrast, rather than setting the sayings in a narrative context of historical events, the Jesus Seminar sees them as fragmentary materials mediated by oral tradition that—by its account—retains only short, memorable aphorisms and parables, floating free from association with any particular historical event. Allegedly, then, we can recover an approximation of "what Jesus really said" by applying general laws of oral transmission to strip away accretions and modifications. One wonders whether the Seminar adopts too sanguine a view of its ability to work backwards from texts written down many years later to restore Jesus' pristine oral teachings.

In any case, the Seminar's concentration on Jesus' *words* as the primary evidence for historical knowledge about him is a late-blooming legacy of the otherwise defunct "New Quest of the Historical Jesus," a spinoff of Bultmannian existentialist theology that was briefly fashionable in the 1960s. The New Quest—some of whose original practitioners are among the members of the Jesus Seminar—sought to recover from Jesus' sayings and parables his "understanding of existence," detached from any particular claims about his life and actions. By drawing heavily upon the Gospel of Thomas and by packaging its results in a more user-friendly format than the abstruse hermeneutical musings of the "New Quest," the Seminar has updated this approach.

Whether it has thereby discovered anything that ought to be classified as historical knowledge is exceedingly doubtful. What the members of the Jesus Seminar have done, in effect, is merely to offer us an anthology of their favorite Jesus-sayings. In this respect, as in several others, they do indeed follow the spiritual and intellectual example of Thomas Jefferson, who—though he declared himself a "Materialist" in contrast to the "Spiritualism" of Jesus—undertook the task of producing an expurgated edition of "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels":

Among the sayings and discourses imputed to Him by His biographers, I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality, and of the most lovely benevolence; and others, again, of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism, and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same Being. I separate, therefore, the gold from the dross; restore to Him the former, and leave the latter to the stupidity of some, and roguery of others, of His disciples.

How did Jefferson distinguish between the sublime teachings of Jesus and the inventions of "the groveling authors" who wrote the gospels? "The difference is obvious to the eye and to the understanding," for the authentic words of Jesus stand out from their setting in the gospels like "diamonds in a dunghill." For the Jesus Seminar, as for Jefferson, an a priori construal of Jesus and his message governs the critical judgment made about individual sayings. N. T. Wright accurately sizes up the Seminar's modus operandi:

What is afoot . . . is not the detailed objective study of individual passages, leading up to a new view of Jesus and the early Church. *It is a particular view of Jesus and the early Church, working its way through into a detailed list of sayings that fit with this view.*

As Wright observes, this is not necessarily a bad thing: any attempt at reconstructing the historical Jesus must operate with some general hypothesis that can be tested against the evidence: nothing is gained by "pseudo-atomistic work on apparently isolated fragments." The difficulty with the work of the Jesus Seminar, however, even more than with Jefferson's scissors-and-paste job, is that so much of the evidence must be thrown away in order to save the hypothesis.

What portrait of Jesus emerges finally from the work of the Seminar? As we are repeatedly told, "He was a traveling sage who traded in wisdom." The description pegs him-as some of the Seminar members have argued in other publications-as an itinerant Cynic philosopher, rather than as a prophet or the leader of a religious reform movement. He was a "laconic sage" who never initiated debates or controversies: "He is passive until a question is put to him, or until he or his disciples are criticized." When he did speak, he spoke in parables and aphorisms, employing "exaggeration, humor, and paradox." He shocked his contemporaries by calling for a reversal of roles and overturning people's ordinary expectations. He never spoke about himself, however, or claimed to play any distinctive role in the consummation of God's purposes. Certainly he never claimed to be the Messiah.

Some of the elements of this portrait are, of course, familiar from the canonical portrayals. The distortion lies more in what is denied than in what is affirmed. The depiction of Jesus as a Cynic philosopher with no concern about Israel's destiny, no connection with the concerns and hopes that animated his Jewish contemporaries, no interest in the interpretation of Scripture, and no message of God's coming eschatological judgment is-quite simply-an ahistorical fiction, achieved by the surgical removal of Jesus from his Jewish context. The fabrication of a non-Jewish Jesus is one particularly pernicious side effect of the Jesus Seminar's methodology. One would have thought that the tragic events of our century might have warned us to be wary of biblical scholars who deny the Jewishness of Jesus.

III

Who are the scholars that make up the membership of the Jesus Seminar? The group's publicity creates the impression that they represent a broad cross-section of this country's leading critical scholars. It is asserted that "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." Though the Seminar expects to encounter hostile criticism, its work is said to be under attack principally "by conservative Christian groups" and by "those who lack academic credentials." The casual reader of the introduction to *The Five Gospels* might suppose that no serious New Testament scholar would differ materially from the consensus represented by this book, were it not for the single telltale polemical reference to anonymous "elitist academic critics who deplored the public face of the seminar." In fact- let it be said clearly-most professional biblical scholars are profoundly skeptical of the methods and conclusions of this academic splinter group. The membership of the Jesus Seminar does not include the overwhelming majority of the New Testament scholars who teach at the major graduate institutions in the United States. This may be verified by a check of the roster of seventy-four Fellows of the Seminar provided as an appendix. Not one member of the New Testament faculty from Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Duke, University of Chicago, Union Theological Seminary, Vanderbilt, SMU, or Catholic University is involved in this project. It probably goes without saying that the faculties of evangelical seminaries are not represented here. Nor are any major scholars from England or the Continent.

This is not to say that the Seminar participants are without credentials. They hold doctorates from reputable institutions, with Claremont and Harvard being the most heavily represented, in that order. The point is simply that this imaginative book has been produced by a self-selected body of scholars who hold a set of unconventional views about Jesus and the gospels. They are of course free to publish these views; however, their attempt to present these views as "the assured results of critical scholarship" is-one must say it-reprehensible deception.

The Seminar's disingenuous self-representation stands in service of a larger agenda: the deliberate creation of a new gospel. *The Five Gospels* is the realization of a vision clearly articulated by Funk in his keynote address at the opening meeting of the Jesus Seminar in 1985, subsequently published in *Forum*, the Westar Institute's journal. "The religious establishment has not allowed the intelligence of high scholarship to pass through pastors and priests to a hungry laity," and television preachers have "played on the ignorance of the uninformed." Thus, the Jesus Seminar rides to the rescue: "Our work . . . will spell liberty for . . . millions." Funk opines that "we are having increasing difficulty these days in accepting the biblical account of the creation and of the apocalyptic conclusion in anything like a literal sense." For him, the Bible's story of the world's history and destiny is a narrative fiction that has lost its credibility and usefulness in late modernity. It is not only the mythic beginning and ending of the Bible that have become problematic, however, but also the "hypothetical middle-Jesus of Nazareth." After all, as we are informed in *The Five Gospels*, "the Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope. . . . Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo have dismantled the mythical abodes of the gods and bequeathed us secular heavens."

To put the matter bluntly, we are having as much trouble with the middle-the messiah-as we are with the terminal points. What we need is a new fiction that takes as its starting point the central event in the Judeo-Christian drama and reconciles that middle with a new story that reaches beyond old beginnings and endings. In sum, we need a new narrative of Jesus, a new gospel, if you will, that places Jesus differently in the grand scheme, the epic story.

In the work of the Jesus Seminar, Funk's desideratum has been achieved: a new gospel that disposes of the embarrassments of apocalyptic ends. The pathos-or bathos-of the project resides in the incongruity between Funk's epic pretensions and the actual findings of the Seminar. Does the passive, politically correct, laconic sage who speaks in the red type of *The Five Gospels* have the capacity to remake our imaginative world and provide a new fiction within which millions might find meaning for their lives? Surely not.

But even if the grand design of liberating millions through a new gospel should fail to pan out, Funk also has a more modest and realistic aim: "If we are to survive as scholars of the humanities, as well as theologians, we must quit the academic closet. And we must begin to sell a product that has some utilitarian value to someone-or which at least appears to have utilitarian value to someone." Presumably, in the commercial realm, *The Five Gospels* will fulfill this hope. This likelihood is immeasurably enhanced by the fact that one of the "Fellows" of the Jesus Seminar is moviemaker Paul Verhoeven (*Robocop*, *Basic Instinct*), who reportedly plans to turn the Seminar's findings into a Hollywood screenplay.

Funk's concern for the appearance of utilitarian value perhaps explains the peculiar way in which *The Five Gospels* deploys the rhetoric of empiricism ("empirical, factual evidence," "independent, neutral observers"), despite Funk's own earlier avowal that "our fictions, though deliberately fictive, are nevertheless not subject to proof or falsification." If indeed, as Funk suggests, "we need a fiction that we recognize to be fictive," the present volume is an odd way of filling the prescription. *The Five Gospels* purports to offer precisely the opposite: a factual Jesus discovered by scientific methods and disentangled from the fictive Jesus rendered in the gospel narratives. Truth in advertising would be served if Funk's 1985 essay were published in place of the book's present introduction.

So, when I return my brother-in-law's phone call, here is what I shall say: No, the case argued by this book would not stand up in any court. The critical study of the historical Jesus is an important task-perhaps important for reasons theological as well as historical-but *The Five Gospels* does not advance that task significantly, nor does it represent a fair picture of the current state of research on this problem. Some of its

purported revelations are old news, and many of its novel claims are at best dubious. No, I was not involved in the project, nor were any of my colleagues at Yale and Duke, all of whom share my view that the Jesus Seminar is methodologically misguided. Should you take it seriously? Only if you want to compare its findings to other scholarly reconstructions of Jesus of Nazareth. If you are interested in the problem, there are at least a dozen other books I would recommend in preference to this one. But their authors are less likely to be interviewed on the radio: no scandalous sound bites.

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