

The Jesus Seminar and the Public: Another Take

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August, 2003

The Seminar has a rather minimal Jesus that many critics do not see as a genuine reflection of the historical Jesus. This is why the Seminar did not catch on with many scholars in historical Jesus studies.

Robert Miller's piece on the Jesus Seminar is a revealing glimpse of how someone from inside the Seminar sees the Seminar's work. Two goals of the Seminar are primary for him: (1) to find out what critical historiography can say about the historical Jesus, and (2) to communicate responsibly the results of our scholarly work to the public. He says that the Seminar's commitment to "full public disclosure" set, in effect, a new standard for candor among scholars addressing these issues in a public forum. My essay will assess whether such candor actually helps us get to the historical Jesus and whether the effort of the Seminar can be regarded as a meaningful contribution to the debate about what Jesus did and said. I will say this much for the Seminar. They were very "up front" about their goals and desires. But such aims in themselves do not mean that a significant contribution to scholarly discussion has taken place, no matter how honest or sincere the effort has been in aiming at its target.

Matters of Agreement (and the Need to Nuance)

It might be well to note what is agreed upon by many New Testament people who work in the historical Jesus field while telling you a few things Miller did not note about the Seminar's results and utilization of such ideas.

First in the gospels there is a mixture of exactly what Jesus said and of summaries of what Jesus said as worded by the church or the evangelists. What makes this even more difficult to treat when discussing the historical Jesus is that one need not quote a figure to portray accurately what they taught or did. This kind of complex historiographical issue is not really noted in Miller's piece. Today, with our access to video and audio recording, all of this historical record keeping is more straightforward for us. However, in the ancient world the use of summary to work with the gist of someone's teaching was common place, since there was no Memorex or VHS tape. When one considers the red-pink-grey-black voting scale that the Seminar used, it could well be said that three of the four colors represent the historical Jesus at least to a degree. Three levels of saying could well puts us in touch with him. Miller's suggestion toward the end of his article that what we have is a mix of "fact and fiction" oversimplifies and obscures the difficulties involved in making such judgments about sayings material constructed in this manner. Even a color coding is not the best of indicators of what could be happening. What Miller also did not tell you is that about 50% of the Seminar's votes ended up in black. This means that over half the tradition has no contact with Jesus at all. It was this highly skeptical result that many critical scholars, not just conservative scholars, challenged. Many historical Jesus people question if the tradition was passed on so freely with regard to its historical roots.

Second, there is agreement that the earliest level of this tradition was oral. However, what Miller did not indicate is how it is debated in the scholarly community how this oral material was passed on and moved into its more written form. Some argue that a Jewish context of a "culture of memory" is at work with this tradition, keeping it focused on the gist of what Jesus said as it was passed on. This meant it was not so

subject to creative tendencies as the Seminar believes. In this view, such care with the oral tradition would not result in a 50% attrition of historical connection.

These two points raise the issue of how one assesses historicity in the gospel accounts. It is not simply a matter of finding Jesus' words to find Jesus. A reporter can say President Bush said today and quote him or say President Bush said today and summarize him and give us historical information of equal value. The public needs to be made aware of this dimension of the discussion about Jesus as well.

Third, there is nothing wrong with bringing to bear evidence that any potential source like the Gospel of Thomas may provide about Jesus. Miller discusses the debate over the use of the Gospel of Thomas and suggests that the use of Thomas made the results of the Seminar more conservative and that all scholars accept the fact that Thomas is an "early and independent" witness. Here is what Miller did not tell you. The reason many scholars objected to the way the Seminar used Thomas was not because it was an extra-biblical witness as his article suggests, but that Thomas was viewed as too early in the Seminar's scheme. When Thomas or its traditions are placed next to the Q source as the oldest layer of tradition, this exaggerates its importance in the tradition chain. The effect of this was not only to exaggerate the role of Thomas but to suggest that a certain form and kind of material was the earliest preserved oral material, namely short pithy sayings of Jesus that would be memorable. Now this use of Thomas was objected to because Thomas is seen by most to be an early second century source, not a first century source. It also was objected to because in Judaism oral material of some length was also committed to memory, not just short, pithy sayings like we have in Thomas.

Scholarly Reaction to the Seminar (and Some More Details)

Miller's article hints that scholars who are not fundamentalists also were critical of the Seminar, and they were. These critics argued that the Seminar had exaggerated its claims. Here Miller cites critical citations by Richard Hays and Howard Clark Kee. Miller dismisses these as making greater claims for the Seminar than the Seminar claimed for itself. According to Miller, the Seminar did not claim to speak for most scholars as Hays and Kee imply. Of course, the reason this point is now to be made is that so many scholarly critics did not embrace the results of the Seminar. What the Seminar did claim in its introduction to *The Five Gospels* was that it was objectively applying rules of criticism that had been forged together over 200 years of scholarly discussion. So that the result of the Seminar should be seen as a historically credible portrait of Jesus that should be the best historical portrait we have, especially since it was freed of dogmatic considerations and bias. (I am summarizing the claims of the introduction here, not quoting it. I hope I am historical in describing the claim). The result was also "to inform its audience that certain of its positions are shared by most biblical scholars" (I am quoting here).

Miller's list of "negative findings" include some categories where one would be hard pressed to find historical evidence even if such events happened today. For example, "There is no historical evidence that Jesus had no human father." How could one give concrete evidence for this? Others obscure the debate that does go on in New Testament studies. So, for example, another claim Miller notes, "There is no historical evidence that Jesus' corpse came back to life." Actually this is a complicated claim. How does one find traceable, ancient evidence that a corpse has come back to life? One could appeal to evidence of an empty tomb or to the fact others saw him after his death, or that their views about their understanding of themselves or their mission or their doctrine changed. All of these effects are what the gospels claim. They are historical evidence, but it is evidence that needs interpreting. What is debated is what such claims indicate. Most scholars in fact do hold that the disciples believed that Jesus was raised from the dead—and that their behavior changed radically as a result. The key question is what caused them to form that belief, including a belief in a doctrine that had no real precedent in Judaism or pagan religion, an immediate, bodily resurrection outside of the time of the judgment at the end. For a long monograph defending the rich, historical ground for the resurrection and making this point about precedent, see N. T. Wright's recent *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. His work represents where many critical New Testament scholars are on such questions.

However, here is more that Miller did not tell you about the Seminar's substantive conclusions. The Seminar did argue that Jesus did not make a claim to be the anointed one and did not form a group of disciples (I have in mind the Twelve here), although such claims and acts with such implications Jesus are multiply attested in the gospels. (Multiple attestation is one of the critical criteria for authenticity). Something drove the disciples to place Jesus in such a category and make them willing to risk their lives to proclaim it. The Seminar argued that Judas' betrayal and Peter's denials were fiction, despite the embarrassment such stories would carry with them. They also argued that Jesus was an itinerant sage, but it is not so clear what Jesus taught about the kingdom of God beyond it was already present but unrecognized in a way that challenged apocalyptic and nationalistic expectations. Such hesitation on Jesus' basic teaching about the kingdom is despite the fact that most Jesus scholars regard this expression as his most comprehensive theme.

In sum, the Seminar has a rather minimal Jesus that many critics do not see as a genuine reflection of the historical Jesus. This is why the Seminar did not catch on with many scholars in historical Jesus studies. This is something the public also needs to know about the Seminar.