



A Century of Quests for the Culturally Compatible Jesus

By [Howard Clark Kee](#)

The Jesus Seminar has been receiving nationwide publicity, culminating in the recent publication of books by its two leaders, Robert Funk and Dominic Crossan,¹ and the popular press has hailed its approach as innovative and academically significant. Despite all this, these reconstructions of Jesus have clear antecedents, both in strategy and substance, in studies that have appeared over the past hundred years. Like the earlier analyses of the Jesus traditions, the conclusions reached by these scholars are inherent in the presuppositions and methods they have chosen to adopt from the outset. Apart from the contemporary jargon they employ in their translation of the Gospels ("If salt loses its zing," Mt. 5:13), their efforts to purge the apocalyptic and wonder-working features, as well as messianic claims, from the historical Jesus have ample precedent in critical analyses of the Gospels back into the nineteenth century.² In order to evaluate the work of Funk and Crossan (and others using similar methods), it is essential first to examine the methods and aims of some of these precursors.

HARNACK, SCHWEITZER, AND BULTMANN

At the opening of the present century, the avowed effort to reconstruct the historical basis of the origins of Christianity and of the message of

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¹ Robert Funk, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

² Analysis and documentation of the development of critical study of the New Testament is offered by W. G. Kümmel in *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*. Abingdon, 1972).



Jesus was epitomized in the work of the great church historian Adolf von Harnack, "at is Christianity? His sketch of Jesus concerned the message he preached rather than his public activity and could be summarized under three (pre-feminist!) headings: (1) the fatherhood of God, (2) the brotherhood of man, and (3) the infinite worth of the human soul. With regard to Jesus' announcement of the coming kingdom of God, Von Harnack wrote,

The kingdom of God comes by coming to the individual, by entering his soul and laying hold of it.... It is the rule of the holy God in the hearts of individuals; it is God himself in his power. From this point of view everything that is dramatic in the external and historical sense has vanished. It is not a question of angels and devils, thrones and principalities, but of God and the soul, the soul and its God.³

Harnack defined the kingdom as "something supernatural, a gift from above," which provides "an inner link with the living God" and is one's, 'most important experience,' permeating and dominating one's "whole existence."⁴ The gospel that Jesus proclaimed had to do "with the Father only and not with the Son."⁵ It tells us of "the value of the human soul," of "the worthlessness of worldly goods and anxiety for the things of which worldly life consists," and thus it brings peace and certainty.⁶ Questions about the messianic titles "Son of God" and "Son of Man," about predictions attributed to Jesus concerning the end of the age, and about virgin birth and bodily resurrection can all be moved from center stage. Harnack's central concern is for the sovereignty of God and human enjoyment of kinship with the divine. The consequence of what presents itself as historical analysis of the New Testament evidence is a confirmation of ethical monotheism. Any features that do not fit these predetermined cultural objectives are strained out or set aside as irrelevant. This individualistic, warm-hearted piety dominated much of Protestant life and teaching in the period prior to World War 11, epitomized in the old pious, egocentric gospel chorus, "He walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own."

An important, disturbing challenge to this image of Jesus was presented by Albert Schweitzer in 1906, when he published his critical survey of studies of the historical Jesus. These extended from Reimarus' late eighteenth-century portrait of Jesus as a Jewish nationalist, whose failed hopes were transformed by his disciples into a portrait of him as a universal savior,⁷ to William Wrede's shattering attack on liberal Protestantism's scheme of the psychological development of Jesus' messianic

³ Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Son, 1902), pp.60-61.

⁴ id., p. 67.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁷ H. S. Reimarus' studies, published posthumously by G. E. Lessing as the *Wolfenbuettel Fragmenten* in 1778.



consciousness, which its scholars elicited from the Gospel of Mark.⁸ Schweitzer's own analysis of the gospel evidence led him from "thoroughgoing scepticism" to "thoroughgoing eschatology."⁹ Jesus unveiled the secret of the kingdom of God. The movement John the Baptist had launched was continuing in a manner miraculous and certain to come to fulfillment, since it was in the power and purpose of God, but only

Jesus and the inner circle of his followers recognized it. The fact that it did not come to fulfillment as soon as expected required Jesus to force God's hand. In expectation that God would in some way vindicate him¹⁰ and convinced that he was the coming Son of Man, Jesus laid ...

hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which [was] to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuse[d] to turn, and he thr[ew] himself upon it. Then it [did] turn, and crushe[d] him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, he ... destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is his victory and his reign.¹¹

Having arrived at this apocalyptically-based historical reconstruction of

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the life and aims of Jesus, Schweitzer identified himself with Jesus on the grounds of a mystical relationship:

He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall experience in their lives who he is.¹²

Before this volume was published, Schweitzer announced that he was going to abandon theological work and pursue a medical doctorate. Accordingly, he devoted the rest of his life to organ music and to the

⁸ W. Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1901).

⁹ The title of chapter nineteen of his book *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, which was translated in 1910 under the title, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A. and C. Black, 1910; third edition, 1954).

¹⁰ Schweitzer, *Quest*, pp. 356-357, 364.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 401.



mission hospital he founded and built in equatorial Africa. Apocalyptic hope was transmuted into mystical motivation for human service.

Another refugee from an apocalyptic view of Jesus was Rudolf Bultmann, who developed a commendable form-critical program for seeking the probable community origin of the sayings and narrative units that comprise the Synoptic Gospels. But after declaring that it is not "possible for us to determine which is the original form" of the Gospel tradition,¹³ Bultmann simply attributed all the apocalyptic features of the Gospels either to borrowed Jewish sources or to the early church as it was shaping the Jesus tradition. Yet he asserted that the story of the dispute about Jesus' exorcisms is preserved in Q (Luke 11:14-23) in a more original form than in Mark 3:22-30, while passing over the fact that Jesus in the Q version directly links his exorcisms with the coming of the kingdom of God-an apocalyptic concept. Bultmann's escape from an apocalyptic worldview was provided not by his form-critical method alone but also by his espousal of existentialist philosophy. This led him to assert in 1934 "how truly the eschatological message and the preaching of the will of God are to be comprehended as a unity." These are combined in the sense that "the message of the coming kingdom and that of the will of God point men to the present moment as the final hour in the sense of the hour of decision." He concluded, "The real future stands before man in decision ... the future which will give him a character he does not yet have."¹⁴ His refuge from the wonder-working prophet preparing the new community for the coming of the new age is, thus, analogous to that of the mysticism of Schweitzer.

APOCALYPTIC REVIVED

In the intervening years, however, apocalyptic came to be recognized by scholars, including many of Bultmann's students, as a major formative factor in the teachings of Jesus and Paul, as well as in the various forms that Judaism took in the post-Maccabean period. This is especially evident in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the so-called Pseudepigrapha, the Jewish literature of this period that was not accepted into the Jewish or Christian canons of Scripture. The formative role of apocalyptic in the teaching of Jesus and in the beginnings of Christian faith was set forth powerfully by Ernst Käsemann in an essay, "On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic."¹⁵ While acknowledging that some of the apocalyptic material in the gospel is the product of the early church, he was persuaded that the basic statements in the Gospels about the coming kingdom "go back to Jesus himself." Käsemann also showed that Jesus

¹³ Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 120.

¹⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner, 1958), pp. 129-132.

¹⁵ A lecture delivered in 1962 appearing in English translation in *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 108-137.



radically redefined the apocalyptic (and holy war¹⁶) expectations of his Jewish contemporaries, including those of the ascetic rigorist John the Baptist: "Jesus is

obviously speaking of the coming of the basilea [kingdom] in a sense different from that of the Baptist and contemporary Judaism."¹⁷ Jesus oriented his hearers toward grace, not impending wrath, and toward the service of God in daily life.¹⁸ style="mso-spacerun:yes"> It is on this basis that the disciples of Jesus and Paul, who shared the conviction of God's vindication of Jesus by the resurrection, expected the epiphany of Jesus as heavenly Son of Man. Käsemann declares, "We bar our own access to the primitive Easter kerygma if we ignore its apocalyptic context."¹⁹ Recent studies have shown how widespread was the apocalyptic worldview in Judaism of the post-Maccabean period.²⁰ Käsemann notes that, in contrast to these insightful analyses of the apocalyptic features of Jewish literature of the period, there are those who seek to have early Christian apocalyptic "more or less industriously eliminated or pushed away to the outer fringes of our awareness," which results in the intellectual situation that "interpretation is no longer the servant of history which has to be illumined, but is making the latter into a quarry for its own arbitrarily constructed buildings for homeless contemporaries."²¹

NEW FLIGHTS FROM APOCALYPTIC: THE JESUS SEMINAR

When one turns to the results produced by the Jesus Seminar, it is obvious how fitting is Käsemann's critical analysis, written more than three decades earlier. Crossan's *Historical Jesus* begins with historical and sociological analyses of the Mediterranean world in the Roman imperial period. Useful insights are mixed in with sweeping generalizations and inappropriately neat categories. For example, in spite of the proximity of Nazareth to Sepphoris (just over three miles), which was in process of development as the administrative and Greco-Roman cultural center of Galilee during the lifetime of Jesus and therefore an obvious place of employment for Jesus and Joseph as builders,²² Crossan's theory is that Jesus was exposed to an apocalyptic scheme during his early associations

¹⁶ This is clearest among the Dead Sea documents in the War Scroll, which was not yet available when Käsemann wrote this essay.

¹⁷ Käsemann, "Apocalyptic," P. 112.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

²⁰ George W. Nickelsburg and Michael E. Stone, *Faith and Piety in Early Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), especially the sections on "Deliverance, Judgment, and Vindication" (pp. 117-160) and "The Agents of Divine Deliverance" (pp. 161-202). Literary and conceptual analysis of this material is offered by John J. Collins in *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*. (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

²¹ Käsemann, "Apocalyptic," p. 110, n. 2.

²² Traditionalists continue to translate *tekton* as "carpenter" with reference to the occupation of Jesus and Joseph, although in Greek literature this term is also used for masons and other types of construction workers. The building needs in a tiny village such as Nazareth would be minimal and occasional, while in nearby Sepphoris they were at a peak during Jesus' lifetime. See Richard A. Batey's, *Jesus and the Forgotten City New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).



with John the Baptist, but that after the break with him, Jesus never spoke of himself or anyone else as the apocalyptic Son of Man.²³ Mark and the Q tradition call Jesus Son of Man, but the suffering and rising Son of Man is the creation of Mark,²⁴ and the term was inserted in Q by the later editor.²⁵ How does one differentiate the older from the later versions of Q? By the fact that these features are absent from the earlier stage—a triumph of circular reasoning! Similarly, the absence of references to John the Baptist, the prophets of Israel, and apocalyptic hopes in the Gospel of Thomas proves that "it is therefore as old as anything we can get."²⁶ In analyzing the Q passage about the contrast between Jesus and John (Luke 7:31-35; Matt. 11:16-19), Crossan distinguishes between John as "an apocalyptic ascetic" and Jesus as "the opposite," without detailing the distinction.²⁷ He notes that Jesus' reference here to himself as Son of Man is an apocalyptic title, but he ignores the fact that the terms "glutton and drunkard" derive from Deuteronomy 21:20, where the one so characterized is to be put to death by the community (through stoning) as a threat to the integrity of the covenant people. Similarly, while denying that there is any titular use of Son of Man in Daniel, Enoch, and 4 Ezra, Crossan overlooks the crucial fact that the term is used to designate the one through whom the community is to be redefined and renewed.²⁸

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Moreover, for Crossan the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus is not a new epoch but a mode of human understanding—not apocalyptic but sapiential—or, in terms proposed by Burton L. Mack, intellectual achievement, ethical excellence, mythical ideal.²⁹ The kingdom in the authentic teaching of Jesus is people under divine rule. That this personalization, detemporalization, and internalization of the message of Jesus proposed by Crossan and Mack sounds much like the proposals of

²³ Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, p. 259.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 244-249.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

²⁸ H. C. Kee, *Understanding the New Testament* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1993), pp. 99-100.

²⁹ B. L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). Mack asserts that Jesus' message of the kingdom, like that of the Cynics, did not envision an ideal political order but was a social critique addressed to individuals, which can be epitomized as, "See how its done? You can do it also" (p. 73). It was Mark and the later editor of the Q tradition that recast Jesus' message into an apocalyptic framework. How can this later stratum of Q be identified? It is apocalyptic!



Harnack and Bultmann outlined earlier is no accident. All are flights from the apocalyptic outlook and message of Jesus in the gospel tradition. The miracles attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are designated by Crossan as "magic," by which he means unofficial or unapproved religion. The meals shared by Jesus with his followers are symbols of togetherness across the social barriers imposed by the wider society. For Jesus, according to Crossan, the kingdom is not a dream but "magic and meal," the heart of Jesus' program. He adds, "If that is incorrect, this book will have to be redone."³⁰

The serious flaws in this reconstruction of Jesus are cleverly covered over by appeal to purely conjectural sources and stages in the development of the Jesus tradition. In order to remove the clearly apocalyptic connotations of the Beelzebub controversy story, which Crossan must admit has a claim to credibility by his standards since it has multiple attestation (Mark 3; Luke 11; Matt. 12), he assigns it to "Q2," the later editorial stage. The reason for locating it in the later phase of Q is, of course, that it has apocalyptic features. With regard to the eucharistic significance of Jesus' final meal, Crossan follows Helmut Koester in pointing to an allegedly older, non-eucharistic tradition in Didache 10, in contrast with the later tradition in Paul's Letter to the Corinthians 10-11 and to the final stage of development in Mark 14. The undeniable fact that Didache comes from the mid-second century is simply ignored. In defiance of the huge evidence—from literary, historical, and archeological sources—of the diversity of Judaism in Palestine in the post-Maccabean period, Crossan declares that there was only one Judaism in the time of Jesus, and it was "hellenistic," composed of a mix of conservative exclusivists and innovative inclusivists. Obviously, Jesus is in the second category. Indeed, Crossan depicts him and his followers as "Jewish Cynic hippies" in dress and lifestyle, while his critics are Augustan-oriented "yuppies."³¹ The scholarly conforming of the so-called historical Jesus to the culture of the late twentieth century could scarcely be more succinctly stated!

Robert Funk's analysis of the Gospels claims to build on what he calls, in the introduction to his *Five Gospels*, "seven pillars." These are: (1) the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, (2) the distinction between the (more historical) Synoptics and (the less historical) John, (3) the priority of Mark to Matthew and Luke, (4) the use of Q as a source for Luke and Matthew, (5) the liberation of aphorisms from Schweitzer's apocalyptic model of Jesus, (6) the conviction that orality (short, provocative, memorable, oft-repeated phrases, sentences, and stories) is the clue to authentic Jesus tradition, and (7) Gospels are "narratives in which the memory of Jesus is embellished by mythical elements that express the church's faith in him, and by plausible fictions that enhance the telling of the gospel story for first-century Christian

³⁰ Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, p. 304.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 416-426.



listeners who know about divine men and miracle workers firsthand."³² The aim of the work of the Seminar is said to be "to make empirical, factual evidence-evidence open to confirmation by independent, neutral observers-the controlling factor in historical judgments. "³³

In spite of these claims about objectivity, the presuppositions of Funk and the group are evident from the outset: Jesus was a traveling sage who traded in wisdom.³⁴ Another basic methodological assumption of the group is that the early Christian tradition about Jesus developed in four stages: (1) the oldest layer (30-60 C.E.) represented by Paul and the first editions of Q and Thomas; (2) in 60-80, the Gospel of Signs (used by John), the first editions of Mark, and Didache; (3) in 80-100, Matthew, Luke, the Gospel of Peter, the second edition of John, and canonical Mark; and (4) in 100-150, the final edition of John, the Gospel of Mary, and the second editions of Didache and Thomas.³⁵ How are these levels to be distinguished, since there is no documentary evidence to support this elaborate thesis? By the prior assumption that the historical Jesus was a non-apocalyptic figure who conceived God's rule as all around him, though difficult to discern, and who had a poetic sense of time in which present and future melted together.³⁶

Several rules are set down by this group to determine what Jesus really said. One is that he never made any messianic claims, so, for example, a saying about Son of Man (which is always translated "Son of Adam") is inauthentic if it is a messianic designation rather than a reference to Jesus' solidarity with humanity. On this score, Jesus is said to have shared much with the Cynics, who wandered about the Roman world but did not share their ascetic lifeStyle.³⁷ In spite of the highest credibility given by the Seminar to aphorisms and sayings, nevertheless, the Golden Rule, the whole of the Matthew 5, and sayings such as the Sign of Jonah (Luke 11:29-30) are ruled out as authentic since they "are not particularly memorable" or "add nothing to our stock of knowledge about Jesus."³⁸ "Most, perhaps all" of the quotations from the Bible attributed to Jesus are secondary,³⁹ as are Jesus' instructions to the questioners who come to him from John the Baptist.⁴⁰

The Seminar's method of deciding authenticity consisted of depositing a red, pink, grey, or black bead into a box to indicate the degree of probability that Jesus uttered the saying under consideration, with red affirming authenticity and black indicating inauthenticity. Eighty-two percent of the sayings and all of the narratives about Jesus are considered to be the invention of the early Christian story tellers. Curiously, although

³² Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 182.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177.



many sayings are ruled inauthentic because they lack parallels in other sources, the Lukan parables of the Good Samaritan, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son are classified as authentic (red) or probably authentic (pink). Many readers of Funk will rightly recognize that the favorable assessment of these materials rests on the Seminar's admiration of the anti-establishment thrust of these stories. That same mindset is evident in the linguistic style of what is assigned by Funk the grandiose title "the Scholar's Translation."⁴¹ "Blessed are you" becomes "congratulations!" "Woe to you" becomes "Damn you!" Trendy adaptations of the sayings of Jesus include, "No prophet is welcome on his home turf" and "What did you go out in the wilderness to gawk at?" The account of the trial of Jesus is a fictitious invention, since the manifest familiarity with Roman law could only have been written later by a Gentile.⁴² Jesus' words from the cross, the post-resurrection narratives, and the transfiguration story are fictitious inventions, which serve the perspectives of the writers, just as the account of Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees fits the post-70 context when Jesus had become the supreme authority for the church. Other stories manifest the "story tellers license" or are the "product of some later scriptwriter."⁴³

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The arbitrariness and prejudicial nature of this construction is obvious when it is asserted that the version of Jesus' saying about receiving the kingdom of God as a child (Mark 10:13-16) is to be found in its more original version in Thomas 22. Although the initial saying is followed by what is called "interpretive rephrasing," it is obvious that this passage's call to rid oneself of the orders and structures of creation involves, like the whole of the Gospel of Thomas, a radical Gnostic reworking of the Jesus tradition, rather than merely a bland appeal to "recover one's original self" as Funk suggests.⁴⁴ Such manipulation of the evidence in order to rid Jesus of an apocalyptic outlook and any sense of himself as God's agent of renewal is only the late twentieth-century counterpart of earlier scholarly attempts to recreate Jesus in a form more compatible with the current intellectual climate. Ironically, it betrays that the Seminar, which claims to represent a major segment of New Testament scholarship but which is actually a tiny minority, has succumbed to what

⁴¹ Implying that this is the translation to which all true scholars will give support.

⁴² Funk, *Five Gospels*, p. 88.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-71.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 487.



Funk calls the "last temptation," which is "to create Jesus in our own image, to marshal the facts to support preconceived convictions."⁴⁵

OTHER REDEFINITIONS OF JESUS

An effort analogous to that of the Jesus Seminar-and involving some of the same scholars-is the Q Seminar, led by James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester. This group claims that it can sort out from the Q material the oldest layer of Jesus sayings. These are free of apocalyptic features or of references to Jesus performing miracles. In short, Jesus is purely a teacher of wisdom. Supporters of this movement are convinced that the closest historical model for Jesus is the Cynic itinerant philosophers, those who wandered around the Mediterranean world criticizing the political and cultural establishment and calling hearers to a life of true freedom. Burton L. Mack has presented a book-length portrait of Jesus based on this theory of developmental stages in Q.⁴⁶ In these Q hypothetical reconstructions, Jesus is pictured as matching the image of the Cynic-Stoic itinerants, who wandered about the Greco-Roman world offering clever criticisms of contemporary culture,⁴⁷ a kind of prototype of Ben Franklin. The crucial feature in these efforts to portray Jesus as a wisdom figure is that the evidence from the Gospels has to be completely recast according to the scholar's preconceptions before the ostensible inquiry can begin. This scholarly effort has surely succumbed to Funk's "last temptation!"

Other attempts to redefine Jesus in ways compatible with a contemporary outlook or lifestyle are evident among church leaders as well as among scholars. A recent gathering of more than 2,000 feminists in Minneapolis from several denominations⁴⁸ was convened with the goal "to re-imagine" the church traditions, with special interest in transforming the place of women in the tradition and in the contemporary church. This was seen as a way to carry out the World Council of Churches' aims in its Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. What resulted was a move to displace Christ by the feminine figure of Sophia, based largely on the Gnostic representation of personified Wisdom as the major link for humans with the divine. Some proponents of this theological and liturgical revision want Sophia to replace Christ in the Trinity, while others perceive her as having a central role in communication between God and his people. Some of the participants claim that the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

⁴⁷ Ignored in these constructs is the fact that Stoic writers in the Roman period (including advisors to the Roman rulers such as Cicero and Seneca) predict a coming time of divine judgment, in which all humanity will be called to account for its moral behavior and a new era in which the cosmos will be transformed and renewed-features analogous to apocalyptic expectations. Details offered in my *Who Are the People of God?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 42-44.

⁴⁸ Records indicate the attendees were chiefly Presbyterian, United Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, and United Church of Christ members.



person now known as Jesus was really a woman named Sophia, whose name first generation male chauvinist Christians changed to Jesus. Paul inadvertently discloses her true name in 1 Corinthians 1-2, where God is depicted as present among his people in Sophia (wisdom), which in Greek is a feminine noun.

This recent movement is in some ways reminiscent of the claim advanced by Morton Smith two decades ago concerning the Secret Gospel of Mark, which he claimed to have found (but no other scholar has ever seen) and which he declared was part of a document by that name mentioned by Clement of Alexandria.⁴⁹ The clear implication of the fragment Smith alleged to have found is that the Jesus movement was among homosexuals, as is evident when Jesus reportedly spent the night with a naked young man to teach him "the mystery of the kingdom of God." Though this document is available only in a photographic copy of the fragment, some scholars assume that it is indeed part of an earlier version of traditions that became conformed by later orthodoxy as the canonical Gospel of Mark.⁵⁰

THE TRIUMPH OF THE PERIPHERAL

Personal predilections about Jesus continue to triumph over the historic evidence concerning him, the basic perspective of which is confirmed by non-Christian sources.⁵¹ Of course the Gospels and other New Testament writings have modified and restructured the Jesus tradition to serve the distinctive purposes of the writers and of the particular group of early Christians for whom each of the Gospels was written. Early Christianity was diverse from the outset, as was first-century Judaism,⁵² and the differing ways in which the Jesus tradition was appropriated must be taken into account in interpreting them. But there is a convergence of evidence in spite of this diversity of interpretive detail, and that cannot be set aside by prejudice masquerading as scholarship. The Seminar's claim to speak for the majority of scholars is grossly inaccurate. Many of those listed as members of the Seminar are merely on the mailing list and do not attend or vote. The active participants are a small segment of New Testament scholars, and some listed as members have published studies

⁴⁹ Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel of Mark* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

⁵⁰ For example, *Helmut Koester in Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 302.

⁵¹ These non-New Testament sources are set forth and analyzed briefly in my book *What Can We Know about Jesus?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵² The literary and conceptual dimensions of this diversity of understanding covenantal identity among first century Jews and Christians is discussed in my book *Who Are the People of God? Early Christian Models of Community* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). The diversity within Judaism is effectively depicted in the title of a collection of essays edited by Jacob Neusner, W. S. Green, and Ernest Frerichs, *Judaisms and their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).



of the historical Jesus radically different in their conclusions than those set out by Funk in *The Five Gospels*.⁵³

One can hope that the publications of the Jesus Seminar and others developing along comparable lines will be recognized for what they are-peripheral, prejudicial pronouncements-rather than being taken as a substantive development in responsible scholarly study of the historical Jesus.

⁵³ A notable example of an understanding of Jesus by one listed as a member of the Seminar, but radically different from that of the Five Gospels is Marcus Borg's *Jesus: a New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).