



STATEMENT DJ-222

VIEWPOINT

The Jesus Seminar and the Gospel of Thomas: Courting the Media at the Cost of Truth

by James R. White

Simon Peter said to them, "Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life." Jesus said, "Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the domain of Heaven."¹

A glance at the ancient text reproduced above immediately tells the reader that the author knew little, if anything, of biblical teaching concerning the roles of men and women, and of the fact that both men and women were created in the image of God. Such false teaching comes plainly from Gnostic sources that vilified the body and exalted the spirit, and in the process often denigrated the feminine and exalted the masculine. The early church struggled long and hard against Gnosticism, which constantly threatened her. As early as Paul's epistle to the Colossians, we find a strong warning against "proto-Gnosticism," telling us that Christ cannot be placed in any position other than that of Creator (Col. 1:15–18; 2:8–9).

Anyone who thinks Gnosticism no longer has proponents should be advised that the truth is just the opposite. In fact, if the self-aggrandizing press releases of the Jesus Seminar are to be believed, the consensus of scholarship now believes that documents thoroughly influenced by Gnosticism, such as the Gospel of Thomas, from which the above citation is taken, are far more reflective of the actual teachings of Jesus Christ than the "canonical Gospels" familiar to most Christians — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The Jesus Seminar is a small group of extremely liberal scholars.² Yet they seem to have a lock on the major media outlets so that their pronouncements are taken as *the* final word by major magazines, newspapers, and public broadcasting programs. As a result, headlines proclaiming that scholars have "discovered" that Jesus never said He'd return (so He won't), and the like, are common fare. What is worse, this kind of material finds its way into the college classroom as the "assured results of critical scholarship," and young Christians are faced with the specter of this imposing group of Bible scholars condemning their faith in a risen Savior as mere myth.

The leaders of the Jesus Seminar confidently proclaim themselves to be the standard bearers of the scholarly consensus. While they are, in reality, far away from the vast majority of biblical scholars, they vigorously deny their own marginality by proclaiming that everyone *else* is marginal.

In 1989 this writer attempted to dialogue with Dr. Robert Funk on a radio program in Phoenix, Arizona, concerning the Jesus Seminar's conclusion that Jesus never intended to return. Funk was painfully clear that such men as F. F. Bruce and Leon Morris are "fringe scholars" whose opinions have been rejected by "the guild."³ I pointed out that when one defines who is and who is not a scholar, it's quite easy to say "all scholars agree with us." All one has to do is say, "Everyone who disagrees with me is not a scholar." Sadly, most in the mainstream media never challenge the easy and grandiose claims of the leaders of the Jesus Seminar.

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With the release of *The Five Gospels* in 1993, the Jesus Seminar helped propel the second-century Gospel of Thomas into the forefront of media attention. For all intents and purposes, the Jesus Seminar has "canonized" this "Gospel," known primarily from a Coptic translation found in Egypt at Nag Hammadi in late 1945 (though fragments of Thomas, written in Greek, had been discovered years earlier). In fact, it is quite clear that the scholars of the Seminar consider the Gospel of Thomas far more reliable and important than the Gospel of John, and probably more than Matthew and Luke's Gospels as well, as far as being useful in "reconstructing" the words of the "historical Jesus." Using their color coding method of determining Jesus' real words, the Gospel of Thomas allegedly provides more of the authentic Jesus than does the entire Gospel of John.

That these scholars are unfairly biased toward the importance of Thomas can hardly be denied.

The large majority of scholars date The Gospel of Thomas to the middle of the second century. The reason is obvious. The religious beliefs and concepts that came into vogue *after* the New Testament period deeply influenced this work. Strange, esoteric doctrines and beliefs appear throughout Thomas. These teachings are not only directly contradictory to the teachings of the canonical Gospels, but they also point to a date for the production of the work well into the century after Christ. Here is a sampling of interesting statements attributed to Jesus in The Gospel of Thomas:

"When you see one who was not born of woman, fall on your faces and worship. That one is your Father" (15).

"If the flesh came into being because of spirit, that is a marvel, but if spirit came into being because of the body, that is a marvel of marvels. Yet I marvel at how this great wealth has come to dwell in this poverty" (29:1-3).

"Where there are three deities, they are divine. Where there are two or one, I am with that one" (30).

"Congratulations to those who are alone and chosen, for you will find the [Father's] domain. For you have come from it, and will return there again....If they say to you, 'Where have you come from?' say to them, 'We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, established [itself], and appeared in their image.' If they say to you, 'Is it you?' say, 'We are its children, and we are the chosen of the living Father.' If they ask you, 'What is the evidence of your Father in you?' say to them, 'It is motion and rest'" (49-50:1-3).

"I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all attained. Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there" (77:1-3).

"How miserable is the body that depends on a body, and how miserable is the soul that depends on these two" (87).

"Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to him" (108).

"Damn the flesh that depends on the soul. Damn the soul that depends on the flesh" (112).

The thorough influence of Gnostic concepts is found throughout these passages. Yet, despite this, the Jesus Seminar is willing only to say that Thomas reflects an "incipient gnosticism." Admitting how thoroughly the work is soaked in Gnostic thought would place Thomas far into the second century and would show to the unbiased observer that the canonical Gospels are far superior to Thomas on any meaningful historical basis.

In addition to the plain influence of a developed Gnostic world view, the Gospel of Thomas also shows deep familiarity with the canonical Gospels, freely drawing from them. These two factors together obviously make Thomas a late and secondary work.

So why has the Jesus Seminar made such an issue of Thomas? The answer goes to the very heart of what the Jesus Seminar is all about: the re-creation of the Christian faith in a mold more pleasing to the leaders of the group (Robert Funk in particular). Funk's dislike of confessional, historical Christian belief is easily documented in his writings.

Dedicating *The Five Gospels* to Galileo, Thomas Jefferson ("who took scissors and paste to the gospels"), and David Strauss hardly leaves one in doubt of the viewpoint of the editors.

But to reconstruct Christianity, they need to get rid of the main thing standing in their way: the church, replete with its doctrines and creeds, including, above all, an orthodox view of Christ. Hence, no matter how little notice is given by the media, the Jesus Seminar is on a crusade to undercut, in the name of self-defined scholarship, the authority of Scripture and the historicity of the very founder of the faith, Jesus Christ. The results of their "research" are all determined from the start. The Jesus proclaimed by Christians around the world never existed. There is no risen Christ, no resurrection, no coming kingdom. This is the "gospel" of the Jesus Seminar, and any piece of information usable, including a second-century Gnostic "Gospel" attributed to Thomas, is fair game.

What should the believer do when faced with a person who finds in the Jesus Seminar the epitome of "serious biblical scholarship" (the very phrase used by none other than the atheist magazine, *Free Inquiry*)? We dare not treat them as they treat us. That is, since the Jesus Seminar simply defines conservative scholarship out of existence, do we just return the favor? Or do we arm ourselves with the facts and engage their outrageous claims and conclusions on the battlefield of meaningful debate? It is plain they will not engage us in full public view, for they already have the media on their side, and they know they cannot win such an engagement anyway. But this does not relieve us from the duty of "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). We need to instruct our young people concerning the methods and errors of such "scholarship" and assure them that they are not wrong in their faith despite being told they are "out of step" with such "developments." They need to know they can respond in a meaningful way to the claims of these groups and truly "give the reason" (1 Pet. 3:15) for the hope that is within them.

NOTES

¹Thomas 114:1-3, cited from *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, ed. Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1993). The translation provided is modestly and characteristically named *The Scholar's Version*. All citations of *Thomas* in this article are from the *S.V.* The reason for the variation in how the citations are listed in this review is that some of the sections have verse breaks, but most do not.

²For a discussion of the Jesus Seminar and the scholars involved, see Craig L. Blomberg, "The Seventy-Four 'Scholars': Who Does the Jesus Seminar Really Speak For?" *Christian Research Journal*, Fall 1994, 32-38. For a more recent response, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996).

³This fascinating interview, which included Dr. Funk's insistence that "fundamentalists" are on a "witch hunt" and wish to reinstate the "Inquisition" so that they can "kill" true scholars, ended with Dr. Funk telling the hosts and the guests (including myself) to "go to hell" and hanging up on us. This tape (#419) is available from Alpha and Omega Ministries through our web page at <http://www.aomin.org>, or at P.O. Box 37106, Phoenix, AZ 85069.