



STATEMENT DJ030

The “Jesus Seminar”: The Quest for the “Imaginary” Jesus by Brian Onken

Did He or didn't He? Did Jesus really say the things attributed Him in the Gospels? For members of the Jesus Seminar, in many cases the answer is no. In fact, the Seminar participants have decided that only three of the Beatitudes were actually spoken by Jesus Himself – “Blessed are you poor...you that hunger...you that weep.”

The Jesus Seminar is a panel of New Testament scholars whose chairman is Dr. Robert Funk, professor of religious studies at the University of Montana. Over the next five or six years the panel will evaluate the approximately 500 sayings attributed to Jesus.

Through a voting procedure which involves dropping colored pegs into a ballot box, the Seminar participants hope to make the common opinion of the scholarly community clear. They seek to answer the question, “which sayings of Jesus are authentic?” The projected final product of the Seminar participants' labor will be a New Testament with Jesus' “authentic” sayings printed in red ink, those of which there is some question in pink, those which are held in serious doubt in gray, and those which the panel determines are definitely not the words of Jesus in black.

The Seminar participants see themselves as a much-needed voice to “correct” the conservative bent in many a lay person's (and, in fact, church leader's) theology. Robert Funk reflects the basic perspective of the panel when he states that “to learn that the Jesus of the Gospel of John is a figment of the evangelist's pious imagination or that Paul is not the author of the Pastoral Epistles goes down poorly with ecclesiastical officials, who are more concerned with membership and the collection plate with the historical truth” (*San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*, 9 March 1986).

How did the Seminar come about? How justified are its conclusions? And did the evangelists really put words into Jesus' mouth that He never actually said? To answer these questions, let us take a brief look at the history of New Testament studies as it pertains to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the presuppositions of the Seminar participants, and some weaknesses in their approach.

The Beginning of New Testament Criticism

The science of New Testament criticism is relatively new. Critical study of the New Testament books (e.g., questions of authorship, date, etc.) was not totally absent among early students of the Bible, but New Testament criticism really came into its own in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the early nineteenth century, rationalism, the dominant philosophy of the day, began invading New Testament scholarly circles. The New Testament was approached with an anti-supernatural bias, and man's reason became the final judge of its authenticity and authority.

Source Criticism

It was during this time that schools influenced by this rationalism turned their attention to the “Synoptic Problem” (i.e., the difficulty of accounting for the many similarities as well as differences evident between the first three Gospels). The effort to solve the Synoptic Problem through theorizing about source documents for these Gospels is known as Source Criticism.

To date, there is no universally accepted solution to the Synoptic Problem. However the “Two Source Theory” is widely accepted (even by some conservative scholars) Basically, this theory suggests that Mark was the first Gospel

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written, and that Matthew and Luke drew on Mark and a document called “Q” (probably from *Quelle*, German for “source”) in writing their Gospels. The Two Source Theory has several weaknesses, including a lack of manuscript evidence for any such Q document.

Form Criticism

Source Criticism concentrated on studying the use of certain written documents purportedly behind the Gospels. However, it gave little concern to the origin of such sources. Questions eventually arose regarding what preceded these written sources.

Form Criticism (*Formgeschichte*), accepting some form of Source Criticism theory, attempted to explain how the oral tradition was preserved, circulated and, finally, formalized.

The Form Critics’ task was to analyze the “form” of various units of oral tradition and classify them. Potentially a useful literary discipline, in the hands of such early Form Critics as Martin Dibelius and Rudolph Bultmann, it became a process of evaluating the historical validity of the identified units of oral tradition, and the presuppositions they introduced have resulted in the trends which we see today.

Form Criticism begins with the legitimate assumption that various oral reports about Jesus’ words and deeds circulated freely after His death. It then proceeds to argue that as these stories were retold, they were modified and embellished (and in some cases even created) by the Christian community to meet specific immediate needs. Both Dibelius and Bultmann embraced philosophies that allowed them to categorize many such stories as “myth” or “legend”— creations of the church — thereby denying their historical basis.

Historie versus Geschichte

For Bultmann and many others who have followed in his footsteps, there are two types of history. “Historie” consists of the external and verifiable — real space-time events; this is objective history “Geschichte” consists of events that are conceived to be true in mind or heart; it is internal and unverifiable and constitutes “faith” or subjective history. There is no need for Geschichte to be based in Historie: “This distinction permits the assertion that something (say the resurrection of Jesus) is “true” [i.e.: geschichte] which is not “true” in the sense of history as-fact [i.e., historie]...” (Richard Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 79).

Hence, for the Form Critic, underneath the Gospel record there is a Jesus of History (*Historie*). However, after His death, the reports of His life and teaching circulated, were modified, and finally accepted, creating a Christ of faith (*Geschichte*).

The task before the Form Critic is to “demythologize” the New Testament — to work from the Christ of faith to arrive at the Jesus of history. This is the Form Critic’s “Quest for the Historical Jesus” — to supposedly find the fact behind the story created by the church.

Redaction Criticism

Similar to the way Form Criticism grew out of apparent shortcomings in Source Criticism, so Redaction Criticism grew up in the 1950s out of apparent shortcomings in Form Criticism. The Form Critic, with his emphasis on the creative community, could offer no adequate explanation for the individual characteristics of the Synoptics. With Form Criticism, the evangelists were merely collators of the forms as found in the sources.

Redaction Criticism (*Redaktionsgeschichte*) suggests that these distinctives are attributable to the evangelists. According to Redaction Criticism, the evangelists were not merely collators of oral tradition — they were authors/editors (“redactors”) in their own right. Supposedly they took the various forms available to them from the sources at hand and arranged, modified, and altered them, even, in some cases, going so far as to create material in writing their Gospels. All this was done with a specific theological purpose in mind. Hence, the evangelists are seen primarily as theologians and not historians, and it is assumed that their theological views rendered impossible their serving as good historians.

Summing it Up

Thus, beginning with an anti-supernatural, rationalistic base, the Source Critic attempts to identify the sources for the Synoptic Gospels. The Form Critic then explains how such sources grew out of the creative oral traditions concerning Jesus. Then the Redaction Critic explains how the evangelists put it all together, altering and creating along the way in order to fit their theological biases.

For one schooled along these lines of thought, the procedure for studying a biblical passage might well develop according to the following pattern. First, the “Gospel tradition” would be distinguished from its editorial framework. Then, each unit of the traditional material would be classified according to a particular form thought to fit the life situation of the early church. This would be followed by a stripping away of the alleged embellishments added to the basic tradition. Finally, judgment would be passed on the “stripped-down” traditions regarding their historicity and authenticity.

The Seminar’s Perspective

It is clear from the Jesus Seminar’s proceedings, and comments made by its participants, that the Seminar follows in the pattern of New Testament criticism just described. For example, the *Salem Statesman-Journal* (5 April 1986) reports:

In trying to determine the precise words of Jesus, the scholars [participating In the Seminar] consider the ancient culture and how the part under consideration fits into the flow of His teaching, Funk said.

The Great Commission, for example, has Christ ordering disciples to preach to the entire world and establish church institutions. Funk said scholars doubt that Jesus had a world view, and they say He had no interest in starting a church. The quotation was probably added later to Christ’s words, he said....

The idea that He was the savior of the world “was a fantasy created by the church” he said. Scholars of today look at such concepts as the Virgin Birth as “something not to be taken seriously or even argued about,” he said.

Even In these brief comments, Robert Funk’s presuppositions are clear. For him, the Jesus of the Bible is not the Jesus of History. And, rejecting the Jesus of the Scriptures, he espouses a Jesus of his own creation.

This rejection of the biblical portrait of Jesus is reflected in all the Seminar’s work. In the first full voting session held in the fall of 1985, “the participants deem[ed] that more than half of the Jesus sayings in the Sermon on the Mount were put on his lips by Gospel authors or members of the early church” (*Los Angeles Times* 12 February 1986). In fact, at least nine of the Seminar participants do not feel *anything* recorded in the Gospels reflects what Jesus Himself said.

Thoughts In Response

Traditionally, the orthodox church has held that the Bible tells us what Jesus said and did. Although not an exhaustive record of His life (John 20:30), the Jesus of the Bible is the accepted Jesus of history.

Both the Scriptures and history affirm that there were many eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus. These eyewitnesses, both pro-Christian (e.g., Acts 2:32) and anti-Christian (e.g., Acts 2:22), were alive at the time the oral tradition was forming and the written sources were supposedly prepared. It is inconceivable that the “creative believing community” with the help of the “theologically biased” evangelists could have successfully fabricated a “tradition” about Jesus that did not fit the historic facts. The hundreds of eyewitnesses would hardly have accepted such a fabrication.

Also, for the Jesus Seminar scenario to be workable, the early Christian community would have needed to lack a genuine interest in sound historical information about Jesus. Yet, even the Seminar participants desire historically sound and reliable information about Jesus (so they say). Why hold that the earliest Christians had less interest in preserving an accurate historical record of their Lord? Could the many who gave their lives do so for a Jesus of their own imagination?

The Jesus Seminar scholars also question the accuracy of the evangelists. They assume that because the Gospel writers were theologically informed and concerned they could not have written accurate history and, instead, resorted to manipulating and creating information to suit their own views. But, the Seminar participants are

themselves theologically informed and concerned. How is it that *they* are capable of writing and evaluating objectively if the evangelists were incapable?

Perhaps the greatest internal flaw in the Seminar's work has to do with its subject's nature. Ultimately, the Seminar participants reject portions of the Gospels as "nontypical" of Jesus, not on the basis of external evidence but merely their own subjective opinion concerning what He must have been like. Rejecting the Gospels as unreliable, they construct an imaginary Jesus and then measure the biblical portrait by their own corrupt standard.

As noted earlier, Funk states that Jesus had no interest in starting a church and that He was definitely not the savior of the world. Seeing that such views are *not* the views expressed in the extant historical material (i.e., the Gospels), where do Funk and his associates get such a view? It is, in the final analysis, personal bias; a "guess" masquerading as "truth" with the support of slanted "scholarship."

The fruit of the Jesus Seminar is the natural product of a diseased tree. With roots in rationalism, a tree afflicted with the errors of Form and Redaction Criticism has produced corrupt fruit. The assumptions and approach of the Seminar are both internally and biblically flawed.

In the final analysis, the work being done by the Seminar scholars is no different than the efforts of others who have gone before: "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools..." (Rom. 1:21-22).