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Marcus Borg

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THE JESUS SEMINAR FROM THE INSIDE

MARCUS BORG

I appreciate Paul Anderson's invitation to add my comments to his essay on the quest for the historical Jesus in a recent issue of *Quaker Religious Thought*, especially his treatment of the Jesus Seminar. It is a generous invitation, and I commend Paul for extending it.

Paul and I know each other. Our homes are only twenty miles apart, and we have had conversations about New Testament scholarship. Paul's essay is helpful, clearly written, and generally a reliable guide to recent emphases and issues within Jesus scholarship. I agree with much of it.

My comments fall into two main parts. In part one, I will comment about his description of the Jesus Seminar. In part two, I will add to what he has said by briefly commenting about why the historical approach to Jesus and Christian origins matters in our time.

PART ONE: THE JESUS SEMINAR

I begin with some remarks about my own involvement as a Fellow of the Jesus Seminar. I was most active in its work during the first two stages of its activity. Stage one—which is all we imagined doing when we began our work—was the systematic analysis of all the sayings of Jesus. Examining “the words of Jesus” took us six years, from 1985 to 1991.

Then, because we were reluctant to end what had been for most of us the single most stimulating and collaborative academic experience we had ever had, we decided to embark on a second stage. So we turned to an examination of the “deeds tradition”—the stories in the gospels that reported things that Jesus did, or that had happened to him (thus including the stories of his birth, baptism, death and resurrection). We completed stage two around 1995.

Since then, I have not been very active in the further work of the Seminar, only occasionally attending meetings. The reasons for my relative non-involvement do not reflect disenchantment with the Seminar. Rather, they are twofold. On the one hand, I am “on the

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road” a lot as a lecturer, and thus I need a strong reason to spend an extra two weekends away from home each year. On the other hand, the suggested subsequent projects of the Seminar—a creeds seminar, a canon seminar, a Paul seminar, an Acts seminar—did not provide sufficient motivation for me to continue.

The Jesus Seminar is controversial, within both the church and the academy. Many mainline Christians have welcomed it enthusiastically, precisely because it has made the methods and results of a historical approach to Jesus and early Christianity highly visible. Many conservative and fundamentalist Christians have decried it on the grounds that it threatens the biblical foundations of Christianity.

My own impression is that it has done far more good than harm within the church. Thousands of people have said, “The Jesus Seminar has made it possible for me to return to the church” or “The Jesus Seminar has made it possible for me to remain within the church as a whole-hearted Christian.” On the other hand, I would be surprised if even a few Christians have lost their faith because of the Jesus Seminar.

Within the academy, the reasons for the controversy are complex. Some of the sternest critics of the Jesus Seminar are advocates of “narrative theology,” a way of seeing the Bible that emphasizes the biblical narrative itself, and that regards any attempt to ask about the history behind the narrative as a mistake. I agree with the positive affirmation of narrative theology: biblical narrative matters greatly. But I disagree with the rejection of asking about the history behind the narrative.

Other scholarly critics have a “high” notion of biblical authority that overrides questions of historical factuality. And, I suspect, some scholars resent the obscurity of their own scholarly efforts compared to the high visibility of the Jesus Seminar. Biblical scholars are not immune to professional jealousy.

In my judgment, Paul’s presentation of the Jesus Seminar relies primarily on the voices of our critics. He has listened more carefully to the voices of “outsiders” than to the voices of those of us who are “insiders.” I cite two examples.

First, Paul repeats the charge that we were motivated primarily by the desire for “getting coverage by the media!” (p. 13; exclamation point his). Our activity was marked by “strategized playing to the media at every turn”; it was more of “a publicity stunt than a deliberative, academic endeavor” (p. 14).

From an insider's perspective, what we were doing looks quite different. The purpose of the Jesus Seminar from its beginning was twofold. First, we wanted to measure the degree of scholarly consensus about how much in the gospels goes back to Jesus and how much is the voice of the early Christian community. For this purpose, systematic analysis, discussion, and voting are ideal. Of course, voting cannot settle questions of history factuality; but it does disclose how this group of scholars sees things. An analogy may help: voting among theoretical physicists cannot settle whether the universe began with a "big bang," but it does disclose what contemporary physicists think.

Our second purpose was to raise consciousness among the general public about the methods and results of modern biblical scholarship. This purpose intrinsically involved "going public." So, were we "playing to the media at every turn"? Or were we seeking to accomplish our stated purpose of raising public awareness?

Second, Paul reports the claim that the Seminar does not represent biblical scholarship and that some of the Fellows lack impressive credentials. Granted, the number of Fellows is small compared to the 10,000 biblical scholars in the United States. But the vast majority of biblical scholars are neither trained in nor particularly interested in historical Jesus scholarship. Despite our relatively small number, we are the largest group of Jesus scholars ever to meet over a sustained period of time. Moreover, during the ten years that I was most active, I can recall only one Fellow who did not have a Ph.D. in a relevant field (he had a Ph.D. in another discipline, and he was impressively self-taught in Jesus scholarship). Finally, what makes us "representative" of biblical scholarship is that we use the methods and share the presuppositions common to mainstream biblical scholars.

My third comment adds to what Paul has written rather than countering it. Namely, how the results of our voting are interpreted matters greatly. To use the 18 percent of the sayings of Jesus that received red or pink votes to illustrate the point, there are two very different ways of interpreting this result:

*The first way: the Jesus Seminar is saying that, in its judgment, *only* this much goes back to Jesus.

*The second way: the Jesus Seminar is saying that, in its judgment, *at least* this much goes back to Jesus.

The difference between "only" and "at least" is huge. Though a few Seminar members have spoken as if the first interpretation is correct,

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most of us affirm that the second interpretation is correct. Red and pink material (consisting primarily of short sayings and parables) reflects a strong positive consensus that at least this much goes back to Jesus.

Perceptions of the Jesus Seminar are very much affected by modern western culture's preoccupation with factuality, a phenomenon we might call "factualism." In his essay, Paul recognizes this, citing Hans Küng's statement: "fact is assumed to be the measure of Truth" (p. 11). We live in the only culture in human history that has ever identified truth with factuality. For what we might call "factualism," if something isn't factual, it isn't true. Within this mindset, the Seminar's claim that Jesus didn't say something attributed to him sounds as if the Seminar is saying, "Therefore, it isn't true."

To relate this to a question that Paul asks on p. 6 of his essay: "Are the portraits of Jesus in the four canonical gospels trustworthy?" To many people living in a culture that identifies truth with factuality, this question will mean, "Are they trustworthy as historically factual accounts?" My own response to the question (and I say this as somebody who voted black on almost the whole Gospel of John): the portraits of Jesus in the four gospels are completely trustworthy. That is, they are trustworthy accounts of what Jesus had become in the experience and lives of his earliest followers. They are true, even though many parts are not historically factual. They are a combination of history and symbol, memory and metaphor. And symbol and metaphor, despite modern culture's preoccupation with factuality, can be true. To quote from a recent sermon by a Catholic priest: "The Bible is true, and some of it happened."

PART TWO: WHY THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF JESUS MATTERS

Here I add my own comments regarding why the historical study of Jesus and Christian origins matters. My claim is that it matters in particular in our time, and that it matters for Christian reasons. Moreover, my claim is that it matters in spite of its uncertainties and in spite of the great variety of sketches offered by historical Jesus scholars. That is, independently of whether any sketch is fully persuasive—whether mine, or N. T. Wright's, or John Dominic Crossan's, or John Meier's, or Robert Funk's, or Paula Fredriksen's, to name a

variety of book-length treatments of the past decade—the historical study of Jesus matters. For reasons of space, I cite only two reasons.

First, it matters because an older widespread image of Jesus and the image of the Christian life that goes with it have become unpersuasive to millions of people in our time. This older popular image is quite familiar; most of us who were raised in the church grew up with it. It is the product of reading the gospels quite literally or semi-literally, in harder or softer forms, as straightforward historical documents, and of seeing Jesus and the gospels through the lenses provided by Christian doctrinal teaching.

In shorthand, we might call this the literalistic/doctrinal image of Jesus. Its central features are well-known. Jesus was the only Son of God, and he knew that and taught that about himself. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, he was born of the virgin Mary. As the Son of God, he could do spectacular deeds like nobody else has ever been able to do. He saw his own death as “salvific,” as having saving atoning significance; indeed, his death as a sacrifice for sin was the primary purpose of his life. Easter involved the greatest miracle of all, his physical bodily resurrection from the dead. Finally, his message was primarily about himself, his role in salvation, and the importance of believing in him.

Usually, this image of Jesus is associated with affirming the unique and exclusive truth of Christianity: Jesus is the only way of salvation. The image of the Christian life that goes with this is one centered in believing. Christians are people who believe all of this to be true in a literal and factual sense.

But there are millions of people in North America and Europe who no longer find this picture of Jesus persuasive and compelling. In the twentieth century, many of them dropped out of church. The literalism (whether in hard or soft forms) and exclusivism of this older image are impossible for them to accept.

One of the central questions for Christian evangelism in our time is, “What do we say to people who can’t be literalists?” What is the Christian message to people for whom the older image no longer works? Do we have anything to say to them? For many of these people, the realization that the gospels are a combination of history and metaphor, and that Jesus was different in some important ways from the literalistic/doctrinal image of him, has made it possible for them to take Jesus and Christianity seriously once again.

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Second, the historical study of Jesus matters because of the importance of the distinction between “the pre-Easter Jesus” and “the post-Easter Jesus.” The pre-Easter Jesus is, of course, the historical Jesus. The post-Easter Jesus is what Jesus became after his death, by which I mean the Jesus of both Christian experience and Christian tradition. The post-Easter Jesus of Christian experience is a living divine reality who continues to be known in the experience of Christians, from the first century to the present. The post-Easter Jesus of Christian tradition is the Jesus we meet in the developing tradition of the early Christian movement—on the surface of the gospels and the rest of the New Testament and in the great creeds of the church. In fully-developed form, the post-Easter Jesus of Christian tradition is “one with God,” “Lord,” “very God of very God,” the second person of the Trinity, and so forth.

When we don’t make the distinction between the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus, we risk losing both. When the distinction is not made, all that we say about the post-Easter Jesus is easily projected backward on to the historical Jesus, and he ceases to be a credible human being. He becomes God in human form. When this language is understood unreflectively, the pre-Easter Jesus is seen as having had divine knowledge (omniscience) and divine power (omnipotence). But anybody who is omniscient and omnipotent is not a real human being. Moreover, he even ceases to be very remarkable.

If Jesus as a figure of history possessed these qualities, then what he did is not very striking. He could have done so much more than feed a multitude, walk on water, and save a wedding banquet from running out of wine.

In short: whenever the divinity of Jesus is emphasized at the expense of his humanity, we lose track of the utterly remarkable human being that he was. The South African gospel and Jesus scholar Albert Nolan makes the point very effectively: “Jesus is a much underrated man. To deprive this man of his humanity is to deprive him of his greatness.” The historical study of Jesus, whatever its particular results, enables us to see the distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus and to glimpse how utterly remarkable he was. We are thus able to marvel once again at the question, “What manner of man is this?”

I conclude by quoting Mark Allen Powell, a contributor to this issue and author of many books, including *Jesus as a Figure in History*

(Westminster John Knox, 1998), which I regard as the clearest and most-balanced survey of contemporary Jesus scholarship. In this book, Powell affirms for himself the primacy of “the Jesus of story” (p. 8). By “the Jesus of story,” I understand Powell to mean the Jesus whom we meet in the many individual stories in the gospels, as well as the Jesus we meet in the completed stories we call gospels.

I completely and emphatically agree with him. For Christian life and faith, it is “the Jesus of story” who matters most, not any particular historical reconstruction of Jesus. My claim is a more modest and yet important one. Namely, the historical approach to Jesus and Christian origins enables us to see the stories and story of Jesus better—more clearly, more persuasively, and more powerfully.