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A RESPONSE FROM JESUS SCHOLARS IN GENERAL

MARK ALLEN POWELL

I was asked to introduce Robert Funk (founder of the Jesus Seminar) at a lecture series one time. I referred to him as “someone who gets people riled up over things that matter.” I meant this as a compliment. Funk is not *just* a troublemaker, though he is that; and the Jesus Seminar is not *just* a collection of radical scholars subverting traditions of academia, challenging platitudes of the pious, and courting the attention of popular society. They are that, but not *just*.

In general, I believe that Paul Anderson’s article on historical Jesus quests in Issue #94 of *Quaker Religious Thought* offers a fair appraisal of “where scholars are” right now, with special and appropriate reference to the faith communities that this journal serves. His descriptions of Jesus scholarship—his digest of worthy construction material, discussion of criteria for determining historical authenticity, and suggestions concerning the “goal” of Jesus—are all in line with mainstream scholarship, probably more so than the sometimes idiosyncratic views of the Jesus Seminar. Yet I resonate with the concern raised by Mr. Standing that Anderson might be too dismissive of the Seminar’s work and that there might be “something of a chasm between those who support the work of the Jesus Seminar and those who deprecate this work.”

Let me say first that if Anderson *is* dismissive of the Jesus Seminar (and I leave that judgment to the individual reader’s discretion), he is at least accurate in reporting the manner in which the Seminar is often regarded within a wider sphere of scholarship. The Jesus Seminar holds no monopoly on scholarly investigation of this topic. I chair the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, an organization of scholars that has nothing to do with the Jesus Seminar. The Historical Jesus Section does not issue consensus statements or seek to speak with a unified voice. Instead, it is a forum for discussion of diverse perspectives. Members present papers, argue with each other, revise their views, and sometimes publish articles or books representative of ideas that others in the group might not share. Such an approach does not make for eye-catching

headlines, so the media pretty much ignore us. Still, my barber sometimes informs me with some excitement about how he read about what I was doing in *Newsweek* (no, that was the Jesus Seminar). We get tired of being confused with them and it has no doubt been frustrating for many scholars to see the media treat the Jesus Seminar as the only game in town (many prominent historical Jesus scholars have had no connection with the Jesus Seminar: Dale Allison, Raymond Brown, James Dunn, Bart Ehrman, Craig Evans, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Paula Fredricksen, Martin Hengel, John Meier, Ben Meyer, E. P. Sanders, Gerd Theissen, Geza Vermes, Ben Witherington, N. T. Wright, and many more). Who knows? Some old-fashioned envy may also come into play. In addition, many scholars who are Christian believers (including me) have been somewhat appalled at Seminar conclusions that question the veracity of our supposedly rigorous faith. The fact is—for whatever reason—the Jesus Seminar has become somewhat marginalized within the world of scholarship, often being ignored or even mocked as a sort of second-tier group of popularizers whose projections of Jesus were the product of their own liberal naïvete and wishful-thinking fantasies.

But I do not believe this is a fair assessment of the Seminar's contributions or of its significance to the academic guild and to society at large. In the first place, as Anderson acknowledges, the Seminar has included some of the best minds in the field. Even the Jesus Seminar's sharpest critics confess a healthy respect for John Dominic Crossan's impressive erudition and often-brilliant insights. Robert Funk himself was once the Executive Director of the SBL and probably deserves more credit than any other individual for building that organization into the important institution that it is today. Harold Attridge, William Beardslee, Marcus Borg, Bruce Chilton, Dennis Duling, Robert Fortna, John Kloppenborg, Gerd Lüdemann, Vernon Robbins, James Robinson, Bernard Brandon Scott, Theodore Weeden, and Walter Wink are all persons whose work can often be found on required reading lists of many academic programs for study in religion. But aside from the celebrities, the Seminar has included many hard-working lesser-known academics and a few educated, committed non-specialists. In my view, the participation of such persons broadens the group's horizons such that it does not simply follow the well-worn paths of influential mentors. In his book *The Jesus Seminar and Its Critics* (Polebridge, 1999), Robert J. Miller responds to the somewhat snobbish critique of one scholar who had noted that

many of the Seminar members do not hold distinguished positions at the finer schools by noting his own position: "I teach at a college that is so obscure I've yet to meet anyone at Society of Biblical Literature meetings who's heard of it. I teach four classes per semester. My college does not grant sabbaticals...I am in short an academic working stiff—which makes me like most biblical scholars in this country." The Jesus Seminar is no ivy-league conglomerate, but it has for the most part been composed of persons well-versed in the subject area, who bring an unusually high level of commitment to their task.

Likewise, the Jesus Seminar's supposedly secular cast ought not intimidate faith-oriented proponents of Christian theology. As an ordained minister and a person of faith myself, I admit that I often find the group's findings to be incompatible not only with the confessions of my religious heritage but also with the presuppositions with which I approach scholarship. The group has no doctrine of sacred scripture and seems to take critical study of the Bible to an almost unprecedented extreme. It is one thing to recognize that the New Testament authors evince the prejudices of their time and utilize a variety of literary forms (including myth, legend, and midrash) in conveying what is often mistakenly read as straightforward history. It is quite another to regard these writings (as some Seminar members seem to do) as the products of a manipulative and potentially deceptive cult whose leaders may have been out of touch with reality. No matter. Jesus belongs to the world as well as to the Church, and there is no valid reason why he should be studied only by theologians, much less, only by Christians. If we worshiped Zeus or Aphrodite, our faith would be relatively immune from historical critique. But the fact is, we Christians put our faith in one who lived a public life on the stage of world history. Almost from the very start, secular historians took note of him. Today, almost any student (or professor) of world history would list Jesus as one of the ten most significant persons who ever lived. It is only natural, then, that historians of every stripe would be interested in studying this amazing man. I welcome the dialogue, and, though it is always necessary to separate wheat from chaff, I have learned much from the work of non-ecclesial researchers in general, and from the Jesus Seminar in particular.

I do have my criticisms of the Seminar, though this is not the best forum for a detailed presentation. Methodologically, I think the group has pursued a piecemeal approach to evidence gathering that provides a somewhat unstable "data base." As N. T. Wright has

pointed out, historical inquiries require some sort of macro-hypothesis on the basis of which evidence is evaluated. The Seminar appears to have eschewed any official (stated) hypothesis in the interests of neutrality, but of course, individual members had their own hypotheses to guide them and as the voting membership shifted from meeting to meeting, a variety of diverse perspectives may have contributed to decisions as to which data would be judged acceptable. But then it is often alleged that the Jesus Seminar was a group of like-minded scholars who were not in fact entirely neutral in their perspectives but worked for the most part as a team defined by similar ideologies. If this is true, I count it as a strength not a weakness. The Jesus Seminar has never claimed to speak for all of academia. They represent one voice within the guild—an important voice whose significance is only enhanced by the fact that they are a chorus. Anderson rightly notes that the seventy-four scholars who signed their names to the Jesus Seminar's most influential work (the book *The Five Gospels*) are but a tiny minority of the thousands of persons with the credentials to contribute to such a study—but it is still seventy-three more names than have contributed to any other book-length singular presentation on the topic.

Theologically, my principal critique of the Jesus Seminar is that they have not clearly distinguished between what is “historically unverifiable” and what is “historically false.” In terms of the former category, the results of the group are not really very controversial. If the question is “What elements of the Jesus tradition can be verified as authentic on the basis of strict historical research alone?” then few knowledgeable Christians would be surprised to discover that the body of “red and pink material” (i.e., verifiable, authentic sayings and deeds of Jesus) is pretty slim. The official statements of the Jesus Seminar, however, tended to claim that they had determined that Jesus “did not say” or “did not do” various things ascribed to him. Such proclamations go beyond the evidence. Roman Catholic historian John Meier indicates that the virgin birth of Jesus cannot be substantiated by historical research and, so, cannot be regarded as a “historical fact” in the usual sense of that term. Yet Meier maintains that he does in fact believe that Jesus was born of a virgin for reasons that are not susceptible to historical analysis. It would be impudent for Meier or any other theologian to claim that testimonies of faith should be regarded as authentic history even when they cannot be verified according to the canons of historical research. But it is equally impudent for historians to claim that they have succeeded in falsi-

fying what people acknowledge to be confessions of faith merely by demonstrating that such testimonies lack historical verification.

Still, the Jesus Seminar has reminded us of something that it is curiously easy to forget—namely, the importance that Jesus ought to have for Christianity. It is odd that Christians of every denomination can become so caught up in the trappings of their religion, so preoccupied with matters of liturgy, piety, doctrine, and ministry that they forget about Jesus himself. This tendency seems to have been with us from the start. In all the epistles of the Apostle Paul there is nary a single reference to the man Jesus who lived and worked in Galilee. Paul is interested in the Jesus of Holy Week—the man who instituted the eucharist (1 Cor. 23–26) and whose death, burial, and resurrection are definitive of faith (1 Cor. 15:3–4). Paul preaches Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2:2), which is to say he does not preach Jesus the miracle worker, the teller of parables, the friend of sinners, the companion of outcasts, the proclaimer of God’s impending reign. As Robert Funk points out, the Apostle’s Creed summarizes what most Christians supposedly identify as essential for their faith: “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.” What does this leave out? Only the entire *life and ministry* of Jesus—everything that he ever said and did! Is Jesus himself—the man who made a mark on history between the events of Christmas and Holy Week—incidental to our religion? For many Christians in revivalistic churches today, what really counts is having “a personal relationship with Jesus,” inviting the Lord and Savior into one’s heart to rule one’s life. For those in other traditions, what counts is worshiping the figure who sits at the right hand of God in glory and receiving his benefits through Word and Sacrament. But what does that man who lived and worked in Galilee have to do with any of this? To use the terminology popularized by Marcus Borg, the “post-Easter Jesus” seems to have replaced the “pre-Easter Jesus” as the central figure of Christian faith. Ironically, the average Christian theologian has shown a lot less interest in the historical person of Jesus than the supposedly secular scholars who compose the Jesus Seminar.

Theologian Hans Küng was once asked why he did not simply leave the Roman Catholic Church that he had criticized so sharply in his writings. He replied, “I am a problem that the Church needs to have right now.” Likewise, in the decade of the ’90s, at least, the Jesus

Seminar was a problem that critical scholarship needed to have. They got people riled up over things that matter and made people realize that the Jesus of history was a lot more important to Christian faith than Christians themselves seemed to think. So if Christians have been annoyed by some of the Seminar's outlandish proclamations or by all the media coverage given to a non-faith approach to Jesus, well, perhaps we had it coming to us. The Seminar's work—and the attention paid to it—has been something of a wake-up call to Christian theologians, some of whom are just now realizing that Jesus matters after all.