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JESUS MATTERS: A RESPONSE TO PROFESSORS BORG, POWELL AND KINKEL

PAUL ANDERSON

I appreciate very much the graciousness of professors Borg, Powell and Kinkel for their responses to my recent essay, “On Jesus—Quests for Historicity, and the History of Recent Quests” in *QRT* #94 (2000, pp. 5-39). This continuing discussion of Jesus matters allows for an extended treatment of important themes, and it also provides a plurality of perspectives on these issues. I am thus pleased with what has resulted from Herbert Standing’s request for further treatments of the subject. The present venue also allows me to clarify some of my own views, to stand corrected where appropriate, and to point the way forward to further considerations of Jesus matters in the future.

At the outset I’d like to point out the extensive similarities between my survey of recent approaches to Jesus studies and the tools and methodologies embraced by the Jesus Seminar. Mr. Standing may not have noticed the ways in which the methods and tools I consider profitable ways to proceed in doing historical Jesus studies are in accordance with some approaches adopted by Robert Funk and members of the Jesus Seminar, and this may have led to an overlooking of the many ways our understandings and approaches are in sympathy. Then again, as I consider the seven “pillars” of biblical scholarship listed by Robert Funk in *The Five Gospels*, at least four of the seven are very shaky pillars indeed. Their adequacy also depends on how they are used, and I have alluded to these factors in my essay.

I appreciate professors Borg and Powell commenting on the rather uncontroversial character of my treatment of the history of Jesus quests and the tools used by contemporary scholars in their analyses, but this highlights one of the enduring questions still deserving to be addressed. I can understand why fundamentalists and conservatives might oppose the Jesus Seminar, and I can even understand why ultra-skeptics might be upset at allowing *any* possibility of historicity being represented in faith documents such as the gospels; but why would other New Testament scholars as well as theologians

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with solid academic credentials challenge the findings of the Jesus Seminar? This is not a factor of some “being bred at Oxford or Cambridge” and some not (indeed, Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright, whose book, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, provides the best liberal/conservative dialogue on Jesus studies available, *both* have their doctorates from Oxford, and Tom Wright did some teaching at Cambridge). There are disagreements within the guild, as well as outside it, and this fact is what I was trying to address in my essay.

One worthy speculation alluded to by both Borg and Powell is that some scholars may indeed be envious of the publicity generated by the Jesus Seminar. On this matter I agree with all three of our contributors, though, that meaningful scholarship should address the larger interests of society. As important as the purely irrelevant quest for truth is for any authentic, academic discipline, practical application also has its place. This being the case, I would encourage other scholars to make their own findings known in ways that make a difference beyond the guild instead of being limited to its parameters. Indeed, this is one of the phenomena the Jesus Seminar has sought to correct.

Another reason scholars get upset, though, is suggested by Powell. For whatever reason, reporters and journalists have at times covered the findings of the Jesus Seminar as representative of Jesus scholars in general, and this makes those outside the group say, “Wait a minute! That might represent *some* scholars, but it does not represent *all* scholars.” The confusion of Powell’s barber is a lucid example of this carryover. In fact, voting on each saying and action attributed to Jesus is sure to leave even some Seminar members feeling like many of the results do not represent their own judgments. On any given passage some Jesus Seminar members might still assert their own opinion against the tabulated results from the group, and such is a direct factor of making an explicit corporate judgment by means of voting.

Parenthetically, I might mention an alternative approach. Over the next three years, I will be concluding annual discussions at the national AAR/SBL session within a new “John, Jesus, and History” Consultation by means of seeking “a sense of the meeting.” I don’t know if this approach will be any better, but we’re going to give the Quaker decision-making process—even within the academic guild—a try. Our two major papers in the fall, given by such leading experts as Robert Kysar and Paula Fredriksen, address critically two developments within modern scholarship: “The De-Historicization of John”

and “The De-Johannification of Jesus.” Debates on these matters are by no means wrapped up and tied with a bow, and definitions of historicity itself may stand some critical reworking.

This leads to a third reason some scholars might oppose the Jesus Seminar: they disagree with some of the methodologies and assumptions used by the group and would advocate approaching the enterprise differently. Borg alludes to some of those approaches in his essay, and on literary and dogmatic approaches, I agree with him against his critics. Despite the fact that the gospel narratives can be profitably analyzed using narrative-analysis methodologies, their genre is not fictional narrative but historical narrative. So historical questions will remain with us, as well as literary ones. Likewise, despite the later developments of orthodox belief systems, the first responsibility of the exegete is to seek the best and original meanings of the biblical text. Tensions will exist between exegetical and theological ventures, but this has always been the case. We will always have to deal with differences between the beliefs of earlier and later Christians, and the question is how to do that well. Another fact about the criteria for determining historicity is that these are very inexact tools, and sometimes the rigorous application of even a valid criterion, rather than a more nuanced use of it, contributes to a flawed result. This is why even those who affirm a particular approach used by the group may also disagree with its implementation. Distortions may indeed result from applying some criteria too extensively and mechanistically, thereby forfeiting nuance and sensitivity to the material.

Nonetheless, let me clarify a question raised by Powell. I indeed do believe the Jesus Seminar is a very important development in the history of Jesus studies, and this is why it deserves special treatment in any good Jesus-research essay. However, this is not to say that its findings represent the last word, nor would any of its members claim such. A great feature of Seminararians’ rating the words and deeds of Jesus along the lines of four gradients (instead of three or five) is that it forces scholars to get off the fence. Where scholars grow accustomed to playing it safe with their circumlocutions and refusals to assert a clear thesis, the voting on Jesus’ words and actions indeed provokes reactions, both positive and negative, precisely because it makes judgments that are publicly stated. This is the fourth reason fellow scholars have challenged the findings of the Jesus Seminar. They have made explicit, collective judgments and thus have attracted attention. My interest, therefore, is not to deprecate the work of

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the Jesus Seminar but to help the reader appreciate its contribution critically and constructively.

At this point, I'd like to agree with Marcus Borg on several features of his critique of my work. I especially appreciate how differently things look from the inside of the Seminar in contrast to perceptions from the outside. It is also no small matter to get a project covered in the media, and I agree that seeking to inform the popular world about the sorts of opinions biblical scholars have had for some time is a qualitatively different venture from "playing to the media at every turn." I stand corrected on that perception and am happy to defer to my colleague's authentic interest in the proper stewardship of this important venture. From what I know of other members of the Seminar, I believe most of them would feel like Marcus does on that matter. I would like to point out, though, that my assertion was not that getting media coverage was the primary motivation behind the Seminar's work, but rather, its accomplishment. The full statement on page 13 is: "the Jesus Seminar has certainly succeeded at one thing: getting coverage by the media!" And, in agreement with Powell on this point, this is a large reason the work of the Jesus Seminar cannot be overlooked.

This relates to the next criticism made by professor Borg, and I appreciate his distinction between construing the Jesus Seminar as representing the bulk of New Testament scholars, which it never claimed to be, and its employment of scholarly tools that are largely used by New Testament scholars, which it indeed has purported to do. As I look again at the list of participants, I am struck by the considerable variety of backgrounds and faith commitments of its participants, although most appear to be from liberal, mainline Protestant traditions. This may diminish the likelihood that the group was susceptible to groupthink, although I imagine that the guiding hand of Robert Funk would have been a formative presence in the discussions. I also want to affirm again my high respect for many of the scholars listed within the group, and I appreciate better the distinction between the Fellows and the Associates. It was some of the Associates I had in mind, who at times lacked first-rate academic credentials, and I am helped by the clarification that it is only the Fellows who participated in the primary discussions and whose votes were publicized.

Recently, a member of the Seminar shared with me that the Associates did vote on some of the material (although the results were kept separate), and while their mean averages were similar to those of

the Fellows, they tended to be more polarized. For whatever reason, the Associates appear to have included more staunchly liberal and conservative members, and this probably affected the tone of the discussions. Still, I imagine that the same sort of project performed by scholars with a stated interest in “overturning the control of liberals on biblical studies” would produce a contrasting array of results, even if using the same methodological tools. This is why the findings of the Jesus Seminar should be appreciated, but within the context of the founder’s interests and agenda.

I really like the third point made by Marcus Borg, and it is very helpful to hear him emphasizing “*at least* this much” goes back to Jesus. I concur. That is far different from saying “*only* this much” goes back to Jesus! This may also be a place where the representation of the Seminar’s findings could use some tweaking. Within the currents of modernistic positivism, the emphasis has been to speak only that whereof one is not likely to be mistaken. This means the emphasis of historical investigations has been primarily negativistic, rather than constructive. Regarding gray and black designations, if something sounds like the teachings and preachings of early Christian leaders several decades after Jesus, or if something has a parallel within contemporary religions, this does not mean that Jesus’ having said or done something like this is an impossibility. The point is that claiming to *know* Jesus *did not say or do something* bears with it the same burden of proof as claiming that he did. I appreciate Borg’s distinction here because saying something is questioned with respect to its historicity is much less problematic than claiming that something did not happen, and approaching historical Jesus studies in more measured ways is less likely to be wrong.

This relates also to Powell’s contention that distinguishing the “historically unverifiable” from the “historically false” is less problematic theologically. The point I want to make is that this is less problematic theologically *and* historically. Negation is more difficult to prove than attestation, and my criticism of the Seminar’s pervasively negative “findings” is primarily a factor of not feeling convinced that evidence of negative proof has been established. The results of critical scholarship must be subject to the same scrutiny as the holdings of traditional scholarship, if indeed it is to be considered critical scholarship instead of an obverse form of orthodoxy. If indeed the majority of Jesus Seminar members and their representations agree with Borg’s latter

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approach, that *at least* 18 percent of the sayings go back to Jesus, this would alleviate the historical and theological concerns of many.

In response to other parts of Powell's essay, I find myself agreeing with nearly all of it. Most interesting to me is his treatment of Robert Funk and his place within the guild, and a further factor in scholars' taking issue with the Jesus Seminar is that they may associate its contributions with those of Funk, perhaps a bit too closely. As an example of someone who gets people stirred up over things that matter, Funk punctuates his book, *Honest to Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco 1996), with twenty-one theses at the end. Among them are calls to focus on Jesus rather than Peter or Paul, to give Jesus a "demotion," to abandon Christian doctrines of the blood atonement, the bodily resurrection and the Virgin Birth, to rid Christianity of apocalyptic motif, and to declare the New Testament "a highly uneven and biased record of various early attempts to invent Christianity." He then concludes with these words, "These are my twenty-one theses. If I *had a church*, I would *scotch tape them to the door*" (p. 314, emphasis mine). One might personally enjoy Funk's wit and forwardness, but his aggressive approach to public, religious challenge really is a departure from otherwise understated, academic discussion. Direct reactions to Funk and his work, and strong ones, are not unfounded. Whether this is a Luther-type Reformation of the church only time will tell, but such is an example of how Funk stirs up discussion, and it also explains some of the reactions his projects—and colleagues—have received.

A second point of Powell's I want to respond to regards the fact that because Jesus is such an important subject in world history, it is not surprising that he is free game for analysis by those who claim to be part of his movement, as well as those who do not. Indeed, some members of the Jesus Seminar claim to be untainted by faith commitments to Christianity. The challenge, however, is to understand a figure in history adequately. While some aspects of Jesus' teachings and ministry can be rightly judged from the outside, there is a great deal to be said for understanding Jesus from the inside—from the perspective of a committed faith relationship. I suppose I would feel the same about any great subject. The perspectives of those who have spent a lifetime immersed in a subject tend to speak more authoritatively than those who come to it briefly, or incidentally, even though they may bring a fresh insight to the table from time to time. Here the bastion to be challenged is the hegemony of modernistic objectivism. The "living truth" alluded to by Mr. Standing always involves

an engaged relationship of interactivity between the subject and the investigator; and while distanced perspective is important, so is the experience of intimacy and encounter. On this point I agree with Walter Wink entirely, himself a Jesus Seminar member, that the best of biblical analysis comes from sustained engagement with the text rather than distanced observations of it. I imagine all three of our responders would agree.

This is where the implications of recent Jesus studies come into play, and I appreciate Gary Kinkel's willingness to join our discussion as a trained theologian and former pastor of an Iowa Friends meeting. The central question raised by professor Kinkel, in my view, is whether the naturalistic methodologies adopted by modernistic scholars are themselves determiners of outcomes rather than entirely neutral platforms from which to conduct an unbiased analysis. If one claims "religious neutrality" as a naturalistic historian but then challenges all narratives that go against a modernistic view of the cosmos, this is problematic. Naturalism *is* a religious mindset. That being the case, the results of the Jesus Seminar's voting could be construed as the by-product of an ideological approach rooted in modernistic naturalism, and Kinkel's point here is well taken. Their results might say less about real discoveries and more about owned assumptions they bring to the table.

Ironically, this flying of the modernist flag appears just as modernism may be losing some of its hold on western society. As we enter the post-modern era I detect something of a growing openness among Jesus scholars to the spiritual world of the first century, an openness that includes wondrous events and interpretations within historiography rather than excluding such from canons of reality. On this matter, there is more openness to the supra-natural, or the unexplained, than there was among Jesus scholars half a century ago, and this includes some Jesus Seminar members. One wonders about the degree to which the interest in preserving a modernist portrait of Jesus reflects the "conservatism" of ensuring that these modernistic trademarks be recorded before we pass into a post-modern era. As Bible scholars move into post-colonial, reader-response, feminist, African, and Latin American approaches to biblical analysis, the historical-critical method is indeed becoming one of several options at the table instead of the dominant one. From a history-of-research perspective, a representative record of modern naturalistic appraisals of Jesus' words and works is significant to establish, and this is a task the Jesus Seminar has performed well.

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What becomes apparent here is the “evangelistic” interest of the Jesus Seminar and some of its members. I appreciate Marcus Borg’s above description of the ways that his new vision of Jesus might reach out to many members of a post-Christian society and bring them closer to the Good News made manifest in the ministry of Jesus. As a believing Christian, professor Borg describes with personal interest the new lenses through which Jesus may be viewed and embraced again by many who had otherwise given up on Christianity. Rather than forcing members of the modern era to accept first-century worldviews, readers of the Jesus Seminar’s publications are invited to consider an alternative construction of Jesus purported to be unencumbered by ancient perspectives and cosmologies. Indeed, such approaches may open the door to Jesus for thousands of thoughtful people today; and yet, Kinkel’s question persists. Are we really sure that it is the “Jesus of history” people are meeting instead of the “Jesus of modernism” to which people are being introduced? While the Jesus Seminar appears to have faced into this concern intentionally by highlighting the warning (in red): *beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you*, its commitments and outcomes are remarkably similar. How do we know that it is not simply the reflection of a western modernist that is seen in the “well” of contemporary Jesus studies, purporting to be something more authentic? Here, Albert Schweitzer’s reminder that the authentic Jesus comes to us “as one unknown,” often challenging our loyalties and comfort zones, cuts in more than one direction. This warning relates to traditional and nontraditional views alike.

An interesting point made by all three of our responders relates to the degree to which canons of historicity and naturalism might have challenged canons of inspiration and supra-naturalism in western society. The relevant point Kinkel raises here is that if a person or group is going to redo the New Testament canon, this needs to be done on theological terms, not just historical ones. This is especially the case when the findings of “historical” analyses get used, then, for “theological” purposes as a result. Obviously, many other gospel narratives were also available to early Christians, but they were rejected for considered reasons. Aspects of canonicity may be important matters to discuss at a later time, if not as a foundation for Jesus studies, certainly as a result of them.

Here, though, I might question Kinkel’s contention that modern biblical studies have subverted an established hermeneutic, replacing it with their own, without challenging it directly. Historical-critical

Bible scholars have long been at odds with Christian leaders and theologians, and this has been the reason for the fundamentalist reaction to modern biblical scholarship for over a century. As I look again at Funk's introductions to *The Five Gospels* and *The Acts of Jesus*, he indeed does outline the historical-critical methodologies that Jesus scholars have been hammering out over the last two centuries or more. The greatest contribution of modern biblical studies (I might even say the greatest contribution of modern historiography proper!) is to develop a plausible set of inferences regarding the developments of traditional gospel material between the times of the historic ministry of Jesus and the finalizations of gospel narratives. When you look at the similarities and differences between the gospels, and when you consider the emergence of various gospel traditions in the contexts of historical developments within the first-century church, differences between more primitive memories of Jesus and later ones become informative. Here I think Kinkel makes a good point and a weak point. On the weaker side, one cannot say that there is no difference between the earlier Jesus of history and the confessed Christ of the later Christians. As stories of this Jewish leader came into contact with the Hellenistic world and as Christian worship practices and convictions developed, views of the Christ to be worshipped did grow in the thought and experience of early Christians. Christological developments then also had some impact on traditional presentations of Jesus, so Borg is right to distinguish the pre-Easter Jesus from the post-Easter Jesus, at least somewhat.

On the other hand, Kinkel rightly reminds us of the importance of maintaining a close connection between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. What is to keep us, for instance, from patterning the character of the risen Christ after our personal preferences and desires? The normative anchor of the historic teaching and example of Jesus serves a critical function for maintaining the center of Christian faith and practice. Take, for instance, the issue of Jesus and nonviolence. One brief example is the Seminar's "finding" that Jesus did not bless peacemakers. I know that Matthew's nine beatitudes are different from and more spiritualized than Luke's four (implying Matthean elaboration); and yet, I don't know that I would list "Congratulations to those who work for peace! They will be known as God's children" (as well as Matthew's other non-Lukan beatitudes) in black rather than red or pink. Not only on theological grounds, but on historical grounds, a good case can be made for Jesus' ministry

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being a non-violent contrast to other first-century prophets (see “Jesus and Peace,” *The Churches’ Peace Witness*, ed. Marlin Miller and Barbara Gingerich, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, pp. 105-130). This may have been a foundational distinctive of Jesus’ teaching rather than an eventual attribution. Even so, this is an example of the important implications of particular judgments being made about Jesus. Based upon one’s impression of Jesus’ teachings a host of ethical responses to violence and injustice follow.

Here I like Borg’s emphasis on the history of Christian origins as well as the historical Jesus, and a helpful way forward may be to affirm the function of the canon. While the Jesus Seminar might not put it in these terms, if one believes the Bible is inspired by God, then gospel material is equally compelling for readers, whether it originated in Jesus’ ministry or in the preaching and teaching of the early church. A canonical reading of the Bible therefore allows one to benefit from all of the material rather than a selection. Here Borg’s reference to the trustworthiness of the gospel narratives allows the emerging Christian memory of Jesus to still be authoritative for later believers, even if a detail or insight reflects a traditional development within the early church.

Along these lines, it has always seemed ironic to me that Christians with a high regard for Scripture have insisted on historicity, as though the authority of divine inspiration were not enough. Likewise, it has seemed odd that those diminishing the inspired character of Scripture nonetheless seek to use it for religious purposes. Everything in the gospels is historical and theological, and the questions are: what aspect of history is being represented (Jesus, the emerging tradition, or the historical setting of the evangelist and his audience), and what is the theological content of each passage? If an insight reflects a Matthean or Lukan perspective on Jesus—or even a Johannine perspective—it still remains authoritative for later believers. We may even be helped in considering why a particular traditional development or perspective emerged, and we may be better enabled to apply the content to parallel situations in which we may find ourselves today. This is why I do not feel the authority of Scripture is threatened if sound insights into its development and composition—and therefore interpretation—emerge through sound critical analysis. But soundness implies the validity of thought and veracity of evidence, and these are the fields of engagement that matter most for distinguishing long-term contributions over short-term ones.

One final issue deserves to be addressed, and the essays of Borg and Kinkel bring it to the fore in sharp relief. Professor Borg claims that a human Jesus must be considered directly and separate from post-Easter perspectives, lest both be lost. Professor Kinkel, on the other hand, claims that separating the cosmic triumph of Jesus as the Christ from Jesus of Nazareth reduces him to a victim of Roman violence and negates any claim he might have on later generations. So how do we proceed? They both have good points, but are their claims essentially contradictory, or might there be a way forward? First, their commonalities: both call for an abandonment of unrealistic views of Jesus—the wraith-figure, whose person continues to be omniscient and omnipotent (a christological flaw that was rightly rejected in the fourth and fifth centuries)—and both call for a solid commitment to a realistic appraisal of Jesus. Both also emphasize the importance of the post-Easter Christ and his ongoing work in the life of the church.

Where Borg and Kinkel differ sharply is the relation between the earthly Jesus and the eternal Christ. Borg wants to make sure that our impressions of and commitments to the eternal Christ do not distort our understandings of the kind of real man Jesus was. Conversely, Kinkel wants us to maintain the connection between the Christ Events (the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus) and the earthly ministry of Jesus because they are central components of the Gospel. Both are important considerations to maintain, and these, by the way, are the two poles the early church fathers and mothers dealt with for several centuries, out of which the orthodox creeds of the church emerged. Notice that at every turn, the orthodox syntheses ended up restoring tensions that were otherwise lost by particular strands of interpretation. It is no exaggeration to say that the early Christian theologians were themselves seeking to be interpreters of the biblical text—especially regarding claims about Jesus as the Christ—and modern scholars have wrestled with many of these same issues. Where leaders of the first five centuries of the church used the best scientific tools of their day, resolving issues in terms of Greek metaphysical thought and categories of being, modern scholars attempt the same by means of the literary and historical-critical tools available to them. How those sets of issues come together for each of us ultimately, however, is a matter of *faith*, and Powell's essay reminds us of that fact.

In conclusion, I express again my appreciation to our responders because these Jesus matters are important ones to address. They have

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been for centuries, and will continue to be as long as people find the ministry of Jesus compelling and uphold it as a model of God's redemptive work in the world. If people inside and outside the church get more involved in discussing Jesus matters, I suppose the controversial work of the Jesus Seminar will have been a help to Jesus' receiving fresh attention. Of course, productive attention hinges upon an authentic rendering of the Gospel message, so perhaps our biblical studies still need thoughtful theological input as well. In terms of establishing new portraits of Jesus, though, claims of ahistoricity are as fraught with challenge as claims to historicity, but such venues provide some of the keenest opportunities for thoughtful engagement available. And this, of course, is because of the importance of the subject and the resulting implications from refining one's view about his mission and message. After all, wherever one comes down on the particulars of these quests, one thing is certain indeed: *Jesus matters!*