

Behind and Beyond the Jesus Seminar

Implications for Christian discipleship

The text of a presentation by Gregory C. Jenks to a public debate with Bishop Paul Barnett (Bishop of North Sydney) at St Francis' College, Brisbane on Wednesday, 9 December 1998.

The original article which prompted this public forum appeared in the November 1998 issue of "Focus", the monthly newspaper of the Anglican Diocese of Brisbane.

The title for our forum this evening has within it three very significant threads. I hope that we shall have an opportunity to explore each of them as the evening progresses.

1. In the first place, we are promised a glimpse **BEHIND** the Jesus Seminar. What kind of enterprise is this project? How does it stand in relation to other approaches to NT study? What has been its history?
2. Then we are told that we shall be seeking to go **BEYOND** the Jesus Seminar. There is, after all, much more to be said about Jesus than can be properly explored and affirmed by an academic research team such as that assembled for the Jesus Seminar.
3. Finally, we are invited to consider the **IMPLICATIONS** of all this for Christian discipleship. For me, this is perhaps the most engaging part of the forum. How indeed can we be honest to Jesus in a world that is now so far removed from his? And how can we be faithful to his vision of the life of faith in a church that is so very different from the irregular band of misfits that he drew around himself during his brief public activity?

All of those are vital questions. I appreciate the opportunity to explore them to some extent with you in this forum, and I hope that we shall all find the evening worth the effort that we have each made to get here.

BEHIND the Jesus Seminar

Let me begin by offering some account of the emergence of the Jesus Seminar, and the history of its

research efforts to this point in time.

The story begins with the early retirement of Robert Funk from his position as Executive Officer of the Society of Biblical Literature in the early 1980s.

After a distinguished career in NT scholarship, Funk set about doing what many other NT scholars have done as they contemplate less time in the classroom: namely, writing a book on Jesus.

He found that there was no consensus among the leading NT scholars as to exactly which parts of the Jesus tradition could be taken as authentic. Worse still, from an academic point of view, rarely did scholars indicate their own personal assumptions about which sayings or actions attributed to Jesus they drew upon when writing their articles and books about Jesus.

Let me illustrate this problem with two quotations from Paul Barnett's own writings.

In his 1986 book **Is the New Testament History?**, Barnett acknowledges that the gospel stories about Jesus' birth cannot be taken at face value as plain history since they have been influenced by the Old Testament:

It may be agreed that, in the form in which the stories are told, Luke in particular has been influenced by certain narratives from the Old Testament. (p 119)

I would agree with that statement. Indeed, so would John Shelby Spong. It is exactly Spong's core argument in his book, **Liberating the Gospels**.

In the same study, Barnett acknowledges that Jesus could not have said all the words that the Gospel of John records him saying:

The force of this argument must be recognised, since the style and vocabulary used throughout the fourth gospel are uniform and it is sometimes difficult to say where the words of Jesus end and those of the evangelist commence. (p. 74)

Again, I would agree with that view; except that I would reverse the final phrases. In my view, it is difficult to see where the words of the evangelist end and the (authentic) words of Jesus commence in the Gospel of John.

Please note that this is no minor point, as it goes to the question of the burden of proof.

Those who wish to defend the historicity of the New Testament will often assert that the burden of proof lies with those who challenge the Scriptures. This is not so.

As in all historical and literary analysis, the burden of proof lies with those who wish to assert or defend the authenticity of a particular document, or the historicity of certain descriptions.

There is an essential methodological scepticism underlying all scholarship. For the scholar, the question is not; "This appears to be so, and I see no reason to question it." Rather, the scholar observes: "This is said to be so, but how can that claim be validated?"

Such a sceptical mindset lies at the heart of scholarship. It is what distinguishes scholarship from apologetics. It is an uncomfortable reality for many of the faithful, who would prefer their beliefs to be affirmed rather than tested critically.

So, having found no consensus among scholars on the extent of the "assured words of Jesus," Funk set about organising a collaborative research project to seek that agreement as the first step in a larger plan to write a definitive book on Jesus.

Invitations went to a wide circle of NT scholars, drawing on his long association with the SBL.

Many declined to participate. That is not surprising. Other priorities and commitments explain part of it. Personal antipathy to Bob Funk arising from his long public career explains another part. And some were sceptical of the very idea itself, and saw no prospect of success in such a project.

Some of those who were originally involved in the Seminar have since left. In some cases, their academic and professional interests have moved to other topics. Others have disagreed with some of the directions in which the project was moving.

About one third of the original Fellows are still involved in the project. A remarkable commitment to collaborative research over almost 15 years.

In all more than 200 scholars have been involved in the Seminar since 1985, with around 80 Fellows currently active in its work.

They come from variety of faith traditions: Anglican, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Jewish and Muslim, as well as people with no personal religious affiliation.

Certain core principles have provided a basis for our work together:

- We are committed to historical truth rather than religious dogma.
- The Seminar works collaboratively rather than competitively, and always comes to a conclusion one way or the other, rather than leaving things up in the air.
- The project is totally self-funding, so it can remain free of any vested interests.
- Fellows make all our findings public, rather than keeping them within the confines of the academic cloisters.

Since 1985 the Jesus Seminar has identified and assessed all available traditions about Jesus from the first 300 years of the common era. The material is not limited to the 4 canonical gospels, but includes the other 18 gospels that have survived from antiquity. More than 1500 sayings attributed to Jesus and 387 reports of events involving him have been painstakingly examined.

Detailed public reports on the Seminar's assumptions, methodology and findings have been published: **The Five Gospels** (1993) and **The Acts of Jesus** (1998). Both are readily available in local bookstores.

The Seminar found that just 18% of all the sayings attributed to Jesus appear to be authentic, and only 16% of the stories told about him. That might seem a fairly meagre result, but it was rather higher than many scholars would have predicted as they had long suggested that almost nothing remained in the tradition from the historical Jesus.

When we narrow the question of authenticity to encompass only the biblical texts, the proportion of sayings rated by the Jesus Seminar as Red or Pink rises to around half of those found in the canonical Gospels. The findings of the Seminar, then, are not as sceptical as many people assume.

Despite many of the claims by its critics, there is no distinctive methodology applied by the Jesus Seminar in its assessment of the Jesus tradition. Each Fellow is required to have an advanced graduate degree in biblical studies or some other relevant discipline, but there is no attempt to select those with particular approaches.

From the beginning of the project, a conscious effort was made to avoid extended discussion on methodology. Instead, using whatever tools each deems appropriate, the Fellows argue their case for and against particular items in the database. When the votes are taken, one person's bias is balanced by that of another.

In a very real sense, the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar represent the mainstream of contemporary biblical studies. That is not to claim that our opinions are those of all - or most - other scholars. Simply that we belong within that "broad church" of critical biblical scholarship found in mainstream seminaries, religious studies departments and theological faculties all around the world.

If there is one emphasis of the Seminar that appears to be unique within that broad tradition, it is perhaps the Seminar's judgment that Jesus was not an apocalyptic firebrand, but more a teacher of sacred wisdom within the tradition of ancient Israel. This view arises not from a bias against apocalyptic, but from a close study of the parables that extended over many years in North America but was largely ignored elsewhere.

What the Jesus Seminar has proposed is that the "voice print" of Jesus that emerges from a study of the parables and other sayings is one that seems to be in tension with the traditional representation of Jesus as an apocalyptic teacher. That conclusion is not accepted widely - as yet. Nor is it only found among the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar.

Again, as an aside, let me cite Paul Barnett's own writings here. In his book, **The Truth of Jesus**, Barnett notes with approval the positive attitude of Josephus towards Jesus:

His lack of hostility, in contrast with that displayed towards various revolutionary and partisan prophets of the time, is probably due to Josephus' perception that,

unlike those persons, Jesus was apolitical, a non-agitator." (p. 15)

In the same context, Barnett notes Josephus' description of Jesus as a teacher and a miracle worker, rather than as an apocalyptic messianic figure. This is not so very different from the findings of the Jesus Seminar!

In brief, then, the Jesus Seminar is part of a broadly-based discipline of critical New Testament studies and the Fellows share much in common with colleagues elsewhere, while also having some particular interests and a focus on making their findings accessible to the general public. It is to that latter issue that we now turn, since it is that agenda beyond the academy that seems most to have frightened the horses.

BEYOND the Jesus Seminar

In some respects the Jesus Seminar project has a limited agenda. It is essentially a collaborative research team that has a specific focus: the quest for the historical Jesus.

The Seminar is one of a number of research projects under the auspices of the Westar Institute founded by Bob Funk. It is this association that gives rise to the Seminar's interest in making its findings widely known.

The problem of "religious illiteracy" has captured the mind and heart of Bob Funk, and it lies behind much of his work with Westar and in projects such as the Jesus Seminar.

Funk is concerned that so few people know what kind of book the Bible is, have any realistic comprehension of its contents, or the skills to use it appropriately. And he has despaired of the official church as a vehicle for addressing that ignorance, since we so often seem to prefer our personal and institutional safety to the crucible of truth.

The Westar Institute has a goal of broadening the knowledge base of the general population with respect to religion. The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar want to include anyone who is interested in religion in the debates that otherwise remain hidden away behind the gates of the seminary.

We may not agree with Funk's recommendations for a curriculum to redress that functional illiteracy in matters of religion, but we can perhaps all agree that he has put his finger on a problematic issue.

And what is a problem in North America has reached plague proportions in Australia. Here, general knowledge of the Bible is appallingly low, and fundamentalist churches draw thousands into their circles of influence as they peddle their literalistic (per)versions of Christian faith.

So we can go beyond the Jesus Seminar ... and indeed, we should.

The Jesus Seminar is a specific historical research project. It will have a limited shelf life, and may already have largely concluded its most productive period of activity.

It is not a religious enterprise, except for its concern at the general lack of biblical literacy. Too few people know how to use the Bible with skill and critical insight.

However, like us, many of the Fellows of the Seminar are persons of Christian faith.

As such, they want to go beyond the limits of historical enquiry. They propose profiles of Jesus that use the database of Red and Pink sayings. They also draw on the Gray and Black sayings for insight into how the earliest disciples may have understood Jesus. And they articulate their own personal statements of who Jesus is for them.

In doing so, these Fellows (and I am thinking especially of Marcus Borg whose work I find so full of meaning) go beyond the limitations of the Jesus Seminar as a collaborative research project.

They also remind us that, whatever our approach to Scripture and to faith, people of faith will always need to articulate our understanding of Jesus. For some of those people, and I am one of them, that will no longer be in the concepts and language of the ancient world.

For people such as myself, the processes and the findings of the Jesus Seminar are part of a movement of God's Spirit in the contemporary world that frees us from nonsensical affirmations that none of us take seriously, but few of us dare question.

It is to the implications of liberal critical scholarship for contemporary discipleship that I now wish to turn.

IMPLICATIONS for Christian discipleship

In his most recent book **Why Christianity Must Change or Die**, Bishop John Shelby Spong uses the metaphor of exile to capture what many people of faith sense in today's society and church.

Like his earlier much-quoted epithet, "the church's alumni association," Spong's phrase "believers in exile" evokes a response from many of us.

We ask, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

The traditionalist choirmaster tells us to practise our plainsong, straighten our cassocks, and sing more heartily.

Some of us have tried that. For some it works. Or so it seems. For others that is no solution at all.

Some of us find that speaking religious language, even the language of Bible and Creed no longer works.

One of those who wrote to the Editor of *Focus* following my recent article cited the Articles of

Religion, and especially article IV *Of the Resurrection of Christ*.

Leaving aside for now the legal and constitutional ambiguity of the affirmation that we actually make in this Diocese prior to licensing, such appeals have little value. Let us take both article III. *Of the going down of Christ into Hell*, as well as the article concerned with the Resurrection.

Both these Articles of Religion presuppose a three-tiered universe and a literal interpretation of the sacred symbols in the biblical narrative. I could not name a single Priest in our Church who really believes that Jesus visited a place known as Hell between Good Friday and Easter morning. Nor do I think I could name a single Priest who actually believes - literally - that (and I quote)

Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again his body, with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of Man's nature; wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth, until he return to judge all Men at the last day.

Persons such as myself do not believe literally in a place called Hell, nor in another called Heaven. We do not imagine Jesus taking his flesh and bones into that realm, and sitting in distant glory until some future return to judge us all at the end of time. Indeed, we do not believe that there is a divine being "out there" who intervenes "in this world."

This is not to doubt the reality of the sacred, but it is to question the traditional uses to which we have put the word "God."

It is also to appeal for ways of speaking the language of faith that are meaningful in the modern world.

For persons such as myself, the kind of critical liberal scholarship represented by the Jesus Seminar is an indicator that such a new lexicon of faith is perhaps possible; and may even have antecedents in the person of Jesus himself.

Of course, we believers in exile find ourselves not just in an alien space far from the multi-layered worlds of antiquity; but also in a church that often seems far removed from the first disciples of Jesus.

We are part of a church much compromised by our alliances with the rich and powerful over the centuries. It has been a rare and a brave Christian soul who has stood with the poor against the rich and powerful, and for truth against the magisterium of the Church.

If there is even a pinch of truth in the glimpses of Jesus that emerge from the research of the Jesus Seminar, then the historical churches of Christianity have much to answer for. There is, after all, an Evangelical impulse at the centre of this portrait of Jesus that the Seminar's critics find so offensive.

Allow me to repeat the thumbnail sketch of Jesus as he appears in the reconstruction by Bob Funk

in his book, **Honest to Jesus**. Not because Funk is right about Jesus, but because there is something in that portrait of Jesus that rings true.

1. Jesus appears to have been an itinerant sage who delivered his parables and aphorisms in public and private venues for both friends and opponents in return for food and drink.
2. He never claimed to be (nor allowed others to call him) the Messiah or a divine being.
3. Jesus taught a wisdom that emphasised a simple trust in God's unstinting goodness and the generosity of others. Life was to be lived and celebrated without boundaries and without thought for the future. He rejected asceticism.
4. Ritual ceremonies had no value. Purity taboos and social barriers were never allowed to come between the people who responded to God and one another in simple trust.
5. There were no religious "brokers" in Jesus' vision of God's domain. No priests, no prophets, no messiahs. Not even Jesus himself was to be inserted between a person and God.
6. To experience forgiveness one simply had to offer forgiveness to others.
7. No theological beliefs served as a test for participation in God's domain.
8. Apocalyptic speculation with future punishments for the wicked and rewards for the virtuous played no part in Jesus' teaching.
9. Jesus was killed because he refused to compromise this radical vision of life. Those defending the status quo with its elaborate brokerage system for religious favours had to destroy him or lose their hold over others.

It is not hard to sense that the institutional church would most often vote with the Sanhedrin. We have had many hundreds of years experience in handing Jesus over to Pilate. We gladly accept Barabbas in place of the disturbing Jesus of Galilee.

So what are the implications of the Jesus Seminar for discipleship?

They are, I would suggest, many-faceted. Let me suggest just a handful.

1. They include the assertion that the historical Jesus should have a powerful say in the way people imagine their religion and express that faith in word and symbol.
2. They include the idea that people have a right to know that there is a difference between the Jesus of history who walked the dusty pathways of Galilee and the various frames of faith in which he has so often been presented by the churches.

3. They include the insight that we can learn more about being people of faith in our own day by listening to both the original voice of Jesus and to the voices of his first followers.

4. And they include the realisation that the actual historical humanity of Jesus is the focus of his divine value to us. It is in Jesus-as-human that we see God at work within and amongst us. Not as the Holy Stranger, but as the Familiar Sacred. The one who called us into being, who would call us out of our exile, and into that reality beyond personal death that we presently label "resurrection."

© 1998 Gregory C. Jenks