



## The Jesus Seminar

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### What is the Jesus Seminar?

§ A group of New Testament scholars working together to reach a consensus as to what Jesus really said (as opposed to words that have been attributed to Jesus by later tradition)

### Behind the Jesus Seminar:

§ The Westar Institute, Sonoma, CA — sponsor of the Jesus Seminar

<http://westarinstitute.org>

§ Robert W. Funk, founder of the Westar Institute  
§ John Dominic Crossan, (former) co-chair of the Jesus Seminar

### Who Belongs to the Jesus Seminar?

§ Originally started with 30 Fellows (professional scholars)

§ Membership grew to about 74 Fellows and about 100 Associates (interested non-specialists)

§ Many are well-known NT scholars  
§ A few are evangelicals

### Original Purpose of the Jesus Seminar:

§ To compile a list of all the words (canonical or not) attributed to Jesus in the first three centuries

§ To determine by consensus which of these words were probably from Jesus and which were later

### Goal of the Jesus Seminar:

§ To popularise the results of these deliberations  
§ To make the general public aware of current New Testament research

“*The Five Gospels* represents a dramatic exit from

windowless studies and the beginning of a new venture for gospel scholarship. Leading scholars — Fellows of the Jesus Seminar — have decided to update and then make the legacy of two hundred years of research and debate a matter of public record.”

### Publications:

*The Parables of Jesus, The Gospel of Mark, The Sayings Gospel (Q), The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Matthew, The Gospel of Luke, The Gospel of John, The Five Gospels, The Acts of Jesus, The Gospel of Jesus*

§ Scholars vote on sayings using colored beads

### Working Premises of the Jesus Seminar:

§ The Jesus Seminar has published its working premises.

§ There are 64 numbered premises and 7 “pillars of scholarly wisdom.”

§ What follows is a sample.

§ Numbering of premises follows *The Gospel of Mark*, pp. 2-26.

§ Roman numerals are from *The Five Gospels*, pp. 2-5.

### Some premises we could agree with:

§ (2) Jesus taught his disciples orally; Jesus wrote nothing.

§ (6) Jesus’ mother tongue was Aramaic; the gospels were written in Greek.

§ (III) Mark was written before Matthew and Luke (i.e. Markan priority).

§ (IV) Luke and Matthew shared a similar source of Jesus’ teaching [=Q].

§ (VI) Ancient oral culture is not like modern print-based culture.

§ (7) Jesus possibly spoke Greek as a second language.

§ (8) Jesus was itinerant: he moved around and adapted his sayings and parables to the occasion.

### Some premises we might disagree with:

§ (12) Forty years elapsed after the death of Jesus before the first canonical gospel was composed (ca. A.D. 70). [Many conservative scholars would say the interval is closer to thirty years.]

§ (24) The Gospel of Thomas represents an earlier stage of the tradition than do the canonical gospels. [More likely the Gospel of Thomas is early second century.]

§ (25) The Gospel of Thomas represents an independent witness to the Jesus tradition. [The Gospel of Thomas draws on the canonical gospels, but with a Gnostic twist.]

### Some premises we would reject outright:

§ (I) The historical Jesus is not to be equated with the Christ of faith.

§ (II) The Synoptic Gospels are more historical than the Gospel of John (in other words, the Gospel of John is not a source for information about the historical Jesus).

§ (V) The authentic Jesus of the sayings and parables is not to be equated with the non-authentic Jesus of the kingdom and return.

§ (VII) The burden of proof is to prove historicity.

### Some premises we would have questions about:

§ (4) Oral tradition is fluid. [The question is, how fluid?]

§ (5) The oral mentality remembers, not the precise words, but the core of what was said. [Sometimes, but not always; there are Jewish examples.]

§ (19) Mark has arbitrarily arranged the events in his story of Jesus. [History is more than mere chronological sequence — it can be topically covered, for example.]

§ (9) Jesus' disciples were oral and itinerant: they moved around and revised/created his sayings and parables as the situation demanded.

§ (37) Q and Thomas were composed during the period A.D. 50-60. Mark was written about A.D. 70. Matthew was composed about A.D. 85. Luke-Acts was created around A.D. 90.

**EXAMPLE (1):** The Temptation in the Wilderness — Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13. Which account represents the actual order of events?

**EXAMPLE (2):** The Baptism of Jesus — Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22. Public event (Matthew) or private event (Mark, Luke)?

**EXAMPLE (3):** Peter's Confession at Caesarea Philippi — Matthew 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21. What did Peter confess? (All three differ.)

**EXAMPLE (4):** The Healing of the Centurion's Servant — Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10. Did the centurion come in person (Matt) or send representatives (Luke)?

**EXAMPLE (5):** The Abomination of Desolation (in the Olivet Discourse) — Matthew 24:15-22; Mark 13:14-20; Luke 21:20-24. Distant future (Matt, Mark [?]), near future (A.D. 70; Luke), or both (all three)?

**EXAMPLE (6):** The Trial of Jesus — Matthew 26:57-68; Mark 14:53-65; Luke 22:54-71. What was Jesus' answer when asked if He was the Christ?

### § The Results of the Jesus Seminar's Deliberations

#### § Of the words ascribed to Jesus (red letters) in the canonical gospels

**EVALUATION** • What should we say about the methods and the results of the Jesus Seminar?

#### The Jesus of the Seminar:

§ Had no mission with the twelve

§ Did not predict his suffering

§ Performed no miracles to draw attention

§ Did not judge

§ Did not make messianic or personal claims (all this is in contrast to the portrait of Jesus in the gospels)

"In theory, the project could produce an interesting freeze frame shot of the status of gospel scholarship near the end of the twentieth century: not exactly the epoch-making scientific breakthrough of a Galileo, but a modestly worthwhile survey of opinion."

#### Major Problems:

1. The self-selected group of researchers which constitutes the Jesus Seminar, though it includes several fine scholars, does not represent a balanced cross section of current scholarly opinion.
2. The selection and dating of sources is a major problem, especially the valuing of the Gospel of Thomas as an early and independent source for Jesus tradition.
3. Another major problem is the Seminar's dominant use of the criterion of dissimilarity for assessing the authenticity of Jesus tradition:
  - § Everything that is authentic must be dissimilar (unlike) to both Judaism and Christianity.

4. The Jesus Seminar's insistence on finding a "non-eschatological" Jesus:

§ Jesus himself did not proclaim a message of God's future intervention in history, a final judgment, nor is the kingdom a major theme.

5. The assessment of Jesus' sayings in isolation from a more comprehensive reconstruction of the events of his life, ministry, death, and resurrection is methodologically problematic and leads to a Jesus whose character does not fit events we know took place.

6. The Seminar has a minimalist, socially concerned Jesus, even a naturalist Jesus, who was offensive in his social claims, but really was not unique in his religious teaching.

§ Could such a Jesus generate a fresh religious movement?

7. The Seminar suffers from a limited view of the perspectival nature of history and sayings. Subsequent events can reshape sayings and history without reflecting a distortion of that history or saying. Sayings can summarise and still be historical (we do it all the time today).

8. The historical Jesus is still seen in sayings that may be rated pink or gray (the voice [vox] of Jesus versus the very words [verba]). But the amount of sayings the Seminar puts in black is suspect, often operating on hidden premises ("Son of Man" example — meets the criteria, but is still excluded on theological grounds; also sayings tied to miracles).

"What is afoot...is not the detailed objective study of individual passages, leading up to a new view of Jesus and the early Church. It is a particular view of Jesus and the early Church, working its way through into a detailed list of sayings that fit with this view."

### **What Difference Does It Make to Us?**

§ At least the Jesus Seminar came up with some authentic words from Jesus (i.e. he really existed)

§ At the same time the wedge is firmly driven between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith

§ The Seminar offers an attempt to explain who Jesus is that is representative of where many are who study him — great moral teacher, Galilean rabbi, social activist, etc.

§ The Jesus Seminar does not represent a cross-section of modern New Testament scholarship — one only has to look at the reaction of moderates to see this

§ The Seminar's view tends to be radical, skeptical, and cynical

### **There is an alternative to the Seminar's view of who Jesus is:**

§ This alternative is represented by works like *Jesus Under Fire*, *Jesus the Messiah*, *Jesus According to Scripture*, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (and numerous monographs, as well as the IBR Jesus Project.)

§ This debate is important because it is the difference between a domesticated Jesus and the Jesus who claims to show the way to God and provide access to him in the context of hope and forgiveness — a moral Jesus (the religious teacher) versus a unique Jesus who brings God's blessing, forgiveness, and hope.