

The Jesus Seminar: A Position Statement
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A Summary of The Jesus Seminar

The Jesus Seminar (TJS) is a ragtag collection¹ of skeptical New Testament scholars who have set out to determine who the historical Jesus really is through what he said. In existence for about twenty years, they often rear their heads around Easter when summoned by the press to comment on the person and work of Jesus.² In reality, their agenda is to make the results of their critical studies available to the rank and file. In other words, they want to liberate Christians from the clutches of fundamentalists who claim that the Bible records the very words of Jesus.

TJS, through a color-coded legend, gives their best guess as to what material in the canonical Gospels actually record what Jesus said.³ The reason for employing these critical methodologies is because the Jesus of history cannot be understood simply through a reading of New Testament documents. Their methodology they claim, is much like that of New Testament textual critics who attempt to vote on the certainty of a given variant (i.e. A, B, C, D, in the textual apparatus) in light of multiple manuscript readings.

Their basis for determining the authenticity of the words (and works) of Jesus is rooted in historical critical methodology. TJS works off the presupposition that the canonical gospels as we now possess them are creations of the church written for its benefit. We do not know what Jesus actually said. Besides, truth cannot be established by history since it is skewed. TJS has as its goal to reconstruct the historical Jesus from the results it has found in the destruction of the information that it has of him.

In order to reconstruct the historical Jesus from these results, TJS employs various criteria. Among them is the principle of dissimilarity. When Jesus stands out from what the church or Judaism may have said, it is likely to be original. Another one is the criteria of multiple attestation. A reading that appears in more than one Gospel is likely to be authentic. Therefore much of John must be ruled out since so much of his readings are not in the Synoptic Gospels. Then there is the presupposition by those in TJS that Jesus' sayings must be assumed to be inauthentic until they can be proved otherwise. All of this leads to the obvious conclusion in their scheme that very little of what we possess is actually the words of Christ. And if so little of what we possess is from the lips of Jesus, most of what he is purported to have done must be treated with the same skepticism. Simply stated, TJS holds that we have a very small amount of authentic words of Jesus based on their reconstruction of him, and what we do have is simply aphorisms, very short saying with little or no context.

¹ Actually there are about 70 of them, most of whom are not well known, with the exception of John Crossan, Robert Funk and Marcus Borg.

² This media attention is both in the written press as well as broadcast media.

³ For one variation of this methodology used by TJS, see *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, ed. Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 35-38.

In their reconstruction of short units in the aftermath of deconstruction, TJS places a high degree of emphasis upon other works such as the Gospel of Thomas. The result of trying to resurrect the words of Jesus is that about 18% of what Jesus is said to have said in the canonical Gospels are assumed to be the actual words of Jesus. TJS calls for faith in a Jesus that historically is impossible to comprehend. He has no message of repentance or the forgiveness of sins. He is a blurry figure who feels that everyone is OK. For instance, Crossan's Jesus is one of a *peasant Jewish Cynic*.⁴ But the ramification of this is that Jesus is one "who preaches inclusiveness and equality...within the idealized ethos of the late-twentieth-century academic: he is nonpatriarchal and noninstitutional; his kingdom consists of an open table where everyone accepts everyone else."⁵ Johnson notes that the Jesus portrayed by Crossan "is so much collapsed into the stereotype of 'the peasant' that he loses not only his uniqueness but even any distinctiveness as a human person."⁶

An Evaluation of The Jesus Seminar

TJS as noted above is based upon certain presuppositions that call for an evaluation. Regarding the principle of voting in through a color-coded scheme, such a methodology is not the same as what textual critics do in rating the certainty of a particular Greek reading in the critical apparatus. As one critic of TJS has stated, they are in effect mixing apples and oranges.⁷ There is a great deal of difference in between reconstructing the words of Jesus from a plethora of existing manuscripts, than attempting to do so from non-existent or dubious ones (e.g. Q, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Secret Mark*).

As to the criteria they use in determining the actual words of Jesus, there are inherent problems as well. For instance, the criterion of dissimilarity states that anything that Jesus said that differed from what the church might say or was in contrast to Judaism would be authentic. Yet if this is true, than Jesus can have nothing in common with his own Jewish heritage or the church that he came to establish.⁸ Jesus is both non-Jewish and unchristian!

Another criterion is that of multiple attestation. This assumption is that a reading that appears in more than one Gospel is likely to be authentic.⁹ This flies in the face of what TJS often argues for in their own Redaction Criticism, namely that the authors tied all the loose forms they

⁴ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 421.

⁵ Timothy Luke Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷ cf. Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 78-79.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹ For many scholars in TJS, sources also include Q, "M," and "L," along with the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Secret Mark*, and *Gospel of Peter*.

possessed into a narrative that fits with their theological purpose. Surely if this is true, then one particular author is likely at times to contain one or more readings that are unique to his own account.

One of their other assumptions is that Jesus' sayings must be assumed to be inauthentic until they can be proved otherwise. This is not the same assumption that other scholars in various other disciplines dealing with historical records make. They allow all the material to speak equally. Yet for some reason, biblical texts in the minds of TJS are not given the same fair shake. As a matter of fact, they give a higher priority to material that is at best, speculative. For instance, The Gospel of John is dismissed out of hand as unhistorical, being the creation of John that flowed out of the church community.¹⁰

For instance, they, and in particular Funk and Crossan, hold that the Gospel of Thomas is both earlier and independent of the canonical Gospels.¹¹ However the overwhelming conclusion regarding this work is that it is at best, late second century. It was found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt among other eclectic documents. The opinion of scholars of all stripes is that it is dependent on a tradition that is independent of the Gospels.¹²

The facts are that TJS builds its entire case that the canonical Gospels are suspect upon a foundation that is much weaker than the one they attempt to dismember. It should not surprise anyone that TJS came to such a conclusion. Their own presuppositions led them there. Once it is assumed that the canonical Gospels are not inspired and inerrant, then nothing that they contain can be trusted. The rest is simply left up to the imagination, which is what they have done. They have constructed a Jesus who is an empty shell of the one portrayed by the Gospel writers.

Conclusion

Radical portrayals of Jesus and the church he founded are nothing new. But history has shown that such viewpoints have been good for the church. They have forced the church to refocus on who Jesus really was, God incarnate. It has also stimulated the church to recover his commission to the church, namely, to preach the Gospel and make disciples. Jesus came to save sinners from eternal damnation through his own death on the cross for their sins. He came to save sinners, even those who deny who he was and what he came to do.

¹⁰ Funk and Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, 10.

¹¹ cf. Funk and Hoover, 10 for an optimistic view of the relevance for the Gospel of Thomas.

¹² cf. Witherington, 48-50.