

CHAPTER 2

JESUS THE TALKING HEAD

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JESUS SEMINAR

The Jesus Seminar has received a tremendous amount of attention as a result of its controversial procedures and results and its concerted marketing campaign. This chapter looks closely at the intent of the founders, the makeup of the Jesus Seminar, its decision-making process and its results. A critical examination reveals serious flaws in all these areas. In particular, Jesus is denuded of his historical context, and his sayings are stripped of their literary settings. The very procedures followed guarantee that too little of the relevant data will be allowed to speak to the issue of what Jesus said or did. The seminar itself is almost exclusively made up of North American scholars, and it is founded and dominated by a few of the more radical Jesus scholars in the U.S. Many of the major university religion departments, graduate schools and seminaries are not represented at all. A close look at the intent of the founders shows that the purpose of this seminar is to discredit fundamentalist and traditional images of and ideas about Jesus. The very process of voting on the sayings of Jesus leaves little room for nuances or probabilities, and, more importantly, yields a picture of Jesus with which no one scholar fully agrees. This composite picture leaves us with Jesus the talking head,¹ a Jesus who does not fit well into the context of early Judaism and whose story we cannot discern.

LONG AFTER THE THIRD QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS IS OVER, THE ONE enduring image that will be left in the minds of many will be a group of biblical scholars using colored beads to cast votes on the sayings of Jesus: a red bead to indicate "Jesus surely said this," pink for "he probably said that," gray for "he probably didn't say this" and black for "it is very unlikely that he said anything like that." The final conclusion reached by this approach was that only 18 percent of the Gospel sayings attributed

to Jesus were actually spoken by him.

Judging from the reaction in letters to the editor and special articles appearing in newspapers and magazines across the country, the devout layperson of whatever denominational affiliation finds this entire enterprise to be presumptuous. A great deal of heated debate has been generated and not much light shed on what is going on. In this chapter I will discuss the Jesus Seminar, its intents, its methodology and its results. One thing is certain—this seminar reflects the intense renewed interest in the 1980s and 1990s in finding out what the historical Jesus was really like. It shows that the Third Quest for the historical Jesus is fully underway.

The Jesus Seminar: Its Composition and Leaders

In its statement of purpose, found conveniently in the back of its red-letter edition of the parables of Jesus,² the steering committee indicates that the members of the Jesus Seminar are all critical scholars, by which is meant they adhere to the historical-critical approach of examining ancient historical sources. This however is not the whole story. It also means a commitment to newer approaches to the Bible, such as the social-scientific method and computer science. What is rather striking about this last remark is that it leaves out many older scholars, including many from Europe and the Third World.

One of the notable characteristics of the Jesus Seminar is its largely North American composition.³ It is not a group sponsored by either of the two major scholarly guilds, the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) or the group that originated in Europe and now, like the SBL, is an international organization, the Society for the Study of the New Testament (SNTS). Rather, it is a group sponsored, as Richard B. Hays says, by "[Robert W.] Funk's maverick entrepreneurial venture, the Westar Institute, located in Sonoma, California," the same venture that has a self-perpetuating publishing organ, Polebridge Press.⁴

From an examination of the list of Jesus Seminar fellows, it would appear to me that they are indeed a very carefully self-selected group, including none who could be labeled fundamentalists and only three or four who could be labeled conservative or evangelical.⁵ But this is not all. As Hays points out, if one examines even the most recent list of seventy-four fellows,⁶ "not one member of the New Testament faculty from Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Duke, University of Chicago, Union Theological Seminary, Vanderbilt, SMU, or Catholic University is involved in this

project. . . . Nor are any major scholars from England or the Continent."⁷ In short, this is hardly a representative sampling of critical scholars, even if one leaves evangelicals and conservative scholars out of the equation altogether.⁸

The statement of the steering committee makes clear that the fellows of the Jesus Seminar *could* not include any fundamentalists, for it contrasts the judgments of critical scholars like those on the Jesus Seminar with those of fundamentalists.⁹ It also says that television evangelists inhibit conservative institutions and scholars from participating more fully in the critical debate. Near the close of this statement we find the remark, "Unless biblical scholarship wants to lose its credibility—and it has come dangerously close to doing so because of its identification in the popular view with Sunday Schools and TV evangelism—it must adhere to the canons of research and publication that govern the physical sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities generally."¹⁰

Even on a charitable interpretation of things, one must conclude that the steering committee of the Jesus Seminar had as one of its major agendas the presentation of a "critical" portrait of Jesus that must necessarily be distinguished from the fundamentalist or traditional portraits.¹¹ The we/they language is unmistakable, and it calls in question the claim to be taking an unbiased approach. In fact in personal conversations with some of the members of the Jesus Seminar, I have been told that one of the major intentions of some of the prime movers in this group was to attack and discredit American fundamentalism and the images of Jesus it offers.

Hays is also right to point out that publications like *The Five Gospels* must be seen for what they are—imaginative and creative books "produced by a self-selected body of scholars who hold a set of unconventional views about Jesus and the gospels." Hays concludes, "Their attempt to present these views as 'the assured results of critical scholarship' is—one must say it—reprehensible deception."¹² I would suggest that the results are at least interesting in that they reveal how and what a certain subset of North American scholars think about the sayings of the historical Jesus.

Only in a thoroughly democratic society where the assumption that the majority view is likely to be right and to reflect a true critical opinion on the "truth" could the idea of voting on the sayings of Jesus have arisen.¹³ There are however major methodological problems with this assumption,

especially when the test group of scholars is self-selected and represents only one portion of the spectrum of scholarly opinion. While the voting may make the process *appear* democratic, the preselection of the fellows, the exclusion of the majority of scholars, the disregard for the vox populi and, perhaps most tellingly, the disregard for the opinions of scholars of previous generations, shows that we are dealing ultimately with an elitist and not a democratic approach.

A Majority of the Minority

Let us suppose however that this group's views do represent the views of the *majority* of critical New Testament scholars. It does not take much historical memory to realize that very often the majority is wrong on significant matters of truth. Truth often is precisely what makes the majority edgy and leads to the suppression of the minority. The case of Galileo, to which Funk and others appeal, is a very good example. But to argue that the Jesus Seminar is *like* Galileo, a voice for truth crying in the wilderness of ignorance and blind faith, is another matter. The question is why we should believe that the majority of this *small* representation of New Testament scholarship has achieved greater clarity regarding the historical Jesus than other capable, competent and critical scholars who strongly disagree with them.

In fact, it will not do to suggest that the majority of the Jesus Seminar was in agreement with the results of the various votes taken, for the results were much more ambiguous than they appear at first glance. For example, if we take the votes on Matthew 25:29 ("For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away"), a full 25 percent of the scholars voting on that occasion thought that Jesus surely said it. Another 11 percent gave this saying a pink rating, affirming that Jesus probably said it. Thus a total of 36 percent voted some shade of red for this saying. The rest however gave it a gray or black vote, and thus it is placed either in the black category, in the earlier record of voting,¹⁴ or in the gray category, in the new volume on the five Gospels. But if one takes *only* the black vote on this particular saying, those who are convinced that Jesus did not say it, *that* group is in the minority compared to the other three groups who (1) think it is possible but unlikely, (2) think it is likely and (3) think it is virtually certain! What this shows is not just the divisions among even this group of scholars but that a saying like this

can receive substantial votes in all four categories, indeed almost as many red votes as black votes, and yet can end up in the black or gray category rather than within the 18 percent of authentic sayings of Jesus or in the "probably authentic" category.

Criteria of Authenticity

Perhaps even more important is the fact that while the editors state that all the scholars participating in this seminar affirm the use of the historical-critical method, they do not tell us whether they all agree on *how* the method should be used and what weight should be given to which tool of evaluation. For example, some scholars place a great deal of emphasis on what is called the criterion of dissimilarity. This criterion basically states that a Jesus saying which stands out both from its Jewish historical background and from its early church foreground is likely to be authentic. In other words such a saying is under no cloud of suspicion of having been invented by the early church or of being simply a quotation of something various early Jews, and not Jesus in particular, might have said.

If one uses this sort of criterion as an ultimate or final litmus test, one is bound to end up with only the distinctive or unique sayings and a Jesus who has nothing in common with either his Jewish heritage or his later Christian followers. Of course the idea of Jesus being totally idiosyncratic, without any analogy, is highly improbable. There never has been such a person in all of human history. What the Jesus Seminar people do not tell us is what weight was given to the criterion of dissimilarity and by whom.

While the criterion of dissimilarity can be used to help us discern what is apparently distinctive about Jesus' teaching,¹⁵ it can hardly be used as the sole determinant of what is authentic among his sayings. If it is used as the only criterion it leads to a very distorted picture of Jesus, a Jesus who is both non-Jewish and has little or nothing in common with his Christian followers!

There are other criteria, such as the criteria of multiple attestation. Most Gospel scholars argue that the similarities between Matthew, Luke and Mark are explainable on a theory of mutual relationship. Typically, Mark is regarded as the first Gospel to have been written, with its influence being discernible in Matthew and Luke. The material that Matthew and Luke have in common that is not dependent on Mark is attributed to a hypothetical source called "Q" (from the German *Quelle*, "source"). The material that is distinctive to Matthew or to Luke, material that cannot

be attributed to either Mark or Q, is posited as having come from sources "M" or "L" respectively. Thus the criteria of multiple attestation pertains to a saying that appears in more than one of these Synoptic Gospel sources, to which may be added John or some other independent source such as Paul. If this criterion were brought into play it would probably provide a more well-rounded and authentic picture of Jesus.¹⁶ As Ben F. Meyer has put it, we cannot decide "historicity questions . . . in peremptory fashion by a single acid test . . . dealing with the data atomistically. . . . On the whole it is rare that a solid judgment of historicity can be made prior to and apart from a large frame of reference."¹⁷

Unfortunately we are not told whether the Jesus Seminar used a broad enough spectrum of criteria to reach their conclusions. In view of the fact that some of the sayings they rule out *do* meet important historical criteria but not the criterion of dissimilarity, we must conclude that some of their results might be explained by their overreliance on the criterion of dissimilarity.¹⁸ As Hays has expressed it, "The Jesus who emerges from this procedure is necessarily a free-floating iconoclast, artificially isolated from his people and their Scripture, and artificially isolated from the movement that he founded."¹⁹

A further methodological problem arises from the assumption that, having stripped the sayings of Jesus from their narrative context, we can still know what they mean and decide whether Jesus is likely to have said them or not. Jesus was not just a talking head nor a sage who merely tossed out timeless aphorisms to the crowds. Rather, his sayings must be related, if possible, not only to their narrative contexts in the Gospels, but also to the *events* of Jesus' life, including the deeds he performed.²⁰ This the Jesus Seminar did not even attempt to do, so far as I can see, and this oversight also helps to explain the idiosyncratic results. We can make an aphorism mean whatever we want it to mean if we denude it of both its literary and its historical context.²¹

Yet another methodological problem is the apparent presumption of many members of the seminar that Jesus' sayings *must* be regarded as inauthentic unless they can be proved to be authentic. This is assumed to be *the* critical point of view. But in reality it is a perspective steeped in a negative bias, not a neutral or open stance. Behind this attitude lies the basic assumption that the early church recreated Jesus in the image it preferred, inventing many sayings and placing them on Jesus' lips. Indeed this seminar would lead us to think that as much as 82 percent of the

Gospel sayings fall into this category of ecclesiological invention.

Many critical scholars, both Christian and Jewish, and some of no religious affiliation at all, would simply reject this negative bias as neither historical nor scholarly. Too often scholars fail to be critical of their own motives and theological biases. Too often they assume they know better than the early Christians who preserved and collected the sayings of Jesus and composed the Gospels what Jesus was or was not likely to have said. This assumption is founded on hubris.

In contrast, James D. G. Dunn, on equally critical grounds, concludes that:

The earliest tradents within the Christian churches [were] preservers more than innovators, . . . seeking to transmit, retell, explain, interpret, elaborate, but not to create *de novo*. All of which means that I approach the Synoptic tradition with a good deal more confidence than many of my New Testament colleagues. Through the main body of the Synoptic tradition, I believe, we have in most cases direct access to the teaching and ministry of Jesus as it was remembered from the beginning of the transmission process (which often predates Easter) and so fairly direct access to the ministry and teaching of Jesus through the eyes and ears of those who went about with him.²²

In view of the fact that the earliest conveyors of the Jesus tradition were all, without exception, Jews, we would naturally expect them to treat the teachings of their master with as much respect as did the disciples of other Jewish teachers such as Hillel and Shammai. This is all the more likely if, as happened with Jesus of Nazareth, the teacher suffered an untimely and unexpected end and was highly criticized by some Jews. The need to remember, preserve and defend him against false charges would be acute.²³

The Ascendancy of *Thomas* and Q

A further methodological problem is that the seminar seems to be overly optimistic not only about the antiquity of the sayings found in the *Gospel of Thomas* but also about its independence from the canonical Gospels.²⁴ Polebridge Press continues to publish volumes about Q and *Thomas*, most recently *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*,²⁵ as part of an overall attempt to force scholars and others to place the material in *Thomas* on equal footing with what we find in the Synoptic Gospels. This is problematic on several grounds.

First, we must remember where the *Gospel of Thomas* was found—at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, along with a very eclectic set of ancient documents.²⁶ If one can judge a document by some of the company it keeps, there is little encouragement to see *Thomas* as providing access to the early Jesus tradition or as giving us many clues about the authentic Jesus tradition. The document, it seems, actually originated in the region of eastern Syria (Edessa?). Other documents connected with *Thomas* come from this region (the *Book of Thomas*, the *Acts of Thomas*), and only in this region was Thomas known as Judas Thomas, as he is identified in the *Gospel of Thomas* and these other *Thomas* works.

Furthermore, the only firm evidence for dating this document is its earliest Greek fragments (P. Oxy. 1), which were written no later than about A.D. 200. The first reference to the document by name occurs no earlier than Hippolytus, who was writing between A.D. 222 and 235. Nothing in any of this evidence gives us good reason to think this was a first-century document.

The balance judgment of Richard J. Bauckham is worth repeating:

It seems that the tradition of the sayings of Jesus on which *Thomas* drew was Jewish Christian in origin, . . . but had developed in a gnosticizing direction. Some sayings of clearly Gnostic origin had entered the tradition and the editor of *Thomas* selected from the tradition sayings which were compatible with his own Gnostic theology. . . . The most probable opinion is that *Thomas* is dependent on a tradition substantially independent of the canonical Gospels, though influence from the canonical Gospels cannot be ruled out. . . . *Thomas* can therefore provide useful evidence for the study of the origins and development of the traditions behind the canonical Gospels, *provided that due allowance is made for its greater distance (both theologically and probably chronologically) from the historical Jesus.*²⁷

Bauckham is probably right: of the sayings in *Thomas* that have no parallels in the Synoptics, a few may be authentic. But in view of the Gnosticizing and ascetic tendencies of the document, whether they are due to its editor or to the creator of the material, even where *Thomas* records sayings that are parallel with the Synoptics, the burden of proof lies on those who would maintain the authenticity of their *Thomas* form. It is my own judgment that only very rarely does *Thomas* provide an earlier form of a saying that is also found in the Synoptics. The argument by John P. Meier and others that *Thomas's* frequent dependence on the canonical form of var-

ious sayings can be demonstrated is likely correct.²⁸

But there is more to say about the *Thomas* mentality of some scholars. It assumes that because *Thomas* is a collection of almost solely sayings material, we can then hypothesize that such documents came from communities where a "sayings Gospel" was the only or main form of Gospel in use. In view of the other *Thomas* documents mentioned above, this is a doubtful conclusion. If it is doubtful of *Thomas's* community it is equally if not more doubtful for the community in which the hypothetical Q document originated.²⁹ It seems highly unlikely that there ever was a "Q community," if by that is meant a Christian community that possessed as their sacred tradition only the Q collection of Jesus' sayings, without some form of passion and resurrection traditions.³⁰

Thus it is right to be skeptical of using *Thomas* as a major source for reconstructing the teaching of the historical Jesus, not least because of the document's theological tendencies. These tendencies, especially its Gnosticizing agenda, are not found in the Synoptic Gospels and should be seen as telltale signs that the *Gospel of Thomas* likely arose, at least in its present form, in the second century when Gnosticism was well developed.³¹

On the other hand, scholars are right to insist that in principle we must be open to all possible sources of information about the historical Jesus, both canonical and noncanonical. For example, if fresh evidence at Qumran does in fact speak clearly about Jesus, we must pay careful attention to it. But *all* such sources must be evaluated with critical scrutiny. It is not reasonable to be highly skeptical about the canonical Gospels and highly receptive to the noncanonical Gospels. Earlier documents are on the whole likely to be more faithful and closer to the source and its original form than later ones, and the vast majority of critical scholars still believe the canonical Gospels, especially the Synoptics, are our earliest resources for learning about the historical Jesus.³²

I have pointed out several quite serious methodological flaws in the approach the Jesus Seminar seems to have taken with the Jesus material, and these must be borne in mind as we begin to examine the results of the seminar. We are about to see that the Jesus Seminar paints us a picture of a Jesus who is a sage, but not a very Jewish one, and, perhaps most notably, a noneschatological sage.

The Demise of Markan Authority

Throughout this century it has been a commonplace of Gospel scholarship

that Mark's Gospel is the earliest of the four and was written around A.D. 68-70. Matthew and Luke are said to be later and to have used Mark, so that most scholars would argue that in the so-called triple tradition (the stories and sayings shared by all three Synoptic Gospels) the Markan form should be seen as the earliest of the three, unless there are extraordinary reasons for thinking that one of the others had an independent earlier version. One might then expect that the sayings material in Mark would be one of the sources, if not the primary source, the Jesus Seminar would turn to in reconstructing Jesus' utterances. This expectation, however, is not met.

Amazingly enough, only *one* saying in the whole of the Gospel of Mark is deemed fully authentic and deserving of the red-letter treatment: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mk 12:17). Almost none of the Markan material in Mark 10 about children or marriage or divorce, or the eschatological material in Mark 13, escapes the heavy-handed ax of the Jesus Seminar.³³ One may properly ask why not, and I think the reason is not hard to discover.

We are told in some of the commentary material, presumably written by Funk and the other editors, that the first written Gospels were not Mark, Matthew and Luke, but rather Q and possibly an early version of *Thomas*.³⁴ To this conclusion is added the remark that when Q and *Thomas*, taken as necessarily independent sources, both include a given saying, this is to be taken as strong, early *documentary evidence* for the genuineness of a saying. In other words, the criterion of multiple attestation does finally show up, but for some reason *Thomas* is given precedence over even Mark!³⁵ This approach not only assumes that Q was a document, even though we have no extant copies of it, it also assumes that *Thomas* was an early, pre-70 document. Now this whole procedure, which deals with Mark so cavalierly and grants *Thomas* so much reverence, can only be called radical. Hays is right to stress the problem as he does:

Many scholars regard it [*Thomas*] as literarily dependent on the canonical gospels, though this remains a debated issue. No hint of these debates, however, is allowed to appear in the pages of *The Five Gospels*, which unhesitatingly treats the hypothetical Q and a hypothetical "early version of *Thomas*" as the crucial sources for locating authentic Jesus tradition. Here some suspicion begins to arise about the candor of the editors of the book. They claim that they want to make the results of the best critical scholarship available to the public, but their working

method trades upon a controversial and implausible early dating of *Thomas*, without offering the reader any clue that this is a shaky element in their methodological foundation.³⁶

The Jesus Seminar also assumes something else about Q. The material that makes up Q is embedded in, even laced throughout, the text of Matthew and Luke and has to be ferreted out, leaving behind whatever editorial revisions the First or Third Evangelists may have made. Yet these scholars are more confident in *their* reconstruction of Q as representative of the early Jesus tradition than in Mark's presentation of sayings material, *even though we have a well-established Greek text of Mark, and have no such text for Q*. One can only label this approach presumptuous at best. While I am optimistic that we can know a good deal about the early form of Q, to rate it so much more highly than the source material in Mark is clearly unwarranted. This is especially so since Q's reconstruction involves fine judgments and inevitable uncertainties, with the result that no two scholars agree completely on the shape of Q!

The Parables of Jesus

What then of the Q and *Thomas* material that escapes the ax? We will concentrate here on the parable material since it is very familiar to most readers and because the other results of the seminar do not yet reveal any crucial additions to the picture it paints. We are told that there are only five parables that certainly go back to Jesus: (1) the parable of the leaven (Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20-21), which received 60 percent red votes and no black votes, the highest rating, (2) the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-35), (3) the parable of the dishonest steward (Lk 16:1-8), (4) the parable of vineyard workers (Mt 20:1-15) and (5) the parable of the mustard seed in its *Thomas* form (*Gos. Thom.* 20.2).

All of these parables are of course familiar and draw by analogy on true-to-life situations. What could we deduce if this was all the Jesus material we had? For one thing it would be clear that Jesus had a rather radical critique of ethnic prejudice (the good Samaritan), for another we might conclude that he was bitter over the brutal social injustices in the land (the vineyard workers). Both the parable of the mustard seed and that of the leaven might suggest taking some sort of action that would eventually produce change in the midst of God's people. The parable of the dishonest steward might be understood to indicate that in a fallen world one should take an opportunistic approach to life. All of these conclusions have some

merit. They suggest Jesus was an old-fashioned social commentator and perhaps an advocate of change, but they overlook the fact that these stories are about the kingdom of God, about what God was doing in and through the ministry of Jesus, rather than simply advocating human actions or attitudes.

There are an additional twenty-one parables that receive pink ratings, but some of these are alternate versions of the five listed above (for example, the *Thomas* version of the leaven parable (*Gos. Thom.* 96.1), or the Synoptic version of the mustard seed (Mt 13:31-32; Mk 4:31-32; Lk 13:18-19). Two other parables made it into the pink category only in their *Thomas* version—the empty jar (*Gos. Thom.* 97) and the parable of the tenants (*Gos. Thom.* 65). In addition, we have the following familiar parables in some form: (1) the parable of the sower (Mk 4 and parallels), (2) the three parables of the lost coin, sheep and son in Luke 15, (3) the unjust judge (Lk 18:2-5), (4) the pearl (Mt 13:45-46; *Gos. Thom.* 76.1), (5) the Pharisee and the publican (Lk 18:10-14), (6) the unmerciful servant (Mt 18:23-34), (7) the treasure (Mt 13:44; *Gos. Thom.* 109), (8) the feast (Lk 14:16-23; *Gos. Thom.* 76.1), (9) the rich farmer (Lk 12:16-20; *Gos. Thom.* 63.1), (10) the barren tree (Lk 13:6-9) and (11) the entrusted money (Mt 25:14-28; Lk 19:13, 15-24). Other parts of these parables could be mentioned separately, but we will leave these out.

What does one learn from the above list? First, that the *Thomas* version of some sayings is preferred over canonical versions, though the rationale for this is doubtful. Second, that there is a decided preference for Luke's parables and the Lukan version of parables. This last point comports with certain trends among Q scholars and deserves questioning.

There is no disputing that Matthew's version of various sayings and parables is more eschatological and often more Jewish than Luke's (using, for example, the phrase "kingdom of heaven" rather than "kingdom of God"). How are we to account for this? There are two avenues of approach. One could argue that the First Evangelist or his source introduced Jewish and eschatological elements *into* the sayings of Jesus that originally were not in this form and that Luke or *Thomas* presents the earlier version. On the other hand, one can suggest that Luke, probably the only Gentile of any of the New Testament writers and one who moreover probably wrote for a Gentile audience, is likely to have put things in a more generic form, a form more understandable to Gentiles who were not familiar with Jewish eschatological and apocalyptic forms of expression. In this case,

Matthew's version of these sayings may at various points be closer to the original, more Semitic version.

One example of this Lukan approach may be given. In both Mark and Matthew, when the centurion speaks from beneath the cross at the point of Jesus' death, he says, "Truly this man was God's Son" (Mk 15:39; Mt 27:54), while in Luke 23:47 he says, "Certainly this man was innocent," (literally, "righteous"). Now the latter declaration would make very good sense in the Greco-Roman world, where it was widely assumed that the character of a person would be revealed in the way he or she handled death. The version in both Mark and Matthew is surely more Semitic and likely to be earlier. There is no sound scholarly basis for formulating a general rule that Luke's form of sayings is more likely to be original than Matthew's. Each saying must be judged on a case-by-case basis. I would argue, as do various Lukan specialists, that Luke also *tends* to deeschatologize his source material or focus on realized eschatological aspects in accord with his salvation-historical perspective.³⁷

If we take the seminar's pink material as a whole, what else do we learn about Jesus? We hear a good deal about imploring God to act through prayer, about surprising discoveries, about planting seeds and about how injustice is finally rectified and wrongs are righted. We also learn about the mistake of assuming one is going to live forever. Furthermore, we read about using the resources one has, investing them and making more, and seizing one's opportunities. Of course all of this advice or commentary once again sounds like the kind of thing even the sages who contributed to Proverbs could have said, except for one thing. Jesus says these things about change, opportunities and even saving the lost precisely because he believes God's divine saving activity is at work in these ways and with these sorts of opportunities and results. The Dominion of God certainly has social effects, but Jesus is not simply talking about the effects, he is also speaking of the divine causes of such changes and their surprising results.

Unless we are careful to note that all these parables are parables of God's *inbreaking* kingdom, the net effect of the Jesus Seminar's choices is a somewhat less Jewish Jesus, certainly a less eschatological Jesus. Funk's summary of the results of the seminar is instructive. He concludes:

1. Jesus' sayings were short, provocative and memorable.
2. Jesus' best-remembered forms of speech were aphorisms and parables.

3. Jesus' talk was distinctive.
4. Jesus' sayings and parables cut across the social and religious grain of his society.
5. Jesus' sayings and parables surprise and shock; they characteristically call for a reversal of roles or frustrate ordinary, everyday expectations.
6. Jesus' sayings are often characterized by exaggeration, humor and paradox.
7. Jesus' images are concrete and vivid, and his sayings and parables are customarily metaphorical and without explicit application.
8. Jesus does not as a rule initiate dialogue or debate, nor does he offer to cure people. He rarely makes pronouncements or speaks about himself in the first person.³⁸

The Omissions of the Jesus Seminar

By and large the problem with these conclusions is not what they affirm but what they omit, which is a very great deal. In particular the teachings of Jesus that are not parables or aphorisms are omitted, as are the controversy dialogues and presumably various of the pronouncements in the so-called pronouncement stories.³⁹ The latter is apparently thought to be too direct for Jesus, the ever elusive and allusive sage.

Also omitted, almost altogether, is the theological and eschatological matrix out of which all this teaching operates. For example, it has long been the consensus of most scholars that if there are two things Jesus certainly spoke about they are the Son of Man and the kingdom of God. Yet these subjects hardly surface in the Jesus Seminar's discussions of important topics.

The Jesus Seminar's approach to Jesus the sage yields a Jesus who was too self-effacing and modest to speak much about himself or about his mission and purpose in life. It is very difficult on the basis of Funk's conclusions to imagine why Jesus would ever have gathered twelve disciples, and yet most scholars, including as critical a scholar as E. P. Sanders, are convinced he did.⁴⁰

Perhaps most tellingly, *nothing* of real consequence from the passion or resurrection narratives that might present us with any clues about who Jesus was and why he died is found to be authentic. This is of course because *Thomas* has no such material, and *Q* has precious few hints in that direction. If one starts with *Thomas* and a very Lukan version of *Q*, it is hard to arrive at the picture of Jesus that one finds in Mark in general

and in the passion narratives in particular.

To arrive at the minimal results that Funk enumerates requires that we dismiss a good deal of the early evidence in Mark, but we have seen that this seminar was prepared to take that step. The Jesus this seminar repeatedly maintains *did* exist was a traveling sage who traded in proverbial wisdom. While this is one legitimate angle from which to view Jesus—clearly much of his teaching takes on the form of wisdom in parables, aphorisms and riddles⁴¹—it does not tell the whole story. It certainly does not account for Jesus' use of eschatological language about the Son of Man and about God's eschatological saving activity breaking into the present and culminating in the future.⁴²

Jesus Without a Story

What is perhaps most striking about the work of the Jesus Seminar is that while each participating scholar no doubt has a story about the life of Jesus in mind into which he believes these various sayings of Jesus fit, this framework is never discussed. Ultimately the determination of what is authentic or inauthentic among the sayings of the Jesus tradition must be checked against not merely the broader historical matrix in which Jesus operated (the historical Galilee of the early first century) but against the particular narrative, as we can reconstruct it, of Jesus' life. The judgment, "Jesus couldn't have said or done that," presupposes knowledge about what comports with the facts of Jesus' life and with Jesus' character and ministry. This is why scholars like Sanders have rightly stressed that we need a framework of facts about Jesus' life into which we can try to place and interpret his teachings (and actions).⁴³ The story of Jesus is the matrix out of which his words and deeds must be understood.

The seminar goes on to suggest that Jesus was not a controversialist, never initiated debates or controversies, and was passive until someone questioned or criticized him or his followers. He was not a prophet or a radical reformer. He is seen as a person who never spoke of himself or claimed to play any decisive role in God's final plans for humankind, never claimed to be the Messiah.

So we might ask how anyone as inoffensive as this could have generated so much hostility, much less get himself crucified. The Jesus of the Jesus Seminar could never have ended up on Golgotha nailed to the cross. Yet the crucifixion of Jesus is one of the basic historical givens of what we know about Jesus, as even Rudolf Bultmann agreed! Since Jesus is char-

acterized by the seminar as a man with a laconic wit given to exaggeration, humor and paradox, he seems a much better candidate for a late-night visit with David Letterman or Jay Leno, or for an appearance in "Stand Up Spotlight." At the end of the day the seminar rejects the majority of the evidence (82 percent) in order to come up with a portrait like this. I will leave the reader to decide whether it is a truly scholarly and unbiased approach to reject the majority of one's evidence and stress a minority of it. In a court of law, where there is plenty of critical scrutiny, point and counterpoint, this sort of approach would never stand up.

We simply add that this seminar Jesus will not preach, did not come to save and likely will not last. It may be a new Jesus, but it is doubtful this portrait will ever represent *the* scholarly consensus that will lead us into the next century. More likely it will go the way of the various literary portraits painted by the nineteenth-century biographers of Jesus.⁴⁴ It probably tells us more about various members of the Jesus Seminar than about Jesus. Perhaps they wish to see themselves as sages offering intercultural wisdom.