THE FIVE GOSPELS

The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus

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INTRODUCTION

THE SEARCH FOR THE REAL JESUS: DARWIN, SCOPES, & ALL THAT

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.

In the aftermath of the controversy over Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (published in 1859) and the ensuing Scopes "monkey" trial in 1925, American biblical scholarship retreated into the closet. The fundamentalist mentality generated a climate of inquisition that made honest scholarly judgments dangerous. Numerous biblical scholars were subjected to heresy trials and suffered the loss of academic posts. They learned it was safer to keep their critical judgments private. However, the intellectual ferment of the century soon reasserted itself in colleges, universities, and seminaries. By the end of World War II, critical scholars again quietly dominated the academic scene from one end of the continent to the other. Critical biblical scholarship was supported, of course, by other university disciplines which wanted to ensure that dogmatic considerations not be permitted to intrude into scientific and historical research. The fundamentalists were forced, as a consequence, to found their own Bible colleges and seminaries in order to propagate their point of view. In launching new institutions, the fundamentalists even refused accommodation with the older, established church-related schools that dotted the land.

One focal point of the raging controversies was who Jesus was and what he had said. Jesus has always been a controversial figure. In the gospels he is represented as being at odds with his religious environment in matters like fasting and sabbath observance. He seems not to have gotten along with his own family. Even his disciples are pictured as stubborn, dense, and self-serving—unable to fathom what he was about. Herod Antipas, in whose territory he ranged as a traveling sage, had him pegged as a troublemaker, much like John

the Baptist, and the Romans regarded him as a mild political threat. Yet mu about him remains obscure. We do not even know for sure what language usually spoke—Aramaic or Greek—when instructing his followers. It is r surprising that this enigmatic figure should be perpetually at the center of ston of controversy.

The contemporary religious controversy, epitomized in the Scopes trial a the continuing clamor for creationism as a viable alternative to the theory evolution, turns on whether the worldview reflected in the Bible can be carri forward into this scientific age and retained as an article of faith. Jesus figur prominently in this debate. The Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firm in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those wl have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope. The old deities and demo were swept from the skies by that remarkable glass. Copernicus, Kepler, ar Galileo have dismantled the mythological abodes of the gods and Satan, ar bequeathed us secular heavens.

The profound change in astronomy was a part of the rise of experiment science, which sought to put all knowledge to the test of close and repeate observation. At the same time and as part of the same impulse, the advent historical reason meant distinguishing the factual from the fictional in accoun of the past. For biblical interpretation that distinction required scholars to prol the relation between faith and history. In this boiling cauldron the quest of th historical Jesus was conceived.

Historical knowledge became an indispensable part of the modern world basic "reality toolkit." Apart from this instrument, the modern inquirer could n learn the difference between an imagined world and "the real world" of huma experience. To know the truth about Jesus, the real Jesus, one had to find th Jesus of history. The refuge offered by the cloistered precincts of faith gradual became a battered and beleaguered position. In the wake of the Enlightenmer the dawn of the Age of Reason, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centurie biblical scholars rose to the challenge and launched a tumultuous search for th Jesus behind the Christian façade of the Christ.

THE SEVEN PILLARS OF SCHOLARLY WISDOM

The question of the historical Jesus was stimulated by the prospect of viewin Jesus through the new lens of historical reason and research rather than throug the perspective of theology and traditional creedal formulations.

The search for the Jesus of history began with Hermann Samuel Reimar (1694–1768), a professor of oriental languages in Hamburg, Germany. A clos study of the New Testament gospels convinced Reimarus that what the autho of the gospels said about Jesus could be distinguished from what Jesus himse said. It was with this basic distinction between the man Jesus and the Christ c the creeds that the quest of the historical Jesus began.

Most late-twentieth-century Americans do not know that one of our ow sons of the Enlightenment, Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), scrutinized the go pels with a similar intent: to separate the real teachings of Jesus, the figure c

history, from the encrustations of Christian doctrine. He gathered his findings in *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, Extracted textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French, and English*, a little volume that was first published in 1904 and is still in print.

Meanwhile, back in Germany, the views of Reimarus and his successors were greatly furthered in the monumental *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* by David Friedrich Strauss (first edition, 1835). Strauss distinguished what he called the "mythical" (defined by him as anything legendary or supernatural) in the gospels from the historical. The storm that broke over the 1,400 pages of minute analysis cost him his first teaching post at the seminary at Tübingen. Critics hounded him up to the time of his death in 1874.

The choice Strauss posed in his assessment of the gospels was between the supernatural Jesus—the Christ of faith—and the historical Jesus. Other scholars in the German tradition developed a safer, but no less crucial, contrast between the Jesus of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke—and the Jesus of the Gospel of John. Two pillars of modern biblical criticism were now in place. The first was the distinction between the historical Jesus, to be uncovered by historical excavation, and the Christ of faith encapsulated in the first creeds. The second pillar consisted of recognizing the synoptic gospels as much closer to the historical Jesus than the Fourth Gospel, which presented a "spiritual" Jesus.

By 1900 the third and fourth pillars of modern critical scholarship were also in place. The recognition of the Gospel of Mark as prior to Matthew and Luke, and the basis for them both, is the third pillar. A fourth pillar was the identification of the hypothetical source Q as the explanation for the "double tradition"—the material Matthew and Luke have in common beyond their dependence on Mark. Both of these pillars will be discussed below.

The tragic and heroic story of those who endeavored to break the church's stranglehold over learning has been chronicled by Albert Schweitzer in his famous *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906). Schweitzer himself contributed to that revolt in a major way, following the breakthrough of Johannes Weiss in his *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (1892). For Weiss and Schweitzer, the basic decision that had to be made about Jesus was whether he thought the age was about to end in a cataclysmic event, known as the "eschaton" (Greek for the "last event"), or whether he took a longer view of things. Weiss and Schweitzer opted for an eschatological Jesus. Consequently, Schweitzer saw Jesus' ethic as only an "interim ethic" (a way of life good only for the brief period before the cataclysmic end, the eschaton). As such he found it no longer relevant or valid. Acting on his own conclusion, in 1913 Schweitzer abandoned a brilliant career in theology, turned to medicine, and went out to Africa where he founded the famous hospital at Lambaréné out of respect for all forms of life.

The eschatological Jesus reigned supreme among gospel scholars from the time of Weiss and Schweitzer to the end of World War II. Slowly but surely the evidence began to erode that view, which, after all, had been prompted by the revolt, towards the close of the nineteenth century, against the optimistic theology of progress that then prevailed. Meanwhile, neo-orthodoxy under the tutelage of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann suppressed any real interest in the historical Jesus for the better part of five decades (1920–1970). Barth and Bult-

mann dismissed the quest of the historical Jesus as an illegitimate attempt to secure a factual basis for faith—an attempt to "prove" Christian claims made on behalf of Jesus. Even today historical studies of Christian origins still labor under that theological interdiction.

The creation of the Jesus Seminar coincides with the reemergence of interest in the Jesus of history, which was made possible by the wholesale shift of biblical scholarship away from its earlier academic home in the church, seminaries, and isolated theological enclaves. While biblical scholarship has not lost its interest in and concern for the Jewish and Christian traditions, it has finally won its liberty.

As that interest came back to life in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars were surprised to learn that they no longer labored under the tyranny of either neo-orthodoxy or an eschatological Jesus. John the Baptist, not Jesus, was the chief advocate of an impending cataclysm, a view that Jesus' first disciples had acquired from the Baptist movement. Jesus himself rejected that mentality in its crass form, quit the ascetic desert, and returned to urban Galilee. He took up eating and drinking and consorting with toll collectors and sinners, and developed a different point of view, expressed in the major parables and root metaphors for God's imperial rule, as the kingdom of God has now come to be known. The liberation of the non-eschatological Jesus of the aphorisms and parables from Schweitzer's eschatological Jesus is the fifth pillar of contemporary scholarship.

Jesus' followers did not grasp the subtleties of his position and reverted, once Jesus was not there to remind them, to the view they had learned from John the Baptist. As a consequence of this reversion, and in the aura of the emerging view of Jesus as a cult figure analogous to others in the hellenistic mystery religions, the gospel writers overlaid the tradition of sayings and parables with their own "memories" of Jesus. They constructed their memories out of common lore, drawn in large part from the Greek Bible, the message of John the Baptist, and their own emerging convictions about Jesus as the expected messiah—the Anointed. The Jesus of the gospels is an imaginative theological construct, into which has been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth—traces that cry out for recognition and liberation from the firm grip of those whose faith overpowered their memories. The search for the authentic words of Jesus is a search for the forgotten Jesus.

A sixth pillar of modern gospel scholarship, to be explored subsequently, consists of the recognition of the fundamental contrast between the oral culture (in which Jesus was at home) and a print culture (like our own). The Jesus whom historians seek will be found in those fragments of tradition that bear the imprint of orality: short, provocative, memorable, oft-repeated phrases, sentences, and stories.

The seventh and final pillar that supports the edifice of contemporary gospel scholarship is the reversal that has taken place regarding who bears the burden of proof. It was once assumed that scholars had to prove that details in the synoptic gospels were *not* historical. D. F. Strauss undertook proof of this nature in his controversial work. As a consequence, his work was viewed as negative and destructive. The current assumption is more nearly the opposite and indicates how far scholarship has come since Strauss: the gospels are now assumed

to be narratives in which the memory of Jesus is embellished by mythic elements that express the church's faith in him, and by plausible fictions that enhance the telling of the gospel story for first-century listeners who knew about divine men and miracle workers firsthand. Supposedly historical elements in these narratives must therefore be demonstrated to be so. The Jesus Seminar has accordingly assumed the burden of proof: the Seminar is investigating in minute detail the data preserved by the gospels and is also identifying those that have some claim to historical veracity. For this reason, the work of the Seminar has drawn criticism from the skeptical left wing in scholarship—those who deny the possibility of isolating any historical memories in the gospels at all. Of course, it has also drawn fire from the fundamentalist right for not crediting the gospels with one hundred percent historical reliability.

These seven pillars of scholarly "wisdom," useful and necessary as they have proven to be, are no guarantee of the results. There are no final guarantees. Not even the fundamentalists on the far right can produce a credible Jesus out of allegedly inerrant canonical gospels. Their reading of who Jesus was rests on the shifting sands of their own theological constructions.

In addition to the safeguards offered by the historical methodologies practiced by all responsible scholars and the protection from idiosyncrasies afforded by peer review and open debate, the final test is to ask whether the Jesus we have found is the Jesus we wanted to find. The last temptation is to create Jesus in our own image, to marshal the facts to support preconceived convictions. This fatal pitfall has prompted the Jesus Seminar to adopt as its final general rule of evidence:

- Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you.

THE JESUS OF HISTORY & THE CHRIST OF FAITH

Eighty-two percent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the gospels were not actually spoken by him, according to the Jesus Seminar. How do scholars account for this pronounced discrepancy? Is it realistic to think that his disciples remembered so little of what he said, or that they remembered his words so inaccurately?

Before sketching the answer that gospel specialists in the Jesus Seminar give, it is necessary to address an issue that invariably—and inevitably—comes up for those whose views of the Bible are held captive by prior theological commitments. This issue is the alleged verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible.

Inspiration and inerrancy

If the spirit dictated gospels that are inerrant, or at least inspired, why is it that those who hold this view are unable to agree on the picture of Jesus found in those same gospels? Why are there about as many Jesuses as there are inter-

preters of writings taken to be divinely dictated? The endless proliferation of views of Jesus on the part of those who claim infallibility for the documents erodes confidence in that theological point of view and in the devotion to the Bible it supports.

An inspired, or inerrant, set of gospels seems to require an equally inspired interpreter or body of interpretation. Interpretation must be equally inspired if we are to be sure we have the right understanding of the inerrant but variously understood originals. There seems to be no other way to ascertain the truth. It is for this reason that some churches were moved to claim infallibility for their interpretation. And it is for the same reason that televangelists and other strident voices have made equally extravagant claims.

For critical scholars no such claims are possible or desirable. Scholars make the most of the fragmentary and belated texts they have, utilizing the rigors of investigation and peer review, and offering no more than tentative claims based on historical probability. True scholarship aspires to no more. But that is the nature of historical knowledge: it is limited by the character and extent of the evidence, and can be altered by the discovery of new evidence or by the development of new methods in analyzing data. Even the more exact knowledge of the physical sciences must settle for something less than absolute certainty. Human knowledge is finite: there is always something more to be learned from the vast and complex workings of the universe. And this view makes room for faith, which seems to be in short supply for those who think they have the absolute truth.

There is this further question for the inerrant view: Why, if God took such pains to preserve an inerrant text for posterity, did the spirit not provide for the preservation of original copies of the gospels? It seems little enough to ask of a God who creates absolutely reliable reporters. In fact, we do not have original copies of any of the gospels. We do not possess autographs of any of the books of the entire Bible. The oldest surviving copies of the gospels date from about one hundred and seventy-five years after the death of Jesus, and no two copies are precisely alike. And handmade manuscripts have almost always been "corrected" here and there, often by more than one hand. Further, this gap of almost two centuries means that the original Greek (or Aramaic?) text was copied more than once, by hand, before reaching the stage in which it has come down to us. Even careful copyists make some mistakes, as every proofreader knows. So we will never be able to claim certain knowledge of exactly what the original text of any biblical writing was.

The temporal gap that separates Jesus from the first surviving copies of the gospels—about one hundred and seventy-five years—corresponds to the lapse in time from 1776—the writing of the Declaration of Independence—to 1950. What if the oldest copies of the founding document dated only from 1950?

Distinguishing Jesus from Christ

In the course of the modern critical study of the Bible, which was inspired by the Reformation (begun formally, 1517 C.E.) but originated with the Enlightenment

(about 1690 C.E.), biblical scholars and theologians alike have learned to distinguish the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. It has been a painful lesson for both the church and scholarship. The distinction between the two figures is the difference between a historical person who lived in a particular time and place and was subject to the limitations of a finite existence, and a figure who has been assigned a mythical role, in which he descends from heaven to rescue humankind and, of course, eventually returns there. A Christian wrinkle in this scheme has the same heavenly figure returning to earth at the end of history to inaugurate a new age.

The church appears to smother the historical Jesus by superimposing this heavenly figure on him in the creed: Jesus is displaced by the Christ, as the so-called Apostles' Creed makes evident:

I believe in God the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

The figure in this creed is a mythical or heavenly figure, whose connection with the sage from Nazareth is limited to his suffering and death under Pontius Pilate. Nothing between his birth and death appears to be essential to his mission or to the faith of the church. Accordingly, the gospels may be understood as corrections of this creedal imbalance, which was undoubtedly derived from the view espoused by the apostle Paul, who did not know the historical Jesus. For Paul, the Christ was to be understood as a dying/rising lord, symbolized in baptism (buried with him, raised with him), of the type he knew from the hellenistic mystery religions. In Paul's theological scheme, Jesus the man played no essential role.

Once the discrepancy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith emerged from under the smothering cloud of the historic creeds, it was only a matter of time before scholars sought to disengage the Jesus of history from the Christ of the church's faith. The disengagement has understandably produced waves of turmoil. But it has also engendered reformations of greater and smaller proportions, including a major one in recent years among biblical scholars in the

Roman Catholic tradition. It is ironic that Roman Catholic scholars are emerging from the dark ages of theological tyranny just as many Protestant scholars are reentering it as a consequence of the dictatorial tactics of the Southern Baptist Convention and other fundamentalisms.

TEXT DETECTIVES & MANUSCRIPT SLEUTHS: THE GOSPELS IN GREEK

The search for the real Jesus begins with a modern critical edition of the Greek New Testament.

A critical edition of the Greek New Testament incorporates hundreds of thousands of individual judgments. The most recent, universally used edition of this indispensable tool, sponsored by the United Bible Societies, appeared as recently as 1979. The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar have developed their own critical edition, which has been employed as the basis of the Scholars Version. Like all other critical editions, it is a composite text created out of thousands of Greek manuscripts and earlier critical editions: knowledgeable editors over a century and a half have pieced together the intricate history of the text from its earliest surviving witnesses to its present form. That history is reflected in the thousands of variants printed as footnotes in the many critical editions that have appeared. Out of the mass of data gathered from over 5,000 Greek manuscripts, some mere fragments, scholars have had to select the readings they took to be closest to the original version.

Prior to the invention of the printing press in 1454, all copies of books, including books of the Bible, were handmade and, as a consequence, no two copies were identical. When King James appointed a committee to produce the revision of earlier English translations by John Wycliffe and Miles Coverdale and others, the translators had only the so-called received text on which to base their revision. The received text rests on a handful of late manuscripts and contains speculative readings, attested in no existing manuscript, made by Erasmus in his edition of the Greek New Testament of 1516. In spite of the reverence subsequently accorded Erasmus' text, it contains many erroneous and late readings. Not until the Revised Version was completed in 1881 was the validity of the received text challenged in a new translation.

The dominance of the King James Version (1611) in the English-speaking world stalled further work on a critical Greek text for two and a half centuries. The spectacular discovery of Codex Sinaiticus at St. Catherine's monastery in the Sinai peninsula in 1844 caused the dam to break (a portion of this manuscript is reproduced photographically, p. xi). Constantin Tischendorf, the discoverer, issued his own critical edition of the Greek New Testament (1869–1872), the basis for which was the new codex, dating from early in the fourth century C.E. Another fourth-century copy of the Greek Bible "turned up" in the Vatican Library and was published in 1868–1872. Discoveries of new manuscripts became a flood towards the close of the nineteenth century: thousands of papyri were retrieved from dumps in the sands of Egypt at such exotic places as

Oxyrhynchus. Another amazing find was the Chester Beatty papyri, purchased in 1930–1932 from an unknown source, probably in Egypt. These papyri made another complete overhaul of the Greek text mandatory.

The story of these and other ancient manuscripts is often marked by tragedy and intrigue. Just as the monks of St. Catherine's did not know the value of their treasure—they were actually burning sheets of old manuscripts for heat—and just as the Vatican manuscript had probably lain in vaults for centuries unacknowledged, so the origin of the Chester Beatty papyri is unknown. What we do know is that the Chester Beatty papyri were written in the first half of the third century, almost a century earlier than Sinaiticus and the Vatican Bible. (The sequestering of portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls has been another sad story, this one marked by scholarly arrogance and procrastination.)

The oldest copies of any substantial portion of the Greek gospels still in existence—so far as we know—date to about 200 C.E. However, a tiny fragment of the Gospel of John can be dated to approximately 125 C.E. or earlier, the same approximate date as the fragments of the Egerton Gospel (Egerton is the name of the donor). But these fragments are too small to afford more than tiny apertures onto the history of the text. Most of the important copies of the Greek gospels have been "unearthed"—mostly in museums, monasteries, and church archives—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

To crown what has been a century of exhilarating discoveries, the Nag Hammadi library turned up in Egypt in 1945, and the Dead Sea Scrolls began to appear in 1947. The Scrolls do not help us directly with the Greek text of the gospels, since they were created prior to the appearance of Jesus. But they do provide a significant context for understanding both Jesus and John the Baptist, his mentor. And they have moved our knowledge of the Hebrew text of numerous Old Testament books back almost a thousand years.

The Nag Hammadi treasure, on the other hand, is a fourth-century C.E. repository of Coptic gospels and other texts related to a Christian gnostic sect that once thrived in Egypt. Nag Hammadi has yielded a complete copy of the Gospel of Thomas, lost to view for centuries, along with the text of the Secret Book of James, and the Dialogue of the Savior. The Gospel of Mary, which is usually included in the publication of the Nag Hammadi library, survives in two Greek fragments and a longer Coptic translation, part of which is missing.

In spite of all these amazing discoveries, the stark truth is that the history of the Greek gospels, from their creation in the first century until the discovery of the first copies of them at the beginning of the third, remains largely unknown and therefore unmapped territory.

A MAP OF GOSPEL RELATIONSHIPS

The establishment of a critical Greek text of the gospels is only the beginning of the detective work. To unravel the mysteries of the nearly two centuries that separate Jesus from the earliest surviving records, scholars have had to examine the gospels with minute care and develop theories to explain what appears to be a network of complex relationships.

Two portraits of Jesus

The first step is to understand the diminished role the Gospel of John plays in the search for the Jesus of history. The two pictures painted by John and the synoptic gospels cannot both be historically accurate. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus speaks in brief, pithy one-liners and couplets, and in parables. His witticisms are sometimes embedded in a short dialogue with disciples or opponents. In John, by contrast, Jesus speaks in lengthy discourses or monologues, or in elaborate dialogues prompted by some deed Jesus has performed (for example, the cure of the man born blind, John 9:1–41) or by an ambiguous statement ("You must be reborn from above," John 3:3).

Such speeches as Jesus makes in Matthew, Mark, and Luke are composed of aphorisms and parables strung together like beads on a string. In John, these speeches form coherent lectures on a specific theme, such as "light," Jesus as the way, the truth, the life, and the vine and the canes. The parables, which are so characteristic of Jesus in the synoptic tradition, do not appear in John at all.

The ethical teaching of Jesus in the first three gospels is replaced in John by lengthy reflections on Jesus' self-affirmations in the form of "I AM" sayings.

In sum, there is virtually nothing of the synoptic sage in the Fourth Gospel. That sage has been displaced by Jesus the revealer who has been sent from God to reveal who the Father is.

These differences and others are summarized in Figure 1, facing.

The differences between the two portraits of Jesus show up in a dramatic way in the evaluation, by the Jesus Seminar, of the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John. The Fellows of the Seminar were unable to find a single saying they could with certainty trace back to the historical Jesus. They did identify one saying that might have originated with Jesus, but this saying (John 4:44) has synoptic parallels. There were no parables to consider. The words attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel are the creation of the evangelist for the most part, and reflect the developed language of John's Christian community.

The synoptic puzzle

The primary information regarding Jesus of Nazareth is derived from the synoptic gospels, along with the Gospel of Thomas. The relationships among Matthew, Mark, and Luke constitute a basic puzzle for gospel scholars. The three are called "synoptic" gospels, in fact, because they present a "common view" of Jesus. Most scholars have concluded that Matthew and Luke utilized Mark as the basis of their gospels, to which they added other materials. There are powerful arguments to support this conclusion:

1. Agreement between Matthew and Luke begins where Mark begins and ends where Mark ends.
2. Matthew reproduces about 90 percent of Mark, Luke about 50 percent. They often reproduce Mark in the same order. When they disagree, either Matthew or Luke supports the sequence in Mark.

Figure 1

Two Portraits of Jesus

The Synoptic Gospels	*The Gospel of John*
Begins with John the Baptist or birth and childhood stories	Begins with creation; no birth or childhood stories
Jesus is baptised by John	Baptism of Jesus presupposed but not mentioned
Jesus speaks in parables and and aphorisms	Jesus speaks in long, involved discourses
Jesus is a sage	Jesus is a philosopher and mystic
Jesus is an exorcist	Jesus performs no exorcisms
God's imperial rule is the theme of Jesus' teaching	Jesus himself is the theme of his own teaching
Jesus has little to say about himself	Jesus reflects extensively on his own mission and person
Jesus espouses the causes of the poor and oppressed	Jesus has little or nothing to say about the poor and oppressed
The public ministry lasts one year	The public ministry lasts three years
The temple incident is late	The temple incident is early
Jesus eats last supper with his disciples	Foot washing replaces last supper

3. In segments the three have in common, verbal agreement averages about 50 percent. The extent of the agreement may be observed in the sample of the triple tradition reproduced in Figure 2 (p. 12), where the lines have been matched for easy comparison. (Scholars have adopted the convention of referring to segments the three synoptics have in common as "triple tradition.")
4. In the triple tradition, Matthew and Mark often agree against Luke, and Luke and Mark often agree against Matthew, but Matthew and Luke only rarely agree against Mark.

These facts and the examination of agreements and disagreements have led scholars to conclude that Mark was written first. Further, scholars generally agree that in constructing their own gospels, Matthew and Luke made use of Mark.

A gospel synopsis, in which the three synoptics are printed in parallel columns, permits scholars to observe how Matthew and Luke edit Mark as they compose their own versions of the gospel. Matthew and Luke revise the text of Mark, but they also expand and delete and rearrange it, in accordance with their own perspectives. The basic solution to the synoptic puzzle plays a fundamental role in historical evaluations made by members of the Jesus Seminar and other scholars. Mark is now understood to be the fundamental source for narrative

information about Jesus. The priority of Mark has become a cornerstone of the modern scholarship of the gospels.

The mystery of the double tradition

In addition to the verbal agreements Matthew and Luke share with Mark, they also have striking verbal agreements in passages where Mark offers nothing comparable. There are about two hundred verses that fall into this category. Virtually all of the material—which may be called "double tradition" to distinguish it from the triple tradition—consists of sayings or parables. As a way of explaining the striking agreements between Matthew and Luke, a German scholar hypothesized that there once existed a source document, which he referred to as a *Quelle*, which in German means "source." The abbreviation "Q" was later adopted as its name.

The existence of Q was once challenged by some scholars on the grounds that a sayings gospel was not really a gospel. The challengers argued that there were no ancient parallels to a gospel containing only sayings and parables and lacking stories about Jesus, especially the story about his trial and death. The discovery of the Gospel of Thomas changed all that. Thomas, too, is a sayings gospel that contains no account of Jesus' exorcisms, healings, trial, or death.

Verbal agreement in the material Matthew and Luke take from the Sayings

Figure 2

The Synoptic Puzzle

Mark 2:16–17	Matt 9:11–12	Luke 5:30–31
And whenever the Pharisees' scholars saw him eating with sinners and toll collectors	And whenever the Pharisees saw this,	And the Pharisees and their scholars
they would question his disciples: "What's he doing eating with toll collectors?"	they would question his disciples: "Why does your teacher eat with toll collectors and sinners?"	would complain to his disciples: "Why do you people eat and drink with toll collectors and sinners?"
When Jesus overhears, he says to them: "Since when do the able-bodied need a doctor? It's the sick who do."	When Jesus overheard, he said, "Since when do the able-bodied need a doctor? It's the sick who do."	In response, Jesus said to them: "Since when do the healthy need a doctor? It's the sick who do."

Gospel Q is sometimes high (an illustration of extensive verbal agreement in a segment of double tradition is provided by Figure 3, below). At other times the agreement is so minimal it is difficult to determine whether Matthew and Luke are in fact copying from a common source. Further, the Q material Matthew and Luke incorporate into their gospels is not arranged in the same way. It appears that Matthew and Luke have inserted Q material into the outline they borrowed from Mark, but they each distributed those sayings and parables in very different ways. In general, specialists in Q studies are inclined to think that Luke best preserves the original Q order of sayings and parables.

The general acceptance of the Q hypothesis by scholars became another of the pillars of scholarly wisdom. It plays a significant role in assessing the development of the Jesus tradition in its earliest stages. It is also worth noting that, inasmuch as both Matthew and Luke revised Mark and Q in creating their own texts, they evidently did not regard either source as the final word to be said about Jesus.

The hypothesis that Matthew and Luke made use of two written sources, Mark and Q, in composing their gospels is known as the two-source theory. That theory is represented graphically in Figure 4, p. 14.

Figure 3

The Mystery of the Double Tradition

Matt 3:7–10	Luke 3:7–9
When he saw that many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming for baptism,	
(John) said to them, "You spawn of Satan! Who warned you to flee from the impending doom? Well then, start producing fruit suitable for a change of heart, and don't even *think* of saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' Let me tell you, God can raise up children for Abraham right out of these rocks. Even now the axe is aimed at the root of the trees. So every tree not producing choice fruit gets cut down and tossed into the fire."	So (John) would say to the crowds "You spawn of Satan! Who warned you to flee from the impending doom? Well then, start producing fruit suitable for a change of heart, and don't even *start* saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' Let me tell you, God can raise up children for Abraham right out of these rocks. Even now the axe is aimed at the root of the trees. So every tree not producing choice fruit gets cut down and tossed into the fire."

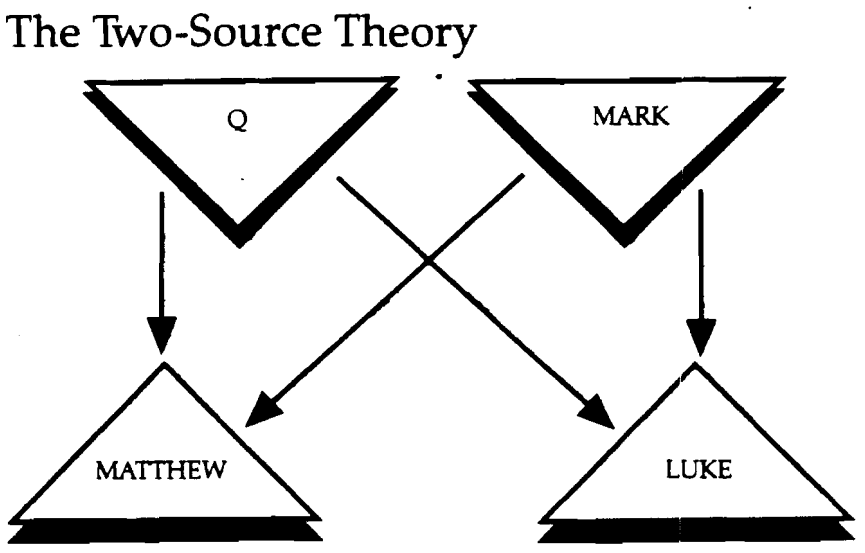
Additional sources M and L

After scholars extract Q from Matthew and Luke (about two hundred verses), and after they identify the material drawn from the Gospel of Mark, there is still a significant amount of material left over that is peculiar to each evangelist. This special material does not come from Mark, or Q, or any other common source; Matthew and Luke go their separate ways when they have finished making use of Mark and Q. It is unclear whether the verses—including parables and other teachings—peculiar to Matthew and Luke reflect written sources from which the two evangelists took their material, or whether the authors were drawing on oral tradition for what might be termed "stray" fragments. "Stray" refers to stories and reports that had not yet been captured in writing. In any case, the materials peculiar to Matthew and Luke constitute two additional independent "sources."

The view that Matthew and Luke each had three independent sources to draw on in composing their gospels is known as the four-source theory (represented graphically in Figure 5, p. 15). Each evangelist made use of Mark and Q, and, in addition, each incorporated a third source unknown to the other evangelist. Matthew's third source is known as "M," Luke's third source is called "L."

Sources M and L contain some very important parables, such as those of the Samaritan (L), the prodigal son (L), the vineyard laborers (M), the treasure (M), and the pearl (M), which scholars think may have originated with Jesus. The parables of the treasure and the pearl have parallels in the newly discovered Gospel of Thomas.

Figure 4



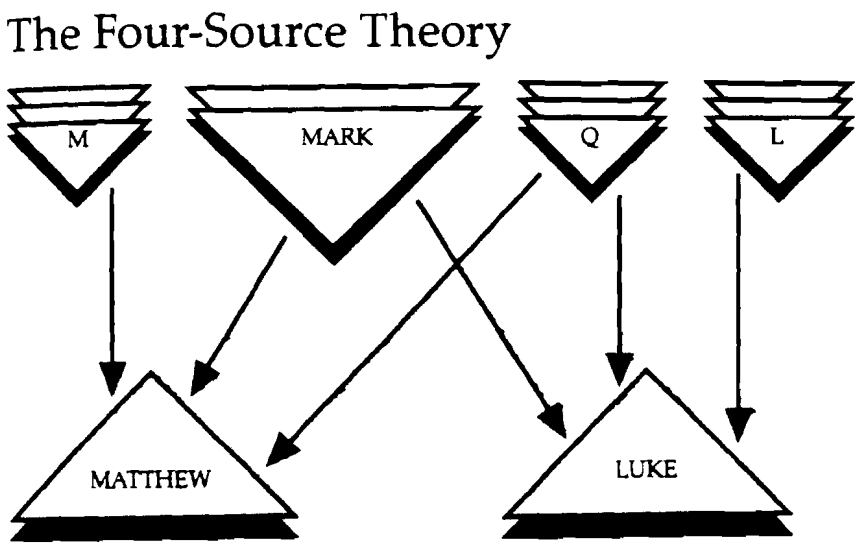
The Two-Source Theory is the view that Matthew and Luke made use of two written sources—Mark and the Sayings Gospel Q—in composing their gospels.

Gospel of Thomas

A significant new independent source of data for the study of the historical Jesus is the Gospel of Thomas. The Coptic translation of this document, found in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, has enabled scholars to identify three Greek fragments, discovered earlier, as pieces of three different copies of the same gospel. Thomas contains one hundred and fourteen sayings and parables ascribed to Jesus; it has no narrative framework: no account of Jesus' trial, death, and resurrection; no birth or childhood stories; and no narrated account of his public ministry in Galilee and Judea.

The Gospel of Thomas has proved to be a gold mine of comparative material and new information. Thomas has forty-seven parallels to Mark, forty parallels to Q, seventeen to Matthew, four to Luke, and five to John. These numbers include sayings that have been counted twice. About sixty-five sayings or parts of sayings are unique to Thomas. (Complex sayings in Thomas, as in the other gospels, are often made up of more than one saying, so that the total number of individual items in Thomas exceeds one hundred and fourteen.) These materials, which many scholars take to represent a tradition quite independent of the other gospels, provide what scientists call a "control group" for the analysis of sayings and parables that appear in the other gospels.

Figure 5



The Four-Source Theory is a common explanation of the relationships found among the synoptic gospels. Matthew used Mark, Q, and his own special source called M. Luke also used Mark and Q, but had another source called L, which Matthew did not have. The material in M and L probably comes from oral tradition.

Independent & derivative sources

In making judgments about the age and authenticity of various sayings and parables preserved by the gospels, scholars are understandably concerned to distinguish independent from derivative sources. Based on the two-source theory (Figure 4) combined with the four-source theory (Figure 5), scholars accept four independent sources behind the three synoptic gospels. They are (1) Sayings Gospel Q, (2) Gospel of Mark, (3) Special Matthew, and (4) Special Luke. In addition, the Gospel of Thomas is now available and provides a fifth independent source for the sayings and parables of Jesus.

The present edition of the Gospel of John incorporates an earlier written source, a Gospel of Signs, in the judgment of many scholars. This brings the total number of independent sources to six. The Gospel of Signs, as a part of the Gospel of John, contains very few aphorisms and no parables of the synoptic type. As a consequence, it contributes little to the search for the authentic sayings of Jesus. This point was discussed at length above under the heading, "Two portraits of Jesus."

The letters of Paul and other early Christian documents, such as the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (also known as the Didache, an early instructional manual), sometimes quote Jesus and these, too, constitute independent sources.

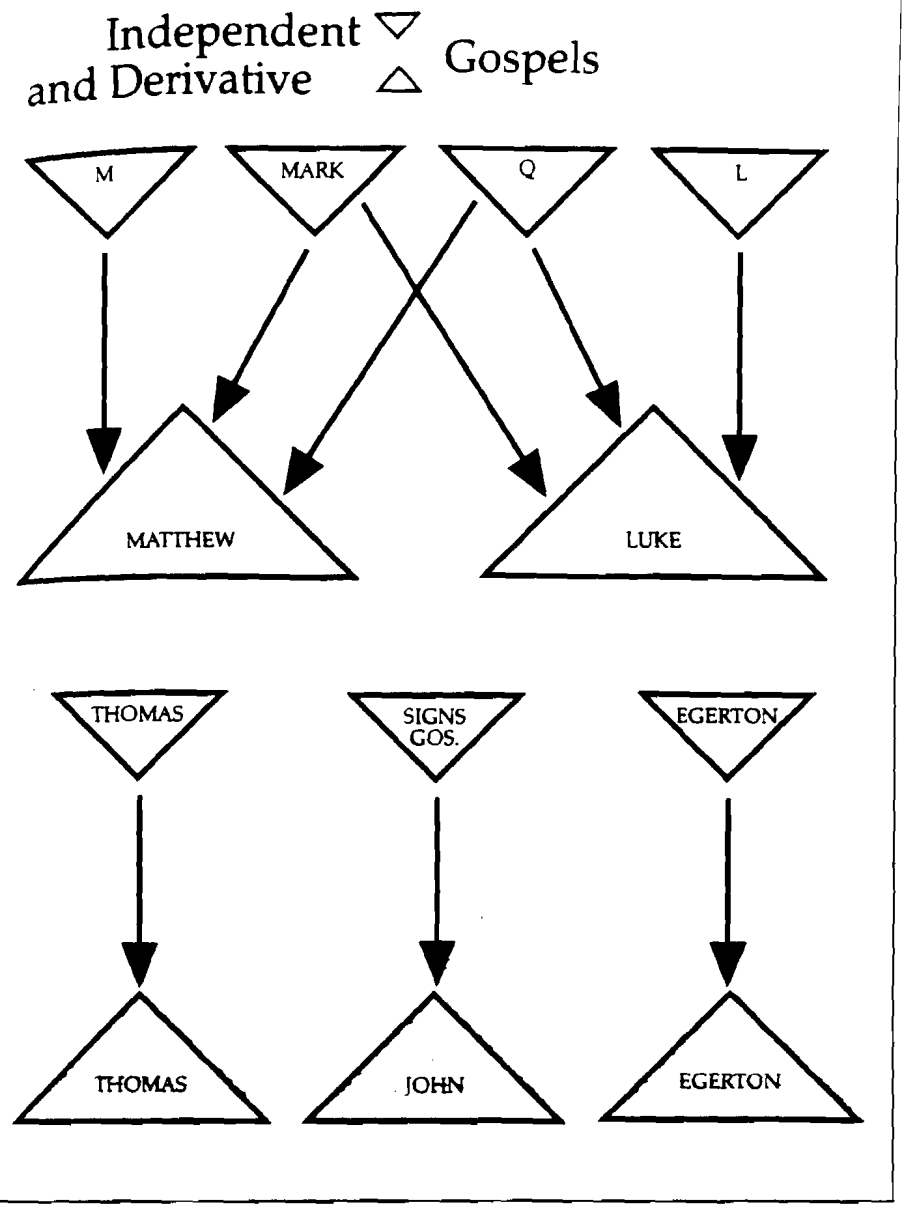
Present knowledge of what Jesus said rests mostly on the evidence provided by the first five independent sources listed above. The independent sources for the Jesus tradition are summarized graphically in Figure 6, p. 17. Their chronological position in early Christian tradition is indicated in Figure 7, p. 18.

RULES OF WRITTEN EVIDENCE

The Jesus Seminar formulated and adopted "rules of evidence" to guide its assessment of gospel traditions. Rules of evidence are standards by which evidence is presented and evaluated in a court of law. A standard is a measure or test of the reliability of certain kinds of information. More than two centuries of biblical scholarship have produced a significant array of rules or criteria for judging the reliability of the evidence offered by the gospels, which are, after all, reports of what Jesus did and said.

The evidence provided by the written gospels is hearsay evidence. Hearsay evidence is secondhand evidence. In the case of the gospels, the evangelists are all reporting stories and sayings related to them by intermediate parties; none of them was an ear or eyewitness of the words and events he records. Indeed, the information may have passed through several parties on its way to the authors of the first written gospels. Those initial transmitters of tradition are, of course, anonymous; they cannot speak for themselves and we cannot interrogate them about the source of their reports. We don't even know who they were. The authors of the written gospels are also anonymous; the names assigned to the gospels are pious fictions (Figure 8 sketches "How the Gospels Got Their Names," p. 20). Because the evidence offered by the gospels is hearsay evidence, scholars must be extremely cautious in taking the data at face value.

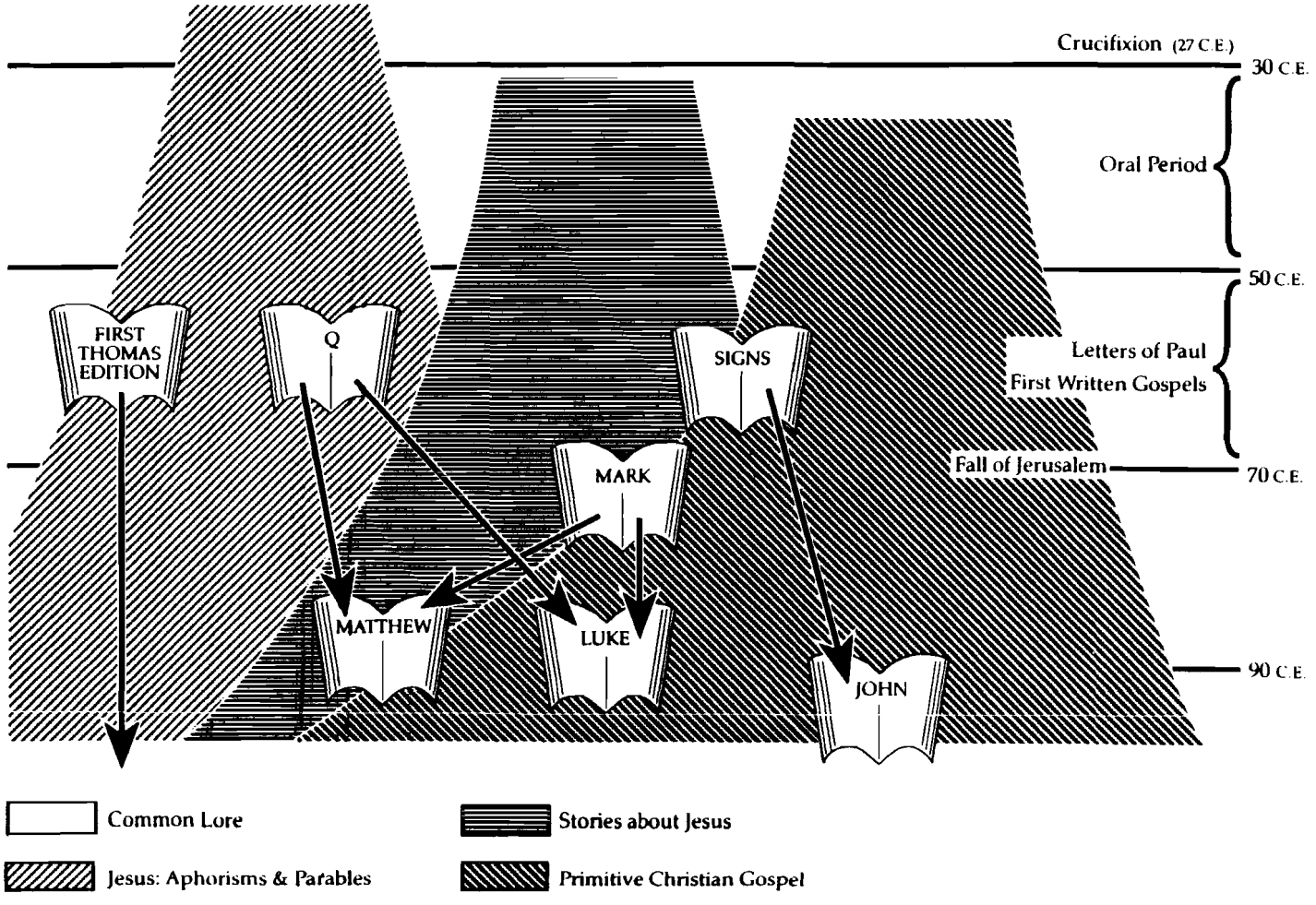
Figure 6



Scholars have divided the rules of evidence into categories, depending on the kind of evidence. One broad category treats the rules of written evidence. These rules are based, for the most part, on observations regarding the editorial habits of Matthew and Luke as they make use of Mark and the Sayings Gospel Q. The rules also reflect a scholarly assessment of the general direction in which the

Figure 7

The Growth of the Jesus Tradition



tradition developed; in this matter, the Gospel of Thomas also plays an important role. The more important rules of written evidence follow with brief explanations.

Clustering and contexting

The authors of the gospels group sayings and provide contexts for them, which usually affects their interpretation.

- The evangelists frequently group sayings and parables in clusters and complexes that did not originate with Jesus.

As it develops, the gospel tradition tends to group sayings and parables into simple clusters at the oral stage and then into more extended complexes in the written stage. Clustering aphorisms and short parables makes them easier to remember, provided some kind of memory device is employed. Clusters were created out of common themes, or forms, or by the use of a key word, usually termed a "catchword." The materials in Mark 10:17–31 were collected around the theme of wealth. The so-called beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) are an example of clustering by form. Association by catchword is often subtle and not particularly logical:

Mark 9:48 where the worm never dies
and the fire never goes out!
9:49 As you know, everyone there is salted by fire.
9:50 Salt is good ⟨and salty⟩
—if it becomes bland,
with what will you renew it?

The mention of fire in v. 48 attracts the saying in v. 49. The mention of salt in that saying becomes a magnet for the saying about bland salt. These sayings did not originally belong together, in all probability. Matthew and Luke do not reproduce the cluster, and the third saying in v. 50 appears in quite different contexts in Matthew and Luke.

Grouping sayings and parables in clusters is a way of controlling the interpretation. Luke collects three "lost" parables in chapter 15: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (the prodigal). Luke thereby indicates that he understands the three parables in a comparable way. The tendency to cluster and compound often obscures the original sense of particular sayings or parables.

- The evangelists frequently relocate sayings and parables or invent new narrative contexts for them.

Another way to give a saying or parable a context is to embed it in a narrative. The most common form of this technique is the pronouncement story (in Greek rhetoric, the technical name for this is the *chreia*); the pronouncement story consists of a short anecdote that climaxes in a witticism. Pronouncement stories may contain historical reminiscences, but many of the settings are contrived.

The pronouncement story in Mark 2:23–28 furnishes a good example of an artificial context. In this story, the Pharisees criticize Jesus' disciples for har-

Figure 8

How the Gospels Got Their Names

MARK

The Gospel of Mark is attributed to John Mark, a companion of Paul (Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5; 15:36–41; Phlm 24; Col 4:10, 2 Tim 4:11), a cousin of Barnabas (Col 4:10), and perhaps an associate of Peter (1 Pet 5:13). The suggestion was first made by Papias (ca. 130 C.E.), as reported by Eusebius (d. 325), both ancient Christian authors. In this, as in the other matters, Papias is unreliable, because he is interested in the guarantees of an eyewitness rather than in the oral process that produced Mark.

MATTHEW

It is Papias again, as reported by Eusebius, who names Matthew (Matt 10:3) as the author of the first gospel. Matthew may have another name, Levi, which is the name given to the tax collector in Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:27, but who is called Matthew in the parallel passage, Matt 9:9. We cannot account for the differences in name. Papias' assertion that canonical Matthew was composed in Hebrew is patently false; Matthew was composed in Greek in dependence on Q and Mark, also written in Greek by unknown authors

LUKE

The tradition that Luke the physician and companion of Paul was the author of Luke–Acts goes back to the second century C.E. The Luke in question is referred to in Col 4:14; Phlm 24; 2 Tim 4:11, where he is identified as a physician. It is improbable that the author of Luke–Acts was a physician; it is doubtful that he was a companion of Paul. Like the other attributions, this one, too, is fanciful.

THOMAS

The Gospel of Thomas is attributed to Didymus Judas Thomas, who was revered in the Syrian church as an apostle (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13; cf. John 11:16; 20:24; 21:2) and as the twin brother of Jesus (so claimed by the Acts of Thomas, a third-century C.E. work). The attribution to Thomas may indicate where this gospel was written, but it tells us nothing about the author.

JOHN

The Fourth Gospel was composed by an anonymous author in the last decade of the first century. About 180 C.E. Irenaeus reports the tradition that ascribes the book to John, son of Zebedee, while others ascribed it to John the elder who lived at Ephesus, and still others to the beloved disciple (John 13:23–25; 19:25–27; 20:2–10; 21:7, 20–23). The Fourth Gospel was opposed as heretical in the early church, and it knows none of the stories associated with John, son of Zebedee. In the judgment of many scholars, it was produced by a "school" of disciples, probably in Syria.

All the gospels originally circulated anonymously. Authoritative names were later assigned to them by unknown figures in the early church. In most cases, the names are guesses or perhaps the result of pious wishes.

vesting grain on the sabbath. Criticism was originally directed towards Jesus; only after Jesus' death would criticism have been aimed at the disciples. Further, the scribes, rather than the Pharisees, were Jesus' opponents; the Pharisees probably did not play a role in Galilee until long after Jesus was gone from the scene. In addition, the response of Jesus involves quoting the story of David and his companions from the Old Testament—another telltale sign of the community's search in the scriptures for legitimacy. (Matthew, for example, has the habit of adding prophetic proof texts wherever he can to buttress his claims—a tendency that must have been universal in the early Christian movement.) And finally, we cannot be sure that the concluding couplet (vv. 27–28) went originally with this story:

> The sabbath day was created for Adam and Eve,
> not Adam and Eve for the sabbath day.
> So, the son of Adam lords it even over the sabbath day.

Mark links the saying to the story with "and he continued," which hints that the saying once circulated independently. Luke reinforces this understanding: he joins the saying to the story with "and he used to say to them" (Luke 6:5).

The reasons for this tendency are plain. In all probability, Jesus' first disciples did not remember the particular occasions on which Jesus first uttered a saying. After all, Jesus must have repeated his witticisms many times. They would have remembered the saying and not a specific context. Further, Jesus' followers were inclined to adopt and adapt his words to their own needs. This led them to invent narrative contexts based on their own experience, into which they imported Jesus as the authority figure.

Revision and commentary

The first two rules of written evidence just enumerated concern the context into which sayings and parables were placed. The next two rules are based on observations of how the evangelists modify the content of sayings internally or control the interpretation by appending comments.

- The evangelists frequently expand sayings or parables, or provide them with an interpretive overlay or comment.
- The evangelists often revise or edit sayings to make them conform to their own individual language, style, or viewpoint.

The disciples of John the Baptist, and the Pharisees and their followers, were in the habit of fasting. Jesus and his followers apparently did not fast. When, in Mark 2:19, Jesus is asked why his disciples do not fast, he responds:

> The groom's friends can't fast while the groom is present, can they?

This aphorism, which has no specific Christian content, may well go back to Jesus. But Mark, or someone before him, has appended a Christian expansion (Mark 2:20):

But the days will come when the groom is taken away from them, and then they will fast, on that day.

The addition justifies the Christian renewal of the Jewish practice of fasting, even though Jesus and his disciples did not fast.

Mark created the collection of parables and sayings found in Mark 4:1–34. The principal ingredient around which the collection was made is the parable of the sower (4:3–8). This parable, according to the editorial frame Mark has given it, holds the secret of God's imperial rule, which Jesus must explain to his disciples in private (4:10–12). In other words, the disciples are privileged listeners: they alone understand what Jesus is talking about. This technique—public teaching, private explanation—plays a prominent role in Mark. Both the technique and the theme are Markan creations. Scholars therefore conclude that 4:11–12 was composed by Mark to articulate his theory and put it on the lips of Jesus. It follows that the allegorical interpretation of the sower is also the work of Mark (4:13–20): it is supposed to reveal the secret to those inside (it is difficult to determine just what the secret was). Because the parables and sayings of Jesus are hard to understand, according to Mark, the author keeps admonishing the reader to pay attention and to listen: "Anyone here with two good ears had better listen!" (Mark 4:9 and often).

These are but two examples of how the evangelists amplify or revise and edit sayings material in order to make the words of Jesus conform to their own themes. Hundreds of other examples will be found in the gospels.

False attribution

The followers of Jesus borrowed freely from common wisdom and coined their own sayings and parables, which they then attributed to Jesus.

- Words borrowed from the fund of common lore or the Greek scriptures are often put on the lips of Jesus.

The concept of plagiarism was unknown in the ancient world. Authors freely copied from predecessors without acknowledgment. The way of oral tradition was to indulge in free quotation and attribution. Sages became the repository of free-floating proverbs and witticisms. Legendary wise men like Solomon and Socrates attracted large quantities of such lore. For the first Christians, Jesus was a legendary sage: it was proper to attribute the world's wisdom to him.

The proverb in Mark 2:17, for example, is attested in secular sources (Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, for example):

Since when do the able-bodied need a doctor? It's the sick who do.

Jesus was not the only one and probably not the first to say it.

In the parallel to the Markan passage, Matthew adds a sentence taken from the prophet Hosea (Matt 9:13):

Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

Matthew takes pains to attribute quotations from the Greek Bible to Jesus.

The Greek Old Testament, called the Septuagint (LXX, for short), played a special role in the augmentation of the Jesus tradition. The Christian community soon began to search the sacred writings or scriptures—which it seems to have known in Greek rather than Hebrew—for proof that Jesus was truly the messiah. The tendency of the gospel writers, especially Matthew, was to make the event fit the prophecies lifted (and occasionally edited) from the Old Testament. In addition, the gospel writers did not hesitate to take words from the Greek scriptures and put them on the lips of Jesus, because these words, too, were sacred words. For this reason, the Jesus Seminar consistently concluded that the words ascribed to Jesus while he hung on the cross were not his: they were borrowed mostly from the Psalms and attributed to him.

- The evangelists frequently attribute their own statements to Jesus.

The evangelists are not unwilling to attribute their own formulations to Jesus. In Mark 1:15, for example, the evangelist summarizes in his own words what he takes to be Jesus' proclamation: "The time is up. God's imperial rule is closing in. Change your ways, and put your trust in the good news." The analysis of this statement indicates that the language belongs to Mark. Luke puts his own outline of the advancement of the gospel—the one he uses as the outline of his gospel and the book of Acts—on the lips of Jesus in Luke 24:46–49. Both of these passages, along with many others, were composed in language typical of the individual evangelists but attributed to Jesus.

Difficult sayings

The Christian community had to struggle with harsh (or "hard") sayings to make them useful for daily living.

- Hard sayings are frequently softened in the process of transmission to adapt them to the conditions of daily living.
- Variations in difficult sayings often betray the struggle of the early Christian community to interpret or adapt sayings to its own situation.

Matthew's version of the aphorism "The last will be first and the first last" (Matt 20:16) is softened in Mark 10:31 to "*Many* of the first will be last, and of the last *many* will be first." The oral version of the saying may have prompted Matthew to override Mark's softening. In addition, only the hard version suited the context into which Matthew had introduced the saying: in the parable of the vineyard laborers (Matt 20:1–15), the last are paid first, and the first are paid last.

Jesus advises the rich man to sell all his goods and give the proceeds to the poor. He is understandably stunned by this advice (Mark 10:21–22). Jesus then tells his disciples that it is easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle's eye than for a rich person to get into God's domain (Mark 10:25). But the disciples and Mark find this a hard saying. So Mark appends a qualifier, probably taken from common lore: "Everything's possible for God" (Mark 10:27). The paradox of the needle's eye is made less harsh by God's unlimited grace. Modern interpreters have been in the softening business too: some literalists have located a

caravan pass, called the needle's eye, which a camel can squeeze through with difficulty, if it is not loaded with baggage; others have imagined a tight gate in the wall of Jerusalem, through which a camel can barely pass. These are feeble and misguided attempts to take the sting out of the aphorism and rob Jesus' words of their edge.

The saying in Mark 3:28–29 about the unforgivable sin is a difficult saying. Christians asked: "Is there an unforgivable sin?" All the versions agree that a word spoken against the holy spirit is not forgivable. Matthew and Luke, however, permit a word spoken against the son of Adam to be forgiven; on this point Mark is silent. The difficult question here is whether blasphemy against the son of Adam—here understood by Matthew and Luke in its messianic sense to refer to Jesus—was different from the blasphemy against the holy spirit. The Christian community evidently struggled with the problem of blasphemy without coming to a final conclusion.

Christianizing Jesus

Christian conviction eventually overwhelms Jesus: he is made to confess what Christians had come to believe.

- Sayings and parables expressed in "Christian" language are the creation of the evangelists or their Christian predecessors.
- Sayings or parables that contrast with the language or viewpoint of the gospel in which they are embedded reflect older tradition (but not necessarily tradition that originated with Jesus).
- The Christian community develops apologetic statements to defend its claims and sometimes attributes such statements to Jesus.

This axiom bears repeating: Jesus was not the first Christian. However, he is often made to talk like a Christian by his devoted followers. The contrast between Christian language or viewpoint and the language or viewpoint of Jesus is a very important clue to the real voice of Jesus. The language of Jesus was distinctive, as was his style and perspective, if we take the bedrock of the tradition as our guide. The inclination of the evangelists and other Christians was to make Jesus himself affirm what they themselves had come to believe.

The earliest version of the oral gospel preserved for us in written records is the "gospel" Paul reports in 1 Cor 15:3–5 as something he learned from his predecessors. He summarizes it in two steps:

Christ died for our sins
  according to the scriptures,
and was buried,
and rose up on the third day
  according to the scriptures.

Both events—death, resurrection—took place how and when they did because the scriptures said they would.

Paul's version of the gospel was in circulation when Mark composed his story of Jesus. In the three predictions of the passion, Mark betrays his knowledge of the oral gospel:

> He started teaching them that the son of Adam was destined to suffer a great deal, and be rejected by the elders and the ranking priests and the scholars, and be killed, and after three days rise. Mark 8:31

> The son of Adam is being turned over to his enemies, and they will end up killing him. And three days after he is killed, he will rise! Mark 9:31

> The son of Adam will be turned over to the ranking priests and the scholars, and they will sentence him to death, and turn him over to foreigners, and they will make fun of him, and spit on him, and flog him, and put ⟨him⟩ to death. Yet after three days he will rise! Mark 10:33

These formulations of Mark indicate that he knew the oral gospel quoted by Paul. Both versions are composed in "Christian" terminology; Mark attributes his version to Jesus.

- Sayings and narratives that reflect knowledge of events that took place after Jesus' death are the creation of the evangelists or the oral tradition before them.

The sayings attributed to Jesus in the "little apocalypse" (Mark 13:5–37) occasionally reflect events that took place after Jesus' death. The advice to the disciples to look out for themselves because they will be beaten in synagogues and hauled up before governors and kings (Mark 13:9) reflects the events that took place beginning with the apostle Paul. The charge to announce the good news to the whole world (Mark 13:10 and Matt 28:18–20) was developed by Paul, Mark, and others in the early days of the new movement. The betrayal of family members by family members (Mark 13:12–13) probably mirrors the terrible events of the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans, 66–70 C.E.

Whenever scholars detect detailed knowledge of postmortem events in sayings and parables attributed to Jesus, they are inclined to the view that the formulation of such sayings took place after the fact.

FROM THE GOSPELS TO JESUS: THE RULES OF ORAL EVIDENCE

In sorting out sayings and parables attributed to Jesus, gospel scholars are guided by this fundamental axiom:

- Only sayings and parables that can be traced back to the oral period, 30–50 C.E., can possibly have originated with Jesus.

Words that can be demonstrated to have been first formulated by the gospel writers are eliminated from contention. Scholars search for two different kinds of proof. They look for evidence that particular formulations are characteristic of

individual evangelists or can only be understood in the social context of the emerging Christian movement. Or they search for evidence that sayings and parables antedate the written gospels.

Rules of attestation are designed to assist the Seminar in identifying sayings that can be assigned to the oral period with a high degree of probability.

- Sayings or parables that are attested in two or more independent sources are older than the sources in which they are embedded.
- Sayings or parables that are attested in two different contexts probably circulated independently at an earlier time.
- The same or similar content attested in two or more different forms has had a life of its own and therefore may stem from old tradition.
- Unwritten tradition that is captured by the written gospels relatively late may preserve very old memories.

The first three of the rules of attestation make it possible, on purely objective grounds, to isolate a body of sayings material that is older than the written gospels. The fourth rule advises scholars to be on the alert for stray tradition that may go back to the oral period, although strong written attestation is lacking. The antiquity of such stray pieces of tradition will have to be established on the basis of rules of oral evidence.

The oral period is defined, in broad terms, as the two decades extending from the death of Jesus to the composition of the first written gospels, about 50 C.E. (a chronological chart appears as Figure 7, p. 18). To be sure, sayings and stories continued to be circulated by word of mouth until well into the second century. Some early church authorities placed a greater value on oral tradition than on written, even a century after Jesus' death. And one should recall that copies of the first gospels were undoubtedly rare and difficult to use once acquired. It is not an easy thing to look up a passage in a sixteen-foot scroll (unrolling and rolling the parchment until one came to the desired text). Codices were just coming into general use (a codex is a stack of sheets bound at one side like a modern book), but sacred books continued to take the form of the older scroll, as they do in Judaism to this day. Moreover, parchment was expensive and few of the early leaders of the church could read and write. Even papyrus, which is closer to modern paper, was beyond ordinary means and was not as durable as parchment, which was made from animal skins. The economics of publication and the relatively low literacy level in society limited the use of written documents in populist movements like Christianity for many decades.

The first written gospels were Sayings Gospel Q and possibly an early version of the Gospel of Thomas. The Gospel of Mark was not composed until about 70 C.E. For these reasons alone, it is understandable that double attestation in the early independent sources Thomas and Q constitutes strong documentary evidence. When it is recalled that Thomas and Q are sayings gospels, it is even less surprising that the bulk of the sayings and parables that can be traced to the oral period are derived from these two sources.

Rules of attestation look at the evidence from the perspective of the written gospels. When text detectives have done what they can with the comparison of written sources, they must go in quest of the oral forms that preceded—and are

the basis for—the written gospels. This side of the quest begins with a consideration of how oral tradition functions.

Jesus wrote nothing, so far as we know. We do not know for certain that Jesus could write; we are not even positive that he could read, in spite of suggestions in the gospels that he could. His first followers were technically illiterate, so writing did not become a part of the Christian movement until persons like Paul became involved.

Orality and memory

Jesus taught his followers orally. He was a traveling sage who traded in wisdom, the counterpart of the traveling merchant who traded in soft and hard goods. Jesus taught his disciples as he moved about, and his words were first passed around by word of mouth. The gospels portray Jesus as one who speaks, not as one who writes.

Jesus' disciples also responded to his teaching orally: they repeated his most memorable words to one another and to outsiders. They, too, adapted Jesus' words to new situations, improvising and inventing as the occasion demanded.

Transmitters of oral tradition do not ordinarily remember the exact wording of the saying or parable they are attempting to quote. They normally have no written records to which they can refer, and the versions they themselves had heard varied from occasion to occasion. Thucydides, a Greek historian who lived in the second half of the fifth century B.C.E., stipulates how he handled the speeches of various leaders in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*:

> With regard to the speeches various persons made when they were about to launch the war or had already done so, it has been difficult to recall precisely the words they actually spoke. This is the case whether they were speeches I myself heard or whether they were words reported to me from other sources. As a consequence, the various speakers were made to say what was appropriate, as it seemed to me, to the subject, although I attemped to stick as close as possible in every case to the general scope of the speech. *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.1

Passing oral lore along is much like telling and retelling a joke: we can perhaps recall the organization of the joke, along with most or all of the punchline, but we rarely remember and retell it precisely as we heard it the first time or even as we ourselves told it on previous occasions.

Oscar Wilde is reported to have remarked: "People would not worry so much about what others think of them if they realized how little they did." There are quotation marks around this witticism, but it is probably not precisely what Wilde wrote or said and probably not the exact words used by a friend when he first related it to me. When one rehearses the saying, it is possible to rephrase freely without losing the point.

Jesus' native tongue was Aramaic. We do not know whether he could speak Hebrew as well. His words have been preserved only in Greek, the original language of all the surviving gospels. If Jesus could not speak Greek, we must conclude that his exact words have been lost forever, with the exception of terms

like 'Abba,' the Aramaic term for 'Father,' which Jesus used to address God. However, it is possible that Jesus was bilingual. Recent archaeological excavations in Galilee indicate that Greek influence was widespread there in the first century of our era. If Jesus could speak Greek, some parts of the oral tradition of sayings and parables preserved in the gospels may actually have originated with him.

Members of the Jesus Seminar have gathered what is known about the transmission of oral tradition—not just in the gospels, but elsewhere in oral cultures—and have endeavored to turn this knowledge into a set of rules of evidence related to the formation and transmission of the Jesus tradition in oral form. These rules are guidelines for analyzing the earliest layer of tradition found in the written gospels.

We know that the oral memory best retains sayings and anecdotes that are short, provocative, memorable—and oft-repeated. Indeed, the oral memory retains little else. This information squares with the fact that the most frequently recorded words of Jesus in the surviving gospels take the form of aphorisms and parables. It is highly probable that the earliest layer of the gospel tradition was made up almost entirely of single aphorisms and parables that circulated by word of mouth, without narrative context—precisely as that tradition is recorded in Q and Thomas.

These considerations led to the formulation of the first three rules of oral evidence:

- The oral memory best retains sayings and anecdotes that are short, provocative, memorable—and oft-repeated.
- The most frequently recorded words of Jesus in the surviving gospels take the form of aphorisms and parables.
- The earliest layer of the gospel tradition is made up of single aphorisms and parables that circulated by word of mouth prior to the written gospels.

Recent experiments with memory have led psychologists and others to conclude that the human memory consists of short-term and long-term memory. Short-term memory is able to retain only about seven items at a time; beyond that point, items in short-term memory must either be transferred to long-term memory or those contents are lost. Further experiments have demonstrated that we grasp the essence or the *gist* of what we hear or read, relate that gist to knowledge previously acquired, and then store the new information in long-term memory in previously acquired categories. One experiment has shown that most people forget the exact wording of a particular statement after only sixteen syllables intervene between the original statement and the request to recall that wording. But the same experiment has proved that most people are quite good at recalling the gist of what was heard or read.

For these reasons, Fellows of the Seminar formulated this additional rule of oral evidence:

- Jesus' disciples remembered the core or gist of his sayings and parables, not his precise words, except in rare cases.

Those rare cases would, of course, consist of clichés, terms, or phrases that Jesus employed on a regular basis.

We can imagine Jesus speaking the same aphorism or parable on different occasions. We can further imagine that his followers would find themselves repeating these same sayings in contexts of their own, not in Jesus' precise words, but in their own words as they recalled the essence of what he had said. Various leaders in the Jesus movement would then have started to develop their own independent streams of tradition, and these streams would eventually culminate in written gospels like Thomas and the ones we find in the New Testament. It should be noted, however, that the surviving fragments of unknown gospels indicate that there were once many gospels. We already know of approximately twenty gospels; the total number may well have been much higher. The Jesus tradition evidently developed in many different directions simultaneously.

The storyteller's license

We know that the evangelists not infrequently ascribed Christian words to Jesus—they made him talk like a Christian, when, in fact, he was only the precursor of the movement that was to take him as its cultic hero. They also supplied dialogue for him on many narrative occasions for which their memories could not recall an appropriate aphorism or parable. In a word, they creatively invented speech for Jesus.

Storytellers in every age freely invent words for characters in their stories. This is the storyteller's license. Ancient historians like Herodotus, Thucydides, and the author of Acts were adept at this practice. In inventing lines for Jesus to speak, the evangelists were only following common practice.

Occasional dialogue in short stories in the gospels should not be considered direct quotation. Context-bound language has usually been conceived under the storyteller's license. When Jesus says to the man with the crippled hand, "Hold out your hand" (Mark 3:5), the evangelist is not recalling the precise words of Jesus; he is giving the gist of what Jesus might have said on such an occasion. The words put in quotation marks were not remembered and passed on in the oral tradition as memorable witticisms or remarks. Rather, they belong to the fabric of the story of which they are a part. In short, they are context-bound.

Under what circumstances would the evangelists (and other Christian storytellers before them) make up words and put them on the lips of Jesus? They would do so for any number of legitimate reasons, a few of which are represented by the following examples drawn from the Gospel of Mark.

- To express what Jesus is imagined to have said on particular occasions: Jesus says to them, "Let's cross to the other side." (Mark 4:35)
- To sum up the message of Jesus as Mark understood it: "The time is up. God's imperial rule is closing in. Change your ways and put your trust in the good news." (Mark 1:15)
- To forecast the outcome of his own gospel story and sum up the gospel then being proclaimed in his community, Mark has Jesus say, "The son of

Adam is being turned over to his enemies, and they will end up killing him. And three days after he is killed he will rise!" (Mark 9:31-32)

- To express Mark's own view of the disciples and others, Mark has Jesus say to the frightened disciples after the squall had died down, "Why are you so cowardly? You still don't trust, do you?" (Mark 4:40)
- Since Mark links trust with the cure of the sick, he has Jesus say to the woman he has just cured: "Daughter, your trust has cured you." (Mark 5:34) Jesus' remark is underscored by Mark's narrative aside: "He was unable to perform a single miracle there, except that he did cure a few by laying hands on them, though he was always shocked by their lack of trust." (Mark 6:5-6)
- To justify the later practice of fasting, in spite of the fact that Jesus and his first disciples did not fast: "The days will come when the groom is taken away from them, and then they will fast, on that day." (Mark 2:20)
- To elicit the right confession, Mark has Jesus ask, "What are people saying about me?" (Mark 8:27) A little later in the conversation, he asks, "What about you, who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29) Peter then responds: "You are the Anointed," which is what Christians are supposed to say.

The evangelists functioned no differently than other storytellers in this regard. As a consequence, we would expect much of the incidental conversation of Jesus in anecdotes to be the creation of the storyteller. And that indeed is the case. Fellows designated more than half of the inventory items black for just this reason. (Inauthentic sayings are printed in black in this edition of the gospels.) Under the storyteller's license, the evangelist also supplies words for Jesus in scenes where there is no one present to hear Jesus speak, scenes like his temptations in the desert and his prayers in the garden just before his arrest.

Distinctive discourse

Jesus undoubtedly said a great many very ordinary things, such as "hello" and "goodbye," and whatever he hollered when he hit his thumb in the carpenter's shop or stubbed his toe on a rocky road. But if we are to identify the voice of Jesus that makes him the precipitator of the Christian tradition, we have to look for sayings and stories that distinguish his voice from other ordinary speakers and even sages in his day and time. We have to be able to pick out a distinctive voice in a Galilean crowd. If Fellows of the Jesus Seminar were to isolate the words of Jesus from other voices in the gospels, they had to make this assumption:

- Jesus' characteristic talk was distinctive—it can usually be distinguished from common lore. Otherwise it is futile to search for the authentic words of Jesus.

As the Seminar began to identify certain aphorisms and parables, because of their distinctiveness, as something Jesus probably said, they also began to develop criteria that assisted them in articulating the content and style of Jesus'

discourse. One of the first things they noticed was that Jesus' parables and sayings cut against the social and religious grain. When he says, "It's not what goes into a person from the outside that can defile; rather, it's what comes out of the person that defiles" (Mark 7:15), Jesus is abrogating kosher food regulations across the board—a broadside against his own religious traditions. In the Gospel of Thomas this comparable instruction is given to the disciples: "When you go into any region and walk about in the countryside, when people take you in, eat what they serve you" (Thom 14:4). These sayings, and others like them, pass the test of this rule of evidence:

- Jesus' sayings and parables cut against the social and religious grain.

A related rule of evidence is this:

- Jesus' sayings and parables surprise and shock: they characteristically call for a reversal of roles or frustrate ordinary, everyday expectations.

This criterion is based on several of the great narrative parables, such as the Samaritan (Luke 10:30–35), the vineyard laborers (Matt 20:1–15), and the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), as well as on the so-called beatitudes (Luke 6:20–23) and the injunction to lend to those from whom one can expect no return, either interest or principal (Thom 95:1–2).

The man in the ditch does not expect the Samaritan to come to his aid. The younger son who has squandered his inheritance on frivolous things does not expect to be welcomed home. Those who were hired at the end of the day cannot expect to receive the full day's wage. Yet in all three cases, their expectations were reversed. Reversal applies equally to those on the other side of the story line: those who were hired early in the day complained because their hope of greater reward was frustrated. The older son griped because he had not been given a dinner party. And the priests and Levites in the story of the Samaritan and in Jesus' audience are incensed because the legal excuse for their behavior (contact with a corpse meant defilement) was brushed aside.

This criterion has turned out to be exceptionally durable in the quest for the authentic sayings of Jesus.

There is extravagance and exaggeration and humor in the parable in which a servant is forgiven a debt of $10,000,000 by his king, but then sends a fellow servant to prison because he could not come up with an obligation of $10 (Matt 18:23–25). Sayings and parables of this type led to another rule of Jesus' style:

- Jesus' sayings and parables are often characterized by exaggeration, humor, and paradox.

The first beatitude (Luke 6:20) is a paradox: "Congratulations, you poor! God's domain belongs to you" is an apparent contradiction in terms. Proverbial wisdom held that God's domain belonged to the wealthy, who prospered because they were righteous. "Love your enemies" is also a paradox: enemies that are loved are no longer enemies.

Jesus' figures of speech are drawn from the ordinary, everyday world: a master calling his steward to account, a dinner party, a harvest of grapes, leaven causing dough to rise, the lowly mustard weed, the need for daily bread, and the

like. Yet these images may represent only what folk take to be typical: Younger sons are regularly prodigal, aren't they? Village idlers never seek work, do they? The rich are completely indifferent to the needs of others, aren't they? Listeners nod their heads in silent agreement at these caricatures.

These everyday images as Jesus presents them, however, arrest the listener by their vividness and strangeness. The leaven is surprisingly employed as a figure for the holy, whereas leaven was customarily regarded as a symbol for corruption and evil. Everyone in the parable of the dinner party refuses the invitation. The mustard weed pokes fun at the mighty cedar of Lebanon, the symbol of Israel's greatness and power. The listener cannot fail to be struck by the surprising twist, the odd image, or the inverted symbol in these stories.

These features led the Fellows to formulate a further rule of Jesus' style:

- Jesus' images are concrete and vivid, his sayings and parables customarily metaphorical and without explicit application.

Jesus' audience undoubtedly clamored for explanations, for conclusions, for explicit instructions. In return, Jesus gave them more questions, more stories with unclear references, more responses that waffle: "Pay the emperor whatever belongs to the emperor, and pay God whatever belongs to God" (Mark 12:17). The answer shifts the decision back onto his listeners. Jesus' style was to refuse to give straightforward answers.

The laconic sage

Three additional generalizations about Jesus' manner focus on his lack of assertiveness:

- Jesus does not as a rule initiate dialogue or debate, nor does he offer to cure people.
- Jesus rarely makes pronouncements or speaks about himself in the first person.
- Jesus makes no claim to be the Anointed, the messiah.

Those who are being introduced into the world of biblical scholarship for the first time may find these rules of evidence puzzling. Why didn't Jesus initiate dialogue and debate with his critics? Why didn't he make claims for himself? The answers to these questions will make it evident why the findings of biblical scholars are experienced by many as erosive of (naïve) faith.

Like the cowboy hero of the American West exemplified by Gary Cooper, the sage of the ancient Near East was laconic, slow to speech, a person of few words. The sage does not provoke encounters. The miracle worker does not hang out a shingle and advertise services. As a rule, the sage is self-effacing, modest, unostentatious.

The prophet or holy man or woman does not initiate cures or exorcisms. This reticence is characteristic of both the Hebrew prophets—Elijah and Elisha, for example—and of a holy man like Apollonius of Tyana, a contemporary of Jesus, whose life is chronicled by Philostratus in the second century. Those who seek

help either petition in person or have someone petition for them. The holy man is often reluctant to give help even when asked (an example is the story of the Greek woman's daughter, Mark 7:24–30).

Jesus does not initiate debates or controversies. He is passive until a question is put to him, or until he or his disciples are criticized. The rare stories in which Jesus begins the argument are thought to be creations of the storyteller.

Jesus taught that the last will be first and the first will be last. He admonished his followers to be servants of everyone. He urged humility as the cardinal virtue by both word and example. Given these terms, it is difficult to imagine Jesus making claims for himself—I am the son of God, I am the expected One, the Anointed—unless, of course, he thought that nothing he said applied to himself.

The evangelists reflect vague memories of Jesus' unwillingness to speak about himself, to assign himself heroic roles. In synoptic accounts of his trial, Jesus remains stubbornly silent—for the most part. When the high priest asks him, "Tell us if you are the Anointed, the son of God!" Jesus is made to reply evasively, "If you say so" (Matt 26:63). The Greek phrase is ambiguous. It means something like, "You said it, I didn't," or "The words are yours." In the parallel passage in Mark, Jesus replies assertively, "I am!" (Mark 14:62). The Christian inclination to put its own affirmations on the lips of Jesus here overrides the distant memory that Jesus did not make such claims on his own behalf.

The apostle Paul, writing in the 50s of the first century, admonishes the Philippians, "You should humbly reckon others better than yourselves" (Phil 2:3). He then invokes Jesus as the model of what that means: "divine nature," Paul writes, citing an old hymn, "was his from the first. Yet he did not regard being equal with God something to expect, but counted himself as nothing and took the form of a slave. He assumed human likeness, appeared in human form, humbled himself, and in obedience accepted death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:5–9). This hymn produced the doctrine of *kenosis*, the view that Christ "emptied himself" of his divine nature when he assumed human form. Doctrines of this order were designed by early theologians to guard against the docetic heresy, which denies that Christ was fully human. The orthodox position was to place equal weight on both halves of the Chalcedonian definition: fully God and fully man. To deny the latter is to deny the former.

These later and derivative developments only underscore the evidence of the gospels: Jesus did not make claims for himself; the early Christian community allowed its own triumphant faith to explode in confessions that were retrospectively attributed to Jesus, its authority figure. The climax of that trajectory came with the Gospel of John. In John Jesus does little other than make claims for himself. For that reason alone, scholars regard the Fourth Gospel as alien to the real Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth.

To these rules of evidence, we should add a final qualification for those who are tempted to rush forward to the wrong conclusion: the fact that some words attributed to Jesus were not likely spoken by him does not necessarily diminish their importance. Jesus was not the only sage who ever lived: the Psalmist and the prophets, Moses and Job, Socrates and Aesop, and the Cynic philosophers who plied their trade in Galilee in Jesus' day, also had important things to say. And Jesus' followers, too, were inspired to say things about him, or for him, that

may embody profound truths. Many readers of this volume may be prompted to dismiss wise sayings because they cannot be attributed to Jesus. This possibility prompted the Seminar to put not a few items into the category of things we wish Jesus had really said.

BEADS & BOXES: THE JESUS SEMINAR AT WORK

The creation of the Jesus Seminar

Academic folk are a retiring lot. We prefer books to lectures, and solitude to public display. Nevertheless, we have too long buried our considered views of Jesus and the gospels in technical jargon and in obscure journals. We have hesitated to contradict TV evangelists and pulp religious authors for fear of political reprisal and public controversy. And we have been intimidated by promotion and tenure committees to whom the charge of popularizing or sensationalizing biblical issues is anathema. It is time for us to quit the library and speak up.

The level of public knowledge of the Bible borders on the illiterate. The church and synagogue have failed in their historic mission to educate the public in the fourth "R," religion. Many Americans do not know there are four canonical gospels, and many who do can't name them. The public is poorly informed of the assured results of critical scholarship, although those results are commonly taught in colleges, universities, and seminaries. In this vacuum, drugstore books and slick magazines play on the fears and ignorance of the uninformed. Radio and TV evangelists indulge in platitudes and pieties.

The Jesus Seminar was organized under the auspices of the Westar Institute to renew the quest of the historical Jesus and to report the results of its research to more than a handful of gospel specialists. At its inception in 1985, thirty scholars took up the challenge. Eventually more than two hundred professionally trained specialists, called Fellows, joined the group. The Seminar met twice a year to debate technical papers that had been prepared and circulated in advance. At the close of debate on each agenda item, Fellows of the Seminar voted, using colored beads to indicate the degree of authenticity of Jesus' words. Dropping colored beads into a box became the trademark of the Seminar and the brunt of attack for many elitist academic critics who deplored the public face of the Seminar.

The Fellows of the Seminar are critical scholars. To be a *critical* scholar means to make empirical, factual evidence—evidence open to confirmation by independent, neutral observers—the controlling factor in historical judgments. Noncritical scholars are those who put dogmatic considerations first and insist that the factual evidence confirm theological premises. Critical scholars adopt the principle of methodological skepticism: accept only what passes the rigorous tests of the rules of evidence. Critical scholars work from ancient texts in their original languages, in the case of the gospels, in Greek, Coptic, Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin, and other tongues. Critical scholars practice their craft by submitting their work to the judgment of peers. Untested work is not highly

regarded. The scholarship represented by the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar is the kind that has come to prevail in all the great universities of the world.

Critical scholarship is regularly under attack by conservative Christian groups. At least one Fellow of the Jesus Seminar lost his academic post as a result of his membership in the group. Others have been forced to withdraw as a consequence of institutional pressure. Latter-day inquisitors among Southern Baptist and Lutheran groups have gone witch-hunting for scholars who did not pass their litmus tests. Public attack on members of the Seminar is commonplace, coming especially from those who lack academic credentials.

The agenda of the Jesus Seminar

The first step in the work of the Jesus Seminar was to inventory and classify all the words attributed to Jesus in the first three centuries of the common era. The edict of toleration issued by the emperor Constantine in 313 C.E. was chosen as the cutoff point. With the council of Nicea in 325, the orthodox party solidified its hold on the Christian tradition and other wings of the Christian movment were choked off. The Seminar collected more than fifteen hundred versions of approximately five hundred items (it is often difficult to know how to count clusters of sayings and words embedded in longer narratives). The items were sorted into four categories: parables, aphorisms, dialogues, and stories containing words attributed to Jesus. The inventory covers all the surviving gospels and reports from the period, not just the canonical gospels. This was the rule the Fellows adopted:

- Canonical boundaries are irrelevant in critical assessments of the various sources of information about Jesus.

They refused, in other words, to privilege the gospels that came to be regarded as canonical by the church. The Seminar thus acted in accordance with the canons of historical inquiry.

The goal of the Seminar was to review each of the fifteen hundred items and determine which of them could be ascribed with a high degree of probability to Jesus. The items passing the test would be included in a database for determining who Jesus was. But the interpretation of the data was to be excluded from the agenda of the Seminar and left to individual scholars working from their own perspectives.

The Seminar had to agree on two questions that established the course of its deliberations. It first had to decide how it would reach its decisions. It then had to determine how it would report the results to a broad public not familiar with the history of critical scholarship over the past two centuries and more.

Voting was adopted, after extended debate, as the most efficient way of ascertaining whether a scholarly consensus existed on a given point. Committees creating a critical text of the Greek New Testament under the auspices of the United Bible Societies vote on whether to print this or that text and what variants to consign to notes. Translation committees, such as those that created the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version, vote in the course of their

deliberations on which translation proposal to accept and which to reject. Voting does not, of course, determine the truth; voting only indicates what the best judgment is of a significant number of scholars sitting around the table. It was deemed entirely consonant with the mission of the Jesus Seminar to decide whether, after careful review of the evidence, a particular saying or parable did or did not fairly represent the voice of the historical Jesus.

The second agreement reached by the Seminar at the beginning of its work—again, only after agonizing review—was to create a critical red letter edition of the gospels as the vehicle of its public report. We could not readily report the exchange that regularly followed the presentation of technical papers. We required some shorthand and graphic model—one that could be understood at a glance by the casual reader.

The model of the red letter edition suggested that the Seminar should adopt one of two options in its votes: either Jesus said it or he did not say it. A vote recognizing the words as authentic would entail printing the items in red; a vote recognizing the words as inauthentic meant that they would be left in regular black print.

Academics do not like simple choices. The Seminar adopted four categories as a compromise with those who wanted more. In addition to red, we permitted a pink vote for those who wanted to hedge: a pink vote represented reservations either about the degree of certainty or about modifications the saying or parable had suffered in the course of its transmission and recording. And for those who wanted to avoid a flat negative vote, we allowed a gray vote (gray being a weak form of black). The Seminar employed colored beads dropped into voting boxes in order to permit all members to vote in secret. Beads and boxes turned out to be a fortunate choice for both Fellows and an interested public.

Fellows were permitted to cast ballots under two different options for understanding the four colors.

Option 1

red: **I would include this item unequivocally in the database for determining who Jesus was.**

pink: I would include this item with reservations (or modifications) in the database.

gray: **I would not include this item in the database, but I might make use of some of the content in determining who Jesus was.**

black: **I would not include this item in the primary database.**

Option 2

red: **Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it.**

pink: Jesus probably said something like this.

gray: **Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own.**

black: **Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition.**

One member suggested this unofficial but helpful interpretation of the colors:

red: That's Jesus!
pink: Sure sounds like Jesus.
gray: Well, maybe.
black: There's been some mistake.

The Seminar did not insist on uniform standards for balloting. The ranking of items was determined by weighted vote. Since most Fellows of the Seminar are professors, they are accustomed to grade points and grade-point averages. So they decided on the following scheme:

red = 3
pink = 2
gray = 1
black = 0

The points on each ballot were added up and divided by the number of votes in order to determine the weighted average. We then converted the scale to percentages—to yield a scale of 1.00 rather than a scale of 3.00. The result was a scale divided into four quadrants:

red: .7501 and up
pink: .5001 to .7500
gray: .2501 to .5000
black: .0000 to .2500

This system seemed superior to a system that relied on majorities or pluralities of one type or another. In a system that made the dividing line between pink and gray a simple majority, nearly half of the Fellows would lose their vote. There would only be winners and losers. Under weighted averages, all votes would count in the averages. Black votes in particular could readily pull an average down, as students know who have one "F" along with several "A"s. Yet this shortcoming seemed consonant with the methodological skepticism that was a working principle of the Seminar: when in sufficient doubt, leave it out.

Red letter editions

Red letter editions of the New Testament apparently originated with Louis Klopsch around the turn of the century. Klopsch was born in Germany and was brought to the United States in 1854. He eventually became publisher of the American edition of the *Christian Herald*.

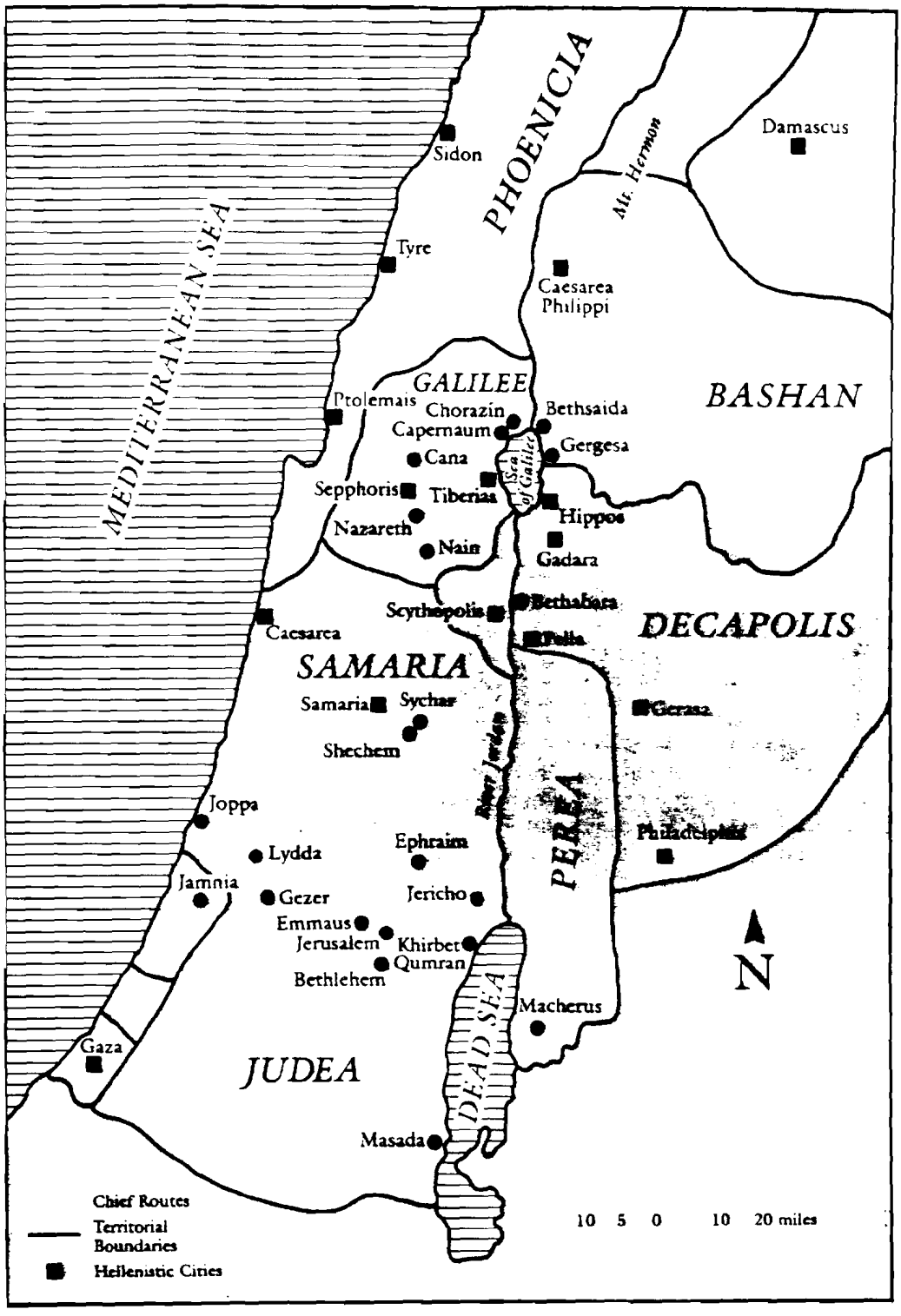
The idea of a red letter edition struck Klopsch as he read the words of Luke 22:20: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." This sentence, which provided the name for the second major division of the Christian Bible—the New Testament—also offered Klopsch the idea for printing the words of Jesus in red, the color of his blood.

Publisher Klopsch invited scholars in America and Europe "to submit passages they regarded as spoken by Christ while on earth." He thus convened the first Jesus Seminar (by mail) and produced the first critical red letter edition. In

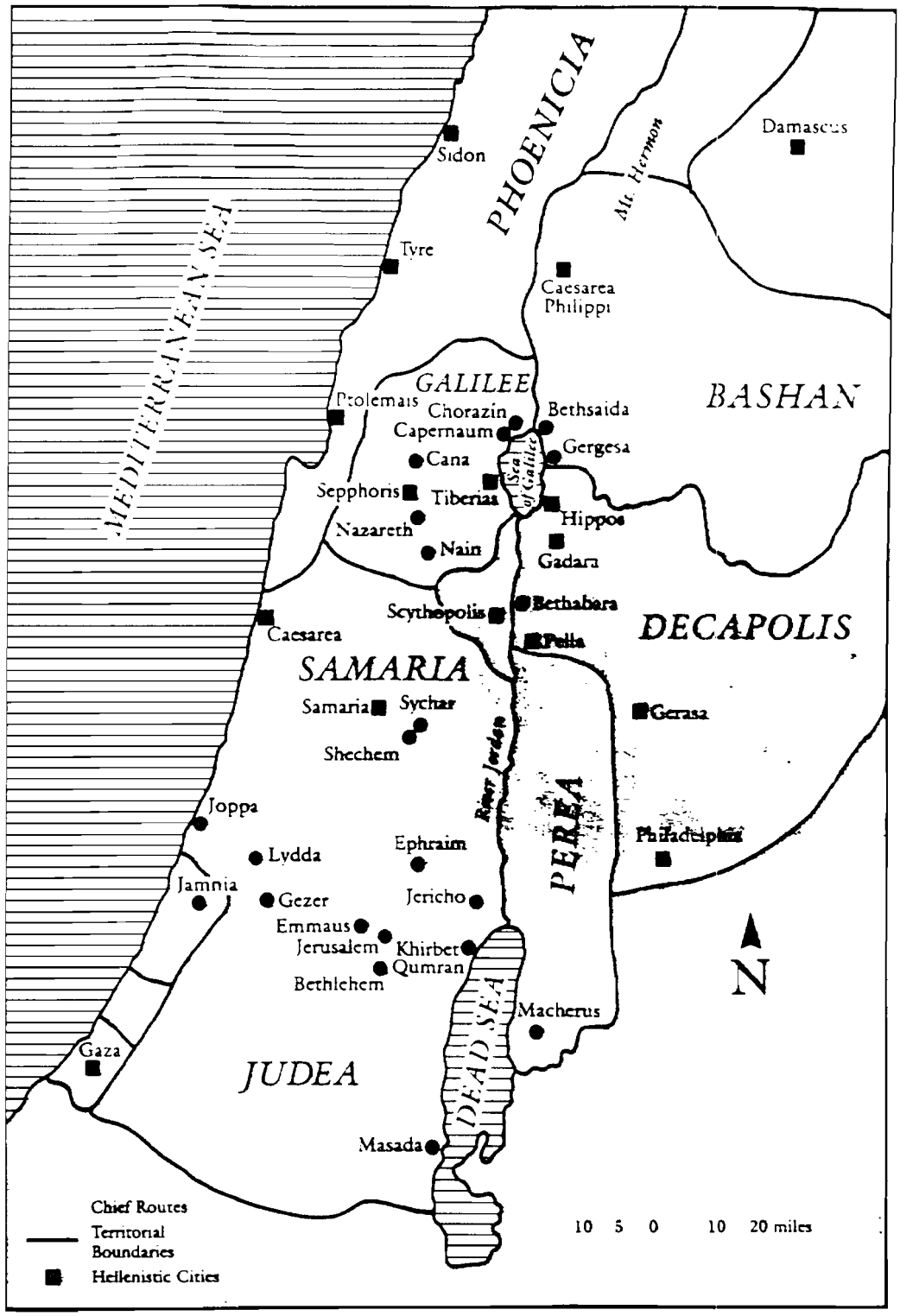
more recent red letter editions, the original limitation to words spoken by Jesus while on earth has been abandoned and all words attributed to Jesus included—on earth, in visions, and after the resurrection. However, publishers vary in what they print in red. Current red letter editions do not tell the reader who made the decisions to print what in red.

A fourteenth-century manuscript of the four gospels written in Greek and Latin anticipated the red letter editions of later times. In this manuscript, the narrative text is written (by hand) in vermillion, while the words of Jesus, the genealogy of Jesus, and the words of angels are written in crimson. Words of the disciples, of Zechariah, of the Pharisees, the centurion, Judas Iscariot, and the devil are in black. The idea for a red letter edition had already occurred to some scribe five hundred years before it occurred to Klopsch. This remarkable copy of the gospels is known as Codex 16 and is housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

The results of the deliberations of the Seminar are presented in this red letter edition of the five gospels. The accompanying commentary summarizes the reasons Fellows voted the way they did. For those who want an overview of red and pink letter sayings and parables, an index is provided at the end of the volume.



Palestine in the first century C.E.



Palestine in the first century C.E.