

The Jesus Seminar, Jesus, and Higher Criticism

By Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. John Weldon

In modern times many enlightened types have become skeptical and we look down on the uneducated types who believe. It's sort of a pity that all most of us know about Jesus is from the creeds, which we can't believe."—James Robinson, of the Jesus Seminar and the International Q Project, cited in the *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1996

As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him, at the last day. For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.—Jesus, John 12:47-50

Introduction

In April of 1996 something unique happened in the history of publishing. In their April 8, 1996 issues, all three major news magazines carried cover stories on Jesus Christ: *Time*, "The Search for Jesus"; *Newsweek*, "Rethinking the Resurrection"; *U.S. News and World Report*, "In Search of Jesus". Even two thousand years after Jesus died, He continues to impact the secular world more than any person in history. Certainly, the world seems to continue to be fascinated by Him, and, naturally, so are His followers.

However, if recent poll results are valid, Christians, ironically, are also confused about Jesus and biblical authority. Before we proceed, consider several illustrations. At the Evangelical Ministries to the New Religions National Conference, September 12, 1996, Dr. John Ankerberg stated the following in his lecture, "Characteristics of the People and False Religion of the Last Days":

According to the recent polls of George Gallup, George Barna and James D. Hunter, 35% of America's Evangelical seminarians deny that faith in Christ is absolutely necessary. What's even more alarming is that 35% of the entire adult Evangelical population agrees with the statement: "God will save all good people when they die, regardless of whether they have trusted in Christ"...*Pulpit Helps* [revealed that] a survey of 7,441 Protestant pastors [51% of Methodist; 35% of Presbyterian; 33% of Baptist; 30% of Episcopalian] did not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus.

Another alarming statistic is that 77% of America's Evangelicals believe that human beings are basically good by nature, whereas, the Scripture says man was created good but fell and now has a sinful nature. Instead of Evangelical preaching that man is utterly condemned and helpless as a result of his sin and can do nothing to save himself, recent surveys have shown that 87% of American Evangelicals hold to the idea that "God helps those who help themselves...."

Today, the doctrine of justification is widely ignored, rarely central, and not infrequently denied outright by Protestant and, tragically, Evangelical theologians and pastors.... One of my old professors, Dr. Clark Pinnock, is so uncomfortable with an objective justification that he favors the "possibility of a doctrine of purgatory."

Consider other polls by the George Barna organization. These are even more disconcerting. In one poll in 1991, "53% of those claiming to be Bible-believing conservative

Christians said there is no such thing as absolute truth.”¹ In another poll, 43% of born-again Christians claimed that it did not matter what religion a person belonged to because all religions teach similar lessons about life.² According to *Newsweek*, April 8, 1996, “A survey conducted last month by the Barna Research Group, a conservative Christian organization in Glendale, California, finds that 30% of ‘born-again’ Christians do not believe that ‘Jesus came back to physical life after he was crucified.’”³

Obviously, something is wrong since these beliefs are wrong. Either these results are incorrect, or people are claiming they are genuine Christians when they are not, or many people in the church have bought a bill of goods. But why? And how did Christians ever get such blatant misinformation in the first place?

Given the declining moral and intellectual trend in our culture in the last generation and its influence in the church, these results are not necessarily unexpected. But for all the places one may look to explain such results, one often overlooked is liberal theology and its “higher critical” approach to the Bible. This critical approach is widely endorsed by mainstream theologians and denominations, critics of the Bible generally, and by cults like Mormonism and world religions like Islam, which have a vested interest in seeking to discredit biblical Christianity. Strangely, those destructive methods are increasingly used even by some Evangelical scholars.

How Do Liberal Theologians See Jesus?

There is no denying the fact that once trust in the Bible as an authoritative source is undermined, its teachings will either be doubted or, especially if unpopular, considered irrelevant. Yet, we don’t think that most Christians, especially the average American, has any idea of the great weight of blame that can be laid at the feet of liberal theology and higher criticism generally for destroying America’s faith in the Bible—or the terrible consequences that must logically flow from it.

To illustrate this liberal approach to the Bible, and some of its problems, we will cite the all too common view of Scripture seen in popular news magazines such as those cited above, *Time*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *Newsweek*.

Almost every year, especially at Easter, these magazines comment about all the books written by liberal theologians in the search for the “historical Jesus,” the alleged enigmatic “real” Jesus of history as opposed to the so-called “Christ of faith” that Christians believe in. Indeed, as an illustration of the number of works on Jesus, consider that one general bibliography, *Life of Jesus Research* (Leiden Brill, 1989) has 1,300 entries.

In fact, in recent years, literally dozens of books have been written by liberal and non-evangelical theologians rejecting or attacking the very foundation of the Christian faith: the biblical Jesus Christ. Among these books are John Dominic Crossan’s *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*; *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* and *Who Killed Jesus?*; Burton Mack’s *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* and *The Lost Gospel: the Book of Q and Christian Origins*; the book published by the notorious “Jesus Seminar,” *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*; Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*; Barbara Thiering’s *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation of the Dead Sea Scrolls*; A. N. Wilson’s *Jesus: A Life*; John Shelby Spong’s *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*; Ian Wilson’s *Jesus: the Evidence*; John Allegro’s *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*; David Spangler, *Reflections on the Christ*; S. G. S. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots*; Robert Funk’s *Honest to Jesus*; Marcus Borg’s *Meeting Jesus*

Again for the First Time, and Morton Smith's *The Secret Gospel* and *Jesus the Magician*.

In books like the above, we find Jesus portrayed in a diverse manner—as a Jewish holy man, an occult magician and mystic, a personification of a psychedelic mushroom cult, a twice married divorcé with three kids, a homosexual, a wicked priest, a social cynic, a political revolutionary and just about any other view one might wish to take. Indeed, according to Gregory Boyd, theology professor at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and author of, *Cynic, Sage or Son of God?: Rediscovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionists Replies*, in the words of *U.S. News & World Report*,

Perhaps the most intriguing part of this modern quest [for the historical Jesus] is how the interests and personalities of scholars intersect with their work. The “control-beliefs of a scholar,” writes Gregory Boyd “...determine what kind of Jesus he or she is looking for by defining what kind of Jesus is and is not possible.” That is why examining the lives of leaders in the historical-Jesus movement is a key to understanding their findings.⁴

In other words, these scholars are more concerned with writing about a Jesus they are personally comfortable with than the Jesus we find in the Gospels.

Consider that many of these books have received wide publicity, not only from magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*, but TV specials also. No wonder they are having such an impact. As *Time* magazine points out, citing one scholar “There’s an enormous appetite among ordinary churchgoers who,” he adds, “are very puzzled about what’s going on.” Reading these books, one can understand why so many people are puzzled.

But puzzled isn’t quite the appropriate word; we think that Christians who are not grounded in theology and apologetics and aware of the problems of historical criticism and the so-called search for the historical Jesus are having their faith damaged, often greatly, by exposure to these materials. It’s a much more serious issue than merely being puzzled. The poll results cited above are proof enough.

Luke Timothy Johnson, a Roman Catholic scholar who is critical of the Jesus Seminar, comments correctly, “People have no idea how fraudulent people who claim to be scholars can be.”⁵ Further, citing another problem:

Americans generally have an abysmal level of knowledge of the Bible. In this world of mass ignorance, to have headlines proclaim that this or that fact about [Jesus] has been declared untrue by supposedly scientific inquiry has the effect of gospel. There is no basis on which most people can counter these authoritative-sounding statements.

Unfortunately, Johnson’s own book, *The Real Jesus* retreats into subjectivism as well, probably due to his Catholic background and its own infection with higher criticism. Here is an illustration of Johnson’s problematic methodology:

Christianity has never been able to “prove” its claims except by appeal to the experiences and convictions of those already convinced. The only real validation for the claim that Jesus is what the creed claims him to be, light from light, true God from true God, is to be found in the quality of life demonstrated by those who make this confession.⁶

In the words of biblical scholar N. T. Wright, this is “poppycock.” “He kicks the ball back into his own net by mistake.”⁷ In other words, Johnson himself falls into a similar quagmire of subjectivism that the Jesus Seminar has been reveling in all along. Thus, it is just as much nonsense to say that the only thing that proves Christianity true is subjective experience and lifestyle as it is to say that nothing in the Gospels is historically credible. If we argue that the only proof of Christianity is found subjectively, then it makes *no difference* whether or not the Gospels are historically reliable.

If what Johnson says is correct, that “the faith of most Christians is sustained principally by the witness of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives,” then how can we know what the Holy Spirit witnesses to if we can’t know that the New Testament records are accurate? “Christianity,” says Johnson, “is an organic, evolving religion based, above all, on personal leaps and tests of faith. Johnson, who received his Ph.D. at Yale University in 1976, says his own most sacred religious beliefs are confirmed in experience, not in texts.”⁸

What is the Jesus Seminar?

The so-called Jesus Seminar (JS) illustrates the fraudulent nature of liberal biblical scholarship generally. According to the *Los Angeles Times* of November 25, 1978, when the Jesus Seminar was first organized it had only a few members and hoped to enlist 12 to 15 biblical authorities to vote on every word of Jesus to decide which were the most authentic and which were “put into his mouth” by early church tradition. Project organizer Robert W. Funk, a former president of the Society of Biblical Literature, said the purpose of the seminar was to determine “what did Jesus *really* say?”

Harvard Divinity School’s George MacRae, one of the first members of the group, said that the real question the scholars would be asking was this: “What can we say Jesus said after 60 years of form criticism, of analyzing individual miracle stories and sayings?”

The *Times* pointed out that some evangelical scholars would be added to the Seminar (back then it was simply a committee) “but only those who use modern critical methods” according to MacRae. Eight years, later the impact of the JS was beginning to be felt.

An article in the April 27, 1985 *Los Angeles Times*, Part II, p. 8, by John Dart, “Skepticism of Many New Testament Scholars Clashes with Laymen’s Faith and Traditional Beliefs on Jesus” pointed out, “So far as the biblical historian is concerned, there is scarcely a popularly held traditional belief about Jesus that is not regarded with considerable skepticism” according to the chairman of Stanford University’s religious studies department, Van Harvey.

Harvey implied that the layman, i.e., the average Christian, really isn’t qualified to understand the Bible or assess its various claims! “The Stanford professor said that New Testament scholarship has become so specialized and requires so much preparation that many scholars feel ‘the lay person has simply been disqualified from having any right to a judgment regarding the truth or falsity of certain historical claims.’”

That’s like saying the average American has been disqualified from, and has no right to judge the truth of certain specialized political claims.

Further, the author of the article, John Dart, reported, “The lay person unacquainted with New Testament research is no more in a position to have an informed judgment on the historical reliability of gospel accounts than a non-specialist would about ‘the Seventh Letter of Plato, the relationship of Montezuma to Cortez’ or other historical matters.” So, most Christians really aren’t qualified to say anything about the words of Jesus. Only the liberal scholars are so qualified. (No scholarly papalism here!)

What Did the Jesus Seminar Conclude About Jesus and His Teachings?

How did the Jesus Seminar vote on the words of Jesus? In the most scholarly manner possible, they voted on the authenticity of the words of Jesus by dropping colored balls into a box. A red ball meant Jesus made the statement or something very like it; a pink ball meant He probably said something like this; gray meant He did not say it but the ideas

were close to His; a black ball meant Jesus never said it.

Only about 18% of Jesus' words "pass" the test and are colored red or pink; however, even a good number of these statements come from the pseudepigraphal, Gnostic, *Gospel of Thomas*, which JS members consider a fifth "gospel."⁹ Thus, Jesus never really believed He would die for the world's sins despite His clear statements in Matthew 20:28, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many," and Matthew 26:28, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins," and John 12:27, "And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason that I came to this hour."

Nor did He think He was the Messiah despite John 4:25-26. Here, in response to the woman at the well who said, "I know that Messiah is coming," we read, "Then Jesus declared, 'I who speak to you am *He*.'" And before the high priest himself, under oath, Jesus declared He was the Messiah, "The high priest said to him, 'I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.' 'Yes, it is as you say,' Jesus replied. 'But I say to all of you: in the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven'" (Mt. 26:63-64).

In addition, He never really claimed to be God despite claims like the following, "Before Abraham was born, I am" (Jn. 8:58); "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30); and "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9).

Jesus never spoke of heaven or hell despite Matthew 25:46, "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Jesus was not virgin born and did no miracles despite Matthew 1:22-23 and 11:46. In the former verse we read that the virgin birth of Jesus "took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son....'" That Jesus did miracles is also obvious. In fact, when John the Baptist was in prison, apparently discouraged, and heard about all the miracles Jesus was doing, he sent his own disciples to ask Jesus whether or not He was the Messiah. Jesus' reply was that the miracles He did *proved* He was the Messiah.

At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses, and evil spirits, and give sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (Lk. 7:21-23).

Finally, the Jesus Seminar asks us to believe that Jesus never called for anyone to repent of their sins and, of course, He never rose from the dead, despite the unanimous testimony of all four Gospels and the verdict of history.

In fact, only about 15 actual sayings of Jesus are colored red—and even then not necessarily in each Gospel.¹⁰ This reduces Jesus' "authentic" words in the Gospels to less than 6 per cent. In other words, 94 per cent of what we read Jesus saying in the Gospels is doubtful or wrong. The Gospel of Mark, for example, had only one single verse (!!) of over 280 verses spoken by Jesus colored red—Mark 12:17. This means that according to traditional authorship, Mark (or Christian tradition) misquoted or invented the words of Jesus some 300 times for every time he quoted Jesus correctly. And worse yet (if that were possible), virtually *everything* in the Gospel of John was voted black! The beloved Apostle John actually had a worse record of accurately recording Jesus' words than Mark. Everyone can

now relax. We know the truth that the Gospels are worthless. (To make certain we know it, the JS is now spending its time determining what Jesus never *did* in the Gospels.)

Should Liberal Theologians Be Trusted?

If what these scholars say is true, Christianity is not just a false religion, it is a worthless religion and a fraud of the worst sort. One is tempted to think that having us arrive at such a conclusion is perhaps the real motive underlying the work of many of these scholars. One also wonders about scholars who spend so much of their time and effort attempting to disprove the Bible when to them it is so obviously a falsehood to begin with. (Hint: Maybe it's because they think it really might be true but really don't want it to be—kind of like the TV commentator who said, “Perhaps the most fearful thing about the Christian hell is that it might be true.”¹¹)

The kind of arrogance displayed in the Jesus Seminar, which actually votes on the accuracy and reliability of Jesus' statements—Jesus was, after all, God incarnate!—or the assumption that only the scholars have the right to judge New Testament reliability represents the height of insolence. In his knowledge of New Testament reliability the informed Christian laymen is actually better educated than these “scholars” whose rationalistic, skeptical assumptions leave them speaking nonsense or in a hopeless muddle, uncertain what to believe. As one commentator noted, “If a vote were taken on the usefulness of the Jesus Seminar, is there any doubt what the outcome would be?”¹²

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to determine from the New Testament accounts that Jesus claimed to be God and that He said His words would never pass away. Nor does it take a Nobel Prize winner or a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies from Stanford to ascertain with a relatively small amount of study that the New Testament documents are historically accurate and that Jesus rose from the dead. What *is* noteworthy is the tremendous amount of legitimate scholarship the rationalistic theologians, liberals and skeptics will completely disregard in order to maintain their own biases.

We think that liberal biblical scholars generally, who have done so much to damage the cause and credibility of Christianity in the eyes of both the church and the world, can hardly be seen as objective theologians honestly searching for the “real” Jesus. After all, the real Jesus has been clearly present in the Scriptures for 2,000 years. Instead, these liberals should be viewed as self-serving ideologues at best—indeed, hypocrites, if they claim to be Christian—and at worst as enemies of the Christian faith. No other perspective would seem to do them justice. Discontent to keep their destructive views to themselves, they actively seek to persuade others not to trust in the biblical picture of Jesus. And they are highly successful—their “new view of Christ that denies His supremacy is gaining followers all over the world.”¹³ Indeed, why do you think the “Jesus Seminar” releases its “findings” just before Easter and Christmas? Obviously, this is a calculated attempt to target the public at the best possible time to secure maximum exposure for their radical views.

However, this liberal quest for “the historical Jesus” can only terminate as theological road kill along the path to, presumably not heaven. Even *Newsweek* commented, “After 150 years of scholarly search, there are signs that the quest for the ‘historical’ Jesus has reached a dead end. There have been no new data on the person of Jesus since the gospels were written.”¹⁴ The major reason such a critical search exists at all is because many people don't want to believe what the gospels clearly state. The real problem, then, is that the critics don't want to believe in Jesus. We have demonstrated elsewhere that the

problem is not the quality of the evidence to substantiate biblical Christianity and its documents as historically reliable.¹⁵ After all, the gospels were long ago proven accurate, historical reporting. That evidence to substantiate this is available to everyone. When one looks at the quality of evangelical scholarship in, e.g., the six volume *Gospel Perspectives* (Sheffield, JSOT Press 1986) or a critique of the JS like Michael Wilkins and J. P. Moreland's, eds., *Jesus Under Fire*, one finds a clear and unambiguous refutation of what the liberals are doing as well as an objective defense of New Testament Christianity. But because critics prefer unbelief to a reasoned faith, they literally spend years and thousands of hours inventing and weaving theories to support their personal biases.

When the harmful conclusions of the Jesus Seminar are broadcast nationwide, and indeed worldwide, it's not difficult to understand why Christians who believe in the Bible are so upset by these so-called biblical scholars' approach to Scripture. Their poison is being disseminated everywhere. Again, in the past decade the Seminar participants have "actively sought to publicize their view."¹⁶ Indeed, "It would be hard to find a newspaper in America that hasn't done a story on the Seminar over the past decade."¹⁷

But just who are the members of the Jesus Seminar? Are they the unbiased scholars who have dealt honestly with conservative biblical scholarship and found it wanting as they want us to believe? No, mostly they are blind theologians with an agenda to ignore or discredit New Testament teachings.

Overall, the Jesus Seminar is composed of Protestants, Catholics, and atheists, professors at universities and seminaries, one pastor, three members of the Westar Institute in California which sponsored the project, one filmmaker, and three others whose current occupations are entirely unidentified. Of the 74 there are three women and two Jews. Thirty-six, almost half, have a degree from or currently teach at one of three schools—Harvard, Claremont, or Vanderbilt—with some of the most liberal departments of New Testament studies anywhere.¹⁸

The bias and, in fact, un scholarly approach of the Jesus Seminar and liberal biblical criticism generally is evident. They assume *a priori* that the gospel writers were so overlaid with "Christianizing" propaganda, their writings are useless for determining who Jesus really was, and, therefore are essentially worthless as historical documents. As we noted, according to the Jesus Seminar book, *The Five Gospels*, at most, 18 percent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the gospels were actually spoken by Him. The book of John was entirely eliminated!! And only one sentence of Jesus in Mark survived their tests of authenticity. What bold arrogance! One can only wonder what Jesus Himself would think of all this—especially since He was the one who promised us, "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will *never* pass away" (Mt. 24:35).

Not surprisingly, the head of the Jesus Seminar, Robert Funk, says that the goal of the seminar is to "set Jesus free" from the "scriptural and creedal *prisons* in which we have entombed him."¹⁹ So the historic creeds of Christianity and the Scriptures themselves are to be considered "prisons" that keep the "real" Jesus locked away! Funk also sees the role of the Seminar in laying the foundation for a new "Reformation." "Christianity as we have known it is anemic and wasting away." Thus he thinks it is time to "reinvent Christianity" from the top down, complete with new story symbols and understandings of Jesus.²⁰ Burton Mack, a prominent JS spokesman, says, delightedly, "It's over... Christianity has had a two-thousand year run, and it's over."²¹ No bias against historical orthodoxy here.

What Are Some Problems with the Jesus Seminar?

Three of the key errors made by the JS are: 1) implying its conclusions represent a consensus of modern scholarship; 2) its deliberate skepticism and bias, which are entirely without justification and 3) its fatal methodological flaws that undermine its own conclusions (e.g., they can use their own “criteria of authenticity” standards to show the reliability of the Gospels, and even the resurrection of Jesus).²²

Inevitably, because of their biases, the conclusions of these liberals is predetermined by their sociological, mystical, political and philosophical prejudices. And even the Easter article in *Newsweek*, hardly a conservative theological think tank, can see through their agenda:

They apply the critical tools of today: text chopping, psychological speculation and colleague-bashing. And then they take leaps of faith, often of their own creation. Of the dozens of recent books denying the resurrection stories, many are written by liberal scholars who think the time has come to replace the “cultic” Jesus of Christian worship with the “real” Jesus unearthed by “academic” research. Theirs is not disinterested historical investigation but scholarship with a frankly missionary purpose: by reconstructing the life of Jesus they hope to show that belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a burden to the Christian faith and deflects attention from his role as a social reformer.... In short, modern psychology reduces the Risen Christ to a series of interpsychic experiences that produced in the disciples a renewed sense of missionary zeal and spiritual self-confidence.²³

Not only is there not much new in the liberals’ approach, (similar conclusions having been presented for the last 150 years by previous critics), their scholarship *per se* cannot bear its own weight. *Christianity Today* mentions that in *The Real Jesus: The Mistaken Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, Luke Timothy Johnson points out these scholars are naïve in how they approach historical sources, in their understanding of what history is and can achieve, and in the nature and limits of historical knowledge. Indeed, “the scholarship that undergirds the Jesus Seminar and similar enterprises is based on wild speculation and minuscule evidence.”²⁴ In fact, the liberals associated with the Jesus Seminar and its conclusions don’t even represent the mainstream of biblical scholarship. As the article in *Christianity Today* points out:

...while the radical revisionists have claimed the lion’s share of media coverage, their conclusions are by no means representative of the whole spectrum of New Testament scholarship... the claim, repeatedly reinforced by the media, that their peculiar form of scholarly reductionism somehow represents the “consensus view” of “most” New Testament scholars [is false].

In fact... the conclusions reached by the Jesus Seminar represent the views of a tiny minority of mostly second-rate scholars.... Only a few [of Jesus Seminar participants], such as Founder Crossan and Funk, have any sort of prestigious credentials as scholars.... The views of some 40 people cannot reasonably be said to represent the thinking of, say, the more than 6,900 members of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and the thousands of others...²⁵

Further,

Perhaps the most striking feature of *The Five Gospels* is how out of touch it is even with mainline scholarship. In fact, a major movement among New Testament critics has generated what has been dubbed “the third quest” for the historical Jesus. This quest has been far more optimistic than its predecessors in claiming that substantial amounts of material about what Jesus said and did can be recovered from the canonical Gospels. Indeed, two of the major contributors to this quest—James Charlesworth of Princeton and E.

P. Sanders of Duke—agree that “the dominant view today seems to be that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish, that we can know a lot about what he said, and that those two things make sense within the world of first-century Judaism.”

It is this final clause that the JS virtually ignores. Their Jesus does not make sense in the world of Judaism.²⁶

Where Is the Enigmatic “Q”?

To illustrate the “wild speculation and minuscule evidence” referred to by Johnson, consider the non-existent hypothetical collection of Jesus sayings termed “Q” (supposedly used by Matthew, Mark and Luke). Liberal scholars such as Burton Mack in *Who Wrote the New Testament?: The Making of the Christian Myth* (1995) are now speaking of Q1, Q2, Q3 and Q4 which, Johnson correctly points out, is preposterous and explains “why so much of contemporary New Testament scholarship is viewed with derision by mainstream historians. The entire edifice is ‘a house of cards’...Pull out one element and the whole construction crumbles.”²⁷

John Wenham has had a distinguished academic career as vice principal of Tyndale Hall, Bristol, lecturer in New Testament Greek at Bristol University and warden of Latimer House, Oxford. He is the author of such important works as *Christ and the Bible* and *The Goodness of God*. In *Redating Matthew, Mark & Luke*, where he dates the synoptics at 40, 45 and 54 respectively, he illustrates the quandary of those who employ obviously biased higher critical methods rather than an objective and more fair scholarship that takes all the known factual data into account. Wenham quotes M. D. Goulder who writes, “Not tens but hundreds of thousands of pages have been wasted by authors on this Synoptic Problem [i.e., the likenesses and differences between the first three gospels] not paying attention to errors of method.” Wenham goes on to comment that, “Much of the argumentation is worth very little, because so many of the arguments are reversible: they can be argued either way with approximately equal cogency.”²⁸ Thus, “The view that Matthew and Luke independently used Mark and a lost source “Q” is still held as a working hypothesis by most scholars, but with decreasing confidence.”²⁹

“Q” illustrates the quagmire scholars get themselves into when they are unwilling to take the text at face value even though there is every good reason to do so. “Q” doesn’t even exist; literally hundreds of thousands of hours have been consumed dissecting a purely imaginary text (as in “The international Q Projects” database research which contains, e.g., a 90-page single spaced analysis of a single verse that was ultimately determined to be from Matthew, not “Q!”) The kind of scholarly speculation and/or nonsense represented by Q is almost maddening. And the Q project intends to publish over 60 volumes of 300 pages each, painstakingly evaluating a text that does not exist. Each 300-page volume with about 100 words from “Q” per volume; that’s three pages of scholarly discussion for every non-existent word of Q. Wenham says of “Q”:

When we try to put the Q-theory to the test the matter is of course complicated by the fact that we have no text of “Q” to work with. ...S. Petrie in his *Novum Testamentum 3* (1959) article, “‘Q’ is Only What You Make It” has shown this in a colourful way. He speaks of the “exasperating contradictoriness” of scholarly views as to its nature:

“Q” is a single document; it is a composite document, incorporating earlier sources; it is used in different redactions; it is more than one document. The original language of “Q” is Greek; the original language is Aramaic; it is used in different translations. “Q” is the Matthean Logia; it is not the Matthean Logia. “Q” has a definite shape; it is no more than an amorphous collection of fragments. “Q” is a gospel; it is not a gospel. “Q” includes the

Crucifixion story; it does not include the Crucifixion story. “Q” consists wholly of sayings and there is no narrative; it includes some narrative. All of “Q” is preserved in Matthew and Luke; not all of it is preserved; it is better preserved in Luke. Matthew’s order is the correct order; Luke’s is the correct order; neither order is correct. “Q” is used by Mark; it is not used by Mark.³⁰

Returning to the liberal critics’ view of Jesus, it is obvious the critical scholars have used inventive theories like “Q” only to make Jesus into an image they are comfortable with—whether political revolutionary, proto-feminist, mystic, cynic, etc. Every other image of Jesus is acceptable to them—except the one in the New Testament. Again, no biases here! As *Christianity Today* pointed out, their answer to who Jesus is seems to “be almost anything *but* the risen Christ worshipped by believers around the world.”³¹ Indeed, for the JS, “This Jesus is more Gnostic—concerned primarily to impart true knowledge—than anything orthodox Christianity has ever accepted. Today we might call it ‘New Age.’ But given the JS’s stated goal of discrediting orthodox Christianity and going beyond mainstream scholarship (despite their repeated claims that they represent a consensus), this conclusion should not be surprising.”³²

The reason should be obvious: if we accept the real Jesus of history, the Jesus in the New Testament, then He is indeed our Lord, Savior and Judge. He is not someone we may trifle with but one we *must* bow to as our Sovereign. It is *He* who will judge *us* at the Last Day. (Jn. 5:27-29) Since the human heart, in its rebellion against God, prefers anything other than this, the almost desperate nature of the offensive “scholarship” to formulate a new Jesus is understandable.

What Are the Unjustified Assumptions of the Jesus Seminar?

Once the biblical Jesus is safely disposed of, we need not worry about His claims on our life or the possibility of our own judgment in the next life for rejecting Him now. Perhaps more than any other factor, this explains why liberal scholars adopt such unjustified assumptions in their treatment of the biblical text, e.g.,

There are at least 10 important areas in which the JS adopts assumptions and perspectives that are widely held in nonevangelical scholarship but which need to be challenged. Those assumptions include: (1) The authors of the four canonical Gospels are not Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as traditionally believed. (2) None of these four Gospels were written before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. (3) The oral tradition of Jesus’ sayings was quite fluid. Simple teachings were often greatly expanded, embellished, and distorted in the process. (4) Various people in the early church, including the Gospel writers themselves, felt free to invent sayings of Jesus that had little or no basis in what He actually taught. (5) If a saying can be demonstrated to promote later Christian causes, it could not have originated with Jesus. (6) The historicity of John’s gospel is extremely suspect. (7) Historical analysis cannot admit the supernatural as an explanation for an event. Therefore, Jesus’ words after His resurrection—like His earlier predictions about His death, resurrection, and return—cannot be authentic. (8) Jesus never explained His parables and aphorisms. All concluding words of explanation, especially allegorical interpretations of parables and metaphors, are thus inauthentic. (9) Jesus never directly declared who He was. All such “self-referential” material (in which Jesus says, “I am...” or “I have come to...”) is therefore also inauthentic. (10) The burden of proof rests on any particular scholar who would claim authenticity for a particular saying of Jesus and not on the skeptic.³³

Thus, as *Newsweek* comments, “According to this elaborate academic protocol [i.e., the methods of higher criticism], the Resurrection is ruled *a priori* out of court because it tran-

scends time and space.”³⁴ And, “even the most orthodox Scripture scholars recognize the brief, almost enigmatic accounts of Jesus’ resurrection and its aftermath are fraught with special problems for the historian. For one thing, there were no witnesses to the Resurrection.... For another the post-resurrection stories contain a variety of factual discrepancies about the main characters, places, times and the messages attributed to the Risen Jesus In short, the post-Resurrection narratives are ambiguous stories allowing ample room for historians to imagine what really took place.”³⁵

The above quotations illustrate the seemingly endless distortion of historical methodology and historical fact that one finds not only among liberal theologians but also in the treatments of Christianity in the popular press. There is no legitimate reason for the historian to discard a genuine miraculous event just because it is a miracle. As long as it happened *once*, it is history. Hence, there is no reason to discard the resurrection and attempt to explain the origins of Christianity by other means, especially when those means raise far more problems than the resurrection itself. In addition, the fact that no one actually saw Jesus rise from the dead inside the tomb is irrelevant if hundreds of people saw Him on many occasions outside the tomb later. One does not need to witness or explain the specifics of an event in order to know whether or not it occurred. No one sees the evaporation of surface waters that in the end produces clouds in the sky. Yet no one doubts those clouds are real entities containing millions of tons of water. To suggest even the slightest doubt concerning the factual nature of the resurrection because no one actually witnessed the very moment Jesus rose—in light of both the nature and kind of the post-resurrection appearances—is nonsense. It’s as absurd as denying the holocaust because we can’t produce the body of Adolph Hitler. Reliable eyewitness testimony in both cases proves what happened.

In a similar fashion, to argue that the accounts in the Gospels concerning the resurrection are brief and almost enigmatic is just not true. “Of all the miracles of Christ, the Resurrection receives the most careful and extensive coverage in the Bible. If the Gospels are historically accurate, then the most carefully documented event in the Gospels should be accurately reported.”³⁶

Finally, to speak of *factual* discrepancies, ambiguous stories, etc., that allow for all kinds of philosophical latitude in approaching the resurrection accounts is simply careless reasoning. As we demonstrated (as have many others in more depth) in *Do the Resurrection Accounts Conflict?*, there is not a single provable contradiction or “factual discrepancy” in the four accounts of the Gospels. Indeed, as biblical scholar Murray Harris points out, “When we remember that countless ‘facts’ of ancient history rest on the testimony of a single literary witness, this fourfold literary testimony to the emptiness of the tomb becomes a powerful argument.”³⁷ And as Robert Coleman correctly points out concerning the evidence for the resurrection, “It is the kind of firsthand, objective evidence that would stand in a court of law.”³⁸ We also documented this in the above book (and our *Knowing the Truth about the Resurrection*), by citing numerous first-class lawyers of past *and present* who agree that the truth of the resurrection would stand cross-examination in a modern court of law.

Should It Be the New Testament That Is Rejected or Liberal Scholarship?

Consider another statement from *Newsweek*, “Unfortunately, apart from what is found in Scripture, there is little that one can say about the identity of Jesus.”³⁹ Besides being

false,⁴⁰ even if it were true, why should anyone think this unfortunate? On what historical, rational basis can anything the New Testament writers say be rejected? Why this unwavering bias against the writings of four men that have, for 2,000 years, been proven to be the writings of honest historical reporters? Has even a single argument against their accuracy withstood the test of time? No. Here we have four accounts, two of which (Matthew and John) were written firsthand by eyewitnesses who spent three years with Jesus Himself and knew Him intimately. The other two, Mark and Luke, received their information from the Apostles and were written with great care by men whose integrity is unassailable. These four accounts have been subjected to the most vigorous criticism for 2,000 years by some of the world's best and most critical intellects who have yet to make their case. The writers themselves declare that they were either eyewitnesses to the events recorded or that they took pains to research and write with care and accuracy exactly what did happen. The Apostle Luke told Theophilus, for example, in composing his biography of Jesus, "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Lk. 1:3, 4). In referring to his entire gospel, the Apostle John ended his biography with these words, "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. *We know* that his testimony is true" (Jn. 20:24). John was so confident in the accuracy of his gospel that he made this bold statement publicly even to those most eager to disprove it. The Apostle Peter, from whom Mark received the information for his gospel appealed to eyewitness testimony, "*We did not follow cleverly invented stories* when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were *eyewitnesses* of his majesty" (2 Pet. 1:16). Peter's comment could almost be considered a personal rebuke to the participants in the Jesus Seminar.

As the noted biblical scholar F. F. Bruce remarks,

There is, I imagine, no body of literature in the world that has been exposed to the stringent analytical study that the four gospels have sustained for the past 200 years. This is not something to be regretted, it is something to be accepted with satisfaction. Scholars today who treat the gospels as credible historical documents do so in the full light of analytical study, not closing their minds to it.⁴¹

What more could the Christian ask for? What more does the critic want?

The writings of the Gospels themselves bear the "ring of truth" by what they report and the manner by which they report it. Yet, somehow, we are told that such writings are *not* to be trusted. And on what basis? Largely because of the widely disseminated, entirely false conclusions of the liberal theologians in books such as Burton Mack's *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* and radical endeavors such as the Jesus Seminar.

Here is the real truth. If we discard the Gospels as accurate history, then, as a result, because of the basis upon which we can document their historicity, we must quite literally throw out every other ancient historical document. And which of our critics and liberal scholars are willing to do *that*? When it comes down to it, not one. As Dr. Montgomery recalled on "The John Ankerberg Show:

Last week we mentioned a debate that I had some years ago with Professor Stroll at the University of British Columbia. Professor Stroll said that the documents of the New Testament were simply not adequate to get a picture of Jesus. And I offered evidence to show that these documents are the best-attested documents of the classical world. I said, "If you want to give up Jesus Christ, you first of all have got to dump your knowledge of the classical world." Professor Stroll said, "Fine. I will throw out the classical world." At which

point the head of the classics department got up and said, “Good Lord, Avrum, not *that!*”

You can't just toss out Greco-Roman antiquity because you don't want to face the documents that present Jesus Christ. Last week we went over these documents and we showed that these documents are sound historical materials for understanding who Jesus actually was.⁴²

And *here* is the real Jesus: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn. 14:6). Jesus commanded men to love Him in the exact same way that they love God—with all their heart, soul, and mind (Mt. 22:37-38). Jesus said that God the Holy Spirit would bear witness of Him and glorify Him (Jn. 16:14). Jesus said that to know Him was to know God (Jn. 14:7). To receive Him was to receive God (Matt. 10:40). To honor Him was to honor God (Jn. 5:23). To believe in Him was to believe in God (Jn. 12:44-45; 14:1). To see Him was to see God (Jn. 8:19; 14:7). To deny Him was to deny God (1 Jn. 2:23). To hate Him was to hate God (Jn. 15:23).

In Matthew 25, He said that He would actually return at the end of the world and that He Himself would judge every person who ever lived; that He would personally raise all the dead of history and that all the nations would be gathered before Him! Who ever said *that?* He would sit on His throne of glory and judge and separate men from one another as a shepherd does the sheep from the goats (Mt. 25:31-46, cf. Jn. 5:25-34). Just as clearly, Jesus taught that every person's eternal destiny depended upon how they treated Him (Jn. 8:24; Mt. 10:32).

All these statements and many more like them, leave us little choice. Either Jesus was who He said He was—God incarnate—or else He was absolutely crazy. But who can believe *that?*

In time, the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar and indeed, all liberal, critical biblical “scholarship,” will be relegated to the *circular files* of rationalistic, historical skepticism. *Time* magazine itself questioned what the final outcome of the Jesus Seminar would be four or five years from now, e.g., “their areas of agreement, thus far, have largely been in the negative, and their respective rescued Jesuses vary considerably.” Crossan himself confesses that in the end, “There could be hopeless disagreement.”⁴³ It might be begging the question, but what other conclusion could one logically expect from the kind of subjective approaches, biased research and dismal scholarship we find in the Jesus Seminar?⁴⁴

Notes:

¹ George Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1991) from Adjith Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1995), p. 20.

² In *Christian Research Journal*, Winter 1995, p. 50.

³ *Newsweek*, April 8, 1996, p. 62.

⁴ Jeffrey L. Sheler, “In Search of Jesus,” *U.S. News and World Report*, April 8, 1996, pp. 47-48.

⁵ David Van Biema, “The Gospel Truth,” *Time*, April 8, 1996, p. 57.

⁶ Cited in Van Biema, p. 58.

⁷ Van Biema, p. 58.

⁸ Sheler, p. 53.

⁹ Robert W. Funk, et. al., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (NY: Macmillan, 1993), p. 5.

¹⁰ Craig L. Blomberg, “The Seventy Four ‘Scholars’: Who Does the Jesus Seminar Really Speak For?,” *Christian Research Journal*, Fall 1994, p. 34.

¹¹ “Mysteries of the Bible: Heaven and Hell,” A & E Network Oct. 3, 1996.

- ¹² "Who Was Jesus? Reflections on The Jesus Seminar," *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin*, Feb. 1994, p. 3.
- ¹³ Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ*, p. 19.
- ¹⁴ Kenneth L. Woodward, "Rethinking the Resurrection," *Newsweek*, April 8, 1996, p. 70.
- ¹⁵ See our *Ready With An Answer*.
- ¹⁶ Van Biema, p. 54.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- ¹⁸ Blomberg, p. 34.
- ¹⁹ Sheler, *Newsweek*, *ibid.*, p. 48, emphasis added.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ²¹ *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 1996, p. 67.
- ²² See Michael Wilkins, J. P. Moreland, eds., *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Zondervan).
- ²³ Woodward, pp. 62-63.
- ²⁴ Robert J. Hutchinson, "The Jesus Seminar Unmasked," *Christianity Today*, April 29, 1996, pp. 28-29.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ²⁶ Blomberg, p. 37.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ²⁸ John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), p. 3.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- ³¹ Hutchinson, *ibid.*, p. 28.
- ³² Blomberg, p. 37.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.
- ³⁴ Woodward, p. 65.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.
- ³⁶ Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ*, p. 343.
- ³⁷ Fernando, p. 248 citing Harris, *From Grave to Glory*, p. 107.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 248.
- ³⁹ Woodward, p. 70.
- ⁴⁰ cf., Gary Habermas, *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus*.
- ⁴¹ Foreword in Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), p IX.
- ⁴² Transcript, "Jesus Christ: Was He a Liar, a Lunatic, a Legend or God?", (Chattanooga, TN: The John Ankerberg Show, 1988), pp. 7-8.
- ⁴³ Van Biema, p. 59.
- ⁴⁴ Those who desire a more detailed refutation should consult the anthology of Michael Wilkins, J. P. Moreland, eds., *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Zondervan); Gregory Boyd, *Cynic, Sage or Son of God?: Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies* (Victor) and N. T. Wright, who until recently taught New Testament at Oxford University, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, a 600 page scholarly text which among other things, demonstrates that Christ's bodily resurrection has a sound historical basis. (Wright has also written a 40 page critique of the Jesus Seminar, cf., N. T. Wright, "The New Unimproved Jesus," *Christianity Today*, Sept. 13, 1993.)