

2003

# Will the real Jesus please stand up?: bridging the divide between the Jesus Seminar and its opponents through a Burkeian approach

Carol Melissa Hopson-Sparks

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_dissertations](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations)



Part of the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Hopson-Sparks, Carol Melissa, "Will the real Jesus please stand up?: bridging the divide between the Jesus Seminar and its opponents through a Burkeian approach" (2003). *LSU Doctoral Dissertations*. 2044.

[https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_dissertations/2044](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/2044)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [gradetd@lsu.edu](mailto:gradetd@lsu.edu).

WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP?  
BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN THE JESUS SEMINAR  
AND ITS OPPONENTS THROUGH A BURKEIAN APPROACH

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by

C. Melissa Hopson-Sparks  
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1991  
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1995  
August 2003

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I offer thanks to all who have helped me with this project, especially my committee: Andrew King, Renee Edwards, Cecil Eubanks, Joshua Gunn, and Joseph Ricapito. Additionally, I offer my sincere appreciation to my earlier mentors Harold Mixon and Owen Peterson who helped to shape my research interests. Further, I extend distinctive gratitude to my husband, Cory Sparks; and to my family, Carol and Hal Hopson, and Claire and Steve Procopio.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....   | ii   |
| ABSTRACT.....  | v    |
| <b>CHAPTER</b>   |      |
| 1. INTRODUCTION .....  | 1    |
| The Aims of the Jesus Seminar .....  | 4    |
| The Opposition to the Jesus Seminar .....  | 6    |
| Key Burkeian Concepts .....  | 10   |
| Annotation of Studies of Multiple Rhetors Built<br>on Burkeian Concepts .....                  | 15   |
| Annotation of Studies of Individual Rhetors Built<br>on Burkeian Concepts .....                | 19   |
| 2. THE JESUS SEMINAR: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW .....   | 24   |
| Historical Overview .....  | 24   |
| The First Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Secularizing Quest ..                              | 25   |
| The Second Quest for the Historical Jesus .....  | 33   |
| The Third Quest for the Historical Jesus .....   | 34   |
| The Jesus Seminar and the Quests for the Historical Jesus .....                                | 35   |
| 3. CRITICISMS OF THE JESUS SEMINAR .....   | 42   |
| Attacks on Credibility: Self-Promoters and Displacers<br>of Core Christianity.....             | 42   |
| Attacks on Scholarship: Membership, Methodology,<br>Primary Texts and Conclusions .....        | 49   |
| Conclusion .....   | 59   |
| 4. A BURKEIAN METHOD FOR STUDYING THE RHETORIC<br>OF THE JESUS SEMINAR AND ITS OPPONENTS ..... | 61   |
| Kenneth Burke’s Rhetorical Theory: Key Terms Defined .....                                     | 61   |
| Methodological Justification .....   | 67   |
| Application of the Methodology .....   | 68   |
| Limitations of the Methodology .....   | 70   |
| 5. CLUSTER-AGON ANALYSIS OF THE RHETORIC OF THE<br>JESUS SEMINAR AND ITS CRITICS .....         | 72   |
| Jesus Seminar Rhetor: Robert W. Funk .....   | 77   |
| Assessment of Funk’s Orientation .....   | 89   |
| Jesus Seminar Rhetor: John Dominic Crossan .....   | 92   |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Assessment of Crossan’s Orientation . . . . .            | 102 |
| Jesus Seminar Rhetor: Marcus J. Borg . . . . .           | 103 |
| Assessment of Borg’s Orientation . . . . .               | 109 |
| Jesus Seminar Rhetor: Bishop John Shelby Spong . . . . . | 110 |
| Assessment of Spong’s Orientation . . . . .              | 116 |
| Jesus Seminar Critic: Luke Timothy Johnson . . . . .     | 117 |
| Assessment of Johnson’s Orientation . . . . .            | 122 |
| Jesus Seminar Critic: N. Thomas Wright . . . . .         | 124 |
| Assessment of Wright’s Orientation . . . . .             | 130 |
| Conclusion . . . . .                                     | 132 |
| <br>   |     |
| 6. CONCLUSION DRAWING AND THE CORRECTIVE . . . . .       | 133 |
| Introduction . . . . .                                   | 133 |
| Cluster-Agon Analysis Findings. . . . .                  | 133 |
| Possible Corrective . . . . .                            | 136 |
| Suggestions for Further Research. . . . .                | 140 |
| Conclusion . . . . .                                     | 142 |
| <br>   |     |
| REFERENCES . . . . .                                     | 144 |
| <br>   |     |
| VITA . . . . .   | 156 |

## **ABSTRACT**

This study employs a Burkeian cluster-agon analysis approach to analyze the rhetoric of four members of the Jesus Seminar; namely, Robert Funk, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and John Shelby Spong as well as that of two of the Jesus Seminar's critics; Luke Timothy Johnson and N. Thomas Wright. Specifically, this study sought to discern the orientations or perspectives held by each of the examined rhetors in an effort to locate common ground or similar foundations within two seemingly disparate points of view. In doing so, this study creates a third perspective, or corrective, based on the orthopraxis approach of liberation theology that may be appropriated to dissolve other seemingly intractable rhetorical conflicts that threaten to shut down dialogue in conflicts.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

As a child I was repeatedly drawn to *To Tell the Truth*. It was not a particularly clever game show, but I always enjoyed the suspense of the final seconds when the celebrity panel had to guess which one of the three contestants was telling the truth about who he/she was. Finally, host Garry Moore would ask the real John/Jane Doe to please stand up. As an adult I frequently hear that question directed at Jesus of Nazareth and wonder if the real Jesus will ever stand up? This question has riddled theologians, biblical scholars and the like for centuries. Can we sift through the layers of Hellenistic myth to reveal the historical Jesus of Nazareth? And more importantly, should we even try? The search for the historical Jesus is not new, but it is being pushed center stage by an aggressive stage mom. Since 1985 biblical scholar Robert W. Funk has aimed to have the “real” Jesus remove his shroud and reveal himself to the world. Funk formed the Jesus Seminar, a collaborative team of biblical academics, to dress the stage. Not all audiences have given his historical Jesus a favorable appraisal. In fact, many theologians, biblical scholars, clergy as well as others have voiced opposition to the claims, motives and methodologies of the Jesus Seminar. The crux of the debate is over methodology and epistemology. It is about “ways of knowing.” The Jesus Seminar employs the methods of science, historical criticism and linguistic analysis to arrive at a truth of who Jesus *was* while their critics contend that faith, religious practice, and contemplation are what is needed to know who Jesus *is*. As the work of the Jesus Seminar threatens the legitimacy of long standing assumptions it has the potential to change the very nature of Christian discourse. At the core of this debate is the question

of how are we to read the text central to one of the world's five major religious traditions. Are we to treat it as myth? Fabrication? As the inerrant word of a divine ruler? Or as merely irrelevant? The answer is central to the Christian church and its survival in the United States. As this debate is played out in the public realm it has the potential to affect the core belief system of individuals persuaded by one side or the other.

The significance of this study is two-fold. In terms of the future of Christianity, reconciling the differences between competing voices in the Jesus Seminar debate becomes increasingly significant as Euro-centered Christianity loses its primacy to a much more conservative variety of Christianity emerging in Africa and South America. While an argument can be made that this sort of scholarly debate has been historically characteristic of mainstream Euro-Christianity, it creates a further fragmentation of an already fragile Christian tradition at this particular vulnerable moment of the Christian church's history. The growth of Christianity in the developing world, in number, geographic expanse, and political influence in various Christian faiths, creates a large and increasingly powerful voice within the Christian discourse community that has little patience for the rhetoric of Christ as "real" and prefers instead a Christianity focused on poverty and healing. To allow the Jesus Seminar debate to continue unresolved is to allow a line of fragmentation between Euro-Christian and emerging Christian powers to deepen and fracture further.

This study is also significant to the work of rhetoricians. Born in the polis, the life and significance of the rhetorical art depends upon the ability to build consensual frameworks in which differences can be adjudicated. By seeking *topoi* (or places of argument), common ground, and similar foundations within seemingly disparate points of

view, this study creates strategies and theories that may be appropriated to dissolve other seemingly intractable rhetorical conflicts that threaten to shut down dialogue in conflicts. On a personal note, this study is significant to me as an inquiring Christian. That is, as a Christian interested in the life and divinity of Jesus I am concerned with the quality of historical Jesus research as well as its results and the communication of its findings.

Due to the explosive nature of the conflict between the Seminar and its critics and the importance of the claims made by each side it is critical to bridge the divide. Since faith issues are at the heart of the debate an open dialogue will allow for informed decisions to be reached. The aim of this study is to investigate the rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar and that of its critics to see if a third perspective, drawn from the commonality that may exist between the Jesus Seminar and its opponents, is possible.

The works of social critic and rhetorical scholar Kenneth Burke offer a way to examine the underlying tensions, emerging definitions, possible orientations, and hidden themes of the rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar and their opponents. Each side offers only a partial understanding of reality. Each is limited by its own framework for seeing and has its own vocabulary with which it evaluates reality. To better explain the problem, it is helpful to provide an overview of the aims of the Jesus Seminar and those of its opponents to better highlight some of the tensions.

In the second chapter, this dissertation will explore the antecedents of the Jesus Seminar and come to an understanding of how the current Jesus Seminar relates to more than a century of “historical Jesus” research. Several works detail the development of historical Jesus research and help to clarify the historical context of the Jesus Seminar. These works will be drawn on to reveal the significance of the movement and its history.

Works by Ben Witherington, Michael McAteer and Michael Steinhauser, M. E. Boring, Hershel Shanks, Michael Wilkins and James Moreland, B.B. Scott, James Robinson, Russell Shorto, Barnes Tatum, and D.P. Senior provide an overview of the current quest for the historical Jesus. Albert Schweitzer's provides the best overview of the First Quest for the Historical Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

### The Aims of the Jesus Seminar

Growing out of the tradition of the quests for the historical Jesus, it is the ambition of the Jesus Seminar to seek the authentic voice of Jesus through the use of scientific, historical and linguistic methodologies and to make public their findings. It is Funk's seeming desire to challenge the "religious establishment's" understanding of who was Jesus. Freedom from Church dogma is of fundamental importance to Funk. He calls for biblical scholars to reckon with the "deep crisis in god talk and replace it with talk about whether the universe has meaning and human life has purpose."<sup>2</sup> Through the enterprise of the Jesus Seminar, a movement that takes as its primary agenda the "reinvention of Christianity,"<sup>3</sup> Funk and his Fellows (voting members) generate public debate on the

---

<sup>1</sup> B. Witherington, III., *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995); Michael R. McAteer and Michael G. Steinhauser, *The Man in the Scarlet Robe: Two Thousand Years of Searching for Jesus* (Ontario: The United Church Publishing House, 1996); M. E. Boring, *Interpretation* 50 (1996); Hershel Shanks (moderator), *The Search for Jesus: Modern Scholarship Looks at the Gospels* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994); Michael J. Wilkins and James Porter Moreland, eds., *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Re-Invents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Brandon B. Scott, "From Reimarus to Crossan: Stage in a Quest," *Canadian Review of Biblical Studies* 2 (1994); James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Missoula, MO: Scholars Press, 1979); Russell Shorto, *Gospel Truth: The New Image of Jesus Emerging from Science and History and Why It Matters* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997); Barnes Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus: A Guidebook* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982); D.P. Senior, "The Never Ending Quest for the Historical Jesus," *TBT* 34 (1996); and Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1906; reprint, 1998)..

<sup>2</sup> Robert Walter Funk, "The Coming Radical Reformation: Twenty-One Theses," *The Fourth R* 11, no. 4 (1998), np.

nature of God to advance religious literacy.<sup>4</sup> According to Funk, it is time for Bible scholars to “quit the study and speak up...” For centuries the established Christian churches have played on the “ignorance of the uninformed” by not allowing the “intelligence of high scholarship to pass through pastors and priests to a hungry laity.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast, “the Jesus Seminar is a clarion call to enlightenment. It is for those who prefer facts to fancies, history to histrionics, science to superstition.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Funk declares that the Church is in for a “rude and rancorous awakening”<sup>7</sup> due to the works of the Jesus Seminar.

In the opening remarks at the first meeting of the Jesus Seminar in March of 1985, Funk envisioned the difficulty ahead: “What we [the Jesus Seminar] are about takes courage, as I said. We are probing what is most sacred to millions, and hence we will constantly border on blasphemy. We must be prepared to forebear the hostility we shall provoke. At the same time, our work, if carefully and thoughtfully wrought, will spell liberty for other millions.”<sup>8</sup> From the preceding quote it is arguable that Funk foresees the Jesus Seminar as the beginning of a radical, new social movement that will free Christians from the tyranny of religious myth. From its inception the Jesus Seminar has

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Walter Funk et al., *Lectures from the Once and Future Faith Conference, March 2001* [Website] (The Westar Institute, 2001 [cited September 26 2001]); available from <http://www.westarinstitute.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Westar Institute Membership Form.” 2000, np.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Walter Funk, *The Opening Remarks of Jesus Seminar Founder Robert W. Funk, Presented at the 1st Meeting Held 21-24 March 1985 in Berkeley, California* [Website] (Westar Institute, 2001 [cited September 26 2001]); available from [http://www.westarinstitute.org/Jesus\\_Seminar/Remarks/remarks.html](http://www.westarinstitute.org/Jesus_Seminar/Remarks/remarks.html).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Walter Funk, *The Gospel of Mark: Red Letter Edition* (Sonoma:California: Polebridge Press, 1991, pp.xvi-xvii).

<sup>7</sup> Funk, *The Opening Remarks of Jesus Seminar Founder Robert W. Funk, Presented at the 1st Meeting Held 21-24 March 1985 in Berkeley, California*, np.

<sup>8</sup> Funk, *Opening Remarks of Jesus Seminar 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting*.

demonstrated that it anticipates its revelations will go against mainstream Christian understandings. Perhaps this could be likened to a scientist setting out to prove rather than to reject her hypothesis.

Through his intentional efforts Funk has popularized the quest for the historical Jesus. The Jesus Seminar first awakened the public's eye with the publishing of the Seminar's color-coded edition of *The Five Gospels*.<sup>9</sup> Over a six-year period Fellows evaluated 1,544 versions of 518 different sayings attributed to Jesus. After discussing the textual evidence, they sorted texts from the canonical Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas into four groups. Passages the Fellows deem valid appear in red; lines they credit to the later church appear in black, and sections of questionable authenticity were printed in either pink or gray, indicating varying degrees of uncertainty. Since the publishing of this work Funk and his Fellows have engaged in countless interviews, have prompted prime-time television programs centered on the Quest, have been featured in the *New York Times Book Review*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *GQ*, *Archaeology*, *TV Focus*, and have released both individual and collective works on the historical Jesus. In their works the Fellows scrutinize the historical and archeological evidence on Jesus to determine his true nature.

#### The Opposition to the Jesus Seminar

The rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar movement is extensive in nature and is closely shaped by bitter opposition. In Chapter Three this dissertation explores the criticisms made against the Seminar. At the root of the problem is that the Jesus Seminar strives to ground itself in the materiality of Jesus, but it refuses to accept that materiality is

---

<sup>9</sup> Funk, Robert Walter, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993. Reprint, 1997.

insufficient to explain the symbolic meanings of Jesus' incarnation to the majority of Christians. Thus the rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar has the effect of alienating and constraining many parts of the Christian discourse community because it is perceived to attack the Christian church itself. What is a renewal among the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar is often perceived as an assault on the sacred for traditional Christians who emphasize mystery and divine revelation. Philosopher of religion William Abraham notes that the work of the Jesus Seminar, similar to the work of previous Quests for the Historical Jesus, raises "disputes about the logic of historical investigation" into the Jesus question.<sup>10</sup> The logical problem, for believers, is if particular biblical narratives reflect the work of God in the world then no amount of historical critical study should affect the full depths of the revelations. Therefore critics of the Seminar perceive the Fellows as being anti-Christian.

Opposition to the Jesus Seminar's proclaimed mission to create a new Christianity is abundant. Practitioners of the Christian faith who uphold the mystery of Jesus reject Funk's contention that, "the God of the metaphysical age is dead," or that "there is not a personal God out there external to human beings and the material world."<sup>11</sup> For their part, many non-Jesus Seminar biblical scholars denounce the claims, purposes, methodologies, credibility and findings of the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar. Biblical scholars such as James Charlesworth of the Princeton Theological Seminary, N. Thomas Wright, former Oxford lecturer and noted British theologian, as well as Luke Timothy Johnson of Candler School of Theology at Emory University often lead the attack on the

---

<sup>10</sup> William J. Abraham, "Revelation and Scripture." In *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, 584-90. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999. Reprint, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Funk, "The Coming Radical Reformation: Twenty-One Theses."

Jesus Seminar. Like the Fellows of the Seminar these scholars are committed to finding solutions drawn from their individual perspectives. Seemingly, their divergent viewpoints provide little room for common ground.

Previous studies of the Jesus Seminar controversy reinforce this perspective. Although this dissertation is the first full-length rhetorical survey of the Seminar and its critics, other students have looked at the controversy from the perspective of theology and religious studies. One is a study of Christian *apologia* by Brett Miller.<sup>12</sup> Miller examines traditional Christian advocates who oppose the work of the Jesus Seminar and find that their arguments are largely epistemological in nature. This is germane to this study as the rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar engages in arguments of how people come to know truth. Preliminary analysis of Jesus Seminar rhetoric suggests that many of its key terms cluster around notions of truth. These “truths” are under attack by the Seminar as they aim to prove that Jesus did not do or say much of what is attributed to Jesus. Robert J. Miller, a fellow of the Seminar, conducted a survey of critics and provides an interesting overview of their rhetoric.<sup>13</sup>

Two other studies focus on the methodology of the Jesus Seminar.<sup>14</sup> Nelson examines the six-year period the Jesus Seminar deliberated the authenticity of 518 different sayings attributed to Jesus. While Nelson’s work is primarily concerned with the reliability of the methodology of the Jesus Seminar, it does provide an excellent overview of the history of the movement and those who oppose it. This study will differ from

---

<sup>12</sup> Brett Miller, "The Sacred Art of Verbal Self-Defense: Image Restoration Discourse in Christian Rhetoric" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Missouri - Columbia, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Robert J. Miller, *The Jesus Seminar and Its Critics* (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Randy Wayne Nelson, "The Jesus Seminar's Search for the Authentic Sayings of Jesus: An Examination of Phase One of the Seminar's Quest for the Historical Jesus" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Rice University, 1999).

Nelson's as it uses Burkeian theory to discover the orientations or perspectives of the leadership discourse of the Jesus Seminar, and as its critique of the movement will be based on these findings. Additionally, this study looks for areas of overlap between the Jesus Seminar and its critics to form a basis for community dialogue. Another study that offers insight into the Jesus Seminar is by David Sapp.<sup>15</sup> Again, this study is primarily focused on an analysis of the methodology of the Jesus Seminar. Sapp looks at the Seminar's criteria for evaluating the parables of Jesus and its findings. These are compared to the findings of non-Jesus Seminar New Testament scholars. The author concludes that the Jesus Seminar's criteria are flawed due to many presuppositions. This study's findings might either support or refute Sapp's findings by a close analysis of the Jesus Seminar's orientations.

Finally, Religion Professor Emeritus Birger Pearson, of the University of California at Santa Barbara, suggests a "hidden agenda" in the work of the Jesus Seminar. Pearson notes the frequent use of the term "secular" in *The Five Gospels* as it discusses Jesus. Thus, Pearson argues that this points to the ideology behind the work of the Seminar. Pearson asserts that the Seminar is motivated by an ideology of secularization and that it is trying to create a "secular ideal" that has "robbed [Jesus] of his religion."<sup>16</sup>

These previous studies demonstrate the virulent opposition and strident rhetoric that divide the Jesus Seminar from its critics. Because of this conflict, and clear attempts to question the motives of Seminar members, this dissertation seeks to understand the

---

<sup>15</sup> David Wayne Sapp, "An Analysis of the Criteria Used by the Jesus Seminar to Establish the Authenticity of the Parables of Jesus" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Birger A. Pearson, *The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar* [Website] ([cited October 7 2001]); available from <http://id-www.ucsb.edu/fscf/library/pearson/seminar/home.html>.

rhetorical construction of Seminar arguments and how they relate to those made by the critics. In an effort to promote civil discourse, the dissertation will suggest a Burkeian corrective that will suggest a way to unite the warring groups and enable them to engage in meaningful conversation. The writings of Kenneth Burke provide a basis for the methodology to be used in this study. The fourth chapter of this dissertation will detail the methodology of this study. The pertinent concepts to the methodology of this study are herein explained. Other studies that use Burkeian analysis that contribute to this present one are annotated.

### Key Burkeian Concepts

In *Language as Symbolic Action* Burke contributes to the understanding of the sociopolitical impact of words. Burke develops the concept of language as a key instrument of persuasion throughout *Language as Symbolic Action*.<sup>17</sup> He details his definition of a human as a “symbol-using, symbol making, and symbol-misusing animal” that “orders his world and himself according to a world-view and a self-view, whatever their origins, that are uniquely his own.”<sup>18</sup> The use of words has the result of separating humans from their natural condition by the very instruments of their own making.<sup>19</sup> Hence, once language is acquired it is impossible to perceive reality without having our terms affect our observations. We view reality through our idioms.

Our use of symbols generates terministic screens that separate us from reality. These screens direct our focus to one thing rather than to another. Terministic screens

---

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

<sup>18</sup> Burke, *Language*, pp. 8-20.

<sup>19</sup> Burke, *Language*, p. 16

develop as humans name and structure their environment. These screens act to let through certain perceptions while working to filter out others. Each perspective or orientation constitutes a unique view of the world, and no single perspective is complete; all offer partial views. Burke warns: “much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms.” Thus “any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality.”<sup>20</sup> So our perception is always incomplete and must compete with other orientations. Accordingly, Burke reasons that our “universe would appear to be something like a cheese; it can be sliced in an infinite number of ways – and when one has chosen his own pattern of slicing, he finds that other men’s cuts fall at the wrong places.”<sup>21</sup>

Terministic screens are of two types: terms that either work to pull people together via identification, or terms that make people feel separate via disassociation.<sup>22</sup> Burke’s work suggests the importance of language in society as rhetors apply rhetorical strategies to develop group identification and to order their communities. Burke contends that we perceive our world through language and that language is the factor in human action. The ambiguous nature of language suggests the presence of persuasion to derive meaning. Burke further develops this notion in *A Rhetoric of Motives* when he offers his definition of rhetoric as “the use of symbols to induce cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.”<sup>23</sup> This is important as Burke contends that persuasion,

---

<sup>20</sup> Burke, *Language*, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> Burke, *Language*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Burke, *Language*, p. 49.

rhetoric, and meaning are fundamentally tied to one another.<sup>24</sup> As any group attempts to put forth its worldview it must use rhetoric. Like individuals, groups or social movements use rhetoric to develop identification and to understand or define the people, ideas and objects that make up its world. Identification means recognition and association with others and it is the mode by which humans may overcome division. By nature humans are divided as identification necessitates division, alienation, and/or indifference.<sup>25</sup> Humans spend time devising language dependent strategies to help them identify with others and to gain cooperation from them.<sup>26</sup> And, more important to this study, humans use rhetoric to induce others to action. Burke broadens the scope of rhetoric in *A Rhetoric of Motives* to include an 'unconscious' element as identification is sought.<sup>27</sup> As such, all of human behavior is included in the scope of rhetoric. Thus all that is symbolic and all that seeks unity and/or cooperation may be studied as rhetoric. This includes oral and written communication, visual images, and so forth.

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke further details identification and disassociation. Burke explains "God" and "Devil" terms as symbols that correspond to an individual's positive or negative attitude toward some act, agent, or item. "God" terms represent that which is not subject to change, nor to interrogation. They are considered sacred and they help to promote identification. "Devil" terms represent that which is evil or profane and

---

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950).

<sup>24</sup> Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 172.

<sup>25</sup> Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 43.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Burke, "Rhetoric-Old and New," in *New Rhetorics*, ed. Martin Steinmann Jr. (New York: Scribner, 1968), p. 62.

help to create alienation.<sup>28</sup> These god and devil terms form word clusters that become a significant part of a person's vocabulary of motives. This vocabulary is used to interpret and describe one's experiences; and, thus one's vocabulary of motives can be used to investigate that individual's perspective of the world. The same can be applied to the vocabulary of motives associated with a particular social movement. For the purpose of this study I will employ a cluster analysis to discover and analyze possible "god" and "devil" terms of the Jesus Seminar and those of its critics.

In *Permanence and Change* Burke contends that humans "are not moved by the reality of a cause but by our interpretation of it...."<sup>29</sup> As we interpret we rely on language. Language is selective as it is based on the individual who is using it. Language is imprecise due to its connotative nature. The emotional overtone embedded in one's language suggests how a listener should act toward the object(s). Because we communicate through language reality is always distorted.

This is an important factor for this study as I am less interested in the truth or falsity of the claims of the Jesus Seminar than in their strategic power of expression. This study will seek to examine the limits of the power of the rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar and its critics as each describes and develops its existence.

In *Permanence and Change* Burke explains several terms that are also of primary importance to this study. In his discussion on the problem of interpretation he borrows the notion of "Trained Incapacity" from Thorstein Veblen to explain how an "orientation" (or basic view of reality) is formed and can go awry. Trained incapacity

---

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall Press, 1945), p. 355.

<sup>29</sup> Burke, *Permanence*, p. 151.

transpires when one's abilities or past training leads to one's misjudgment of the present situation. This is a result of one's training functioning as blindness to other ways of doing.<sup>30</sup> Our previous training makes it difficult to see other perspectives. We are inhibited by what we have been taught "to know." Similarly, one's perspective is also limited by one's "occupational psychosis." Occupational psychosis is a notion taken from John Dewey that suggests our patterns of livelihood are carried over into other aspects of our culture.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, it suggests that our "spiritual" values gain authority because they "reinforce the ways of thinking and feeling by which man equips himself to accomplish the tasks indigenous to his environment."<sup>32</sup> Much of our thinking then results from practical needs.

To overcome our trained incapacities and our occupational psychoses Burke suggests the creation of a "perspective by incongruity." Burke likens perspective by incongruity to "modern painters who picture how an object might seem if inspected simultaneously from two quite different positions."<sup>33</sup> Perspective by incongruity widens our view of reality by "yoking disparate viewpoints in a variety of ways. It functions to destabilize a viewpoint not by transforming it but by forcing it head-to-head with other ways of viewing the world."<sup>34</sup> It serves to violate piety ("our sense of what properly goes

---

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence*, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Burke, *Permanence*, p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Second ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941. Reprint, 1967, p. 315.

<sup>33</sup> Burke, *Permanence*, p. 1v.

<sup>34</sup> Wolin, Ross. *The Rhetorical Imagination of Kenneth Burke*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001, p. 87.

with what” or reasonableness) to better assert what is reasonable.<sup>35</sup> This further reveals our own critical capacities by directing our attention to the nature and characteristics of our beliefs. Of course we can never approach the god-like ideal which would be a perspective of perspectives.

In a review of Burkeian theories applied to discourse communities, six of the examined studies offer insight into methodologies that can be incorporated into this study, while seven studies provide insight into Burkeian concepts applied to an examination of a single rhetor.

#### Annotation of Studies of Multiple Rhetors Built on Burkeian Concepts

This project will build on the work of several scholars who have employed a Burkeian framework to analyze the rhetoric of a social movement. These studies are annotated below.

One contributing study is *The Rhetoric of Social Movements: A Burkeian Analysis* by Jose Martinez.<sup>36</sup> Martinez’s dissertation argued the need to develop a rhetorical theory appropriate to the study of social movements. He used existing rhetorical theories that were applicable to the study and understanding of social movements along with the system of philosophy of rhetoric offered by Kenneth Burke to create a methodology for the analysis of the rhetoric of social movements. He tested his model on the Chicano Movement in the United States. One of the main findings of Martinez’s study is that social movements are valid areas of exploration by rhetorical critics. Since his study the analysis of social movements has become an increasingly

---

<sup>35</sup> Burke, *Permanence*, p. 74.

<sup>36</sup> Jose Martinez, "The Rhetoric of Social Movements: A Burkeian Analysis" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Arizona, 1984).

fertile ground for rhetoricians. This area of study has grown substantially over the past two decades. This is important as just over 35 years ago Edwin Black noted that only four movement studies had appeared from 1955-1965.<sup>37</sup> While scholars like Dan Hahn and Ruth Goncher attacked its legitimacy as a viable method in the 1980s.

A second major offering of Martinez's study is his use of Burkeian theory to aid in the analysis of social movements. Martinez uses Burkeian Cluster Analysis to identify a social movements perspective of a situation. He contends that as terms are used in clusters, the critic must not ignore the context in which the terms are used; a fusion of religious, political and ethnic factors in the case of the Chicano or "Bronze Race" movement. Further, Martinez incorporates the work of Richard Weaver<sup>38</sup> in which Weaver proposed the use of "god" and "devil" terms to express values. Martinez's study demonstrates the usefulness of a Burkeian critique of a social movement.

A second contributing study is "Conflict and Institutional Change: The Ordination of Women in the Episcopal Church" by Shirley Sartori.<sup>39</sup> Sartori uses Burke's cluster analysis theory to examine the discourse of the Episcopal Church as it struggled over the ordination of women. She focuses on four key terms, "church," "priest," "male," and "female."

By analyzing the associational clusters around these key words, Sartori was able to establish the differences in the meanings associated with the key words by the establishment and by the challengers' (the women seeking equal status as priests)

---

<sup>37</sup> Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Methodology*, 2nd ed. (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978; reprint, 2nd).

<sup>38</sup> Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

<sup>39</sup> Shirley Sartori, "Conflict and Institutional Change: The Ordination of Women in the Episcopal Church" (Ph.D. Dissertation, State University of New York at Albany, 1978).

rhetoric. Ultimately, a new hierarchy began to emerge and the original arguments against women in the priesthood were no longer accepted. The cluster analysis of the rhetoric of the establishment concerning female priests enabled Sartori to reveal the Episcopal Church's perspective of the church as traditional, orderly, and a unified entity, based on the authority of God. Her work again shows the fruitfulness of Burkeian analyses of social movements. Burke's agonistic terms "male" and "female" had lost their hierarchical tension and become clusters. What goes against what had become a what that now goes with another what.

David Matthew's dissertation on Jim Corbett and the Sanctuary Movement offers insight into the relationship between social movements and their rhetorical situations.<sup>40</sup> Matthew's examination assesses how the rhetoric of one of the primary leaders of the movement defined the rhetorical milieu of the movement. Matthew's methodology drew on Burkeian theory as he used cluster analysis of single terms over a period of nine years to gain insight into how social movements evolve and how definitions of situations change over a period of time. Like Matthew's study this present study is also interested in the development of a social movement over time.

"Breaking the Sound Barrier: The Rhetoric of the 'Deaf Power' Movement," a study by Kara Shultz, uses Burkeian theory combined with Cambell's rhetorical act theory to seek out patterns of meaning in the rhetoric of a social movement. Shultz uses Pentadic analysis to uncover the covert orientations of the movement's leaders' efforts to deliver change.<sup>41</sup> The analysis explores meaning through cluster analysis and

---

<sup>40</sup> David G. Matthews, "Jim Corbett and the Sanctuary Movement: Defining a Social Movement's Rhetorical Situation" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, 1993).

Dramatism. Dramatism is another of Burke's methods of rhetorical criticism. It is the means of "a methodical inquiry into cycles or clusters of terms and their functions."<sup>42</sup>

This builds on Shultz's study to clarify dramatism and how it applies to social movements. As Schultz points out, Burke sees drama as the fundamental way in which humans make sense of the world. Each human event can be analyzed in terms of Burke's Pentad: Who? = Agent; What? = Act; Where? = Scene; How? = Agency; and Why? = Purpose. The ratios of these parts determine the perspective or orientation of the rhetor for the event.

Burkeian theory is again employed to analyze the rhetoric of a social movement in Susan Stewart's study of Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>43</sup> Stewart adapted Burke's dramaturgic method and applied it to both oral and written rhetoric of Alcoholics Anonymous. Like her study, this study will explore both oral and written rhetoric.

In Stewart's study, cluster analysis is used to explore the rhetorical strategies of the White Ribbon Campaign (WRC) of Canada.<sup>44</sup> The WRC is an organization of pro-feminist males. Amanda Goldrick-Jones analyzed 50 documents by and about the WRC in the early nineties to discern the orientations and attitudes embedded in the discussions. Additionally, she shows how identification and division function to establish who may speak about certain issues. Similarly, this study will consider the question of who can

---

<sup>41</sup> Kara Shultz, "Breaking the Sound Barrier: The Rhetoric of the "Deaf Power" Movement" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Denver, 1991).

<sup>42</sup> David L. Sills, ed., "Dramatism." vol. 7, pp. 445-446. *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*.

<sup>43</sup> Susan Stewart, "The Rhetoric of Alcoholics Anonymous" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1990).

<sup>44</sup> Amanda Goldrick-Jones, "Men in a Feminist Forum: A Rhetorical Analysis of the White Ribbon Campaign against Male Violence" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 1996).

speak on the issues of the historical Jesus and how one uses identification and division to establish authority.

#### Annotation of Studies of Individual Rhetors Built on Burkeian Concepts

Numerous studies use Burkeian analysis to examine the orientations of a single rhetor. These include studies by Peter Suwarno, David Shipley, Martha Riley, Mary Bury, Rojas Gomez and Claudia Fiorella, and Julia Gaber. Suwarno examines writings by Indonesian puppeteer Soekarno to explain his rhetorical strategies and motivations.<sup>45</sup> His methodology is based on cluster analysis, identification, logological (study of the meaning and use of symbols), representational, and pentadic ratios. Another study that relies on Burkeian theory to critique the use of symbols is by Shipley.<sup>46</sup> Shipley critiques the symbols employed by Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam rhetoric through logology and cluster analysis. The method Shipley uses is to build equations through cluster analysis to discover how the symbols interrelate. The equations are then analyzed through Pentadic ratios.

Riley's work, "A Rhetorical Biography of Senator James D. Phelan of California: Concentrating on the Ways in Which His Rhetoric Constructed Images and Ideas About Asian Immigrants to the United States,"<sup>47</sup> employs Burke's theories of identification and his method of cluster criticism to discern Phelan's perspectives and the ethics of Phelan's

---

<sup>45</sup> Peter Suwarno, "The Rhetoric of Unity and Freedom: Burkeian Analysis of Soekarno's Selected Writings, 1926-1933" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio University, 1991).

<sup>46</sup> David S. Shipley, "The Rhetorical Drama of Lyndon B. Johnson: A Burkeian Analysis" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1986).

<sup>47</sup> Martha W. Riley, "A Rhetorical Biography of Senator James D. Phelan of California Concentrating on the Ways in Which His Rhetoric Constructed Images and Ideas About Asian Immigrants to the United States." (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1992).

rhetorical construction of Asian immigrant identity, an identity that led to significant discrimination.

In “A Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Speeches of the Reverend Jerry Falwell”<sup>48</sup> Bury examines 14 sermons of Falwell to ascertain how Falwell tries to develop identification through clustering of terms that are aimed at making clear dichotomies in the minds of Falwell’s listeners.

The work of Gomez and Fiorella looks at the rhetoric of Oscar Arias to determine his worldview through cluster analysis.<sup>49</sup> They identify “God” and “Devil” terms and analyze them to reveal Arias’ perspectives. A similar use of Burkeian theory will be employed in this study to examine the perspectives of a social movement, the Jesus Seminar. To discover the motivations of Louis Farrakhan, Gaber uses cluster analysis on three of Farrakhan’s speeches.<sup>50</sup> Gaber’s study reveals Farrakhan’s “like” and “opposing” terms to uncover his orientations.

This writer’s study will build on the Burkeian methodologies and findings used in the previously discussed works in its study of the Jesus Seminar and its critics. In searching for an appropriate methodology for this study, this writer determined that first the terministic screens and occupational psychoses of both the Jesus Seminar and its opponents must be identified to determine if there is a perspective to bridge the differences and bring the two sides together. The Cluster-Agon method developed by

---

<sup>48</sup> Mary J. Bury, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Speeches of the Reverend Jerry Falwell" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio University, 1986).

<sup>49</sup> Rojas Gomez and Claudia Fiorella, "Spiritualizing the Political: A Rhetorical Analysis of Oscar Arias' Discourse on Peace," Ohio University (1992).

<sup>50</sup> Julia E. Gaber, "Lamb of God or Demagogue? A Burkeian Cluster Analysis of the Selected Speeches of Minister Louis Farrakhan" (Bowling Green State University, 1986).

Kenneth Burke proved to provide a parsimonious means of assessing the discourse of the Jesus Seminar and the responses of its primary opponents.

In the fifth chapter, the writer will assess the works of the Jesus Seminar and its critics using the techniques outlined in chapter four. The writings of the key members of the Jesus Seminar and its leading opponents will provide the main rhetorical artifacts for this study. The terms for review will come from the selected sources. Preliminary investigations suggest the following terms for possible analysis: scholarship, historical Jesus, history, theology, creed, sage, cynic philosopher, egalitarian, science, believer, traditional, church, and dogma. Due to the necessity to limit the scope of the project the writer will examine works by Crossan, Funk, Borg, and Spong to establish the orientation of the Jesus Seminar found in their rhetoric. The books published by these Jesus Seminar scholars have emerged as the seminal works of the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus and, thus, having been the most widely disseminated merit the most attention. The voice of the opponents of the Seminar will be studied in the works of two of the most prolific anti-Seminar writers - Luke Timothy Johnson and N. Thomas Wright. These works include books, lectures and media responses to releases by the Seminar.

The first step will be to follow the four major steps in cluster-agon analysis: key terms from the writings of the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar will be identified; patterns of associated terms will be clustered; constellation of positive and agonistic terms will be assembled revealing rival perspectives; hence, revealing terministic screens. According to Burke, these perspectives are more than frames for understanding; they are dynamic models for the construction of social and personal identity. They set the limits of discussion, dictate the range of metaphor and their stakeholders invest in them.

Secondly, the works of the opponents of the Seminar will be analyzed by the same method. Finally, this writer will seek to find a corrective frame that offers a third alternative. The new perspective would have to be willing to embrace doubt and uncertainty, focus on interpretation and remain connected to tradition, and incorporate elements from all views of the issue.

Key terms for the cluster-agon analysis will be chosen on the basis of frequency and intensity and on the use of “god” and “devil” terms. No more than seven or eight key terms will be chosen to prevent the analysis from becoming too complex for the scope of this dissertation. The writer will then begin to chart the terms that cluster around the key terms and will note the context in which each appears. It will be noted if the terms are connected by a conjunction that indicates a connection between them, if the terms are in close proximity of one another, or if a cause and effect relationship between them has been established. This charting will allow the writer to then see if patterns can be established between the key terms and the clusters. The writer will look for both confirming and opposing terms to determine meaning, recognizing that opposing terms surrounding the key term may indicate some confusion or ambiguity. The same is true if it is found that some of the key terms are in opposition to other key terms. Finally, the orientations of the members of the Jesus Seminar and of its critics will be analyzed based on the patterns that emerge from the cluster-agon analysis.

In the sixth and final chapter, this dissertation will examine the orientations and perspectives of the Seminar and its critics through the cluster-agon analysis carried out in chapter five in search of homology, or similarity across arguments, to bring together the

disparate points of view. A third perspective is sought that will adjudicate the differences and create open and productive dialogue.

To begin the initial analysis, the next chapter situates the Jesus Seminar in the historical context that gave birth to the movement. The central tenets of the Seminar's philosophy are articulated. This contextualization is offered to establish the arguments to which critics of the Seminar are responding and to offer a window into the rhetorical battlefield in which the two camps operate.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE JESUS SEMINAR: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explains the antecedents of the Jesus Seminar to develop an understanding of the intellectual history of the movement. Included in this discussion are the major figures, historical developments, basic positions, and unresolved issues of the quest for the historical Jesus.

#### Historical Overview

Since the eighteenth century, many Bible scholars have aspired to cut through layers of text and years of theological speculation and find the historical truth of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> There have been three distinct stages in which the Jesus of History was the object of meticulous study by New Testament scholars: the “Old” or “First Quest,” the “New” or “Second Quest,” and, the current “Third Quest.” In the first wave of speculation, Hermann Reimarus and David Friedrich Strauss used literary-historical criticism to point to inconsistencies in the gospels and to argue that the church had replaced the Jesus of History with the Christ of Faith. After these early pioneers, other authors attempted to continue this method of analysis. Nobel Prize winner Albert Schweitzer summarized

---

<sup>1</sup> For examples see: Charles Anderson, *Critical Quests for Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969; Dennis Duling, *Jesus Christ through History*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1979; C. J. den Heyer, *Jesus Matters: 150 Years of Research*. Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996; Robert L. Heath, *Realism and Relativism: A Perspective on Kenneth Burke*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986; Fred Klooster, *Quests for the Historical Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1977; Harvey McArthur, *The Quest through the Centuries*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966; Robert Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus: An Introductory Survey of the Historical Roots of Gospel Criticism*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1995; and, Barnes Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus: A Guidebook*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.

these efforts in *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, a survey of various works.<sup>2</sup> In that book, Schweitzer encouraged a move away from historical studies of Jesus. Because of the tremendous influence of Bible critic Rudolf Bultmann, this understanding of the historical search dominated New Testament studies for the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> At that point, students of Bultmann sought to move beyond his approach and started what many call the Second Quest for the Historical Jesus. The Jesus Seminar has built out from this movement in Biblical Studies and is sometimes seen as part of the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus. Because the Jesus Seminar sees previous scholars as predecessors and intellectual fathers, any study of the Seminar must begin with an examination of their work that shows the ties between earlier quests for the historical Jesus and the work of the Seminar. In this way, one can discern the roots of the Seminar, and come to understand the historical context for its development and reception.

#### The First Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Secularizing Quest

As Albert Schweitzer notes in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Hermann Reimarus was the intellectual father of those scholars endeavoring to discern a Jesus from history in the divergent gospel accounts.<sup>4</sup> For Reimarus, the creeds of the church had so distorted the message of Christ that rational intellectuals could no longer subscribe to it. For Reimarus, there was a need to rid religion of its myths to develop a secular

---

<sup>2</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1906. Reprint, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Translated by John Marsh. Rev. ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, p. 13.

Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Hermann Reimarus was influenced heavily by the writings of early English Deists.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Reimarus entitled an unpublished manuscript he wrote *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*, which translates as an *Apology or Defense in Behalf of the Rational Worshippers of God*. In Reimarus's view, traditional Christian notions of the deity of Christ, the trinity, and the resurrection of Jesus failed to make rational sense. During his lifetime, Reimarus did write some works on natural religion, upholding it over and against the faith of the church, but he withheld publication of his manuscript out of concern for his family. After his death, Gotthold Lessing, the famed German philosopher and rationalist received the text from the Reimarus family and proceeded to publish it in seven fragments, attributing it to an unknown author.<sup>7</sup>

These publications created a tremendous sensation because they argued for the toleration of Deists and attacked the notion of supernatural revelation. Even more important, the pieces criticized Biblical texts and pointed to inconsistencies in their construction, arguing that the works could hardly be seen as a bedrock for faith. Although the criticism of the Passing of the Israelites through the Red Sea caused some consternation, Reimarus' writings on the gospels became the focus of criticism. In two fragments published by Lessing, Reimarus questioned the resurrection of Christ and attempted to separate the teachings of Jesus from those of the disciples.

---

<sup>5</sup> Randy Wayne Nelson, "The Jesus Seminar's Search for the Authentic Sayings of Jesus: An Examination of Phase One of the Seminar's Quest for the Historical Jesus." Ph.D. Dissertation, Rice University, 1999, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> Reimarus was influenced by writers such as John Toland, Matthew Tyndale, Peter Annet, Anthony Collins, and Thomas Woolston.

<sup>7</sup> Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Fragmente Eines Ungenannten*. Edited by Charles H. Talbert. Trans. Ralph S. Fraser. ET ed, *Reimarus: Fragments*. Braunschweig: Lessing, 1776-78. Reprint, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970.

These attacks on traditional Christianity initiated the search for the historical Jesus, according to Schweitzer, because they combined the rationalist skepticism of the Enlightenment with what Schweitzer terms historical criticism. Although philosophers like David Hume had challenged unscientific reports of miracles in the gospels, their speculation lacked the rigorous research conducted by Reimarus. Although philosophers might question the reasonableness of miracles, Reimarus used the Biblical texts themselves and a study of related literature to expose inconsistencies in the text and question the accuracy of the narratives. His ability to work from the original languages and interpret the message distinguished him from mere Enlightenment free thinkers.

The fragment entitled *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Junger* is the more important of the two fragments because in it Reimarus outlines his view of the history of the early Christian movement. After careful study of the gospels and the Book of Acts, Reimarus concluded that he had discovered a split between the aims of Jesus and those of the disciples. As Schweitzer noted, the starting point for Reimarus's argument was his clear statement: "We are justified in drawing an absolute distinction between the teaching of the Apostles in their writings and what Jesus in his own lifetime proclaimed and thought."<sup>8</sup> The rest of the fragment outlines the nature of this split. According to Reimarus, Jesus believed that he was leading a reform movement within Judaism. Rather than founding a new religion, Jesus saw himself as calling Jews to a higher righteousness, a religious devotion that would eclipse that of the Pharisees and lead to moral perfectionism. In this way, Jesus hoped to create a kingdom of God on this earth. This kingdom would challenge the control of the Roman Empire and ultimately lead to the independence of Israel. Reimarus concluded that Jesus believed the power of his

---

<sup>8</sup> Reimarus, *Reimarus: Fragments*, p. 64.

preaching would lead him into power and bring about the kingdom of God. When this failed, he attempted to lead a revolt against Rome, but Jesus failed and he was turned over to be executed. Reimarus argued that this narrative explains one of Jesus's reported sayings from the cross in Matthew 27 and Mark 15: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" For Reimarus, this comment, recorded in Aramaic in the Gospel according to Mark, survives as a lasting vestige of Jesus's crushed hopes. He had believed that he would lead a mighty movement to overturn Roman power. There on the cross, crushed with despair, he admitted his defeat. The historical Jesus had no notion that he was dying as part of an atonement for sins. He was simply paying the price for a failed revolt against Roman imperial authority.<sup>9</sup>

Reimarus then turned to a question that had intrigued many scholars. Given that Jesus died in such an ignominious way, how and why did Christianity develop? According to Reimarus, a careful study of the scriptures and of Jewish texts shows that the disciples stole the body of Jesus and concocted a story that he had risen from the dead. Reimarus attributed a good deal of cunning to the disciples. Instead of immediately making their claim about Jesus, they held off an announcement until the feast of Pentecost, fifty days after the Passover, so that even if someone discovered the body of Jesus, no one would be able to identify it. In their hands, the kingdom of God became an eschatological prophecy, prefiguring a future age. Why would the disciples perpetrate such a fraud? Reimarus argued that they created this story in a bid to obtain wealth and power and continue preaching, which was far easier than working on boats in the Sea of Galilee.<sup>10</sup> He pointed to the desire for power evidenced by the apostles when they argued

---

<sup>9</sup> Reimarus, *Reimarus: Fragments*, p. 150.

over who was greatest as evidence of their hope for worldly reward. In addition, he noted that the early church held all wealth in common and points to the story of Ananias and Saphira as an indication that the apostles even expropriated the property of followers. Through this re-framing of the story of the early church, Reimarus manifests a skeptic's heart, depicting Christianity as a conspiracy by the disciples to obtain worldly fame and fortune. For Reimarus, the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus are nothing more than clumsy efforts to build the Christian movement and turn the teachings of Christ to their use. Nonetheless, Reimarus believed one could discern the true outlines of the teachings of Jesus through traces left in the accounts.<sup>11</sup> For Reimarus, the role of the New Testament scholar is to unearth the traces of the true Jesus through historical methods applied to the gospels. This was to be the aim of the First Quest for the historical Jesus.

Writing a half-century after Reimarus, David Friedrich Strauss published his *Life of Jesus* early in his career.<sup>12</sup> Although the work made him instantly famous, its unorthodox sentiments led to his removal from his teaching post at Tubingen and years of persecution. Strauss hoped to separate mythical elements from historical elements in the gospel. As Strauss noted, previous scholars had identified mythic elements in the gospel narratives. But they had confined their explorations to the Infancy Narratives and Resurrection stories. Strauss endeavored to trace mythic touches throughout the work. He argued that readers granted too much authority to the eyewitness testimony of the apostles. As Schweitzer mentioned, Strauss believed that the delay between the events of Jesus' life and the writing of the gospels could account for mythic elements entering into

---

<sup>10</sup> Reimarus, *Reimarus: Fragments*, p. 243.

<sup>11</sup> Reimarus, *Reimarus: Fragments*, p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, p. 70.

the stories. In addition, he insisted that the term myth does not discredit stories.<sup>13</sup> In his view, myth is simply the way in which religious ideas combine with legends to express a higher truth. Strauss believed that Jesus embodied for the disciples the highest idea conceived by human thought: the unity of God and man. Their gospel narratives convey this notion, wrapped in Jewish messianic thought and other legends. Heavily influenced by Hegel, Strauss proceeded in his work to pursue a dialectic between a rationalist naturalistic understanding of gospel verses and a super-naturalistic reading of the same passages. Through this process of collision and examination, Strauss demonstrated the importance of myth and legend to any understanding of the gospels. For Strauss, for example, the different accounts of the feedings of the multitudes suggested that this incident had its source in the story of a feeding by the prophet Elisha (II Kings 4: 42-44) and not an actual event in the ministry of Jesus. In a similar way, he claimed, the stories of exorcisms had their roots in the messianic hopes of the disciples, not actual events. Who could believe that demons literally came out of a possessed person while proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God? Legend and myth must be at work.

Around the turn of the century, a number of Bible Scholars, including Albert Schweitzer, began to criticize the earlier quest for the historical Jesus. According to these scholars, Reimarus, Strauss, and other writers had created a Jesus that they found to be palatable but that no more resembled the original Jesus of Nazareth than did the Christ of the creeds. In George Tyrell's classic line, that Jesus was "only the reflection of a liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well." A new generation of scholars proclaimed that the true Jesus was an eschatological prophet, a predictor of doom, who believed that the world was coming to an imminent end. Schweitzer criticized Reimarus

---

<sup>13</sup> Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, p. 79.

and Strauss for discounting the apocalyptic sayings of Jesus. According to him, these comments reflected the true content of Jesus's message and therefore had to be emphasized in any portrait of Jesus. In his dissertation on the Jesus Seminar, "The Jesus Seminar's Search for the Authentic Sayings of Jesus," R.W. Nelson details the writings of this generation of scholars, which has been most famously recapitulated in the pages of Schweitzer's work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*.

According to Nelson, the turn in Biblical scholarship began with the 1892 publication of Martin Kahler's *Der Sogenannte historische Jesus und der geistliche, biblische Christus*.<sup>14</sup> Leander Keck agreed with this claim in his own survey of the attempt to construct a historical Jesus. Although Schweitzer neglected to mention Kahler's book in his own survey, Kahler first noted the distinction between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith that is implicit in the Quest for the historical Jesus. Kahler condemned the scholars of the First Quest for presenting a Jesus who supported their own liberal efforts to conform theology to rational philosophy. They had created, in other words, a Jesus who served their liberal theological ends. Kahler accused the members of the First Quest of attempting to remove the Christ of Faith and substitute their own low Christology. Rather than professing Christ as the son of God, these scholars presented Jesus as nothing more than another human—a man who taught some wonderful ethical precepts and called followers to lead exemplary lives and reform society. For Kahler, the real Christ is the Christ that has been preached for millennia and continues to influence

---

<sup>14</sup> Nelson, "The Jesus Seminar's Search for the Authentic Sayings of Jesus."

Christian believers.<sup>15</sup> The Questers could not hope to substitute their Jesus for the Christ of tradition and of faith.

In contrast to his omission of Kahler, Schweitzer spent a good deal of time discussing the work of William Wrede. In his study, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verstandnis des Markusevangeliums*, Wrede argued that the author of the Gospel of Mark was theologically motivated to present a Jesus who preserved a “Messianic Secret.” Although the Gospel of Mark was the oldest of the gospels and presumed to have priority, Wrede argued that it could not be seen as a historical document about the life of Jesus. Schweitzer admired Wrede’s treatment of the subject, but he wanted Wrede to use the insights of Johannes Weiss, who presented Jesus as an eschatological prophet. In Schweitzer’s view, Wrede failed to see the implication of the gospels that Jesus was an eschatological prophet. Schweitzer argued that this Jesus is the historical Jesus. In his book, he constructed his own telling of the life of Jesus, which relies heavily on the accuracy of the Gospel of Matthew. Schweitzer argued that members of the First Quest shunned an eschatological Christ because it did not serve their need to redefine their theology. Instead, it presented a Christ who was an obscure prophet of the apocalypse. Schweitzer argued that the risen Christ was far more important for an understanding of Christian faith than the Christ of history.

Because of the idea that the search for a historical Christ drew away from an examination of the Christ of Faith, many Bible scholars in the early part of the twentieth century turned away from a search for the historical Jesus. Although the ideas of Schweitzer and other critics of the First Quest suggested this approach, the theology of

---

<sup>15</sup> Leander Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus: The Place of Jesus in Preaching and Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971, p. 19.

Rudolf Bultmann propagated it. Bultmann argued that faith does not depend on historical faith. Efforts to ground Christian belief in historical events, he argued, neglect the living nature of the *kerygma* of Jesus Christ; they omit the very nature of revelation. Bultmann emphasized form criticism in his own study of the gospels. He believed one could learn something about the Christian community's understanding of Christ through studying the different narrative forms in the gospels. At the same time, he was extremely skeptical that one could learn much about the historical Jesus from the gospels. Bultmann did hold out hope that one could come to some idea of the original teachings of Jesus by demonstrating that words attributed to him came neither from ancient Judaism nor from the later church. He hoped that one could learn something of the original teachings of Christ by using the sayings of the gospels.

#### The Second Quest for the Historical Jesus

Following World War II, some of Bultmann's students initiated a new search for the historical Jesus. As mentioned in the introduction to this section, this search for the historical Jesus has often been dubbed the "Second Quest." Proponents of this quest built from the writings of Rudolf Bultmann, who taught many of them. Ernst Kaseman challenged followers of Bultmann to articulate some connection between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith. If they did not take this step, he argued, they risked producing a Christ who was purely supernatural and lacked a connection to the real world of history. Although Kaseman shared the Bultmannian skepticism about the possibility of creating a definitive historical understanding of Jesus, he hoped to encourage positive historical and theological speculation. Many theologians responded to Kaseman, leading to what theologian James Robinson termed a "post-Bultmannian" era in German

theology. In their effort to tie the Christ of Faith to the Jesus of History, these theologians and Bible scholars emphasized an existential approach to the historical Jesus. They hoped to promote an encounter between Christ and the scholar. By connecting to the Jesus of History, as opposed to the *kerygma*, one could hope for a distinctive experience that could lead to greater self-understanding and an “authentic existence.” This connection between scholar and subject distinguishes the Second Quest from the First Quest. Another difference is that the members of the Second Quest were more than willing to acknowledge continuity between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith.

### The Third Quest for the Historical Jesus

Although the Second Quest lost much of its momentum in the late 1960s, a new movement developed immediately afterward that rejected the Bultmannian approach but embraced the New Quest’s attempt to develop a deeper understanding of the historical Jesus. A host of books in the late 1960s and 1970s have been identified as representative of this “Third Quest.” These works present a hodge-podge of theories about the nature of Jesus that attempt to understand him in his historical context in First century Galilee and the greater Mediterranean world. British New Testament Scholar N.T. Wright dubbed this movement the Third Quest in his work “History and Theology.” Wright argued that scholars like E.P. Sanders, Marcus Borg, Anthony Harvey, and Gerd Theissen are attempting to build a more developed view of Jesus’s Jewishness than earlier scholars. The importance of historical Jesus research was underscored in 1981 by the creation of a “Historical Jesus Section” in the powerful Society of Biblical Literature, which is the major professional organization for American Bible Scholars.

## The Jesus Seminar and the Quests for the Historical Jesus

In the mid-1980s Robert Funk founded the Jesus Seminar, which he organized to synthesize research on the historical Jesus. Funk sees his group as working in the tradition of the original Questers. Hence, Funk dedicated *The Five Gospels* to the memory of David Friedrich Strauss (and to that of Galileo Galilei and Thomas Jefferson, for that matter). The Jesus Seminar is reminiscent of the First Quest in several ways. First, it too is a secularizing quest. From the perspective of the First Quest and the Jesus Seminar, the central aim is to free the historical Jesus from the chains of dogmatic orthodoxy. The Jesus Seminar emphasizes a radical separation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith. In *Honest to Jesus*, Funk refers to the work of the Seminar as a “renewed quest,” as Nelson notes.<sup>16</sup> Funk wrote: “I capitalize the “New” to indicate that the precursor of this quest was the new quest of the 1950s.”<sup>17</sup> A second characteristic shared by the First Quest and the Jesus Seminar is an attack on those who would proclaim the Christ of Faith. Funk accused other members of the so-called Third Quest of engaging in “apologetic” for the creedal church. They are not attempting to generate a new understanding of the historical Jesus but, instead, seeking to support the organized church in its presentation of the Christ of Faith. In these statements about earlier attempts to understand the Christ of Faith, Funk revealed important information about the way in which he views his enterprise and about his motives for conducting research on the historical Jesus. For Funk, and the First Quest, the early church distorted the message of Jesus and betrayed the Jesus tradition because of the dubious motives of the disciples.

---

<sup>16</sup> Nelson, “The Jesus Seminar’s Search for the Authentic Sayings of Jesus,” p. 193.

<sup>17</sup> Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996, p. 64.

But the Christ myth did not end with the early church, according to the Jesus Seminar, but instead is continuously proclaimed through the creeds of the modern church.

Therefore, like the First Quest, the Jesus Seminar makes the church an object of anti-ecclesiastical rhetoric.

The Jesus Seminar began in 1985 as an attempt by Robert Funk to create a list of the authentic sayings of Jesus. The first sponsor of the Seminar was the Polebridge Press, which Funk founded in Polebridge, Montana after moving to that state to found a religious studies department at the University of Montana. In 1986 Funk founded the Westar Institute in Sonoma, California. This research institute aspires to increase religious literacy in the general population. As part of this mission, the institute sponsors a number of seminars to explore the relationship between religion and American society. These meetings include the Greek Grammar Seminar, the Fundamentalist Seminar, and the American Myth Seminar, but none of these groups have attained the notoriety of the original Jesus Seminar.

The Jesus Seminar began with twenty-nine “Charter Fellows.”<sup>18</sup> In the initial stages, membership was limited to thirty scholars by invitation only.<sup>19</sup> All of these scholars were identified with Polebridge’s *Foundation and Facets* Series. Since that time, membership has been opened to all scholars. Although estimates of participation vary, some fifty to two hundred scholars have been involved in the work of the Jesus Seminar.

As Nelson argued, it is most probable that this higher number is inflated—as claimed by

---

<sup>18</sup> The 1985 Charter Fellows were: William A. Beardslee, M. Eugene Boring, James Breech, James R. Butts, Ron Cameron, John Dominic Crossan, R. Alan Culpepper, Dennis C. Duling, Richard A. Edwards, Robert W. Funk, R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, Charles W. Hedrick, William Herzog II, Paul W. Hollenbach, Howard C. Kee, Werner H. Kelber, Karen King, John S. Kloppenborg, John Lown, Lane C. McGaughey, Burton L. Mack, Leo G. Perdue, Gary A. Phillips, Vernon K. Robbins, Bernard Brandon Scott, Dennis E. Smith, Robert C. Tannehell, Hal Taussig, and John L. White, found in *Forum* 1.1 (1985): p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> Funk, “Form and Function,” *Forum: Foundations and Facets* 1.1 (1985): p. 56.

critics—and includes non-specialists in the numbers.<sup>20</sup> The most important activities are the Westar National Meetings. These twice-yearly meetings are open to the public and consist of lectures, workshops, and church leaders' roundtables – discussions designed for clergy seeking ways to implement the findings of the Jesus Seminar into their churches.<sup>21</sup> The “Jesus Seminar on the Road” series is a two-day educational program led by Fellows to bring the work of the Seminar to communities across the United States. In the early stages, the Fellows met to vote on the authentic words and deeds of the historical Jesus.<sup>22</sup> After compiling an initial database of what the historical Jesus said and did the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar created “profiles of Jesus.” These are exemplified in their works *The Five Gospels* and *The Acts of Jesus*.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, various Fellows have begun to publish individual accounts of the historical Jesus that question contemporary understandings of the origins of Christianity. Individual works by Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong, Funk, and Crossan exemplify this trend.<sup>24</sup> These efforts have

---

<sup>20</sup> Nelson, "Search for the Authentic Sayings," p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Westar, *Westar Institute Description* [Website] (Westar Institute, [cited September 26 2001]); available from <http://www.westarinstitute.org/Westar/westar.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Westar, *Fellows of the Jesus Seminar* [Website] (Westar Institute, 2001 [cited 9/26 2001]); available from <http://www.westarinstitute.org/Fellows/fellows.html>. The exact number of scholars affiliated with the Jesus Seminar is a matter of dispute. While Funk claims over 200 Fellows the actual number might be smaller. The website lists 94 scholars and claims that this is only a “partial list.” Scholars such as Luke Timothy Johnson, Raymond E. Brown and H. Shanks take issue with the claim of 200 and argue that the number is significantly inflated to bolster credibility with non-scholars who might not know the truth. Shanks suggests that the actual number of participants varies depending on how one counts them. See Johnson's *The Real Jesus*, Brown's “Appendix 1: The Historical Jesus,” in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, and, Shanks's (moderator) *The Search For Jesus*.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Walter Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993; reprint, 1997); Robert W. Funk and The Jesus Seminar, eds., *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> For example see: Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1994)., Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision. Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987)., Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two*

resulted in substantial negative criticism.<sup>25</sup> Beyond these works, the Westar Institute publishes three periodicals based on the work of the Jesus Seminar. These are *The Fourth R*, *Forum*, and *Westar Seminar Papers*. *The Fourth R* is billed as the seminar's "popular" magazine. Its target audience is a non-scholarly audience of general readers, and it presents religion as the "fourth R" of basic literacy. In the "Odyssey Series," a regular feature, a Jesus Seminar Fellow writes an autobiographical account of her faith history. For its part, *Forum* is an academic journal for biblical scholarship. It publishes scholarship emerging from the Jesus Seminar and appears twice yearly. Finally, the *Westar Seminar Papers* are prepared in advance of each semi-annual meeting of the Jesus Seminar and are the basis of deliberation at the meetings.<sup>26</sup>

The Jesus Seminar began its work by trying to develop a scholarly consensus on the sayings of Jesus. Funk stated at the first meeting that the Jesus Seminar would have two goals. First, it would identify all of the sayings associated with Jesus in the first three centuries of the Common Era. John Dominic Crossan accomplished this goal when he created his *Sayings Parallels*.<sup>27</sup> This book, which became the workbook for the Jesus

---

*Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1999); John Shelby Spong, "A Call for a New Reformation," *The Fourth R* 11, no. 4 (1998); Funk, *Honest to Jesus*; Robert W. Funk, *Jesus as Precursor*, ed. Edward F. Beutner, Revised ed. (Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1993); John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1994)., John Dominic Crossan, *The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1994)., John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Luke T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996)., Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 200?)., Gregory Koukl, *The Jesus Seminar under Fire (Transcript from the Radio Show "Stand to Reason," Aired 1995.* [Website] (Stand to Reason, August 12, 1997 2001 [cited September 26, 2001]; available from <http://www.str.org/free/commentaries/apologetics/bible/jsuf.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Westar, *Published Periodicals* [Website] (Westar Institute, 2001 [cited 9/26 2001]); available from <http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/periodicals.html>.

<sup>27</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Sayings Parallels: A Workbook for the Jesus Tradition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

Seminar, found and categorized more than 1,000 versions of 503 items or about 440 independent sayings. In the course of his research, Crossan examined not only the canonical gospels, but also apochrypha from the Nag Hammadi texts, patristic quotations, and other material. Crossan sub-divided these sayings into parables, aphorisms, dialogues, and stories to give some coherence to the material. The second objective of the Seminar was to identify sayings that probably stemmed from Jesus himself. In this search, the Seminar acknowledged that they could not recover the exact words of Jesus, but they hoped to gather something of his voice; “ipsissima vox.”<sup>28</sup> At the meeting, Crossan urged Fellows to focus on the structure of sayings. He and Funk argued that Jesus might have worded an aphorism in different ways while still retaining its original significance.<sup>29</sup>

As part of this quest for the words of Jesus, Funk and the Fellows of the Seminar made a resolution to vote on the sayings of Jesus. Unless the Seminar took this step, Funk argued, the scholars would never generate a consensus and would instead leave the work incomplete and subject to eternal review.<sup>30</sup> The resulting voting system, secret voting by beads, has become the hallmark of the Jesus Seminar. Initially, Funk wanted to use two beads: black and red. In keeping with the tradition of the red letter Bible, red sayings would reflect the words of Jesus, and black sayings would be those statements regarded as later additions to the gospels. Some members of the Seminar balked at the idea of offering nothing but two discrete categories. After some debate the Seminar decided to go

---

<sup>28</sup> Robert W. Funk, "The Issues of Jesus." *Forum: Foundations and Facets* 1.1 (1985): p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Robert W. Funk, "Polling the Pundits." *Forum: Foundations and Facets* 1.1 (1985): p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> Robert W. Funk, "The Beatitudes and Turn the Other Cheek." *Forum: Foundations and Facets* 2.3 (1986): p. 3.

to a four-color system. In addition to black and red, they included pink and gray. The pink bead and the gray bead indicate varying degrees of certainty on the validity of a statement. A pink vote means that a statement could probably be attributed to Jesus. A gray vote, on the other hand, suggests that a statement probably but not certainly should be attributed to later voices. By the time the *Five Gospels* was published the voting scheme had been given some rather flippant meanings. Red, according to this view, says “That’s Jesus!” pink, “Sure sounds like him;” gray, “Well, maybe;” and black, “There’s been some mistake.”<sup>31</sup> When it came time to create a database of the sayings, the scholars developed a weighted average system to determine the overall coloring of a statement in the gospels.<sup>32</sup>

In his dissertation, Nelson argues that the First Quest for the historical Jesus shares certain characteristics with the Jesus Seminar. First, both the Jesus Seminar and the First Quest hoped to overturn the Christ of Faith and replace him with the Jesus of History. In the view of these scholars, the development of historical and literary criticism had rendered the Christ of the creeds untenable. In his place, they hoped to present a Jesus who could still communicate with the modern world.<sup>33</sup> Second, and related, these authors all set out to attack supporters of the Christ of Faith. They believed the early church betrayed the teachings of Jesus and substituted their own platitudes for his authentic message.<sup>34</sup> Third, these authors proclaim a message of “historical positivism.” Nelson outlines nineteenth century notions of historical certainty and argues that the early

---

<sup>31</sup> Funk, et al, *The Five Gospels*, p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> Funk, et al, *The Five Gospels*, p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> Nelson, "Search for the Authentic Sayings," pp. 144-45.

<sup>34</sup> Nelson, "Search for the Authentic Sayings," p. 145.

Questers and the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar share the notion that they can learn the true nature of the Jesus movement through a scrupulous examination of the canonical gospels, the letters of Paul, and other, non-canonical works.<sup>35</sup> Fourth, these Questers, unlike Schweitzer, portray Christ as a non-eschatological prophet. For these students, Jesus wanted to make the kingdom of God a present reality. Rather than promising a future judgment, he proclaimed a new state of affairs on earth.<sup>36</sup>

Nelson argued that the New Quest and the Jesus Seminar, while radically different, do share certain common features. Like Bultmann, and members of the New Quest, the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar have been skeptical about the accuracy of the canonical gospels and privilege the sayings of Jesus. They borrow Bultmann's "criteria of dissimilarity."<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the Jesus Seminar rejects any attempt to show continuity between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith presented by the church.

Since the publication of works by the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar there have been countless responses. While some have commended the Jesus Seminar for bringing the subject of the historical Jesus to the public's attention,<sup>38</sup> others have raised significant challenges to the assumptions, methodologies, credibility and conclusions of the Jesus Seminar. The next chapter explores the anti-Seminar rhetoric that has developed.

---

<sup>35</sup> Nelson, "Search for the Authentic Sayings," p. 146.

<sup>36</sup> Nelson, "Search for the Authentic Sayings," p. 146.

<sup>37</sup> Nelson, "Search for the Authentic Sayings," pp. 162-63.

<sup>38</sup> David L. Bartlett, "The Historical Jesus and the Life of Faith." *Christian Century* May 6 (1992): 489-93; Randel Helms, *Free Inquiry* (Fall 1994): 63-64; Marion Soards, "The Five Gospels." *Theology Today* 52, no. 2 (1995): 272; and, Christopher Mark Tuckett, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 67 (1991): 346-60.

## CHAPTER 3

### CRITICISMS OF THE JESUS SEMINAR

Over the years, academic critics have launched a barrage of attacks on members of the Jesus Seminar. In a broad sense, these criticisms can be broken into two main categories. On one hand, opponents call into question the credibility of Seminar members and their motivations. Such attacks sometimes depict Seminar members as scheming manipulators desperate for popular notoriety and hefty publishing contracts. At other points, the opponents accuse Seminar members of attempting to remake Christianity in some radical fashion. A second set of attacks questions the scholarship of Seminar members. These attacks run the gamut from methodology to conclusions, but they combine to portray Seminar members as slipshod scholars who claim to dispense a scholarly consensus but actually represent nothing more than an insignificant faction in the community of bible scholars. These broad criticisms break into sub-points, and they interrelate with one another in significant ways. However, any survey of these criticisms should begin by recognizing this two-fold division.

#### Attacks on Credibility: Self-Promoters and Displacers of Core Christianity

##### Self-Promotion

Attacks on the credibility of Jesus Seminar members have been extensive and often center on the Seminar's use of the media. Such arguments are abundant. In an article published in *First Things*, a conservative political and theological journal edited by Richard John Neuhaus, Richard Hays mocked the members of the Seminar for their pretentious efforts at publicity. Hays, a New Testament Scholar at Duke University, wryly remarked that the dedication of the *Five Gospels* includes many famous names but

that they had surely missed one of the most important. Alongside Galileo Galilei, Thomas Jefferson, and David Friedrich Strauss, he suggests, the Seminar should have enshrined the memory of P.T. Barnum—the master showman of the nineteenth century. Although members of the Seminar champion the other three men for their freedom of thought and struggles against institutional Christianity, Hays says they owe just as great of a debt to the showmanship and self-promotion embodied by the great Barnum.<sup>1</sup> While Seminar members assert that their use of the media is to bring the question of the historical Jesus to everyday people, critics suggest their motives lie elsewhere. In the popular magazine, *Christianity Today*, a trio of biblical scholars at Trinity Western University, Martin Abegg, Peter Flint and Craig T. Evans, explain that they post newspaper clippings announcing the “latest discoveries” by the Seminar on their office bulletin board as a reminder to fight against the Seminar’s “sensationalism and biased scholarship.”<sup>2</sup> These criticisms represent an important strain of anti-Seminar rhetoric.

Perhaps the harshest such criticisms have come from Luke Timothy Johnson in his book *The Real Jesus*. Johnson wrote the book, he says, to respond to the overwhelming popular attention given to the Jesus Seminar. In the introduction to the work, he writes that he had ignored the media frenzy surrounding the search for the historical Jesus and the Jesus Seminar for years. After he wrote a negative review of Bishop John Shelby Spong’s *Born of a Woman*, however, he decided that he had better respond to the issue. His piece, placed in the mainline magazine *Christian Century*, elicited a flurry of indignant letters from angry readers. Such a reaction from a sober

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Hays, "Book Review of the Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus." *First Things* 43 (May 1994): p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin D. Miller, "The War of the Scrolls." *Christianity Today* 41, no. 11 (October 6, 1997): p. 39.

magazine read by many mainline clergy and lay people convinced him that he had to take action. Many of his criticisms point to what he perceives to be the media-hungry nature of Seminar members. In fact, Johnson's first chapter is entitled, "The Good News and the Evening News." Johnson argues that the Jesus Seminar publicizes its efforts to gain fame, notoriety, or greater academic prestige for its members.

Johnson's attack on the Jesus Seminar for self-promotion has two facets. Few of the members of the Jesus Seminar have enjoyed the hefty publishing contracts that Johnson mentions at points in his criticisms. Even the lower profile fellows, however, may have benefited from working with better-known names and sharing in the publication credits of the Seminar. At any rate, established scholars like Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan had been influential in biblical studies for years before the formation of the Seminar. Their professional accomplishments provided credibility for the Seminar's work. Someone like Marcus Borg, on the other hand, has become more popular in the years since the Jesus Seminar has been in existence. Johnson suggests that not only have these writers gained notoriety, but they have been able to boost sales of their works because of their participation in the Seminar. A statement such as that is difficult to assess, although one must concede that publicity attached to the Seminar might help Crossan, Funk, and Borg to reach a larger audience than otherwise expected. Through newspaper attention and media debate, the titles of books become known to educated laypeople. Before forming the Jesus Seminar, Funk and Crossan had published numerous works for scholastic presses. These works, like most academic monographs, sold relatively few copies. On the other hand, the Historical Jesus Publishing phenomenon has produced impressive sales. It is important to note that

HarperSanFrancisco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, has published all of the aforementioned works.

### Displacers of Core Christianity

Another challenge raised by critics is that the Jesus Seminar members want to remake Christianity to rescue it from orthodox Christianity and American fundamentalism. As we have seen in an earlier chapter, the Seminar members champion this possibility. In their public rhetoric, they often discuss the need to reformulate the Christian faith to meet the demands of the modern age. In particular, members of the Seminar seek to remove supernatural elements from the Gospels. Critics of the Seminar frequently attack this aim. Duke University Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas argues that, “With, perhaps, the best of intentions in the world the Jesus Seminar is committed to making Jesus explicable within the naturalistic metaphysical presumptions that shape as well as reflect the practices characteristic of modernity.”<sup>3</sup> The problem, for Hauerwas, is that this task is flawed. From his viewpoint, it is impossible to reconcile belief in a supernatural God with a mechanistic understanding of the world.<sup>4</sup> Thus, for Hauerwas, the Seminar’s stripping of the supernatural elements from the canonical Gospels also strips distinguishing characteristics from God.

Other opponents of the Seminar such as Johnson, Philip Jenkins, Ben Witherington III and Hays argue Funk, Crossan, Borg and their companions endanger the heart of the church’s teaching because of their contempt for its traditions and creeds.

---

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "The Resurrection and the Jesus Seminar: A Sermon with Commentary." *Journal for Preachers* xxi, no. Easter (1998): p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Hauerwas, "The Resurrection and the Jesus Seminar," p. 29.

Johnson contends that Seminar members hope to generate a revolution in the church by introducing a new conception of Jesus, one opposed to the Christ of the creeds.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Jenkins and other Seminar critics point to the Seminar's belief that "orthodox" Christianity displaced far "healthier forms" of the religion as evidence of the Seminar's disdain for traditional Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Sharyn Dowd, in a brief survey over the current controversy of the historical Jesus, notes that members of the Seminar "are seeking a Jesus who can inspire the loyalty of people unable to identify with the dogmas of the ecclesiastical hierarchy – dogmas created by the early church contrary to Jesus' intent and enshrined in the canonical gospels. They [Seminar members] seek to liberate Jesus from the clutches of the theologians and to make it possible for people to be followers of Jesus without being identified with the traditional church or its teachings."<sup>7</sup> For critics of the Seminar, this begs the question: what sort of Christianity do Seminar members desire? Jenkins argues that they want to create a "non-dogmatic" Christianity that meets the concerns of present day people. As an added incentive, Jenkins contends, the portrait of Jesus presented by the Seminar allows supporters to claim that the early church focused on social concerns akin to our own and fought against unjust social structures. Furthermore, theologian Arland Hultgren contends that, it seems, the Seminar's advocating of Jesus as sage "is all we really need, and that that kind of Jesus is

---

<sup>5</sup> Luke T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way*. Oxford: Oxford Press, 2001, pp.7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Sharyn Dowd, "Which Jesus? A Survey of the Controversy over 'the Historical Jesus!'" 31, no. 2 Summer (1996): p. 91.

better for the health of the world anyway . . .”<sup>8</sup> Jenkins calls the work a “well-rounded liberal mythology.”<sup>9</sup> Jenkins thinks the story told by the Jesus Seminar has such power because their “liberal mythology . . . permits modern-day activists to identify with their early predecessors, and demonstrates the ancient roots of current concerns.” Moreover, it permits the Seminar to claim that early Christianity took the shape of a liberal, non-dogmatic and woman-friendly form. Seminar critic N. T. Wright, further argues that Seminar founder Funk’s aim is to make Jesus into a “social reformer, gadfly and deviant who serves up an alternate construal of reality by offering puzzling parables;” while the Seminar’s co-founder Crossan’s goal is to turn Jesus into someone who sets “up an egalitarian community in Galilee” that offers “free healing and meals open to all comers.”<sup>10</sup> William Willimon, Chaplain of Duke Divinity School, echoes these arguments in his dialogue with Seminar fellow Borg. Willimon contends that Borg’s summation of the teachings of Jesus is too broad and in need of too much qualification. Furthermore, he faults Borg’s focus on the compassion of Jesus as just “one more attempt by liberalism to reduce Jesus to a universal ideal.” In fact, he reasons that “most of the efforts of the Jesus Seminar suggest the last gasp of modernity – it’s the 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘quest’ *redivivus*, one last hurrah for the liberal Jesus.”<sup>11</sup> The problem, for Willimon, is that the Seminar’s Jesus, Borg and other fellows advocate, fails to fit with Willimon’s

---

<sup>8</sup> Arland J. Hultgren, "The Jesus Seminar and the Third Quest." *Pro Ecclesia: a Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* III, no. 3 Summer (1994): p. 269.

<sup>9</sup> Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Ben Witherington III, "The Wright Quest for the Historical Jesus." *Christian Century* 114, no. 33, Nov. 19-26 (1997): p. 1076.

<sup>11</sup> Willimon, William, and Marcus Borg. "Encountering Jesus: An Exchange between William H. Willimon and Marcus Borg." *Christian Century* 114, no. 31, Nov. 5 (1997): p. 1009.

take on the “history of what happened to and after Jesus.”<sup>12</sup> What is it about their Jesus that leads to his crucifixion?

Witherington, a professor at evangelical Asbury Theological Seminary, further questions the motives of the Seminar through an assessment of the mission statement of the steering committee of the Jesus Seminar. Witherington particularly attacks the Seminar’s statement that biblical scholarship is in danger of “losing its credibility...because of its identification with Sunday Schools and TV evangelism....” The statement goes on to call for biblical scholars to build from models provided by the critical sciences. Witherington complains that the statement pretends to place critical scholarship at odds with evangelical or traditional forms of Christianity. He argues that they are using a confrontational “we/they” language that sets them apart as voices of reason in the face of a dangerous church. Furthermore, Witherington says that in conversations with members of the Jesus Seminar, “I have been told that one of the major intentions of some of the prime movers in this group was to attack and discredit American fundamentalism and the images of Jesus it offers.”<sup>13</sup> The veiled reference to anonymous sources is bizarre in an academic context, but the comment possibly shows the depth of Witherington’s feeling.

---

<sup>12</sup> Willimon and Marcus Borg. "Encountering Jesus," p. 1009.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995, p.

## Attacks on Scholarship: Membership, Methodology, Primary Texts and Conclusions

### Criticisms of the Membership of the Jesus Seminar

Beyond the motives of the Jesus Seminar, critics question the scholarship they produce. A diverse crowd of academic readers has criticized their membership, their methodology and their conclusions. Critiques of their methodology begin by questioning the credentials of the self-selected fellows who comprise the Seminar, and by questioning the number of biblical scholars who do not participate in the Seminar. Hays suggests that the Seminar's voting could lend interesting results if it included a broad cross-section of biblical scholars.<sup>14</sup> However, the Jesus Seminar fails to include even a substantial fraction of the members of the Society for Biblical Literature (SBL) or the Society for the Study of the New Testament (SNTS), the two leading academic organizations in the field. These two organizations boast memberships in the thousands. However, by even the most generous figures, Funk and his crew included no more than two hundred biblical scholars. Evans notes that the SBL consists of 5500 members of every religious background, but the Seminar, by comparison, is "this funny, quirky little thing" that "started out with 300 members but now only lists about 75, and that's inflated since only about 35 are even active . . . [they] portray themselves as a fair representative cross section of Jesus scholars. All that is illusory."<sup>15</sup> Witherington points out that the Seminar is not even an organized study group of the SBL or the SNTS.<sup>16</sup> Both professional associations sponsor research on topics like the historical Jesus. Wright asks, "But where is the rest of the guild – those who, for instance, flock to the 'Historical Jesus' sessions at

---

<sup>14</sup> Hays, "Book Review of the Five Gospels," p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin D. Miller, "The War of the Scrolls." *Christianity Today* 41, no. 11 (October 6, 1997): p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest*, p. 43.

the annual Society of Biblical Literature? They are conspicuous by their absence.”<sup>17</sup>

Bruce Chilton, teacher of Religion at Bard College, believes the results of the Seminar would change if more evangelicals participated. Chilton came to this conclusion after nearly forty members of the Seminar voted that the resurrection did not occur, but was probably, as German theologian Gerd Luedemann notes, based on “historically worthless” accounts and “the product of imagination and fantasy.”<sup>18</sup> As mentioned above, the fellows of the Seminar are self-selected and it is impossible to present them as a cross-section of academic opinion.<sup>19</sup> Hence, while noting that the Seminar is free to publish its results, Hays suggests that to call their work “critical scholarship” is – one must say it – reprehensible deception.”<sup>20</sup> Witherington echoes this when he claims that it is difficult to discern whether the Seminar’s work “passes scholarly muster” when much of their material is published by Polebridge Press – the publishing vehicle started by Robert Funk for the Jesus Seminar. The fact that, what is in effect, the Seminar’s “own private publishing company” disseminates their members’ findings casts further doubts on “how open to critical discussion the Jesus Seminar’s working methods and conclusions really are.”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> N. Thomas Wright, "Five Gospels but No Gospel: Jesus and the Seminar." In *Crisis in Christology: Essays in Quest of Resolution*, edited by William R. Farmer. Livonia, Michigan: Dove Booksellers, 1995, p. 118.

<sup>18</sup> "Liberals Pooh-Pooh Jesus' Resurrection." *Christianity Today* 39, no. 5 April 24 (1995), p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> C. L. Blomberg, "The Seventy Four "Scholars": Who Does the Jesus Seminar Really Speak For?" *Christian Research Institute*, no. Fall (1994): p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Hays, "Book Review of the Five Gospels," p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> Ben Witherington III, "Battling over the Jesus Seminar: Buyer Beware! Sentaionalist Claims Sold Here." *Bible Review* Xiii, no. 2 April (1997): p. 24.

### Criticisms of the Methodology of the Jesus Seminar

Their opponents argue that the Seminar's dubious membership calls into question their methodology -- both the system of voting and its results. In his *First Things* article, Hays starts his piece with a look at the voting system employed by the Seminar.<sup>22</sup> The creation of the system is critical to the Seminar's effort to create the "consensus" five gospels of the sayings of Jesus.

While Hays believes the Seminar's voting *could* accomplish more if it were representative of a variety of scholars, others say many supplementary problems exist with the voting system. Arland Hultgren faults the system for not allowing for nuances.<sup>23</sup> The use of weighted averages means that even if a majority vote that a particular saying was either "definitely said" (red) or "probably uttered" (pink) by Jesus, the final result might be marked as "probably not said" (gray) because of a minority of "definitely not said" (black) votes. Hence, it is feasible that if the color of a particular saying is marked gray or pink none of the Fellows of the Seminar voted that color at all. It is, therefore, misleading to let readers presume the votes of the Seminar are the result of a consensus.

N. Thomas Wright likens their methods to those of Italian politics, noting that they amount to proportional representation where "everybody's votes count to some extent, but the result is serious instability."<sup>24</sup> What's more, Wright asserts, readers should view the results as a "snapshot of what some scholars think within one particular context and after a certain set of debates." The reader must realize that "even the snapshot is out

---

<sup>22</sup> Hays, "Book Review of the Five Gospels," p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> Hultgren, "The Jesus Seminar and the Third Quest," p. 268.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, "Five Gospels but No Gospel," p. 125.

of focus, and the colors have been affected by the process of development.”<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, as Jenkins points out, this four-color system encourages voters to downplay the legitimacy of quotes. Witherington points to Matthew 25: 29. In the New Revised Standard Version, or NRSV, this verse reads: “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” Surveying the voting results, Witherington notes that 25% of the voters judged that Jesus must have made this statement. Another 11% suggested that Jesus might have said something like this line. Because a majority of the voters judged the saying unlikely and a small minority claimed that Jesus would not say anything of the sort, the passage was marked black in the original voting and gray in the published version of the *Five Gospels*.<sup>26</sup> The complication of the voting system makes it odd, for Witherington, for the Seminar to label Jesus sayings as either “inauthentic” or “non-historical” as the results mask a range of opinion.<sup>27</sup>

Opponents argue the voting methodology can have other strange consequences such as expanding the canon. As an example, Jenkins mentions the parable of the meal from the Gospel of Thomas.<sup>28</sup> Although the parable appears in no other Gospel, the

---

<sup>25</sup> Wright, "Five Gospels but No Gospel," p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest*, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Witherington III, "Battling over the Jesus Seminar," p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> The Gospel of Thomas is a Coptic text that is a collection of sayings. Some scholars date it early, while others argue that it came later with considerable dependence upon the canonical Gospels. For additional information see Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 117-118.

members of the Jesus Seminar have voted it as probably authentic and thus include it in the canon.<sup>29</sup>

An additional methodological problem is the Seminar's efforts to isolate Jesus' sayings from the rest of the gospel context. Because they cut off the sayings from the overall narrative flow of the work and any reference to the deeds of Jesus, the members of the Seminar distort the image of Jesus. Hays and others argue Jesus is best understood in the context of his mission and action on earth. Witherington mocks the Seminar members for creating a traveling sage who specialized in dispensing witty little aphorisms. Why crucify this sort of figure? If we can trust any of the historic evidence about Jesus, Witherington claims, then we should attempt to explain how the crucifixion would come about.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, N. T. Wright suggests that isolating Jesus' sayings results in removing Jesus from his first-century Israel setting and is erroneous as any portrait must make sense in terms of early Judaism. To compare Jesus to Hellenistic cynics or existential sages is incorrect as they did not exist in first-century Israel.<sup>31</sup> Wright insists that the Seminar's spokespersons instead offer a context that is, perhaps, anachronistic. For example, Wright points to this passage from the *Five Gospels*:

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...As a rule, the sage is self-effacing, modest, unostentatious.<sup>32</sup>

This understanding moves Jesus from any specific mission, and proves "the older liberalism right after all," by reducing Jesus' sayings to "pithy, subversive, disturbing

---

<sup>29</sup> Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest*, p. 57.

<sup>31</sup> Witherington III, *The Wright Quest for the Historical Jesus*, p. 1076.

<sup>32</sup> Funk et al, *The Five Gospels*, p. 32.

aphorisms” that teach people to be nice to one another.<sup>33</sup> Wherein lies the problem for Wright, is that the Seminar’s understanding of Jesus is the one they have in mind all along. It does not emerge from reliable research.

#### Criticism of the Primary Texts of the Jesus Seminar

According to critic Craig Evans, “the Jesus Seminar reveals inadequate interest and expertise in archaeology, Judaica, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, “the Seminar, as a whole, or at least some of its better known members, hold to some views about the Christian canon that mainstream scholarship regards as dubious. These views include a high regard for the antiquity and independence of some of the extracanonical Gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Egerton Papyrus, and the much disputed “Secret” Gospel of Mark, as well as the tendency to situate Jesus at the very margins of Jewish Palestine and the Jewish faith.”<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps the most contested of these is the Seminar’s use of the Gospel of Thomas. A large objection voiced against the Seminar’s first work, *The Five Gospels*, was for its placing of the Gospel of Thomas on par with the four canonical Gospels.<sup>36</sup> In a book review of *The Five Gospels*, reviewer John Meier notes that it “implicitly raises the Gospel of Thomas not only to the canon but to the ‘canon within the canon.’”<sup>37</sup> Meier

---

<sup>33</sup> Wright, "Five Gospels but No Gospel," p. 129.

<sup>34</sup> Craig T. Evans, "Book Review of 'Jesus Seminar and Its Critics'." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 55, no. 1 January (2001): p. 86.

<sup>35</sup> Evans, "Book Review of 'Jesus Seminar and Its Critics,'" p. 86.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Walter Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993. Reprint, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> John P. Meier, "'The Five Gospels, the Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus,' Book Review by John P. Meier." *Bible Review* X, no. 3 June (1994): p. 15.

contends that this is problematic because “a large group of scholars would not accept” this claim.<sup>38</sup>

Seminar critics such as Howard Kee, Birger Pearson, Evans, Hays, Witherington, and Jenkins agree. They question the Seminar’s privileging of the Gospel of Thomas as a reliable source due to its lack of adequate historical support. Jenkins points out that Seminar members Stevan Davies and Stephen Patterson argue that Thomas is a source independent of the canonical Gospels and possibly older than them.”<sup>39</sup> According to the Jesus Seminar, the Gospel of Thomas represents the oldest strand of the Jesus tradition. They compare its importance to the hypothetical source “Q,” which has played an important role in critical studies of the New Testament.<sup>40</sup> Most biblical scholars argue to the contrary that the Gospel of Thomas, which only exists in Coptic translation, is a second century document that builds from some of the same sources as the synoptic Gospels.<sup>41</sup> Despite this fact, the Seminar’s Polebridge Press continues to publish books like Patterson’s *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* that build from the fundamental assumption that the Gospel of Thomas is an independent, earlier source.<sup>42</sup>

Criticism levied at the Seminar’s privileging of the Gospel of Thomas is often bitter. In an interview of Evans, by Kevin Miller, Evans remarked, “...their [the Jesus

---

<sup>38</sup> Meier, "The Five Gospels," p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, p. 62.

<sup>40</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Edited by David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Reference Library*. New York: Doubleday, 1997, pp. 116-122. The hypothetical “Q” source, to which we have no direct access, is posited by many biblical scholars as a source common to the writers of Matthew and Luke. It helps to explain agreements between Matthew and Luke in material not found in Mark.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 120; Christopher Mark Tuckett, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 67 (1991): pp. 346-60.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*. Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1993.

Seminar] infatuation with the Gospel of Thomas and other apocryphal gospels is just laughable. In Europe they are just laughed to scorn. It's looked upon as a silly American phenomenon."<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile the Jesus Seminar is faulted for placing less importance on material from the Gospel of Mark and the rest of the synoptic gospels as well as material from Palestinian manuscripts preceding and overlapping the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E., such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the opinion of most biblical scholars, the Marcan material represents the earliest written gospel; most scholarly estimates place the writing of it in the period around 70C.E.<sup>44</sup>

Much of the Seminar's reliance on texts questioned by mainstream scholars stems from their almost sole reliance on the criterion of dissimilarity. According to this presupposition, which is also important to the overall guild of New Testament scholars, one can presume a saying is authentic Jesus if it differs from the earlier Jewish tradition and that of the later church. Similarly, sayings that might embarrass the church tend to be authentic in this view. While the criterion of dissimilarity is a common tool in New Testament studies, the Jesus Seminar fails to temper it with other criteria and evidence resulting in a skewed analysis of the sayings of Jesus. Following the teachings of Pauline scholar Nils Dahl, Hays holds that scholars may use this criterion to identify "a critically assured minimum" of sayings, but that such use must be "supplemented by other criteria and evidence." Hays questions the wisdom of the Jesus Seminar's over-reliance on the criterion of dissimilarity. As Hays reasons: "The Jesus who emerges from this procedure is necessarily a free-floating iconoclast, artificially isolated from his people and their

---

<sup>43</sup> Miller, "The War of the Scrolls," p. 45.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 158-164.

Scripture, and artificially isolated from the movement that he founded.”<sup>45</sup> Jenkins adds that another difficulty with this approach is that this Jesus “says little that indicates distinctively Jewish roots, but is rather a generic Mediterranean Wisdom teacher. This has the effect of making him sound much more like the redeemer beloved of the Gnostics, for whom the Old Testament tradition was anathema, literally diabolical.”<sup>46</sup> Evans agrees, noting, “the sensationalizing of the Jesus Seminar and others who want to drag Jesus into a different environment and say he was only a Cynic philosopher” opposes “responsible exegesis that interprets scripture in the Jewish context.”<sup>47</sup>

#### Criticism of the Conclusions of the Jesus Seminar

Opponents of the Jesus Seminar argue their flawed membership, methodology, and selection of primary texts contributes to several false conclusions about the nature of Jesus. The Jesus created by the Seminar, Witherington says, is a man of “laconic wit given to exaggeration, humor, and paradox, he seems a much better candidate for a late-night visit with David Letterman or Jay Leno, or for an appearance in “Stand up Spotlight.”<sup>48</sup> A major problem for Seminar critics is that the methodology leads to the conclusion that Jesus is a non-eschatological figure. This conclusion stems from the privileging of the Gospel of Thomas. Critics argue such favoring skews the conclusions and leads to a “Gnostic portrayal of Jesus.”<sup>49</sup> “The real problem,” Witherington contends, “is that the Jesus Seminar has forced Thomas into the canon as the 5<sup>th</sup> Gospel

---

<sup>45</sup> Hays, "Book Review of the Five Gospels," p. 46.

<sup>46</sup> Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>47</sup> Miller, "The War of the Scrolls," p. 45.

<sup>48</sup> Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest*, p. 57.

<sup>49</sup> Miller, "The War of the Scrolls."

without giving good reasons for doing so . . . . Thomas comes at the material much later, and he comes with a specific Gnostic agenda.” The Gnostic character of Thomas results in a portrait of Jesus that removes the eschatology nature stressed by the canonical Gospels.<sup>50</sup> This contention conflicts with most contemporary understandings of the New Testament, but the Seminar insists that Jesus did not refer to the Kingdom of God as a future reality. Nor did Jesus speak of himself, or any figure coming in final judgment. Hays criticizes the Seminar for dropping the eschatological language from the sayings Gospels, Q and Thomas, because it conflicts with an understanding of the kingdom as present and appears too bombastic. According to members of the Seminar, Jesus never made claims about his divine authority and never suggested that he might be the Messiah, the anointed one of Israel. Hultgren finds this problematic as it rejects a “major pillar of contemporary scholarship;” moreover, as a Christian it is troubling to him as “the theology and proclamation of the church” cannot rest on “the shifting sands of historical research.”<sup>51</sup>

An additional conclusion by the Seminar that frequently draws criticism centers on the translation of the Seminar’s “Scholars Version” of the four canonical Gospels and Thomas. Meier contends that, at times, it “is too paraphrastic” and “inaccurate” as well as “too awkward and lacking in rhythm.”<sup>52</sup> As an example, Meier points to the Seminar’s rendering of Jesus’ inaugural proclamation in Mark 1:15. In the Scholars Version it reads, “God’s imperial rule is closing in,” which prompts Meier to remark, “Unless my ears

---

<sup>50</sup> Meier, "The Five Gospels," p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Hultgren, "The Jesus Seminar and the Third Quest," p. 269-70.

<sup>52</sup> Meier, "The Five Gospels," p. 15.

fail me, this is not readable contemporary English. It may sound like an awkward translation, but it is not even an exact translation of the Greek, which reads, 'The kingdom has drawn near.'<sup>53</sup> Wright also questions the linguistic merit of the Scholars Version. Their attempt to represent the Gospels in colloquial American prompts Wright to conclude, "Now it is our turn to be slapped in the face." To illustrate his point he cites their interpretation of Matthew 22:12, which reads: "The king came in to see the guests for himself and noticed this man not properly attired. And he says to him, 'Look pal, how'd you get in here without dressing for the occasion?'" Wright ponders, while not objecting to colloquial translations, why the Seminar's rendition is not named the "People's Version."<sup>54</sup> Perhaps, implicit in Wright's thought is the notion that the so labeled, "Scholars Version," reads more like a script for a B-movie western than a witty comedy of manners.

### Conclusion

As I have shown, academic opponents of the Jesus Seminar have responded to their project with a wide range of attacks. Critics point to questionable motivations on the part of Seminar members. Perhaps, they argue, Seminar members have promoted their activities as part of a cynical effort to gain academic prestige and monetary enticements. The Seminar's public efforts to remake the faith have elicited similar numerous complaints from Bible scholars and theologians. Many construe the writings of the Seminar as a dangerous assault on the faith handed over to the church—an attractively packaged alternative that will weaken the church's historic faith. Scholars point out that

---

<sup>53</sup> Meier, "The Five Gospels," p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> Wright, "Five Gospels but No Gospel," p. 117.

the recommendations made by the Jesus Seminar stem from work that is itself suspect. The Jesus Seminar engages in dubious scholarship, these scholars argue, and, as a result, it produces conclusions laypeople should not trust. These criticisms present a challenge to the Jesus Seminar and show the development of a harsh public dialogue.

With such an eviscerating attack from respected scholars in the field, one might wonder why this is to be taken seriously at all. That is, is there really a “debate” when the Jesus Seminar is so thoroughly marginalized as little more than a sensational minority voice within the community of New Testament scholars? The answer is complex. Despite dismissal from those “in the know,” the Jesus Seminar continues to claim more adherents and profit more commercially. Critics of the Seminar continue to respond strongly suggesting a fear of the movement and its potential populist appeal. Their orthodoxy is threatened by “scholars” who refuse to be silenced by the scholastic community, but prefer instead to give voice to their scholarship in the unrefereed journal of populist opinion.

The next chapter outlines the Burkeian cluster-agon methodology this dissertation will use to examine the debate outlined in the previous two chapters. This method offers a means to explore the perspectives of the competing rhetors, thereby opening up new terrain to explore for potential commonalities in order to develop a basis for community dialogue.

## CHAPTER 4

### A BURKEIAN METHOD FOR STUDYING THE RHETORIC OF THE JESUS SEMINAR AND ITS OPPONENTS

Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is “meaning,” there is persuasion – Kenneth Burke<sup>1</sup>

The search for a methodology for this project led to the works of social reformer and critic Kenneth Burke. For a study of the rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar and its critics, Burke’s cluster agon analysis proves relevant and insightful. In this chapter, I will first provide an overview of Burke’s ideas about rhetoric and define key terms to lay the foundation for a Burkeian cluster-agon analysis of the rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar and its critics. Then I will offer a justification for the use of a Burkeian methodology. Next, I will carefully explain the particulars of the application of the method. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of the method.

#### Kenneth Burke’s Rhetorical Theory: Key Terms Defined

Despite failing to develop a systematic rhetorical theory, literary critic Kenneth Burke has made significant contributions to the field of rhetorical studies. A prolific writer on language use for over fifty years, Burke’s focus has been to expand the scope of rhetorical analysis and to move society toward a better life. Communication is at the center of Burke’s rhetorical theory. Ever interested in understanding the sociopolitical impact of words, Burke places symbols at the center of the human experience. With words, humans are capable of naming and evaluating the world in ways that are significantly more complex than without the use of words. For Burke, many problems arise out of the use of language, as it is never exact as words are qualitatively different

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950, p. 172.

from things in nature. Burke contends that humans “are not moved by the reality of a cause but by our interpretation of it...”<sup>2</sup> This interpreting is problematic because language is selective because it is based on the individual who is using it and because it is imprecise due to its connotative nature. For example, the emotional overtone embedded in a person’s language suggests how a listener should act. Because we communicate through language, reality is inevitably distorted. Still, Burke holds we can understand human motivation through an examination of language. By uncovering a rhetor’s orientation Burke hopes to discover better ways to gain agreement between persons and groups with profound differences. Burke’s rhetorical theory contains his thoughts about the nature of humans, about the human being’s connection to rhetoric, and about the role rhetoric plays in human affairs.

Although Burke contends that communication is the key to leading happy lives, he recognizes the obstacles our use of language imposes upon interpretation and relationships. For Burke, a human is a “symbol-using, symbol making, and symbol-misusing animal” that “orders his world and himself according to a world-view and a self-view, whatever their origins, that are uniquely his own.”<sup>3</sup> The use of symbols, including words, has the result of separating humans from their natural condition.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, once humans acquire language it is impossible to perceive reality without having our terms affect our observations. Burke contends that language is a key instrument of persuasion that has the effect of limiting our worldview.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 2nd, rev. ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 8-10.

<sup>4</sup> Burke, *Language*, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Burke, *Language*, p. 16.

Persuasion, for Burke, includes non-deliberate efforts to alter behavior. Burke explains his rhetoric as thus: “I would reduce it to this: The key term for the old rhetoric was ‘persuasion’ and its stress was upon deliberate design. The key term for the ‘new’ rhetoric would be ‘identification,’ which can include a partially ‘unconscious’ factor in its appeal.”<sup>6</sup> Hence, all of human behavior is included in his scope of rhetoric. All that is symbolic and all that seeks unity and/or cooperation may be studied as rhetoric. This includes oral and written communication, visual images, and so forth. Burke contends that, “. . . we could sum up the proposition that, in all such partly verbal, partly nonverbal kinds of rhetorical devices, the nonverbal element persuades by reason of its symbolic character . . .”<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, a Burkeian rhetoric includes all that is symbolic and all that is created to elicit a response of some sort.

According to Burke, our use of symbols generates “terministic screens” that direct our perspectives of reality. Such terministic screens function to separate us from reality by directing our focus to one thing rather than to another.<sup>8</sup> Terministic screens emerge as we name and structure our environment. These screens act to let through certain perceptions while working to filter out others. Each perspective constitutes a unique view of the world. Developing accurate perspectives is near impossible. Burke warns: “much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms.”<sup>9</sup> Consequently, “any given

---

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Burke, "Rhetoric-Old and New." In *New Rhetorics*, edited by Martin Steinmann Jr. New York: Scribner, 1968, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives*. Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1962, p. 696.

<sup>8</sup> Burke, *Language*, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Burke, *Language*, p. 46.

terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, our perception is always incomplete and must compete with other orientations. Having a complete perspective is impossible. As such, rhetoric functions to define situations and helps to form attitudes. Accordingly, Burke reasons that our “universe would appear to be something like a cheese; it can be sliced in an infinite number of ways – and when one has chosen his own pattern of slicing, he finds that other men’s cuts fall at the wrong places.”<sup>11</sup>

Terministic screens are of two types: screens that either work to pull people together via identification, or screens that make people feel separate via disassociation.<sup>12</sup> Burke contends that by nature, humans are divided. This division gives rise to the motive for rhetoric as rhetoric offers the means by which humans order their communities and unite. Burke writes, “If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity.”<sup>13</sup> Humans spend time devising language-dependent strategies to help them identify with others, to achieve their goals and to gain cooperation from them.<sup>14</sup> Burke fundamentally joins persuasion, rhetoric and meaning.<sup>15</sup> Rhetoric is present in every linguistic action.

---

<sup>10</sup> Burke, *Language*, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Burke, *Language*, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> Burke, *Language*, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> Burke, *A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 546.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950). P. 43.

<sup>15</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*. p. 172.

As a group attempts to put forth its worldview, it employs rhetoric that isolates its view from that of other groups. Like individuals, groups use rhetoric to develop identification and to understand or define the people, ideas and objects that make up its world. Whenever two or more individuals associate, or define his or her place in a community in the same manner agreement occurs. Burke calls this agreement consubstantiality. “A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined. A is identified with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are *or* is persuaded to believe so.”<sup>16</sup> People unite when they share the same substance, real or imagined. Burke’s scope of rhetoric includes an ‘unconscious’ element as people seek identification and consubstantiation.<sup>17</sup> According to Burke, any attempt to create identification (recognition and association with others) necessitates division, alienation, and/or indifference.<sup>18</sup> Strategies for identification help humans adapt to a situation. Moreover, and most important to this study, humans use rhetoric to induce others to action through identification and disassociation.

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke further details identification and disassociation. Burke explains “God” and “Devil” terms as symbols that correspond to an individual’s positive or negative attitude toward some act, agent, or item. “God” terms represent that which is not subject to change. They are considered sacred and help promote identification. “Devil” terms represent that which is evil or profane and help create alienation.<sup>19</sup> These god and devil terms form word clusters that become a significant part

---

<sup>16</sup> Burke, *A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives*. p. 544.

<sup>17</sup> Burke, "Rhetoric-Old and New," in *New Rhetorics*. p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> Burke, "Rhetoric-Old and New," in *New Rhetorics*. p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall Press, 1945). P. 355

of a person's orientation or perspective. God and devil terms are used to interpret and describe one's experiences; and, thus they can be used to investigate an individual's perspective of the world. The vocabulary of god and devil terms associated with a particular social movement or group may also be investigated to determine a group's perspective of the world.

Words are important in how they influence orientation. "Our minds, as linguistic products, are composed of concepts . . . which select certain relationships as meaningful. These relationships are *not* realities, they are *interpretations* of reality – hence different frameworks of interpretation will lead to different conclusions as to what reality is."<sup>20</sup> Interpretive psychological responses to the world are affected by the orientations and "the habits of practice common to the social group of the interpreter."<sup>21</sup> In order for humans to move toward a better life orientations or perspectives must be exposed.

To uncover a rhetor's perspective Burke developed several investigative tools aimed to produce useful insights into particular facets of a rhetorical artifact. These tools highlight the effect of symbols on human motivation. In *Attitudes toward History* Burke introduces the concept of cluster analysis as one such technique for uncovering orientations. Burke defines cluster analysis as "noting what subjects cluster about other subjects."<sup>22</sup> For Burke, the context in which a rhetor places words is as important as the choice of words. The combination of words used in association with one another may be full of hidden meaning. It is the duty of the critic to uncover the "symbolic mergers" and

---

<sup>20</sup> Burke, *Permanence*, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Ross Wolin, *The Rhetorical Imagination of Kenneth Burke* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001). P. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937. Reprint, 1984. p. 232.

to determine what the important meanings are and how they are constructed. Basic to the method is the notion that an intrinsic analysis of the rhetorical artifact will reveal the orientation of the rhetor as well as the relationship between the rhetor's main concerns. It is hoped that the critic will be able to reveal mistaken ideas and unhealthy beliefs and then offer a corrective solution to show the way "toward a better life."

Burke's cluster-agon analysis has been summarized as a series of four interpretive steps: (1) cluster analysis: what goes with what? (2) agon analysis: what is opposed to what? (3) analysis of progressive form: from what, through what, to what? And, (4) analysis of transformations: what is changed into something or someone else? The equations the critic discerns are generally unconscious to the rhetor: "And though he be perfectly conscious of the act of writing, conscious of selecting a certain kind of imagery to reinforce a certain kind of mood, etc., he cannot possibly be conscious of the interrelationships among all the equations."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, cluster analysis offers insights that are not known to the rhetor.

Cluster analysis is one means to combat alienation and social conflict, to solve the problems of human collaboration and to guide social change. It is a useful tool in developing alternative perspectives by revealing the orientations held by rhetors.

#### Methodological Justification

Cluster-agon analysis is a fruitful tool for mapping the rival perspectives of the Jesus Seminar and its critics. The analysis will allow for the charting of the semantic and cultural distances of the two groups. This methodology makes the formalist assumption that discourse is heavily patterned, and that once these patterns have been identified the

---

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Second ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941. Reprint, 1967. p. 20.

various perspectives will be exposed. These perspectives will reveal the intellectual and philosophical orientation, hierarchy of values and the beliefs and assumptions by which the Jesus Seminar and its critics each order the world. Additionally, cluster analysis will yield not only conscious assumptions, beliefs and decisions, but unconscious ones as well. It is necessary to uncover the terministic screens of both the Jesus Seminar and its opponents to determine if a third perspective can be created to bridge the differences and bring the two sides together.

#### Application of the Methodology

Burke never offers a “complete schematization of symbolic ingredients.”<sup>24</sup> William Rueckert offers several guidelines for using Burke’s cluster-agon analysis. First, the process begins with the selection of key terms or symbols used in the rhetorical artifact. Terms and symbols are selected based on frequency (the number of times the symbol is used) and intensity (the sense of power or emotion evoked by the symbol). At this point, a “god” term should become apparent. A “god” term, according to Rueckert, is an “expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate.”<sup>25</sup> The god term is surrounded by “good” terms, which lack the power of the god term but still receive high respect. Additionally, the “devil” term, the counterpart of the god term, should become apparent. The second step in the process is the charting of clusters around the identified key terms. During this phase, the critic is looking for verbal combinations and equations. Terms may cluster in a variety of ways. Such groupings may merely appear in close proximity to key terms, may be linked by a conjunction such as “and,” the

---

<sup>24</sup> Burke, *Attitudes toward History*. P. 285.

<sup>25</sup> William H. Rueckert, "A Field Guide to Kenneth Burke-1990." In *Extensions of the Burkeian System*, edited by James W. Chesebro, 16-17. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1993. p. 243.

equation may suggest a cause-and-effect relationship between key terms, or the combination of key terms may be noted for the strength and clarity of its imagery.<sup>26</sup>

The third step involves the examination of clusters to discover patterns in the linkages of terms and to determine the meanings of key terms. Additionally, an agon analysis is conducted during this stage to discover what terms oppose other terms in the rhetoric. Agon analysis suggests what meaning is not a part of the meaning of the key terms. It is important to note if certain key terms emerge in opposition to other key terms. If so, this suggests there is a possible conflict or tension in the rhetor's worldview that needs resolution. During this step, it should be possible to determine the terministic screens of the rhetor from the meanings of the key terms used.

The fourth step in a cluster-agon analysis is the naming of the rhetor's orientation. This is accomplished through an examination of the previously identified patterns. During this phase the critic addresses the question, "Given that these terms have special meanings for the rhetor, what was the motive for producing this particular rhetoric in this specific way likely to have been?"<sup>27</sup> It is necessary for the critic to consider a number of possible perspectives and then to select the one for which the most support can be garnered from the data provided in the rhetorical artifact.

The four steps of the cluster-agon analysis, as described above, will be applied to select rhetorical artifacts of the leading members of the Jesus Seminar and their chief critics. While I am less interested in the truth or falsity of the claims of the Jesus Seminar or its critics, I am interested in the ability of the rhetors to interpret the situation for

---

<sup>26</sup> Rueckert, "A Field Guide to Kenneth Burke." P. 241-243.

<sup>27</sup> Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 1989. p. 369.

others. A cluster-agon analysis will yield the vocabulary of motives found in the rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar and its critics. Furthermore, having mapped the clusters and agons of the rival positions I believe it will be possible to isolate the points of conflict. Then I will seek to construct a third position or homological convergence as a basis for a respectful dialog between the two groups. The new perspective must be able to embrace doubt and uncertainty, focus on interpretation, remain connected to tradition, and incorporate elements from all views of the issue. It is my hope, like Burke's, that by making rhetors aware of their destructive thoughts and practices, we can improve communication and lead happier lives.

#### Limitations of the Methodology

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to examine the works of each member of the Jesus Seminar or of each of its critics. Key works by seminar co-founders Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan have been selected as they represent the guiding voices of the Seminar, as have works by Seminar Fellows Marcus Borg and John Shelby Spong whose works are widely read by the mainstream. Through the analysis of these works, the principle orientations of the Seminar should emerge. Additionally, key works by N.T. Wright and Luke Timothy Johnson, arguably the two leading critics of the Jesus Seminar, will be analyzed to reveal the principle orientations of the Seminar's detractors. By examining each side, the points of conflict will become apparent. It will then be possible to see if the creation of a third perspective, or corrective designed to heal the conflict, is realistic.

An additional limitation is that I will inevitably be forced to choose some clusters and agons for analysis while rejecting others. A selection of representative clusters will

be made using the guidelines suggested by Burke, Rueckert and Sonja K. Foss. Namely, clusters and agons will be chosen based on the frequency of their use, their ability to bring the text to life, and/or by how they shape the discourse of the rhetor. Some clusters and agons might appear frequently, but dully. Others might only appear once or twice but with such intensity that they merit analysis. The challenge will be to avoid superimposing my own meanings on the rhetorical artifacts of the Jesus Seminar and its critics in my search for a bridging perspective.

The next chapter applies the method of criticism outlined above to select rhetorical artifacts of the Jesus Seminar and its critics. First, is an analysis of the works of the key members of the Jesus Seminar, then, an assessment of the works of its' key critics.

## CHAPTER 5

### CLUSTER-AGON ANALYSIS OF THE RHETORIC OF THE JESUS SEMINAR AND ITS CRITICS

This chapter analyzes the key works of the primary proponents and writers of the Jesus Seminar; namely, Seminar founder Robert W. Funk, Seminar co-founder John Dominic Crossan, and prolific Seminar writers Marcus Borg, and Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, as well as the writings of the Seminar's two key opponents; namely, Luke Timothy Johnson and N. Thomas Wright. Each has written extensively as a part of the Jesus Seminar or in opposition to it. The works of the Seminar scholars elicit a strong negative response, particularly, from both mainstream Christianity and fundamentalist groups. Johnson and Wright are the only two critics of the Seminar examined in this chapter. While other critics could have been included the works of Johnson and Wright stand as representative of mainstream Christian response to the Seminar. I have intentionally not selected anti-Seminar works by fundamentalist scholars because their occupational psychoses would make it too difficult to find common ground and it is unlikely that they would be willing to accept a new perspective.

Kenneth Burke's cluster-agon method is applied to determine the selected rhetors' orientations. I undertake this effort to determine if any commonality exists between the two factions to allow for the development of a third, mutually acceptable perspective that can open dialogue and bridge the divide.

To analyze the rhetoric of Seminar members Funk, Crossan, Borg and Spong, I applied Burke's theory of cluster-agon analysis to select works of these authors. The first step was to select their respective key terms, using as criteria intensity and frequency. Following the example of other rhetorical scholars who have employed this methodology,

I did not engage in precise word counting to determine frequency. During careful readings of each selected text, I noted words that appeared consistently throughout a work, a chapter, or on a page. Other words stood out because of the intensity in which they were used. Next, came an examination of each selected term in the context in which it implicitly or explicitly appeared. By noting what each rhetor repeatedly associated with his key terms in various contexts, I was able to formulate equations to help explain the meanings of the key terms for the rhetors and reveal the rhetor's particular orientation. The cluster analysis permitted the discovery of opposition in the principles of the discourse. Agon analysis was used to interpret the results of the cluster analysis to discern how the symbols functioned for the rhetors. Finally, this process was repeated for the principal Seminar opponents, Wright and Johnson.

The cluster-agon analysis of Funk, Crossan, Borg and Spong reveals four god terms that supercede all others and reveal the Seminar's orientation (as evidenced in Figure 1 on page 75). First, is the term scholar. The Seminar rhetors are concerned with presenting themselves as "the scholars" who are on a "truth" quest for the historical Jesus. As scholars Seminar members see themselves as trustworthy conveyors of the truth. This permeates the rhetoric of each and helps to establish Burkeian identification. The second god term, "historical Jesus" is connected to the first god term. By representing themselves as "the scholars" they take authority for the ultimate knowledge of the historical Jesus. As a result of their historical studies they have determined that a "new Christianity" is warranted. This new Christianity moves toward an egalitarian community and away from a traditional, theological hierarchy. These, "new Christianity"

and “egalitarian,” become the final two god terms that reveal their orientation toward historical Jesus research.

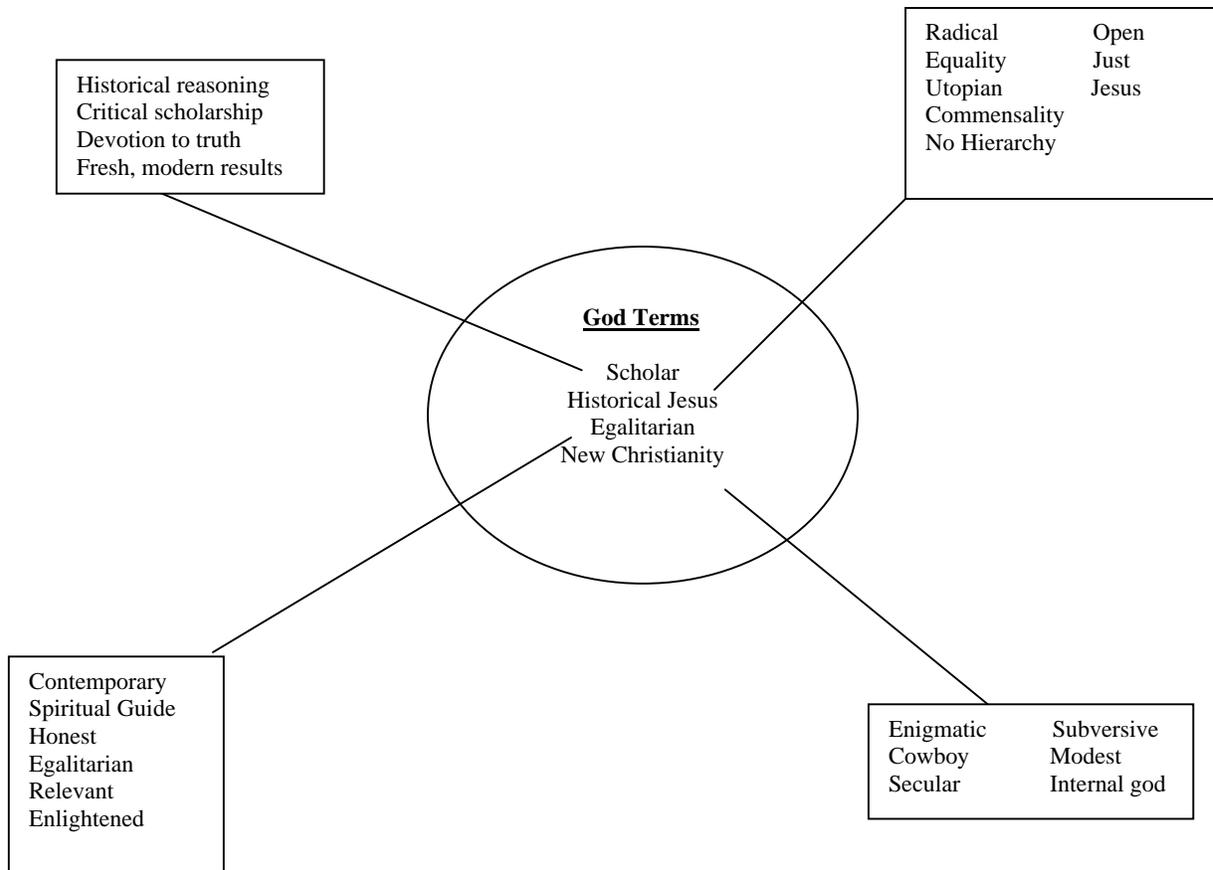


Figure 1 – Associational Clusters for God Terms of the Jesus Seminar

The cluster-agon analysis of their rhetoric further reveals these rhetors share key devil terms that are in opposition to their god terms. These terms (see Figure 2 on page 76) are “church,” theological,” “traditional,” and those who do not concur with the Seminar scholars or “critic(s).” These terms are used to disassociate Seminar scholars from others. The cluster-agon analysis suggests that the Seminar rhetors are each motivated to replace the traditional church view of Jesus as Christ with a new understanding of Jesus that is relevant, fresh, and informed by New Testament historical

scholarship. They seek to replace the old understanding of Jesus with their interpretation of “Jesus as sage”, “revealer of the ground of being,” as “cynic philosopher,” and/or as “spirit-person.” Neither Funk, Crossan, Borg or Spong are willing to discard Christianity. Their orientation towards Christianity is that it can still be significant for the contemporary world if significant truths about the historical Jesus are made known.

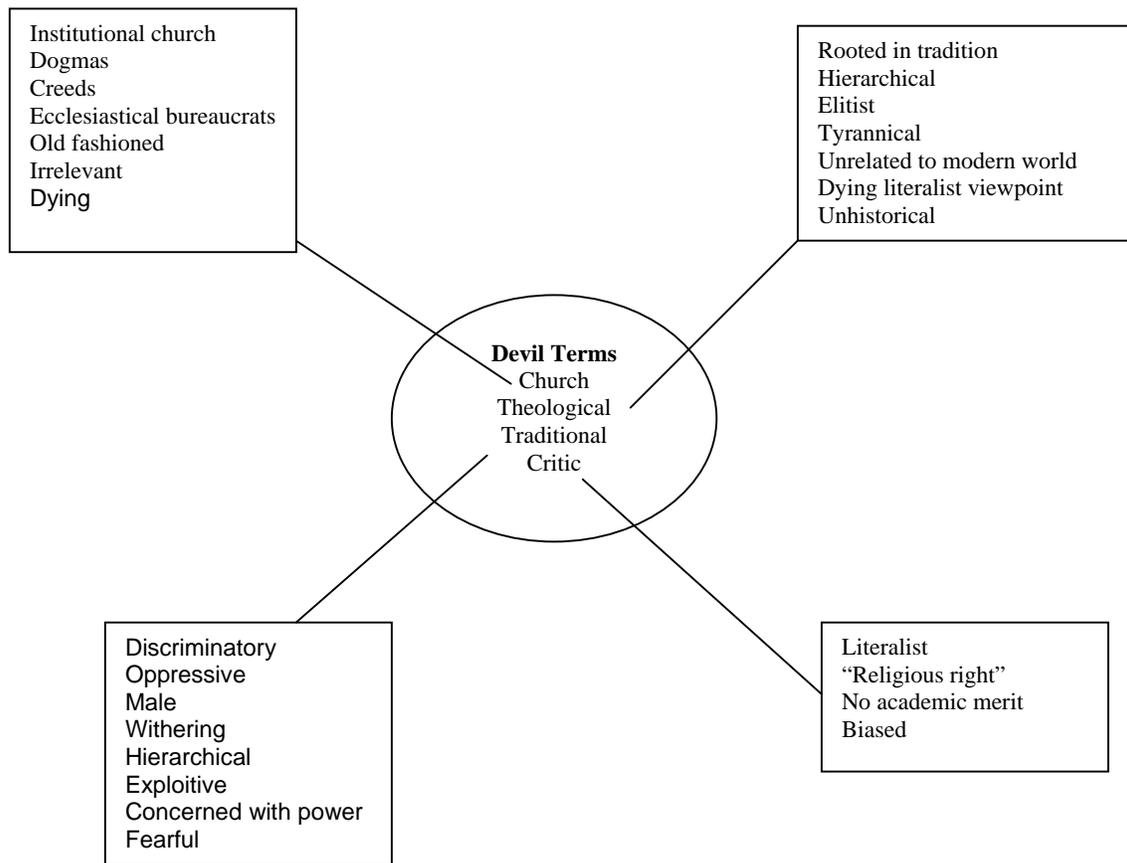


Figure 2 – Associational Clusters for Devil Terms of the Jesus Seminar

By contrast the cluster-agon analysis of the critics of the Seminar, Johnson and Wright, reveal three different god terms in response to the Seminar’s rhetoric (see Figure

3). These critics’ rhetoric privileges “theologians” as scholars, “faith,” and an understanding of “Jesus as Christ” informed by tradition. These rhetors build identification with Christians who are interested in historical research and hold to the divinity of Jesus. While Johnson and Wright are willing to accept, and even encourage, historical examination into the life of Jesus, they reject that such inquiry should occur free of the faith community. They are hostile to the Seminar’s desire to reinvent Christianity in a radical fashion. Moreover, they do not accept the Seminar’s claim to original scholarship. As such, their principle devil term is “Jesus Seminar Scholar” (see Figure 4 on page 78). The associational clusters surrounding this term are employed to disassociate the claims of the Seminar from meaningful historical inquiry.

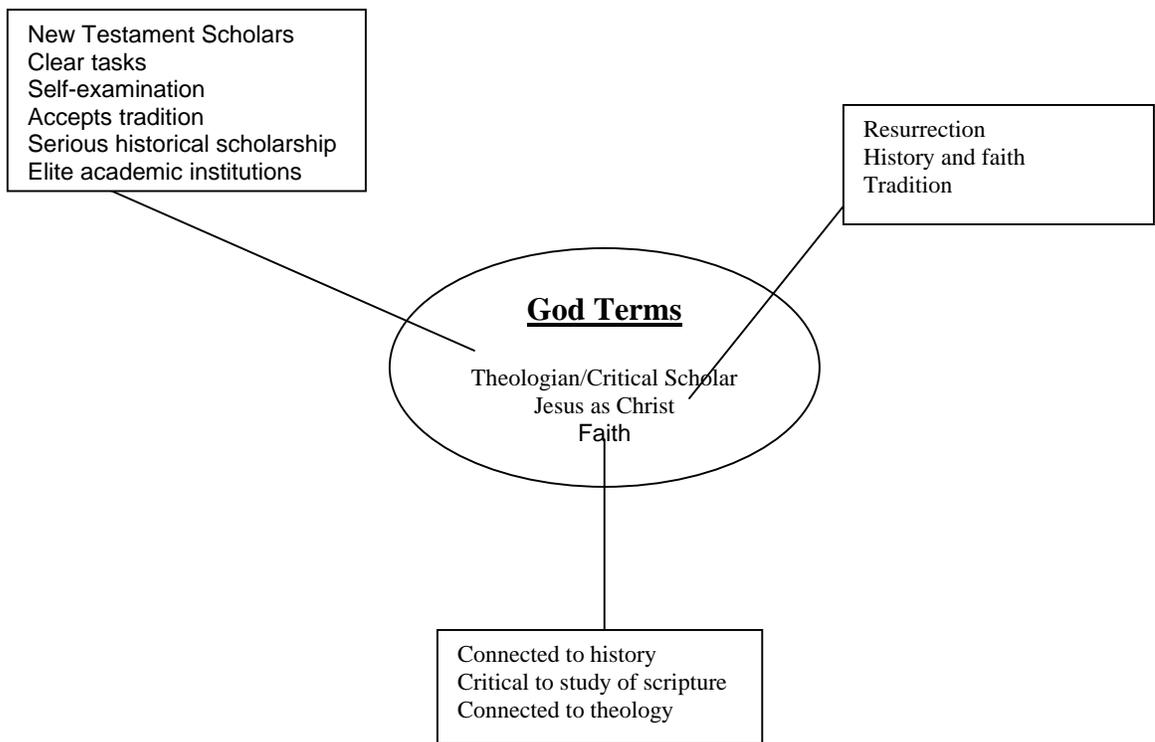


Figure 3 – Associational Clusters for God Terms of the Critics of the Jesus Seminar

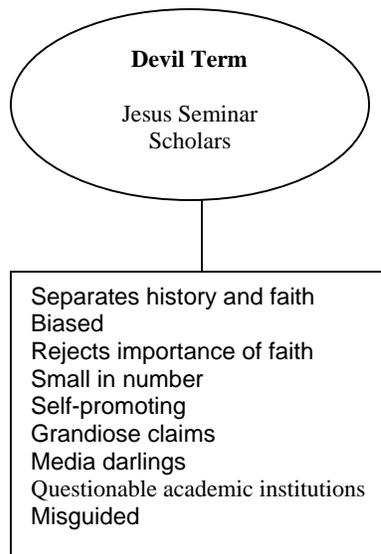


Figure 4 – Associational Clusters for Devil Terms of the Critics of the Jesus Seminar

Jesus Seminar Rhetor: Robert W. Funk

As Jesus Seminar founder, Funk is arguably the voice of the movement. He is largely responsible for the Seminar’s drive to make public their findings. In one paragraph from the *Five Gospels*, Funk referred to himself the prime mover of the enterprise. Of course, this remark self-consciously and sarcastically places him in the role of God in the classic Aquinean proofs for the existence of God. Later in the paragraph, his wife, Char, is said to have a prevenient influence on the final manuscript, sparing it from typos and other errors. Although this archaic English word means “prevent,” it is seldom, if ever, seen outside of the theological world, where it refers to a variety of grace bestowed by God. Perhaps Funk is playing with theological language to see if he can get a rise out of his opponents. At the same time, it is apparent that Funk does not hesitate to apply God language to himself. Since establishing the Seminar, Funk’s writings include many prefaces, chapters, as well as books. Here a cluster-agon analysis is conducted on the prefaces and introductions to the Jesus Seminar’s *Five Gospels* and *The Complete*

*Gospels* and to Funk's *Honest to Jesus*. Although Funk is not independently responsible for the prefaces and introductions to the first two works, he is the primary author and therefore it is herein discussed. Two key god terms emerged in Funk's writings, identified based on their frequency and intensity: "scholar" and "Jesus as Sage," and two key devil terms "church" and "theological." Several good and bad terms clustered around these terms suggesting the meaning of these words for Funk.

### "Scholar"

In reading Funk's works, a tension to his rhetoric becomes apparent. The works are shot through with polemical terminology and cast in terms of a fascinating struggle between good and bad. To borrow Burke's terminology, a series of god and devil terms emerge. "Scholar" is Funk's primary god term when referring to the work of the Jesus Seminar. It appears frequently whenever Funk is discussing the Seminar. The word stands as his main form of self-identification, and it represents the most important standard for action in the religious realm.

How does this god term operate? In the preface to the *Five Gospels*, Funk writes what may be the most revealing sentence about this term. "The Scholars Version," he writes, "is authorized by scholars."<sup>1</sup> At first glance, this statement appears to be nothing more than a bizarre and relatively sad tautology. While this may be true, the redundant use of the word scholar here, in a short paragraph with a bold-faced header that also uses the word, is a clear indication of the frequency of the term in his writing and a sign of the intensity of the word to his mind. Another peculiar instance of redundancy comes in a

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Walter Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993; reprint, 1997), xviii.

paragraph of Funk's preface to the *Complete Gospels*.<sup>2</sup> In a single paragraph, Funk uses the word scholars, or the abbreviation SV (Scholars Version), four times. Of course, the mere use of the name "Scholars Version" for the Jesus Seminar's translation shows the significance and value of the word scholar to Funk and his compatriots.

Another reason to view scholar as a god term is that Funk resolutely applies it to himself and to his fellow participants in the Jesus Seminar building identification. Funk's identity comes from being a scholar. In fact, in *Honest to Jesus*, Funk writes that he became a scholar "in self-defense."<sup>3</sup> Of course, Funk is not suggesting that he tried to preserve his life through scholarship. Rather, Funk contends that his relentless pursuit of the truth meant that he had to become a scholar. In the local church ministry, or other careers, he had found, it was impossible to commit oneself wholeheartedly to a quest for knowledge. Although disappointed by the academy, the life of the scholar offered greater possibilities to him as a scholar does important and weighty things.<sup>4</sup> The dedication to the *Five Gospels* alludes to the significance of scholars to Funk. Funk dedicates the book to Galileo Galilei, Thomas Jefferson, and David Friedrich Strauss. He never shies away from placing himself and the scholars of the Jesus Seminar in august company. Funk compares his scholarly efforts, at least indirectly, to those of some pretty heavy-hitters in human history as he discusses the "seven pillars of scholarly wisdom" in the introduction.

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, rev. and exp. ed. (Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1994), xi.

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 5.

Like Galileo, Jefferson and Strauss, Funk sees the scholars of the Jesus Seminar as working against oppression and injustice in the push for liberty and freedom.<sup>5</sup>

The status of the term scholar in Funk’s rhetoric becomes increasingly apparent through an examination of the good terms that are associated with scholar. These can be broken into three connected categories: (1) terms concerning scholars and methodology; (2) terms concerning scholars and truth; and, (3) terms concerning scholars and fresh results.

First, for Funk, a major group of terms that formed around the term scholar concerned methodology. Scholars are those who employ “historical reasoning” and engage in “critical scholarship.”<sup>6</sup> In *Honest to Jesus*, Funk describes the Jesus Seminar in particular and how it conforms to scholarly codes of conduct. The goal of the organization is “historical truth at all costs.”<sup>7</sup> “Method and goal set the terms for participation.”<sup>8</sup> Scholars are viewed as independent of the church. Funk contends that scholars display “competence rather than theological commitment, rigor and candor rather than posturing.”<sup>9</sup> While candor can be associated with a minister, as Funk attributes to his pastor in high school, it is the virtue of the true scholar.<sup>10</sup> Funk argues that *critical* scholars “make empirical, factual evidence—evidence open to confirmation

---

<sup>5</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary*, 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 4-5.

by independent, neutral observers—the controlling factor in historical judgments.”<sup>11</sup>

Throughout, Funk emphasizes that critical scholarship involves careful study in original languages and peer review to exact the highest standards. As part of the pursuit of critical scholarship and the study of the original languages, the scholars of the Jesus Seminar work to present the clearest and most direct translation of the scriptures possible. Scholars employ historical investigation to engage in “close rigorous examination.”<sup>12</sup>

Another group of good terms that cluster around the god term scholar are those related to truth and honesty. Scholars display a “devotion to truth” and a “resolute willingness to confront the facts, and the unblinking determination to tell all.”<sup>13</sup> We can see these words developed in the *Five Gospels* when Funk states that scholars display “candor” and “honesty” in their work.<sup>14</sup> Funk contends that the enterprise of the Jesus Seminar “demands that we be honest to Jesus.”<sup>15</sup> The quest “demands honesty and candor.”<sup>16</sup>

The third group of terms that cluster around scholar equated scholars with “fresh” or “new” results. The Scholars Version offers a “fresh translation”<sup>17</sup> that uses “the new lens of historical reason.”<sup>18</sup> In the *Complete Gospels*, Funk repeats the claim of a

---

<sup>11</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 310.

<sup>17</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. xiii.

<sup>18</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 2.

“fresh translation” twice within five sentences.<sup>19</sup> Seven pages earlier, Funk prides himself on the vigor of the “fresh, new translations of *all* the gospels.”<sup>20</sup> This work, created by a “team of scholars” develops translations that are “a piece of contemporary literature” and “modern” in style.<sup>21</sup> As we will see, this is in stark contrast to what Funk finds in the more conventional translations. The “new, modern translation . . . is free of ecclesiastical and religious control.”<sup>22</sup> In his elaboration on the nature of the Scholars Version, Funk says that they have achieved a “contemporary translation” by working to capture the oral sound of the texts and avoiding anachronisms unless they directly reflect the culture and time of ancient Israel. Throughout the work, the SV champions contemporary “readability” through the practice of “desacraliz[ing]” terms that were “common” and “secular.”<sup>23</sup> In *Honest to Jesus*, Funk argues that the Seminar is involved in a larger project to create a “wholly secular account of the Christian faith” for the “contemporary, scientifically minded world.” Funk insists that Christianity needs to be rethought if it hopes to continue to open the world to “new realities and truths.” The quest of the scholar is to “formulate a new version of the faith.”<sup>24</sup>

### “Jesus the Sage”

For Funk, the new version of the faith leads to another god term, “Jesus the sage.” This word appears frequently when Funk discusses the findings of the Seminar’s research

---

<sup>19</sup> Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, p. x.

<sup>21</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. xvi.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, p. vii.

<sup>23</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. xvi; Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, p. ix.

<sup>24</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 301.

into the historical Jesus. Around the term “Jesus the sage” cluster several words that operationalize the term for the Jesus Seminar. The ultimate significance to research into the Jesus of history is that it yields an “enigmatic sage.”<sup>25</sup> Jesus the sage speaks in short, pithy parables and aphorisms that hint at the ultimate nature of the truth.<sup>26</sup> Jesus was, according to Funk, a “traveling sage who traded in wisdom....”<sup>27</sup> Funk likens Jesus the sage to “the cowboy hero of the American West exemplified by Gary Cooper “ as Jesus “the sage of the ancient Near East was laconic, slow to speech, a person of few words.. . .” who “never provokes encounters.”<sup>28</sup> Like most sages, he was “self-effacing, modest, unostentatious.”<sup>29</sup> Through his parables and aphorisms, Jesus pointed to a truth that went against the existing social and religious grain of the society. Jesus, Funk contends, is a “subversive sage.”<sup>30</sup> Jesus used images from the ordinary speech of the people to frustrate expected outcomes. As an example of the power of Jesus the subversive sage Funk argues that stories like the Good Samaritan are unexpected as one would never expect the unclean foreigner to be the person who would offer love and aid to the injured traveler. Yet that is exactly what Jesus the sage offers.<sup>31</sup> Jesus, according to Funk, is also a “secular sage.” It is the secular sage’s parables that “obliterate the boundaries separating

---

<sup>25</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 302.

<sup>31</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 30-31.

the sacred from the secular.”<sup>32</sup> The secular sage is “relevant to our society, to our time.”<sup>33</sup> In *Honest to Jesus*, Funk says that orthodox views of Jesus tend to lose this “humble Galilean sage.”<sup>34</sup> With this sage as guide, Funk says, the “movement will be subject to continuing reformations born of repeated quests for the historical Jesus.”<sup>35</sup>

For Funk, the view of Jesus the sage was lost due to efforts to turn the anti-religious Jesus into an object of worship. Jesus’ followers substituted worship of Jesus for the passionate commitment Jesus had for “God’s domain” or “God’s imperial rule.”<sup>36</sup> Rather than seeking this kingdom on earth, they divinized the pointer who encouraged them to find God. “To call for faith in Jesus,” Funk says, “is to substitute the agent for the reality, the proclaimer for the proclaimed.”<sup>37</sup> Instead of following the directions of an enigmatic “sage” pointing to a powerful reality, the first disciples created an “iconic” God who served as an “external savior.” In contrast, Funk is searching for an “internal savior”—a sage/hero who leaves home, manages to overcome evil powers, and then returns to his/her society, where he helps others. As an incarnate savior, Jesus submits to the same limitations as all humans. He understands the human predicament and offers a solution to it.<sup>38</sup> Through the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, humans can find profound answers to the problems surrounding them. As we will examine next, these notions for

---

<sup>32</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 302.

<sup>33</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 302.

<sup>34</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 306.

<sup>35</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 306.

<sup>36</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 304.

<sup>37</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 305.

<sup>38</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 308.

Funk stand in sharp contrast to the suggestions of creedal Christianity, which are filled with escapist foolishness and substitute moralism for deep spiritual connection.

### “Church”

The church plays the role of devil in Funk’s rhetoric. Several terms negatively equate with “church” for Funk and it is evident that he wants to disassociate the Seminar from the church. Funk despises the “institutional church” and its “dogmas” and “creeds.” When Funk describes the church it is always with great intensity. The church, he finds, is filled with “ecclesiastical bureaucrats” who “resist real theological education.”<sup>39</sup> One can see early in the *Five Gospels*, that these terms hold a special role in shaping Funk’s orientation. He sees himself as waging war against all of the forces arrayed against the pursuit of truth. Funk argues the church “smother[s]” the “historical Jesus” and “displace[s]” him with “the Christ.”<sup>40</sup> Funk faults the church for alienating members who “once thought they were instructed in the truth, only to discover that . . . the church had misled them.”<sup>41</sup> Funk complains that the church has had a “stranglehold over learning” that has since been defeated.<sup>42</sup> He opposes his pursuit of the truth to the “creed” and “dogma” of the church, which has “repressed” the search for knowledge and is no longer viable. To say the creeds is to engage in a “cover-up of the real Jesus.”<sup>43</sup> In *The Five Gospels* Funk refers to the “Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages.” According to Funk, this Christ can no longer reign in heavens laid

---

<sup>39</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 10.

bare by Galileo's telescope.<sup>44</sup> The church's "Christ of creed and dogma" can no longer "command assent" as the creeds are no more than "unexamined narrative frames" supporting Christian mythology.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, Funk is "distressed by those who are enslaved by a Christ imposed on them" by the church.<sup>46</sup> It is Funk's desire to "abandon the cloistered precincts of the church . . . where nothing real" is on the agenda.<sup>47</sup> His ultimate "quest is to set Jesus free . . . to liberate Jesus from the scriptural and creedal and experiential prisons" in which he has been "incarcerated."<sup>48</sup>

The church and its servants foster "old-fashioned" translations of the scripture. These writings reveal nothing more than the isolated ramblings of an increasingly "irrelevant institution" and stand in direct tension with the new, modern translations offered by the scholars of the Jesus Seminar. The church's "institutional" and "ecclesiastical" interpretations build an "iconic" view of a Jesus who is an "external redeemer."<sup>49</sup> "Creeds are structured around [this] myth." As a result, they encourage "escapist" forms of religion that perpetuate the status quo and deny the truth.<sup>50</sup>

According to Funk, the church has erected a "Christian façade of the Christ" that hinders a search for the "Jesus of history." The tension between these two terms is fundamental to Funk, because he believes that the followers of Jesus covered his true

---

<sup>44</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 300.

<sup>49</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 307.

<sup>50</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 308.

nature with mythological additions and other obscuring elements. Funk hopes to chip away at this covering to discover the “real Jesus” beneath.<sup>51</sup> This effect occurred in a couple of different ways. First, the creeds, in Funk’s reading, diminish the importance of Jesus’ earthly life and focus all of their importance on the dying and rising of his thirty-third year. All of the ethical teachings of the Christ and his incarnate existence amount to little. Second, the creeds and dogmas of the church focus on the “risen Lord.” As they displace Jesus of Nazareth, they promote the Christ of faith as a saving force. In sum: “Creedalism is a religion that supersedes Jesus, replaces him, or perhaps displaces him, with a mythology that depends on nothing Jesus said, or did, with the possible exception of his death.”<sup>52</sup> Although theologians and church leaders have struggled to preserve this creedal Christianity by isolating it from historical criticism and searching for ways in which it touches the faith lives and/or existential needs of humans, Funk argues that these efforts have failed. The Christian religion is collapsing. Funk’s perspective disassociates truth-seeking Seminar scholars from the truth-hiding church.

#### “Theological”

A strongly related devil term for Funk is “theological.” For Funk, the term “theological” (while not appearing as frequently as the term church) is associated with the ongoing “sacred” work of the church. Those who read the bible with “prior theological commitments” are being “held captive.”<sup>53</sup> The theological discussion of the church is increasingly “unrelated to the important issues in the world”. It serves the “elitist” needs of an academic crowd. When Funk discusses the translation produced by

---

<sup>51</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 304.

<sup>53</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 5.

traditional, theological teams, he condemns them as irrelevant. They reflect “old fashioned language” that is “Puritanical” and “Victorian,” filled with “euphemisms intended for polite company and liturgical usage.”<sup>54</sup> Funk places great stock in direct and forceful language.<sup>55</sup> The worldview offered by older translations is in direct opposition to the fresh and new approach taken by the scholars of the Jesus Seminar. Funk is pleased that “scholars are emerging from the dark ages of theological tyranny.”<sup>56</sup> Funk contends proponents of creedal orthodoxy have been beaten back into “isolated theological enclaves” where they have maintained a “theological tyranny.”

Because of this concern, we see that another complaint by Funk centers on Biblical scholars and their academic speculations on the Gospels. Funk believes that these scholars perpetuate an “elitist” approach to the discipline that alienates members of the public and prevents the dissemination of their findings to large numbers of people. For Funk and the Jesus Seminar, this elitism results in a basic religious “illiteracy” in this country. Because academic Bible scholars have allowed fundamentalists and other figures to dominate popular discussion of religion, they have permitted countless travesties to continue. According to Funk, the worst consequence has been that they have allowed popular “orthodoxy” to develop an “iconic” view of Jesus as an “external savior.” In this worldview, Jesus swoops down from heaven to offer salvation to people completely incapable of achieving it for themselves. From Funk’s perspective, this classic tale tends to incapacitate people because it pushes them to look for salvation in the

---

<sup>54</sup> Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, p. viii.

<sup>55</sup> For example, instead of saying that Mary had not known man before conceiving Jesus, the Scholars Version bluntly declared that Mary had not had sex. Instead of telling folks to go to Hades, the SV directed them straight to hell.

<sup>56</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 8.

world to come. Funk and members of the Jesus Seminar reject this view of spirituality and they hope to generate a new understanding in keeping with the demands of the age.

Assessment of Funk’s Orientation

In the course of this discussion, Funk places his god and devil terms into sharp tension. By exploring these connections between terms, we can come to understand something of his perspective and his intentions in his work. His god and devil terms and their associational clusters appear in the following table:

Table 1 – Associational Clusters for Funk

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><u>View of scholar revealed in cluster analysis</u><br/> critical<br/> implement historical reason<br/> evidence candor<br/> contemporary, fresh, new<br/> honesty<br/> quest for the truth<br/> pertinent to the secular world</p> | <p><u>Opposite - theological</u><br/> elitist<br/> held captive<br/> tyranny<br/> old-fashioned<br/> cover-up<br/> creed, dogma<br/> unrelated to modern world</p>   |
| <p><u>View of a new Christianity</u><br/> speaks to the contemporary context<br/> Jesus as sage, truth seeker, spiritual guide<br/> honest to Jesus<br/> Jesus as secular sage</p>   | <p><u>Opposite - church</u><br/> puritan, old-fashioned<br/> Jesus as external savior<br/> truth hider, cover-up<br/> escapist, misleading<br/> irrelevant<br/> stranglehold<br/> prison<br/> repressive</p> |

Several of these oppositional tensions deserve to be explored in detail. First, we should look at the tension between scholar and theological thought. As mentioned earlier, scholar serves as the most important god term for Funk. Wherever it appears, it is surrounded by a complex cluster of words that include scholarship, honesty, and candor. One often finds these words contrasted to a cluster surrounding the idea of “ecclesiastical authority.” No one word appears as often as scholar to serve as a devil term, a situation

we will discuss later, but it is clear that ecclesiastical authority produces creed and dogma. These words collide with the honesty and candor of the scholar. They involve repression and double talk. When one sees them, they indicate an inability for truth telling. From Funk's writing, one gathers that the scholar has a freeing influence on those who hear him or her. We can see that this is the most important tension for Funk. He is trying to tell a story that is, on one level, about a heroic stand by scholars to push for truth and explore the outer limits of human knowledge in the religious field. Funk believes that this approach will offer many benefits.

Another interesting element of Funk's use of scholar is that there is no one devil term that serves as an antonym. Instead, a whole complex of terms serves to build an image of draconian control over the pursuit of knowledge. In part, this situation must be a product of Funk's attempts to cast himself and the other members of the Seminar as valiant individuals in quest of the truth. This presentation breaks down, however, when Funk starts to discuss his work in detail. In particular, in the *Five Gospels*, we see that Funk refers to practices of the Jesus Seminar and explains how they relate to the general practices of the discipline. This process suggests there is some group of professional Bible critics who do not belong to the Seminar and, perhaps, who disagree with its findings. In a peculiar passage following this section, Funk makes the statement that eighty-two percent of the words credited to Jesus in the gospels were not spoken by Jesus. He then qualifies the claim with the subordinate clause, "according to the Jesus Seminar." Strangely, Funk then says: "How do scholars account for this pronounced discrepancy?" A few sentences later Funk moves to discuss how "gospel specialists in the Jesus Seminar" explain their understanding of the process. We see in these sentences

some slippage in understanding the nature of the scholar. Perhaps the term is not an absolute god term. Maybe other scholars behave in ways that conflict with the outlook of the Seminar.

The prologue to *Honest to Jesus* makes explicit attacks on other scholars. Funk writes in that piece that one group of readers consists of “other professional scholars, especially other biblical scholars.” Funk says that these readers and some journalists who cover religion respond to the work of the Seminar in a variety of ways. Some, he writes, “read, like any genuine intellectual, to discover another point of view...” However, some, he says, read to breed confrontation. “To the extent that this subgroup does read,” he says, “they do so not so much to learn as to smirk.”<sup>57</sup> In a clear response to his critics, Funk says that these folks write from a “pedestal” of supposed “superior knowledge.”<sup>58</sup> While attacking the Seminar, he says they “wound the truth” and “contribute further to the collapse of credibility where biblical scholars and scholarship are concerned. As trigger-happy gunslingers, they will shoot themselves in the foot without even clearing the holster.”<sup>59</sup> When one reads Funk closely, he does acknowledge that there are critical scholars who disagree with him. This reality interferes with his efforts to speak for a monolithic group of Bible scholars.

Clearly, however, Funk would argue that the Jesus Seminar plays a critical role because of its willingness to be truth tellers. Rather than jeopardizing the pursuit of knowledge, these individuals will push for honest disclosure and attack the dissembling of the church and certain biblical scholars, including critics of the Seminar, who seem far

---

<sup>57</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 13.

<sup>58</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 13.

<sup>59</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 14.

more interested in protecting their own places in the academy than exposing their knowledge to the public. One of Funk's major contentions is that mainstream Bible scholars concur with the broad outlines of the Jesus Seminar's claims but are unwilling to participate in public debate. In part, he credits this to a perverse elitism that refuses to accept work with the public as being of sufficient importance. In larger part it is related to fear of "academic rewards and sanctions."<sup>60</sup> Because of the influence of inquisitors in the academy bible scholars have been given to "niceties, qualifications, and political posturing suitable for academic pretend."<sup>61</sup> Funk believes that these factors account for the false formalism of the "Puritanical" and "Victorian" language found in other translations. He contends that these forces will become less powerful as "traditional Christianity shrivels and becomes paranoid."

#### Jesus Seminar Rhetor: John Dominic Crossan

One of the most prolific writers and outspoken participants of the Jesus Seminar is Co-Chair John Dominic Crossan. He has written twenty books on the historical Jesus in the past 30 years and his writings have often led the way for the public debate over the search for the historical Jesus. Four works published since 1991 are of particular interest to this study. All were written after Crossan joined the Jesus Seminar. These works are: *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant*; *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*; *Who killed Jesus*; and, *Excavating Jesus Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*, written with archaeologist J.L. Reed. Crossan's rhetoric insists that most Christians have a distorted view of Jesus that cannot be substantiated by historical

---

<sup>60</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 300.

evidence. For this reason, he rejects the “dying literalist” view of the Jesus disclosed in the New Testament of the Bible. He claims the historical facts reveal a far different picture of the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. His writings serve as a corrective to past mis-portrayals of Jesus, according to Crossan.

To analyze Crossan’s rhetoric, Burke’s cluster-agon analysis was applied to these works. While Crossan’s god terms immediately stand out, his devil terms prove more difficult to determine. Perhaps this is due to Crossan’s promotion of a dialectical approach. Because he sees a tension between reason and revelation, and history and faith, he rejects rigid dichotomies, and his devil terms are not presented in stark terms. Three key god terms emerged in Crossan’s rhetoric: “history,” “egalitarian,” and “scholar,” and one devil term “prophecy historicized.” Several good and bad terms cluster around these words suggesting their meaning in Crossan’s rhetoric.

#### “History” and “Historical”

The primary god term for Crossan is “history” and its relative “historical.” The term “history” appears frequently throughout his work. The first 38 pages of Crossan’s *Who Killed Jesus?* is devoted to explaining the significance of the term to his work, while the epilogue centers on the connection between history and faith. Crossan’s use of the term is of importance as Crossan sees himself as engaged in “historical investigation” to correct the current understanding of Jesus of Nazareth. Several good terms cluster around this god term that imbue it with meaning. Historical methodology allows Crossan to move past the Christ of faith and to arrive at the “facts” of who Jesus was.<sup>62</sup> The very title of *The Historical Jesus* suggests the significance of the term for Crossan. As one

---

<sup>62</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1994), 160.

looks at the jacket to the book, a bold claim stands out: “The first comprehensive determination of who Jesus was, what he did, what he said.”<sup>63</sup> Clearly, for Crossan, history enables us to arrive at an understanding of Jesus as “accurately and honestly as possible.”<sup>64</sup> However, at one point Crossan does qualify this claim. He contends, that while the historical methodology “may not guarantee truth” it “at least makes dishonesty more difficult.”<sup>65</sup>

Throughout Crossan’s rhetoric, “historical Jesus” and “Jesus of history” are used interchangeably and represent significant efforts on Crossan’s part to validate his effort to move past the Jesus of the church to the truth of the historical Jesus. As part of this effort, Crossan wants to present a coherent and persuasive picture of Jesus. In the prologue to *The Historical Jesus*, he states: “I knew, therefore, before starting this book that it could not be another set of conclusions jostling for place among the numerous scholarly images of the historical Jesus currently available. Such could, no matter how good it was, but add to the impression of acute scholarly subjectivity in historical Jesus research.”<sup>66</sup> Crossan’s views his work, therefore, as presenting a clear, objective alternative. According to Crossan, his historical research reveals that “the historical Jesus was a peasant Jewish Cynic.”<sup>67</sup> In fact, Crossan looks to historical artifacts to support this claim

---

<sup>63</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1991).

<sup>64</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. xiv.

<sup>65</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. xiii.

<sup>66</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, prologue.

<sup>67</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 421; Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 198.

and reveal the “heart of Jesus’ original vision.”<sup>68</sup> On the cover of *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, is an image from a relief dating to the first years of the fourth century C.E. Crossan says he selected this historical image because it serves as a summary to the work. The relief illustrates Jesus holding a scroll in his left hand and wearing the pallium of Greek wisdom. Crossan notes that the scroll marks Jesus as a philosopher, and, more “precisely, a cynic philosopher.”<sup>69</sup> What is interesting is that Crossan’s cover only offers the image of Jesus as philosopher. He does not choose to place the entire relief on the cover. The relief also portrays Jesus as a healer. The left side of the relief is Jesus healing the paralytic, as in Mark 2:1-12 of the New Testament; while the right side of the relief is of Jesus raising the widow’s son, as in Luke 7:11-16.

Crossan makes it quite clear that he separates the life of Jesus from the Christ stories fundamental to the creeds and beliefs of the current Christian churches. He indicates this dichotomy when he states in *The Historical Jesus* that this work is “about the historical Jesus and not about the history of earliest Christianity.”<sup>70</sup> Crossan suggests that his historical Jesus may prove helpful to the church. “Is an understanding of the historical Jesus of any permanent relevance to Christianity itself? I propose that at the heart of any Christianity there is always, covertly or overtly, a dialectic between a historically read Jesus and a theologically read Christ.”<sup>71</sup> Historical research is crucial to any understanding of faith for Crossan.

---

<sup>68</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. iv.

<sup>69</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. iv.

<sup>70</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 422.

<sup>71</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 423.

The prologue to *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* suggests the same notion. Crossan maintains that, “This book gives my own reconstruction of the historical Jesus derived from twenty-five years of scholarly research on what actually happened in Galilee and Jerusalem during the early first century of the common era...”<sup>72</sup> Crossan sees his own work as pivotal to understanding Jesus, it does, after all, center on “what actually happened.” Historical research, in Crossan’s rhetoric, is firmly attached to truth telling. He compares the biblical accounts to other historical information of the times and concludes that the Jesus known to Christians is largely a myth that cannot be substantiated by “relevant historical research.” Crossan makes frequent use of the term “history remembered” to describe that part of the gospels that can be substantiated through modern day historical research.<sup>73</sup> A second example summarizes Crossan’s view that historical research can yield a more truthful portrayal of Jesus. “One detail has not changed, however, from one book to the other: my endeavor was to reconstruct the historical Jesus as accurately and honestly as possible.”<sup>74</sup> As we can see, Crossan equates history and historical methodology to accuracy and honesty.

### “Egalitarian”

A second god term to emerge in Crossan’s rhetoric is egalitarian. It is noted for the intensity in which it is used. Crossan holds that Jesus’ “open commensality is the symbol and embodiment of radical egalitarianism.”<sup>75</sup> Such radical egalitarianism thirsts

---

<sup>72</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. IX.

<sup>73</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1995).

<sup>74</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. xiv.

<sup>75</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 71.

“for reciprocity, equality, and justice.”<sup>76</sup> It is the “utopian dream”<sup>77</sup> a “dream of a just and equal world.”<sup>78</sup> It is a “world of radical egalitarianism in which discrimination and hierarchy, exploitation and oppression should no longer exist.”<sup>79</sup> Jesus’ egalitarianism calls for a new kingdom “in which both material and spiritual goods, political and religious resources, economic and transcendental favors are equally available to all . . . .”<sup>80</sup> Jesus’ world is a “combination of free healing and common eating, a religious and economic egalitarianism that negated alike and at once the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religion and Roman power.”<sup>81</sup> Jesus condemned those systems for subordinating the poor. Jesus offers a “fundamental egalitarianism, of human contact without discrimination.”<sup>82</sup> Crossan argues that this understanding of Jesus was lost due to the manner in which history was recorded. Since the past was recorded through the eyes of males and elites, it distorted people of lesser social status. Crossan states that since we currently view history through the eyes of middle class democratic America we must seek again the historical Jesus.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 72.

<sup>77</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, p. 48.

<sup>78</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 74.

<sup>79</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, p. 48.

<sup>80</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, p. 48.

<sup>81</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 198.

<sup>82</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, p. 211.

<sup>83</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, epilogue. This dialogue first appeared in the Christmas 1991 issue of *Christian Century*.

The god term of egalitarianism points to one of Crossan's motives. He desires followers of Jesus to embrace Jesus' radical vision of egalitarianism. This is evident in an interesting dialogue Crossan imagines having with the historical Jesus:

"I've read your book, Dominic, and it's quite good. So now you're ready to live by my vision and join me in my program?"

"I don't think I have the courage, Jesus, but I did describe it quite well, didn't I, and the method was especially good, wasn't it?"

"Thank you, Dominic, for not falsifying the message to suit your own incapacity. That at least is something."

"Is it enough, Jesus?"

"No, Dominic, it is not."<sup>84</sup>

Crossan's use of the terms "vision" and "program" refer to his discussion on Jesus' radical egalitarianism. In this friendly, imagined conversation, Crossan portrays himself as being honest to Jesus' true intent. The very nature of the conversation suggests an informality with Jesus not often associated with a traditional understanding of Jesus as Christ.

### "Scholar"

As for Funk, this is a god term in Crossan's rhetoric; however, it does not appear as frequently in Crossan's work. An assessment of the terms clustered around scholar(s) indicates that Crossan uses this term to create ethos for his methodology, and for himself. It also suggests his identification with the rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar. This is recognizable in the comments selected for the first pages of Crossan's works. On a page titled, "Praise of *Who Killed Jesus?*," Selected quotes offer praise for Crossan's scholarship. Seminar Fellow Marcus Borg labels Crossan "today's premier Jesus scholar"

---

<sup>84</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. xiv.

and notes that his works are “important for both Christians and scholars.”<sup>85</sup> On the same page, Harvard Divinity School Professor Krister Stendahl remarks that Crossan’s “codicil of principled dissent is welcome and important.” Furthermore, Crossan’s work reveals his understanding “of the scholar’s responsibility in the public sphere.”<sup>86</sup> On a page titled, “Praise for *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*,” there is a quote from *Publisher’s Weekly* that claims “We are fortunate to have a writer and a scholar of Crossan’s abilities. . . .”<sup>87</sup> It seems it is important for Crossan to establish his ethos as a scholar, but what does scholar mean to him? This becomes apparent when looking at the good terms that surround scholar in his writings. First, scholars are “critical.”<sup>88</sup> Moreover, as critical scholars, they should follow the example of professional journalists and “never build on anything that has only a single independent attestation.”<sup>89</sup> Here Crossan is seeking approval for his methodology that only accepts as historical fact that which has multiple independent attestations. Second, scholars seek to give an “accurate and impartial account of the historical Jesus as distinct from the confessional Christ.”<sup>90</sup> This is done through historical study that offers an analysis “whose theories and methods, evidence and arguments, results and conclusions are open, in principle and practice, to any human observer, any disciplined investigator, any self-conscious and self-critical student.”<sup>91</sup> In these instances,

---

<sup>85</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* np.

<sup>86</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* np.

<sup>87</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, np.

<sup>88</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. xii.

<sup>89</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. xiii.

<sup>90</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. xi.

<sup>91</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 199.

the term scholar is in opposition to theologians and others who would accept attestation from a single source as well as those who would base faith on the confessional Christ.

### “Prophecy Historicized”

The term, “prophecy historicized,” is a devil term that Crossan uses repeatedly to disassociate the biblical scholars and theologians who hold to traditional views of the passion of Jesus from those who look to facts found through historical study. He claims literalists ignore historical proof. They refuse to see that Jesus did not say or do many of the things attributed to him. Crossan juxtaposes “prophecy historicized” with his god term “history remembered.” This tension suggests that traditionalists have created Jesus’ life to fit the prophecies of the Old Testament and then have incorrectly accepted this as historical fact. Crossan suggests that his opponents have retained the gospels as the literal word of God and have accepted the words and deeds attributed to Jesus as true. This is a mistake as Crossan claims the writers of the gospels took the prophecies of the Old Testament and created events attributed to the life of Jesus that fulfill these prophecies. Crossan contends that his research, in contrast to the literalists’ view, has led to history revisited, which largely discredits the gospels. The Seminar scholars, in their research, have uncovered a different, accurate life of the historical Jesus. Crossan’s god term “history remembered” describes that part of the gospels that can be substantiated through modern day historical research.

In *Who Killed Jesus?*, Crossan establishes a scholarly argument in response to Raymond Brown’s two-volume work, *The Death of the Messiah*. Crossan contrasts their respective views by repeatedly supporting his own view of the current mainstream Christian acceptance of the gospels as “prophecy historicized” and describes Brown’s

work as an erroneous attempt to support the gospel accounts as “history remembered.”<sup>92</sup> Throughout this rhetorical artifact Crossan points to Brown as representative of the “dying literalists” who hold on to a vision of Christ that is the result of gospel stories that were written to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament and that do not bear up under the scrutiny of the “history revisited” of the Seminar scholars.<sup>93</sup> When Crossan discusses traditionalists’ views he argues that they engage in prophecy historicized. This is problematic for Crossan as it is not appropriately critical of the texts. When discussing the commonly held view of the crucifixion he contends that there is a lack of “any detailed historical information about the crucifixion of Jesus.” All of the gospel renderings are “prophecy historicized rather than history recalled.”<sup>94</sup> As such, they cannot be viewed as revealing anything about the truth of who the historical Jesus was.

Also closely associated with history prophesied in Crossan’s rhetoric is the negative term “hope.” In a chapter on first century C.E. Roman and Jewish burial practices after crucifixion Crossan asks, “But was this hope or history?” with regards to Jesus’ friends or relatives being able to bury his body. Did it happen? “Was it hope or history?”<sup>95</sup> Crossan concludes, that the burial stories are “hope and hyperbole expanded into apologetics and polemics. But hope is not always history and neither is hyperbole.”<sup>96</sup> Hope is “totally fictional and unhistorical” for Crossan. It gives rise to

---

<sup>92</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, p. 4.

<sup>93</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, p. 6-12.

<sup>94</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, p. 159.

<sup>95</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, p. 169.

<sup>96</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, p. 188.

“mythology” that is not based on “fact.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, for Crossan, history cannot support those who hold the traditional burial accounts of the gospel narratives as true. Those who hold to these notions hide “behind the screen of creedal interpretation.”<sup>98</sup> This statement makes an implicit criticism of faith as well, since faith is defined as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” in Hebrews 11:1.

#### Assessment of Crossan’s Orientation

Table 2 on the following page represents the associational clusters surrounding the god and devil terms for Crossan. An examination of these clusters and their opposites help to develop an understanding of Crossan’s orientation.

When viewed in this fashion, Crossan’s attacks on literalism become obvious. Although his rhetoric might not be as aggressive as that of Funk, we can see that Crossan embraces a view of the historical Jesus that conflicts with the church’s traditional notions. Crossan hopes that his reconstruction of a “Jewish Peasant cynic” will promote change in the church. As Christians consider the meaning of this Jesus to their faith, they will be more open to his egalitarian, non-hierarchical program. Instead of accepting the voice of authority, Christians will develop their own faith and challenge the existing structure of the world. In this way, they will live out the full meaning of the Jesus movement.

---

<sup>97</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 160.

<sup>98</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. xi.

Table 2 – Associational Clusters for Crossan

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <u>Crossan's orientation toward history revealed in cluster analysis</u><br>reveals heart of Jesus' vision<br>truth, honesty<br>what actually happened<br>accuracy, facts<br>relevant<br>corrective<br>helpful | <u>Opposite – prophecy historicized</u><br><br>dying literalist's view<br>cannot be substantiated<br>lacks historical validity<br>unhistorical, totally fictional<br>cannot bear up under scrutiny<br>hyperbole, mythological<br>hope, not history |
| <u>Crossan's orientation toward egalitarianism revealed in cluster analysis</u><br>radical, no discrimination<br>open, commensality<br>absolute equality<br>no hierarchy<br>just, equal<br>utopian             | <u>Opposite – traditional worldview</u><br><br>discriminating<br>oppression<br>male, elitist<br>hierarchy<br>exploitation<br>distorting  |
| <u>Crossan's orientation toward scholar revealed in cluster analysis</u><br>impartial<br>important<br>responsible to the public<br>accurate<br>critical, self-critical   |  |

Jesus Seminar Rhetor: Marcus J. Borg

Marcus J. Borg is another well-known member of the Jesus Seminar. Like Crossan, he is a prolific writer and a familiar name in the theological community and among many lay Christians. He is an outspoken critic of Christian fundamentalism and strives to move the findings of the Jesus Seminar into mainstream Christianity. Borg is receptive to dialoging with those who do not agree with his viewpoint. This is evidenced in the collaborate efforts between Borg and N. Thomas Wright, one of the outspoken critics of the Seminar. They have joined in the writing of *The Meaning of Jesus-Two*

*Visions* in which each author writes his own chapters. This provides a unique approach to studying the Seminar and its opponents.

Early in the book, Borg says he often feels like a “debunker.” He often has to tell others, “Well, it probably didn’t happen here,” and “Well, it probably didn’t happen at all.” He is content with his role as a disclaimer of the life and times of Jesus as accepted in mainstream Christianity. Even so, he maintains his faith and claims, “I am not among the relatively few scholars who think that *only* that which is historically factual matters.”<sup>99</sup> Three other books by Borg have been studied for this cluster analysis: *Jesus: A New Vision*, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, and, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously, but not Literally*. Through an examination of Borg’s rhetoric in these works, several god and devil terms were chosen. Selected god terms include “wisdom teacher” and “spirit person”, while the devil term “popular image of Jesus” was studied.

#### “Wisdom Teacher”

One of Borg’s primary god terms is Jesus as wisdom teacher or “sage.” He devotes a chapter to this notion in *Jesus: A New Vision*. Several good terms, for Borg, are equated with this designation. First, Borg argues that Jesus’ form of wisdom was “enlightened.”<sup>100</sup> Jesus is a “transformative sage.”<sup>101</sup> He offers a “way of seeing mediated” by “enlightenment wisdom.”<sup>102</sup> Second, Jesus did not engage in “conventional

---

<sup>99</sup> Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1999), 4.

<sup>100</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 69.

<sup>101</sup> Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision. Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 115.

<sup>102</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 70.

wisdom” which merely “elaborates the received conventions” of a group, but, rather, Jesus taught a “subversive and alternative wisdom.”<sup>103</sup> As a wisdom teacher, “Jesus taught the immediacy of access to God apart from convention, tradition, and institution.”<sup>104</sup> Borg likens Jesus to Lao Tzu and Buddha who, like Jesus, “invite hearers into a different way of seeing.”<sup>105</sup> Jesus taught beyond convention.<sup>106</sup> “His wisdom teaching invited a new way of seeing, centering, and living.”<sup>107</sup> Through it Jesus “invited a radical decentering and recentering” that “led to a new way of living.”<sup>108</sup> His wisdom teachings were not mediated by “tradition,” but by “the sacred.”<sup>109</sup> The central value upheld through his teachings was “compassion.” Jesus’ “enlightenment wisdom” generated “a boundary-shattering social vision.”<sup>110</sup> This vision promoted inclusion of all people.<sup>111</sup> Because Jesus called these people into relationship with God, it proved “subversive and alternative,” undercutting the existing systems of thought and the established religious traditions.<sup>112</sup> This is important to people today as his “wisdom

---

<sup>103</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 68; Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 115; Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1994), 30.

<sup>104</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 141.

<sup>105</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 68.

<sup>106</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 115-16.

<sup>107</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 69.

<sup>108</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 69-70.

<sup>109</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 69.

<sup>110</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 70.

<sup>111</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 70.

<sup>112</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 70 & 243; Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 116.

teaching calls us to a life centered not in religious tradition or institution or convention, but in . . . the One in whom we live and move and have our being.”<sup>113</sup>

### “Spirit Person”

Borg describes biblical scholarship and the study of the historical Jesus as largely directed at what Jesus said and did and not at what or who Jesus was. Here Borg departs radically from his fellow Jesus Seminar members. Whereas Funk sees a quest into what the historical Jesus really said and did as paramount to understanding the historical Jesus, Borg does not. Borg’s rhetoric suggests that his interest is in offering a “new vision of Jesus;” a vision that can call one into a contemporary life of discipleship. Borg’s ultimate vision of Jesus differs too from Crossan’s. While Crossan maintains the historical Jesus was a peasant cynic, Borg labels him something else. “What Jesus was, historically speaking was a Spirit-filled person in the charismatic stream of Judaism. This is the key to understanding what he was as a historical figure.”<sup>114</sup> This brings us to Borg’s god term - “spirit person.” It is strongly correlated with the first identified god term, “wisdom teacher.” Often the two terms appear in close proximity in Borg’s works and with great intensity. According to Borg, Jesus’ wisdom teachings grew out of his “relationship to Spirit.”<sup>115</sup> His connection to the Spirit was the “source and energy” for his wisdom teachings.<sup>116</sup> There is, for Borg, a strong link between Jesus the spirit person and the subversive path that he taught.<sup>117</sup> It must be stated that Borg’s use of the term spirit

---

<sup>113</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 243.

<sup>114</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 25.

<sup>115</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 115.

<sup>116</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 51.

person does not equate with the term divinity.<sup>118</sup> For this reason Borg aimed to use a less charged term than “holy man.”<sup>119</sup> So what does Borg associate spirit person to? By examining the good terms that frequently appear in his discussion of spirit person, we can determine what spirit person means. When we look for these words, we note that Spirit person is equated with someone who knows “the sacred,” a “mediator of the sacred,”<sup>120</sup> and one who has “experienced something `real.”<sup>121</sup> The spirit person is one on a “vision quest.”<sup>122</sup> They see reality differently. A spirit person is not unique. Jesus is one of many spirit persons.<sup>123</sup>

As spirit person, Jesus called his followers to “a life grounded in Spirit rather than one grounded in culture.”<sup>124</sup> Jesus served as a conduit for the “wisdom of God to enter” the world.<sup>125</sup> This approach suggests there is more to reality than the modern worldview that sees reality in material terms.<sup>126</sup> This must affect how we see the church, Jesus and God today.<sup>127</sup> Just as important, Borg’s response to Jesus places the emphasis in being in

---

<sup>117</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 116.

<sup>118</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 43.

<sup>119</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 32.

<sup>120</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 31.

<sup>121</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 33.

<sup>122</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 35.

<sup>123</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 37.

<sup>124</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 115.

<sup>125</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 33.

<sup>126</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 33.

<sup>127</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 37.

relationship with the Spirit Jesus knew. Instead of concentrating on belief in Jesus or God, the emphasis is on connection to the divine.<sup>128</sup>

### “Popular Image of Jesus”

An earlier work of Marcus Borg’s that helps define his motives in historical Jesus research is, *Jesus a New Vision*. The Preface to the book begins with, “This book attempts in a scholarly and nondogmatic way to say, ‘This is what the historical Jesus was like, this is what he taught, and this is what his mission was about.’”<sup>129</sup> Borg wants to make a serious and scholarly case for a historical Jesus that is at variance with the popular image of Jesus. He juxtaposes his god term, “wisdom teacher” to his intense devil term, “popular image of Jesus.” The popular image of Jesus is equated with the past and has a way of making Jesus seem “irrelevant.”<sup>130</sup> It has “its roots deep in the past” in the “development of Christian theological thought and piety.”<sup>131</sup> It is the “product of projecting later Christian conviction . . . back into the period of ministry itself.”<sup>132</sup> This image holds Jesus as a “divine” figure<sup>133</sup> or “divine superhero.”<sup>134</sup> And, while widely accepted, “the popular image is not accurate” and has collapsed “in scholarly circles.”<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>128</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 39.

<sup>129</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, preface.

<sup>130</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 13.

<sup>131</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 3.

<sup>132</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 6 & 172.

<sup>133</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p.2.

<sup>134</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p.7.

<sup>135</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 4.

The popular image “is not historically true”<sup>136</sup> and “has nothing to do with historical reality.”<sup>137</sup> The worst part of the popular image is that it can lead to “dogmatism and doctrinal orthodoxy.”<sup>138</sup> For Borg, there is a need to replace the popular image with the notion of Jesus as a “person of Spirit.”<sup>139</sup> “Christian preaching is left to those who still think of the popular image as historical and who can therefore proclaim the image with confidence.”<sup>140</sup> Borg believes that releasing the popular image of Jesus through knowledge gained about the historical Jesus can provide a potent source of renewal for the church and Christians alike.<sup>141</sup>

#### Assessment of Borg’s Orientation

The following table on the next page represents the clusters surrounding Borg’s god and devil terms. An examination of these clusters and their opposites offers insight into Borg’s orientation. For Borg, the “popular image of Jesus” stands as the opposite of both of his primary god terms: “wisdom teacher” and “spirit person.”

What comes through clearly in examining Borg’s orientation is that Jesus has been misunderstood and misportrayed by the church. Furthermore, that image of Jesus is part of a collapsing, dying image that is rooted in tradition and the past and is in no way relevant to the world we occupy today. The negative qualities surrounding the traditionally held or popular image of Jesus can be overcome from Borg’s perspective by

---

<sup>136</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 5.

<sup>137</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 7.

<sup>138</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 200.

<sup>139</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 200.

<sup>140</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 13.

<sup>141</sup> Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p. i.

replacing that image with a new vision of Jesus as spirit person or wisdom teacher. That is Borg's drive: to make Jesus viable for a new age without placing on him the traditional view of Jesus as the messiah. Borg, like Crossan, is not willing to abandon the legacy of Jesus, but he does desire to disassociate the new vision of Jesus from the Jesus of the traditional church.

Table 3 – Associational Clusters for Borg

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <u>Borg's orientation toward wisdom teacher revealed in cluster analysis</u>  | <u>Opposite – popular image of Jesus</u>  |
| enlightened<br>transformative sage<br>subversive, alternative<br>seeing, centering, living<br>new way of living<br>mediated by sacred<br>shattering social vision | past<br>irrelevant Jesus<br>rooted in tradition<br>collapsing image<br>rooted in theological thought<br>dogmatic, doctrinal image<br>cannot be historically true<br>Jesus as divine, superhero<br>known through convention<br>known through religious institution |
| <u>Borg's orientation toward spirit person revealed in cluster analysis</u>   |   |
| source, energy<br>holy man<br>knower of the sacred<br>mediator of the sacred<br>life of spirit, not culture   |   |

Jesus Seminar Rhetor: Bishop John Shelby Spong

John Shelby Spong is a retired Episcopal Bishop who served as the Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, until his retirement in 2000 and who has since become a lecturer at Harvard University. He has written over fifteen books on Christianity. For more than twenty years, Spong has taken numerous controversial stands on the bible and the life of Jesus. He is a chief participant and spokesperson for the Jesus Seminar. *Rescuing the*

*Bible from Fundamentalism* and *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* are two of his most significant works. He considers himself and others in his circle as “Christians in exile.” He is very strong in his conviction that the current Christian institutions do not represent his God or his view of Jesus. Several god and devil terms emerge in Spong’s rhetoric that help to sort out his purpose in writing these books. In *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, Spong attempts to describe his understanding of God. However, he realizes the difficulty of putting his faith into words as he writes, “Human words always contract and diminish my God awareness. They never expand it.”<sup>142</sup> Spong, like Crossan, believes that Jesus did live, but for him, the Jesus “institutional Christianity identified” never existed. As with Crossan, the most significant god and devil terms have been studied. “Scholar,” and “believers in exile” are two important god terms for Spong that appear frequently throughout his works. “Institutionalized Christianity” and “traditional Christianity” work together as his essential devil term and appear with intensity.

#### “Scholar”

As demonstrated with other Seminar rhetors, Spong too builds identification with this god term. Spong claims that he has followed the footsteps of earlier “scholars” who chose the same path. Perhaps the most important example is English Bishop John A.T. Robinson. Writing of him, Spong says he: “forged the rare path that I have walked by trying to combine his career as a bishop with his career as a scholar and writer.”<sup>143</sup>

Robinson caused a public furor in the 1960s when he published his famous book *Honest*

---

<sup>142</sup> John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 4.

<sup>143</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. xvii.

to God. In that work and numerous others over the next decades, Robinson shocked the world with his pronouncement that the personal God had died. For a number of years, Robinson and his “Death of God” message attracted mass media attention like that earned by the Jesus Seminar and many of Spong’s books. As we can see in his discussion of Robinson in *A New Christianity for a New World*, Spong believes that Robinson helped to “bridge the gap between the Christian academy and the person in the pew.” He particularly praises Robinson for bringing the teachings of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich to the fore.<sup>144</sup>

Spong praises a number of “scholars” who have opposed traditional views and fought for a deeper understanding of God. The co-founders of the Jesus Seminar, Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan both get attention for their scholarly prowess. Spong calls Funk a “gifted scholar.”<sup>145</sup> In addition, Crossan is one of several Roman Catholic scholars who are noted for taking stands that criticize traditional theology.<sup>146</sup> Karl Rahner and Hans Kung, his student, serve as other examples of scholarship.<sup>147</sup> By contrast, Spong denies the honorific “scholar” to some of his harshest critics, specifically Alistair MacGrath, N. Thomas Wright, and Luke Timothy Johnson. Instead, he terms them the religious right. In *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, he comments about their works: “When the

---

<sup>144</sup> John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How a New Faith Is Being Born* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), x, xi.

<sup>145</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 82.

<sup>146</sup> Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How a New Faith Is Being Born*, 223.

<sup>147</sup> Spong, *A New Christianity*, p. 16.

attacking books were published, which were revealingly hostile and without saving academic merit, my controversial reputation was solidified.”<sup>148</sup>

“Believers in Exile”

Another important god term that appears both frequently and with intensity for Spong is “believers in exile.” In describing how he is viewed by his peers, Spong states, “None of them, however, will be surprised when I call myself ‘a believer in exile.’”<sup>149</sup> This theme is repeated many times in the book. The key point, from Spong’s perspective, is that there is a host of Christians who can no longer believe in the traditional God. In their minds, this God “has been obliterated before [their] eyes.”<sup>150</sup> For this reason, they must ask themselves if they can even remain believers. Because “the God content of the past no longer sustains the contemporary spirit,” they need to rethink every aspect of God.<sup>151</sup> Like the ancient Israelites taken to Babylon, they must reformulate God for a new era. From Spong’s perspective, the current notion of God is “an almost contentless concept,” which must now be developed.<sup>152</sup>

Spong’s works envision a new God—one who can carry them out of the exile. As a part of this project, Spong presents a Christianity, which can survive the exile we have entered. One of his frequent questions is about the future of the

---

<sup>148</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. xvii.

<sup>149</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 22.

<sup>150</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 40.

<sup>151</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 41.

<sup>152</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 41.

institutionalized church. He tries to imagine worship, or liturgical practice, in a church after an exile. In part, he believes, this work has begun. Because of the influence of past generations of scholars, the church has started to reconsider the God it worships and its own practices in a time of exile.<sup>153</sup> Future changes will become even greater. Ultimately, worship and Christian belief will be purged of traditional content and reoriented to find God in “the depths of our own humanity.”<sup>154</sup> Many of the “forms” of belief will wither away,<sup>155</sup> but the essence will remain as Christians reach toward spiritual maturity. “Those believers in exile who, like me, grew up in a Christian worldview will need to find a way to journey through that Christian system to what lies beyond all systems.”<sup>156</sup>

“Institutionalized Christianity” and “Traditional Christianity”

“Institutionalized Christianity” and “traditional Christianity” work together as Spong’s essential devil term and appear with intensity. They are used as Spong reveals his perspective that what will not survive is the existing church. Spong’s devil term is used to disassociate “believers in exile” from the dying church. According to Bishop Spong, “institutionalized Christianity” is “doomed to die.”<sup>157</sup> The church is filled with “primitive claims.”<sup>158</sup> As he argues in *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, that church

---

<sup>153</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 176.

<sup>154</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 187.

<sup>155</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 189.

<sup>156</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 188.

<sup>157</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 227.

<sup>158</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 225.

is “tearing itself apart externally as it collapses internally.”<sup>159</sup> The church engages in inter-denominational strife and various squabbles, while its God is collapsing. The most significant problem with the institutional church is that it fails to address the critical questions about religious change—the questions Spong embraces. Speaking of this problem, Spong writes, “That institution seems increasingly brittle and therefore not eager to relate its creeds as a set of symbols that must be broken open so that the concept of God can be embraced by new possibilities.”<sup>160</sup>

“Institutional Christianity seems fearful of inquiry, fearful of freedom, fearful of knowledge- indeed fearful of anything except its own repetitious propaganda, which has its origins in a world that none of us any longer inhabits.”<sup>161</sup> Rather than examine the traditional content of its faith, including its views of life after death, the institutional church prefers to parrot its old statements.<sup>162</sup> There is a need to “free us from the killing, idolatrous limits” of Christianity.<sup>163</sup> In *A New Christianity for a New World*, Crossan argues that the institutional church shows itself to be more interested in power than truth. When he discusses prominent theologian Hans Kung, he holds him up as an example of a theologian who is rejected by the church because he questions basic notions and undermines power.<sup>164</sup> In this book, the phrase “traditional faith” is often used in reference

---

<sup>159</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 188.

<sup>160</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 4.

<sup>161</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 4.

<sup>162</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 218.

<sup>163</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 226.

<sup>164</sup> Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*, p. 15-16.

to “institutional religion.” Through the combined uses of these terms, and the word “ecclesiastical,” Spong presents the church as a toppling social order headed for oblivion.

Assessment of Spong’s Orientation

The following table represents the clusters surrounding Spong’s god and devil terms. An examination of these clusters and their opposites help to develop an understanding of Spong’s orientation.

Table 4 – Associational Clusters for Spong

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><u>Spong’s orientation toward scholar revealed in cluster analysis</u><br/>         gifted<br/>         controversial<br/>         truth seekers</p>   | <p><u>Opposite - critics</u><br/><br/>         religious right<br/>         no academic merit</p>  |
| <p><u>Spong’s orientation toward believers revealed in cluster analysis</u><br/>         cannot accept traditional notion of God<br/>         traditional God has been obliterated<br/>         must reformulate God for new era<br/>         open to truth</p> | <p><u>Opposite – traditional and institutionalized Christianity</u><br/>         traditional faith withering<br/>         dying, not surviving<br/>         brittle, doomed to die<br/>         fearful of inquiry, fearful of freedom<br/>         filled with strife and squabbling<br/>         primitive<br/>         power over truth</p> |

The first god term to be discussed is “scholar.” Spong uses the term, “scholar” as a complimentary term and identification builder for the members of the Jesus Seminar. Interesting to note is the observation that the leaders of this movement see themselves as biblical scholars and view those who challenge their findings as fundamentalists who are unable to see the truth. The challengers or “critics” to the work of the Seminar are never referred to as scholars. The scholars, as they refer to themselves, provide support for each other. An examination of the reviews of the works by Crossan, Borg, and Funk as

well as Spong reveals that each of these Jesus Seminar members write strong supporting reviews of the others.

Unlike some of the participants in the Jesus Seminar, Spong has not completely deserted his faith. He claims his dedication to God has not ended, only changed during the past twenty-five years. To support his view, he has chosen to refer to those who have beliefs similar to his as “believers in exile.” He claims that he is looking for a way to maintain his faith while acknowledging that in the 2000 years since the times of Jesus, much of what was accepted as truth has changed. He chooses to explore these “truths” and to expose those that he finds are not valid.<sup>165</sup> He provides many examples of beliefs once held that never were or are no longer valid. “They do not learn in church that the virgin birth accounts were not original to Christianity and did not appear in Christian history until the ninth century...” he states and follows with, “The same is true of the narratives that speak of a physical bodily resurrection of Jesus.”<sup>166</sup>

Spong counters the truth seeking of the believers in exile with those who still adhere to the old Christianity that is ever withering and dying. It is clear that Spong, a retired Episcopal Bishop, takes a perspective that there is a need to rescue God. He is not willing to let God cease to be “the ultimate reality” in his life.<sup>167</sup>

#### Jesus Seminar Critic: Luke Timothy Johnson

Luke Timothy Johnson’s acerbic response to the Jesus Seminar, *The Real Jesus*, questions the motivations for and quality of the scholarship of the group. Johnson summarizes his argument in the subtitle of his work: *The Misguided Quest for the*

---

<sup>165</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 72.

<sup>166</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 73.

<sup>167</sup> Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 3.

*Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. Johnson insists that the Jesus Seminar is an elaborate public relations ploy rather than accurate scholarship. In the course of his attack, he seizes on several key terms for discussion. Among these is the principal god term “scholarship” which Johnson uses in equation with the lack of scholarship of the Jesus Seminar. Johnson’s primary devil term is “media” and it is linked to two terms that take on negative meaning as well - “controversy,” and “provocative.” Johnson concerns himself, in large part, to rebutting the claims of the Seminar, which he sees as grandiose and sensationalistic. At the same time, he attempts to develop a positive view of the role of scholarship in the Christian life. This view of scholarship is sharply contrasted to the work of the Seminar.

#### “Scholarship and the Jesus Seminar”

Despite their differences, Johnson, like the members of the Seminar, privileges the term scholarship. It appears frequently in his writings on the Jesus Seminar. Johnson, in effect, engages in a squabble over the word scholarship. In fact, his initial critique of the Seminar focuses on the extent to which the members of the Seminar do not express the academic consensus of New Testament researchers. As Johnson points out, the size of the Seminar pales in the face of the thousands of members of the Society for Biblical Literature.<sup>168</sup> Even the most liberal measure lists only about 200 members. Of these 200, Johnson writes, none hold positions in elite academic institutions. Moreover, Johnson questions the quality of the scholarship produced by the Seminar. Other than Funk, Crossan, and Borg, few of these scholars have produced genuine scholarship, in his view. In sum, he writes, that the Jesus Seminar does not include “the cream of New Testament

---

<sup>168</sup> Luke T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 2.

scholarship in this country.”<sup>169</sup> He chastises the Seminar for their “grandiose claims” that they “represent...critical New Testament Scholarship.”<sup>170</sup> Johnson thinks the works of the Seminar itself, including *The Five Gospels*, are substandard, and not of “an impressive quality.”<sup>171</sup> When he talks about Bishop John Shelby Spong, Johnson builds on this theme. Speaking of the Bishop’s writings, which have propelled him into notoriety, Johnson has nothing but contempt for them. “it is his position within the church that gives his unoriginal and derivative ‘scholarship’ its visibility and notoriety....”<sup>172</sup> Spong, of course, regularly refers to himself as a Bishop in his books and in several of the titles. Johnson further questions the work of the Seminar as scholarship. He contends that they did not set out to make “a contribution to scholarship,” but embarked on “a cultural” or “social mission” against the eschatological theology of the church.<sup>173</sup>

Although Johnson has a high view of scholarship, he is critical of the way in which the members of the Jesus Seminar represent the Academy over and against the church. For Johnson, this development flows from long running springs in his discipline. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, historical critical Bible scholarship emerged as a faithful response to efforts to identify distinguishing marks of the Christian experience. As scholars attempted to strip away later accretions to the scriptures, they formed a strict dichotomy between the *kerygma*, or saving message, and the doctrine and

---

<sup>169</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 3.

<sup>170</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 3.

<sup>171</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 3.

<sup>172</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 56.

<sup>173</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 6.

dogma of the institutional church. In turn they developed a sense, encouraged by modernity, that championed independent, value-neutral observers. The Academy developed independence from the church in radical new ways. Johnson sees the Jesus Seminar as a logical development from these patterns. Speaking of the scholars, Johnson observes that they are, for the most part, identified with Christianity. However, Johnson maintains, they have a secondary commitment to this arena. “If there is a ‘church’ whose rules and rituals are home to these authors, it is that of the academy. The ideals espoused in this church provide the perspective for the criticism of the Christian ‘Church’ . . . .”<sup>174</sup>

Johnson insists that the Jesus Seminar has gone far beyond an assault on fundamentalism and literalism, as they insist, instead, they are waging war on the very idea of a church tradition or any sort of creed. Through this effort, they are condemning a far broader swath of the church than formally expressed. For example, most mainline Christians and all Roman Catholics subscribe to the creeds, although few of these believers embrace literalism. Johnson points to this issue in Funk’s discussion of the “Nicene Creed.” This 325 A.D. document has been fundamental to Christianity since its completion. However, according to Funk, it “appears to smother the historical Jesus.”<sup>175</sup> In the *Five Gospels*, Funk condemns this creed “as a form of theological tyranny.” Johnson argues that such a sweeping statement indicates that Funk and the Jesus Seminar are waging war on any “who subscribe to any traditional understanding of Jesus as defined by the historic creeds of Christianity, that is, in some sense as risen Lord and Son of God.” Johnson calls on the members of the Jesus Seminar to admit their true purpose. As he puts it in the epilogue, he thinks it would be “entirely appropriate for those who

---

<sup>174</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 55.

<sup>175</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 2.

detested and despised traditional Christianity and sought to destroy it by means of undermining confidence in its normative texts to state their commitments clearly....”<sup>176</sup>

In this way, others could judge their writings by this standard. For Johnson, critical biblical scholarship requires “critical reflection.”<sup>177</sup> It must entail “self-examination” and be “self-critical.”<sup>178</sup>

### “Media”

Johnson emphasizes that the scholarship of the Seminar is not, for the most part, innovative or distinctive. From his perspective, the only thing that distinguishes it is its relationship to the media as they engage in shameless “self-promotion.”<sup>179</sup> In the introduction to the paperback edition of his book, Johnson goes into this claim in particular detail and with high intensity. As Johnson writes, his efforts to attack a “misguided and misleading” form of scholarship have been sucked into the “continuing media event.”<sup>180</sup> Johnson writes that this experience confirmed his opinion, presented in this book, that the media is a poor place to conduct arguments over biblical scholarship. This state of affairs is due to more than the tendency of the media to focus on the sensational and simplistic. In addition, the experience of being lured into the media maelstrom results in a separation from primary areas of involvement like the lecture hall. The time demands proved to be quite difficult. Because of these media concerns, and his own skepticism about the scholarship of the Seminar, Johnson calls it a “far better

---

<sup>176</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 175.

<sup>177</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 171.

<sup>178</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 172.

<sup>179</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 1.

<sup>180</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. vii.

example of media manipulation than of serious scholarship.”<sup>181</sup> According to Johnson, the approach taken by the Jesus Seminar reflects the personality and proclivities of its founder: Robert Funk. Funk, according to Johnson, is no stranger to “entrepreneurship or controversy.”<sup>182</sup> Funk engineered an expansion of the Society for Biblical Literature and helped it to develop its own press. Now, Funk has turned to attracting attention in the popular press. For this reason, Johnson says, the Seminar has been “more provocative stylistically than substantively.”<sup>183</sup> As examples of this style, Johnson points to the voting system of the Seminar, which he regards as a “deliberate attention-creating device.”<sup>184</sup> The system provides a focus for the media, which is accustomed to covering elections. The “road shows” in which the Seminar held its meetings in various cities, similarly attracted the attention of the press. Religion editors hungry for news could look at this story. At the same time, the Seminar offers controversy through “provocative statements crafted into usable sound bites!”<sup>185</sup> Johnson sees the Jesus Seminar as a “media darling” that meets the needs of the press today.<sup>186</sup>

#### Assessment of Johnson’s Orientation

The table below represents the clusters surrounding Johnson’s god and devil terms. An examination of these clusters and their opposites help to develop an

---

<sup>181</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 1.

<sup>182</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 1.

<sup>183</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 3.

<sup>184</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 5.

<sup>185</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 5.

<sup>186</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 10.

understanding of Johnson’s orientation. Johnson’s primary god term “scholar” is placed in opposition to both “Jesus Seminar” and to “media.”

Table 5 – Associational Clusters for Johnson

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><u>Johnson’s orientation toward scholar or scholarship revealed in cluster analysis</u><br/> many New Testament scholars<br/> elite academic institutions<br/> self-critical<br/> substantive results<br/> engages in self-examination<br/> does not reject tradition</p> | <p><u>Opposite – Jesus Seminar Scholars</u><br/> small in number, not true consensus<br/> questionable academic institutions<br/> misguided, misleading<br/> grandiose claims,<br/> unoriginal, derivative<br/> media darlings, sub-standard results<br/> social mission</p> |
|  | <p><u>Opposite – Media</u><br/> manipulation<br/> self-promotion<br/> attention creating<br/> sound bites<br/> stylistically provocative</p>   |

For his part, Johnson’s perspective seems to bridge the chasm between literalists and biblical scholars. He does not view the scholarship of the Jesus Seminar as an acceptable way to do so. From his perspective, it is important that Christians in the church find a way to “maintain allegiance to tradition and appropriate it and transmit it critically.” Rather than forming two non-communicating camps—fundamentalists and members of the Jesus Seminar—Johnson hopes to build another possibility. Importantly, he argues this option will not be possible “so long as critical inquiry’ is identified with ‘historical criticism....’” Johnson is partly motivated by his belief that the real Jesus is knowable. He insists that we have knowledge of Jesus, “the real Jesus” through more than the texts of the Christian community. Johnson borrows a metaphor from the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who says that one should think of the relationship with Christ

like that of a relationship with a lover who is still with us. Rather than obsessing over the nature of the past relationship and trying to determine with exacting specificity the way in which the relationship developed and was expressed, we should focus on the relationship with the lover who is still with us.<sup>187</sup> The tradition of the church is not something to be rejected. Instead, it is an integral part of the “real Jesus” that members of the Seminar claim to be seeking. Perhaps, then, part of Johnson’s motivation for attacking the Jesus Seminar is to call it to engage in more self-examination and to refrain from using the media to stir public sentiment with provocative sound bites. His motive is also to get the public, who has been witness to the Seminar’s use of the media, to critically examine the scholarship of the Seminar. In doing so, he wants the public to agree that their enterprise is suspect.

#### Jesus Seminar Critic: N. Thomas Wright

N. T. “Tom” Wright has published dozens of works in New Testament scholarship. They range from complex tomes to more popular pieces designed for the lay reader. Throughout his writings, he enunciates an evangelical vision of Jesus. Like Luke Timothy Johnson, Wright rejects both the fundamentalist literalism of some Christians and the approach of the Jesus Seminar. Unlike Johnson, however, he is known for efforts to dialogue with its members. His book *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, written with Marcus Borg, is the best example of an effort to converse with members of the Seminar. Despite his efforts to cooperate with Borg, Wright questions the overall approach of the Seminar. Wright develops a number of god terms in his writing. Among these are “scholarship,” and “faith.” His primary devil terms are “Jesus Seminar scholarship,” “literalism” and “fundamentalism.” Wright rejects these latter two devil terms as “either-

---

<sup>187</sup> Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 143.

or” options. He believes that the tendency to divide into fundamentalist and modernist camps impoverishes New Testament scholarship. Like Crossan, Wright hopes to show the tension and uncertainties in the study of the historical Jesus.

“Scholarship versus Jesus Seminar Scholarship”

Wright’s primary god term is “scholarship.” He emphasizes the importance of critical study of the New Testament and prides himself on his pursuit of just this mission. While the term does not appear in Wright’s work at the same frequency as it does in the works of the Seminar members examined in this study it too is significant for Wright. Wright for example, emphasizes the role of the New Testament scholar.<sup>188</sup> Wright believes that the Jesus Seminar thus falls into a sort of positivism in their public statements. In his book, *Jesus: The Victory of God*, he points to some of the earliest press releases from the Seminar as evidence for this point. For example, he quotes from the initial flier advertising the group, which opposed several terms in stark fashion. According to the release, the Seminar welcomed folks who “preferred ‘facts rather than fancies,’ ‘history rather than histrionics,’ and ‘science rather than superstition.’”<sup>189</sup> Wright found it particularly amusing that the circular spoke of the “ ‘assured results of historical-critical scholarship’ , this ought, by the 1980s, to have become a stock joke, since many of the beliefs which were labeled thus as recently as the 1960s have already been assigned to scholarly oblivion, not least by some of those involved in the Jesus Seminar itself.”<sup>190</sup> Wright regards this sort of language as “quite out of place in serious historical scholarship.”<sup>191</sup>

---

<sup>188</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 18-19.

<sup>189</sup> N. Thomas Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 31.

Other criticisms by Wright mirror those of Johnson. He mocks the Seminar for their use of a voting system. In an off-hand remark on the red, pink, gray, and black voting system, he rather dryly remarks that he is not sure if the Seminar ever considered if the classifications were “politically correct” since they referred to black passages as being a mistake and saw pink and red passages as being more authentic.<sup>192</sup> Wright then goes into a more substantive attack. He points out, this system does resemble the protocols of translation committees, but those groups are attempting to choose between alternative manuscripts and the likelihood that they refer to the oldest level of the tradition. The Jesus Seminar, instead, is attempting the more nebulous and uncertain task of reaching beyond the texts themselves to some sort of Jesus tradition that lies beyond the canonical accounts. Like Johnson and other critics, Wright questions the Seminar’s claim to speak for the accumulated knowledge of scholarship. He notes that the members are few in number compared to the large size of the Society for Biblical Literature. Although admitting that members, particularly Funk and Crossan, have done significant work, Wright questions the quality of the scholarship done by the Seminar itself. He notes, for example, that the *Five Gospels* present several premises that “underlie all critical work on the gospels.” The list they propose for critical premises is quite suspect in Wright’s view, however. As he puts it, “the whole point of a premise is that it is not a conclusion, whereas most of the statements offered as ‘premises’ in what follows are conclusions, many of them very dubious.”<sup>193</sup> As examples, he lists the notion that

---

<sup>190</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 31.

<sup>191</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 31.

<sup>192</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 29.

<sup>193</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 32.

Thomas and Q are the earliest sources for the gospels and the idea that only a small portion of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the gospels were actually said by him. Wright rejects any idea that these points are essential to the “critical” enterprise because many scholars reject them.<sup>194</sup> Rather than promoting an objective study of the passages, Wright claims, the Seminar is presenting passages that meet with their preexisting view of Jesus. Wright makes a similar point in *The Meaning of Jesus*. In that book, he rejects the overall approach taken by the Seminar, which is to look at isolated sayings, separated from narratives. This “apparently scientific proposal,” he says, hides assumptions. In the end, the work simply confirms the Seminar’s presumptions about the nature of Jesus.<sup>195</sup>

In a unique attack, Wright, a British Scholar, points out that the Seminar is overwhelmingly an American enterprise. This identity plays itself out in two ways. First, the rhetoric of the seminar focuses on the American presidency and American clashes between fundamentalists and liberals. Funk condemns right-wing Republicans like Pat Robertson on different occasions. Second, the Seminar isolates itself from a broader world opinion when it proclaims its version of the historical Jesus. Wright breezily suggests his contempt for the Seminar’s “Scholar’s Version” translation, which “combines colloquial Americanisms with a somewhat pretentious title....”<sup>196</sup> Wright jokes that the members of the Seminar have an over-inflated sense of their own importance. He points out that Funk seems to be calling his colleagues into “fearless discipleship” along the lines of Mark 8:34, which the Seminar judged inauthentic. Rather

---

<sup>194</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 32-33.

<sup>195</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 23.

<sup>196</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 30.

than this scriptural basis, Wright suggests, perhaps the group is making an “allusion that is more contemporary: boldly going where no one has gone before?”<sup>197</sup> The noble explorers are more in tune with pop culture than with the reality of suffering for commitment and belief.

### “Faith”

Wright makes interesting use of the terms history and faith. He sees that the two terms are not mutually exclusive. He makes frequent use of these words. For example, in one paragraph in *The Meaning of Jesus* each term appears six times within 115 words.<sup>198</sup> In fact, he makes a case for why they go together.<sup>199</sup> He starts chapter three with the statement, “We know about Jesus in two ways: history and faith.” He claims people try to eliminate one or the other based on their perspectives. Wright depicts the Seminar as having a flawed view of Jesus because they reject the importance of faith to knowledge. In place of faith, they present themselves as absolutely objective voices. In the *Meaning of Jesus*, Wright says that, “We cannot find a neutral place on which to stand....” Wright, like Johnson, argues that faith plays a critical role in the study of the scriptures. As Wright puts it: “History, then, prevents faith becoming fantasy. Faith prevents history becoming mere antiquarianism.”<sup>200</sup> Neither faith nor history can veto the judgment of the other. Wright does not want to go into a detailed discussion of epistemology, but he does reject positivism.<sup>201</sup>

---

<sup>197</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 32.

<sup>198</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 26.

<sup>199</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 15-17.

<sup>200</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 26.

Wright argues that we cannot separate history from faith and theology. As he puts it in *Who Was Jesus?*, “It will not do, as we have seen many writers try to do, to separate the historical from the theological.”<sup>202</sup> Wright complains that members of the Jesus Seminar attempt such a maneuver when they proclaim that they have identified the true Jesus through their scholarship.

#### “Literalism and Fundamentalism”

Because of Wright’s view of the complex interplay between faith and history, “literalism” and “fundamentalism” are connected devil terms for him. Wright uses “fundamentalism” as a devil term to describe an unacceptable level of accepting the literality of the Bible. It is most noted for the intensity in which he uses it. He agrees with Spong that those who are proponents of this view often do it for self-serving reasons such as TV evangelists.<sup>203</sup> But, then, Wright makes the next observation. “The word ‘fundamentalism’ has thus become a way of dismissing anyone who places more weight on the Bible than one does oneself. As such, it is fairly useless.”<sup>204</sup> Therefore, Wright on one hand agrees with Spong that fundamentalism and the literal acceptance of the Bible are not reflective of Jesus and then on the other hand says that because Spong labels as a fundamentalist everyone who places more value on the relevance of the Bible than he does, the term loses all meaning and the argument therefore fails. Nonetheless, he argues, “crude literalism” loses some of the depth and the power of the New Testament.<sup>205</sup>

---

<sup>201</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 26-27.

<sup>202</sup> N. Thomas Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 18.

<sup>203</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 78 and ix.

<sup>204</sup> Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, p. 68.

On the other hand, Wright believes that Spong's "blanket denunciation of the literal reading of the scripture leaves him wide open to the charge that, without a literal sense as the anchor, the Bible can be made to mean anything at all."<sup>206</sup> This can lead to theology "born of reaction" and prone to "gross overstatement."<sup>207</sup> Further, Wright quotes Spong on the midrash and uses this again to highlight Spong's either-or view of the situation. This is evident in the words of Spong as quoted by Wright, "...would the choice appear to be between literal truth and overt lies..."<sup>208</sup> Spong's approach relies so heavily on false dichotomy that it collapses.

#### Assessment of Wright's Orientation

Wright's god and devil terms and their associational clusters are charted on the following page. An examination of these clusters and their opposites helps to develop an understanding of Wright's perspective. Wright's god term "scholar" is defined through the negative. That is, it emerges implicitly as Wright discusses the lack of "scholarship of the Jesus Seminar." In this manner he tries to disassociate the term "scholar" from the Jesus Seminar and reclaim it for non-Seminar New Testament researchers. The Jesus Seminar stands in opposition to his god term "faith." Wright seems to be creating a positive identification for those who adhere to traditional Christian faith and are interested in historical Jesus research. Lastly, Wright's connected devil terms "literalism" and "fundamentalism" are charted and reveal how Wright wants to disassociate his criticism of the Seminar from ultra-conservative groups.

---

<sup>205</sup> Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, p. 72.

<sup>206</sup> Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, p. 70.

<sup>207</sup> Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, p. 70.

<sup>208</sup> Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, p. 71.

Table 6 – Associational Clusters for Wright

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><u>Wright’s orientation toward scholarship found in cluster analysis</u><br/> many New Testament scholars<br/> serious historical scholarship<br/> clear task</p> <p><u>Wright’s orientation toward faith revealed in cluster analysis</u><br/> connected to history<br/> critical to study of scripture<br/> connected to theology</p> <p><u>Wright’s orientation toward literalism and fundamentalism revealed in cluster analysis</u><br/> accepts literacy of Bible<br/> creates false dichotomy<br/> domain of self-serving TV evangelists<br/> not reflective of Jesus</p> | <p><u>Opposite – Seminar Scholarship</u><br/> small in number, not true consensus<br/> not serious historical scholarship<br/> uncertain task<br/> accumulated knowledge<br/> suspect critical premises<br/> too American<br/> isolated opinion<br/> positivism<br/> strange voting system<br/> false claim of objectivity<br/> separates history from faith<br/> separates history from theology<br/> rejects importance of faith to knowledge</p> |
|---|---|

In looking at the clusters we find that several tension are at work in Wright’s rhetoric. First, what is scholarship? Wright defines what makes for good scholarship through his negative assessment of the Jesus Seminar. The Seminar’s denial of faith as being of import to the study of the historical Jesus points to a tension for Wright, namely, the relationship of history and faith in the exploration of the depth of the scriptures. Wright is, in part, motivated by the Seminar’s claim to the title of scholarship. A look at the numerous negative terms surrounding Seminar scholarship reveals that he finds their scholarship lacking. An additional perspective of Wright’s is apparent in his discussion of “literalism” and “fundamentalism” in equation with the “Jesus Seminar.” He finds that both the literalists and the Jesus Seminar wind up engaging in false dichotomies that

negate the merits of their claims. Wright is motivated to move beyond these limited views to an understanding of the historical Jesus developed through faith.

### Conclusion

This chapter has examined the orientations of six of the rhetors associated with the Jesus Seminar through a cluster-agon analysis. Key god and devil terms were identified and charted for each rhetor and orientations were discussed. The next chapter will offer a new perspective to help bridge the divide that exists between these rhetors, and conclusions will be drawn.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION DRAWING AND THE CORRECTIVE

#### Introduction

A cluster analysis of the rhetoric of the Jesus Seminar and its critics concerning the issue of the historical Jesus reveals that the two groups share several similarities that make it possible to develop a third perspective. This chapter builds from the cluster-agon analysis of the preceding chapter by first, exploring charted cluster terms and to ascertain the perspectives of the two groups. Then, through an examination of the commonalities and differences, a rhetoric to bridge the divide between the two groups is constructed.

#### Cluster-Agon Analysis Findings

By examining the similarities between the four principal rhetoricians of the Jesus Seminar, it is possible to determine the overall orientation for the group. The first thing that stands out in looking at all four of these is their chief devil terms all relate to a traditional or theological view of who was the historical Jesus. Each shares a sense that the traditional world-view of Christianity is unrelated to the modern world, irrelevant and dying. The cluster analysis of their rhetoric suggests Seminar members are each motivated to replace the withering Jesus Christ with a new understanding of the historical Jesus that is relevant, fresh, and informed by historical New Testament scholarship. They shun the traditional commentaries of Jesus. Instead they speak of Jesus as sage (Funk), revealer of the ground of being (Spong), as an enlightened spirit person (Borg), and as an egalitarian, cynic philosopher (Crossan). Despite presenting unique views of the historical Jesus, none of the Seminar rhetors are willing to discard Christianity completely or join what Spong labels the “church alumni club.” In their efforts to make

Christianity viable for a new age they see themselves as scholarly truth seekers and truth tellers battling the repressive, literalist forces and the tyranny of fundamentalism. They proclaim a Christianity that offers liberation and life to all people instead of one enforcing the status quo or the dominant ideology. Their Christianity pushes for radical change toward total egalitarianism.

The cluster-agon analysis of the rhetoric of the critics of the Seminar, Johnson and Wright, clarifies their perspectives on the issue of the historical Jesus. Whereas the Seminar rhetors are moved to rescue Jesus from the church, their critics are moved to keep any understanding of the historical Jesus firmly grounded in the living traditions of the church. Although both Wright and Johnson believe there is an important place for historical New Testament scholarship, their rhetoric suggests any such examination into the life of the historical Jesus must be connected to faith and theology. These critics oppose the Seminar’s attempts to reinvent the church and to the Seminar’s claim to represent objective, original scholarship. In Table 7 below, the antithetical pairs for the Jesus Seminar and its critics are provided.

Table 7 - Jesus Seminar: Vocabulary of Orientation

| <u>Agon Pairs for the Jesus Seminar</u> |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| <u>Term</u>                             | <u>Oppositional Term</u> |
| Scholar                                 | Theologian/critic        |
| Historical Jesus                        | Jesus as Christ          |
| History                                 | Faith                    |
| Contemporary                            | Traditional              |
| Truth                                   | Creed                    |

This rhetorical examination of the orientations of Jesus Seminar and their critics, likewise points to some similarities between the two groups. Both groups privilege the texts of the New Testament. Although they argue over which texts are most significant to

the tradition, they agree that the Greek language and Coptic texts related to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth are fascinating and significant areas for research. In relation to this, they believe a literalist or fundamentalist take on the texts lacks depth. These rhetors all believe the historical Jesus continues to be significant for human life. Whether or not they proclaim him as risen Lord or as a wisdom teacher, Jesus is a powerful world-historical figure in their estimation. Finally, each agrees that readers should engage in critical reflection on those texts. They share an identity as scholars and consider it important to engage in reflective action. They each seek a relevant Christianity and deem it important for academic enterprise to produce it. When looking at the rhetoric of the Seminar scholars and that of their critics, it becomes clear that certain fundamental terms keep them from engaging in productive discourse. As such, bridge terms are needed to create a basis for discussion with a common language. The following table suggests some possibilities.

Table 8 – Homological Convergence: Potential Bridge Terms for Antithetical Pairs

| <u>Jesus Seminar</u>   | <u>Bridge Term</u>  | <u>Critics' Term</u>   |
|--|---|--|
| Scholar<br>Historical Jesus<br>Contemporary<br>Denial of creed | Student of Jesus<br>Jesus<br>Timeliness<br>Principles of belief | Theologian/critic<br>Jesus as Christ<br>Traditional<br>Creed |

By using the term “student of Jesus” both sides can participate in discussions without feeling alienated. A move to simply referring to Jesus instead of as Jesus the Christ or the historical Jesus would eliminate the connotative meanings held by each side. Instead of thinking of Christianity as either traditional or contemporary, the adjective “timeliness” would provide a neutral term. Timeliness would not negate the expressed

desire of each side to have a view of Christianity, which they accept as relevant to the twenty-first century. Finally, instead of the emotionally charged term creed, which is unacceptable to the Jesus Seminar, the rhetors could employ the phrase “principles of belief,” which would allow for all parties to communicate on this issue.

### Possible Corrective

Given the commonalities of the two sides, it should be possible to develop a new perspective that would enable them to engage in constructive dialogue together.

Interestingly, the solution may well stem from the weaknesses in their respective approaches. One of the most interesting aspects of the argument between these groups is both fail to engage the local churches in the debate. Although we see reference to dogmas and creeds and talk about individual believers, the state of the church is often an implicit concern for both Seminar scholars and mainline theologians (with the exception of Spong). In part, this stems from historical developments in theological education. Over the past one hundred years, mainline seminaries have separated themselves from ecclesiastical control and, in many cases, from the life of the local church.<sup>1</sup> Particularly fascinating is that when the church is discussed, the scholars focus on developments in the United States and Europe. One might not know that churches are growing rapidly throughout the developing world.<sup>2</sup> Each rhetor is blinded by his own occupational psychosis and trained incapacity. The rhetoric that emerges, is arguably, a product of the scholarly lens through which each examines the issues.

---

<sup>1</sup> George M. and Bradley J. Longfield Marsden, *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Another matter springs from trends in theological education. Because of academic specialization, New Testament scholars and theologians rarely dialogue with one another. Throughout these rhetorical artifacts are few explicit references to theologians and their works. Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich make occasional appearances, but they are quite marginal to the overall arguments. But the arguments over the nature and significance of the creeds are first and foremost the domain of theology—God-talk and efforts to understand the nature of the divine; they are not philological matters. Christians have studied the scriptures over the centuries to come to an understanding of the meaning of Jesus for their lives. In order to bridge the gap between the Jesus Seminar and its critics, we should turn to the realm of theology and to the church—to places where scripture is used to understand the nature of God and of humanity and, more importantly to believers, to work out salvation.

An appropriate theology to incorporate into the corrective is liberation theology. Liberation theology is a theology that in practice privileges the local over the universal. It is an important movement, which began in the 1960s in Latin America. Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest, started to explore the church's relationship to the social structure.<sup>3</sup> In response to Marxist claims that the Christian church was the opiate of the masses, he proposed a theology that builds from the experiences of suffering and the poor and looks at salvation as being a story of liberation.<sup>4</sup> Just as the ancient Israelites were rescued from Egypt by the mighty acts of God, oppressed peasants in Latin America

---

<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 14-15.

could count on God to hear their cries. The church should unite with these suffering masses and fight for their liberty and freedom.<sup>5</sup> In Gutierrez's reading of scripture, Jesus identified with these same people, proclaiming freedom and liberty for all those oppressed by evil systems.<sup>6</sup> Liberation theologians speak of a "preferential option" of God for the poor, which is manifested by Jesus becoming man in a simple peasant family. In addition to these developments in Latin America, James Cone, an American theologian, developed a Black theology that built from the experience of African-Americans in slavery.<sup>7</sup> Cone condemned oppressive elements in Christianity but embraced it as offering a message of salvation for a suffering people. Feminist scholars made a similar point about their oppression in the church. Over the decades since these figures began writing, other voices have responded to their work and spoken out against oppression felt by their groups. Womanist theology criticized both feminist theologians and Cone for ignoring the special problems affecting Black women. Asian Christians, Native American Christians, Latino Christians, and Gay Christians have followed.<sup>8</sup> They have developed a process of reflection on social context that helps them to understand Christianity and the nature of God that both the Jesus Seminar and its critics should find acceptable.

Any understanding of the service liberation theology could provide should move through a discussion of its use of scripture and an outline of its work with groups. As part of their work on theological reflection by lay people, liberation theologians have

---

<sup>5</sup> Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 158-159.

<sup>6</sup> Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 168.

<sup>7</sup> James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> Justo L. and Gonzales Gonzales, Catherine G., *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994), 15.

encouraged the creation of base communities, small groups, which engage in critical reading of Bible texts to comprehend their meaning for the reader(s).<sup>9</sup> One of the chief points for liberation theologians is that the text speaks to us in our social situation. When we read the scriptures alone, we sometimes lose the effect of hearing the gospel in community—like the earliest Christians. Liberation theology tries to recreate this experience through group Bible study. Rather than engaging in sophisticated historical criticism, these groups study the texts to find a meaning and a power for their lives. Perhaps they are like the early disciples when they interpreted the sacred Jewish scriptures in the light of their own experiences. This approach to scripture easily could be applied to the conflict between the Jesus Seminar and its critics—with some modifications. New Testament scholars could work with small groups of lay people to study scripture. Although this approach might clash with the perceived role of the scholar, both sides might well find it productive. The Jesus Seminar has professed concern for the average person to be exposed to the latest research, and this opportunity would allow them to approach the public. Johnson and Wright and other critics of the Seminar might be engaged by the opportunity to discuss the scriptures in light of their meaning for the life of the believer. This approach would give them a chance to reflect on how the text is received by groups, and it would permit the members of the Jesus Seminar to share their research findings.

Liberation theologians similarly engage in liturgical action together. Along with other members of the community, they craft worship services that express the meaning of God in their lives. As such, they engage in direct action with members of the community

---

<sup>9</sup> Justo L. Gonzales, *Manana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 27-28.

to explore the meaning of faith in the contemporary world and to offer praise to God. Rather than engaging in desperate battles over texts in the media, New Testament scholars could give opportunities for small groups to consider how they should worship God. Instead of repeating the set liturgies of the church, the two sides could consider what the liturgies say about the nature of God and what significance they hold. By reflecting on the shape of worship services, on passages that could be used, and on the language of prayers, groups could deepen their understanding of God and enrich their spiritual lives. Both the seminar and its critics express an interest in liturgy in their works.

A healing response to the battles between the Jesus Seminar and its critics would involve them in a more direct effort to influence the faith life of believers. Rather than engaging in debate in the public arena, the place for them to communicate would be in local church contexts or with others, who have left the church but continue to express an interest in the Christian life.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

Although the current study has focused on a Burkeian analysis of four of the principle writers of the Jesus Seminar and two of its most outspoken critics, there are several significant areas for further research that have emerged from this study.

1. This study focused on the founding members of the Jesus Seminar and all came from a New Testament scholar's background. A further study into more recent associates of the Seminar, who often lack academic backgrounds, would hold significant interest to see if they are as much at odds with the critics of the Seminar as those in this study. Have the New Testament scholars of the Seminar been too blinded by their occupational psychoses?

2. A second area of relevant study would be to examine the role of the mass media rhetoric in presenting the findings of the Seminar to the public at large. The media has been a main source for promoting the Seminar. What effect, if any, has the media had in shaping public perception and interest on the historical Jesus issue?
3. Research into the effects of the Jesus Seminar findings on mainstream Christian believers who accept current creeds and dogma is needed. If the Seminar findings are going to attempt to discredit that which a large body of believers holds to, then the effects of this rhetoric on these individuals needs to be examined.
4. The Seminar mainly has involved individuals from the United States where there are hundreds of years of Christian thought and dogma imbedded into the lives of all. In some ways the arguments that have grown from this movement could be a stumbling block for the emerging Christianity in the developing countries of the world where there is no historical thread of Christianity. A study to ascertain the impact of the Jesus Seminar's rhetoric, if any, on Christianity in these nations would be significant.
5. Finally, some of the main dissent toward the Jesus Seminar has come from fundamentalist Christians in America who are often referred to as the religious right. Their rhetoric is strong and has a loud voice among their followers. Views of the Jesus Seminar as held by fundamentalist leaders such as Pat Robertson should be considered for study.

## Conclusion

This dissertation set out to analyze the perspectives or orientations of the primary rhetors of the Jesus Seminar and those of its principal critics through a Burkeian cluster-agon analysis. The analysis was undertaken to determine if a third perspective, drawn from the commonalities of both groups of rhetors, could be used to develop an approach acceptable to both. By healing the rift between these select New Testament scholars, it is hoped that open and productive dialogue can begin.

The corrective suggested that the two factions can benefit from adapting the practices of liberation theologians, such as engaging in critical, small group scripture studies that seek meaning and power for living. This corrective permits both the Jesus Seminar members and their critics to engage the public in exploring the meaning of faith and Jesus for the contemporary world. Together, within small communities of those interested in Jesus, they can dialogue on how to share in the worship of God and how to develop an understanding of the significance God holds for believers.

This corrective is plausible. Already, Seminar member Marcus Borg and Seminar critic N. Thomas Wright engage in dialogue. Their relationship began after corresponding about previous works they had published. They then decided to write a joint account of their opposing visions of Jesus. Predictably, this book is far less vituperative than other pieces by members of the Seminar and their critics. In *The Meaning of Jesus*, Wright and Borg focus on their commonalities of interest, and they work to break through the name-calling and invective that have plagued the debate.<sup>10</sup> Borg and Wright began *The Meaning of Jesus* by celebrating the Eucharist together.

---

<sup>10</sup> Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1999).

During the next five days, according to their preface, they participated in morning and evening prayer together. Discussing this point, they make an interesting comment:

We believe that this setting, so far from prejudicing the “objectivity” of our work, was and is the most appropriate context for it... Anyone who supposes that by setting scholarship within a modern secular university, or some other carefully sanitized, non-religious setting, they thereby guard such work against the influence of presuppositions that can seriously skew the results should, we suggest, think again.<sup>11</sup>

Building from this liturgical base, Borg and Wright engage in a civil discussion about the New Testament texts and their understandings of Jesus. Given their example, it seems the corrective here offered is feasible. It is only asking both groups to expand their dialogue to include a small group of lay people. Given that they already have an audience they write to, it should be particularly easy to accept – other than the constraints of time. Knowing that the rhetors of the Jesus Seminar and their critics are each motivated by the desire to find the meaning of Jesus for contemporary society this corrective could be an appealing bridge for Borg, Wright and the other rhetors examined in this dissertation.

---

<sup>11</sup> Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. viii.

## REFERENCES

- Abraham, William J. "Revelation and Scripture." In *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, 584-90. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999. Reprint, 2000.
- Anderson, Charles. *Critical Quests for Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969.
- Ankerberg, John, and John Weldon. *The Fact on False Views of Jesus: The Truth Behind the Jesus Seminar*. Harvest House, 1997.
- Bartlett, David L. "The Historical Jesus and the Life of Faith." *Christian Century* May 6 (1992): 489-93.
- Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Herzberg, ed. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1990.
- Black, Edwin. *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Methodology*. 2nd ed. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978. Reprint, 2nd.
- Blomberg, C. L. "The Seventy Four "Scholars": Who Does the Jesus Seminar Really Speak For?" *Christian Research Institute*, no. Fall (1994): 32-37.
- Borg, Marcus. "The Historical Jesus and Christian Preaching." *The Christian Century* August 28 - September 4 (1985): 764-67.
- . *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*. Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994.
- . *Jesus: A New Vision. Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987.
- . "Spirituality and Contemporary Culture." Paper presented at the National Forum of the Center for Progressive Christianity, Irvine, California, June 1-3 2000.
- . *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1994.
- . "A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus." In *Society of Bible Literature: 1986 Seminar Papers*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986.
- Borg, Marcus J., and N. T. Wright. *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1999.

- Boring, M. E. *Interpretation* 50 (1996): 341-54.
- Bornkamm, Gunther. *Jesus of Nazareth*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960.
- Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Edited by David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Reference Library*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. *History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Translated by John Marsh. Rev. ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes toward History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937. Reprint, 1984.
- . *Counter-Statement*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.
- . *A Grammar of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall Press, 1945.
- . *A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives*. Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1962.
- . *Language as Symbolic Action*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.
- . Letter to Malcolm Cowley, October 22, 1931, Burke File, Pennsylvania State University.
- . *Permanence and Change*. 2nd, rev. ed. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965.
- . *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. Third ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- . *Perspectives by Incongruity*. Edited by Stanley Edgar with the assistance of Barbara Karmiller Hyman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964.
- . *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Second ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941. Reprint, 1967.
- . *A Rhetoric of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950.
- . *The Rhetoric of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961.
- . "Rhetoric-Old and New." In *New Rhetorics*, edited by Martin Steinmann Jr. New York: Scribner, 1968.
- . "The Tactics of Motivation." *Chimera* 1, no. Spring (1943): 27.

- Bury, Mary J. "A Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Speeches of the Reverend Jerry Falwell." Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio University, 1986.
- Cone, James. *Black Theology and Black Power*. New York: Seabury Press, 1969.
- Crossan, John Dominic. *The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1994.
- . *Four Other Gospels. Shadows on the Contours of the Canon*. New York: Winston Press, 1985.
- . *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1991.
- . *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1994.
- . *Sayings Parallels: A Workbook for the Jesus Tradition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.
- . *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1995.
- Crossan, John Dominic & Jonathan L. Reed. *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.
- Decker, Rodney J. "Preaching Jesus to Skeptics: A Response to the Impact of the Jesus Seminar." Paper presented at the Eastern Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Hatfield, PA, March 21, 1997.
- den Heyer, C. J. *Jesus Matters: 150 Years of Research*. Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996.
- Doherty, Earl. *The Jesus Puzzle: Was There No Historical Jesus? Book Review of Robert W. Funk's "Honest to Jesus"* [Website]. [cited October 7, 2001]. Available from <http://www.magi.com/~oblio/jesus/funkrev.htm>.
- Dowd, Sharyn. "Which Jesus? A Survey of the Controversy over 'the Historical Jesus'." 31, no. 2 Summer (1996): 87-102.
- Duling, Dennis. *Jesus Christ through History*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1979.
- Evans, Craig T. "Book Review of 'Jesus Seminar and Its Critics'." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 55, no. 1 January (2001): 86.
- Farmer, W.R. *The Gospel of Jesus*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1994.

*Forum: Foundations and Facets.*

Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 1989.

Funk, Robert W. "The Beatitudes and Turn the Other Cheek." *Forum: Foundations and Facets* 2.3 (1986): 3.

———. "The Coming Radical Reformation: Twenty-One Theses." *The Fourth R* 11, no. 4 (1998): 3.

———. *Description of the Jesus Seminar* [Website]. Westar Institute, 2001 [cited September 26 2001]. Available from [http://www.westarinstitute.org/Jesus\\_Seminar/jesus\\_seminar.html](http://www.westarinstitute.org/Jesus_Seminar/jesus_seminar.html).

———. "Form and Function." *Forum: Foundations and Facets* 1.1 (1985): 51-57.

———. *The Gospel of Mark: Red Letter Edition*. Sonoma: California: Polebridge Press, 1991.

———. *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996.

———. "The Issues of Jesus." *Forum: Foundations and Facets* 1.1 (1985): 7.

———. *Jesus as Precursor*. Edited by Edward F. Beutner. Revised ed. Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1993.

———. *New Gospel Parallels*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1 and 2, *Mark*. Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 1995.

———. *The Opening Remarks of Jesus Seminar Founder Robert W. Funk, Presented at the 1st Meeting Held 21-24 March 1985 in Berkeley, California* [Website]. Westar Institute, 2001 [cited September 26 2001]. Available from [http://www.westarinstitute.org/Jesus\\_Seminar/Remarks/remarks.html](http://www.westarinstitute.org/Jesus_Seminar/Remarks/remarks.html).

———. "Polling the Pundits." *Forum: Foundations and Facets* 1.1 (1985): 31-50.

Funk, Robert W., Brandon B. Scott, and James R. Butts. *The Parables of Jesus: Red Letter Edition*. Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1988.

Funk, Robert W., and The Jesus Seminar, eds. *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1998.

———, eds. *The Gospel of Jesus: According to the Jesus Seminar*. Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 1999.

- Funk, Robert W., The Jesus Seminar, and et al. *The Once and Future Jesus*. Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2000.
- Funk, Robert Walter, Karen Armstrong, Don Cupitt, Arthur J. Dewey, Lloyd Geering, Roy W. Hoover, Robert J. Miller, Stephen J. Patterson, Bernard B. Scott, and John Shelby Spong. *Lectures from the Once and Future Faith Conference, March 2001* [Website]. The Westar Institute, 2001 [cited September 26 2001]. Available from <http://www.westarinstitute.org/>.
- Funk, Robert Walter, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993. Reprint, 1997.
- Gaber, Julia E. "Lamb of God or Demagogue? A Burkeian Cluster Analysis of the Selected Speeches of Minister Louis Farrakhan." Bowling Green State University, 1986.
- Goldrick-Jones, Amanda. "Men in a Feminist Forum: A Rhetorical Analysis of the White Ribbon Campaign against Male Violence." Ph.D. Dissertation, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 1996.
- Gomez, Rojas , and Claudia Fiorella. "Spiritualizing the Political: A Rhetorical Analysis of Oscar Arias' Discourse on Peace." Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio Univehrsity, 1992.
- Gonzales, Justo L. *Manana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.
- Gonzales, Justo L. and Gonzales, Catherine G. *The Liberating Pulpit*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994.
- Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973.
- Harvey, A. E. *Jesus and the Constraints of History*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982.
- Hauerwas, Stanley. "The Resurrection and the Jesus Seminar: A Sermon with Commentary." *Journal for Preachers* xxi, no. Easter (1998): 25-29.
- Hays, Richard B. "Book Review of *the Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*." *First Things* 43 (May 1994): 43-48.
- Heath, Robert L. *Realism and Relativism: A Perspective on Kenneth Burke*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986.
- Helms, Randel. *Free Inquiry* (Fall 1994): 63-64.

- Hoover, Roy W. "How the Canon Was Determined." *The Fourth R* 5, no. 1 (1992): 1-7.
- Hultgren, Arland J. "The Jesus Seminar and the Third Quest." *Pro Ecclesia: a Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* III, no. 3 Summer (1994): 266-70.
- Hutchison, R. J. "The Jesus Seminar Unmasked." *Christianity Today*, no. April 29 (1996): 28-29.
- Jacobson, Arnold D. *The First Gospel: An Introduction to Q*. Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1992.
- Jenkins, Philip. *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way*. Oxford: Oxford Press, 2001.
- . *The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Johnson, Luke T. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996.
- Keck, Leander. *A Future for the Historical Jesus: The Place of Jesus in Preaching and Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971.
- Klooster, Fred. *Quests for the Historical Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1977.
- Kloppenborg, John S. *The Formation of Q*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
- Kloppenborg, John S., Marvin W. Meyer, Stephen J. Patterson, and Michael G. Steinhauser. *Q Thomas Reader*. Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1990.
- Koester, Helmut. *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990.
- Koukl, Gregory. *The Jesus Seminar under Fire (Transcript from the Radio Show "Stand to Reason," Aired 1995)*. [Website]. Stand to Reason, August 12, 1997 2001 [cited September 26, 2001]. Available from <http://www.str.org/free/commentaries/apologetics/bible/jsuf.htm>.
- "Liberals Pooh-Pooh Jesus' Resurrection." *Christianity Today* 39, no. 5 April 24 (1995).
- Mack, Burton L. *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993.
- . *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995.

- Marsden, George M. and Bradley J. Longfield. *The Secularization of the Academy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Martinez, Jose. "The Rhetoric of Social Movements: A Burkeian Analysis." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Arizona, 1984.
- Matthews, David G. "Jim Corbett and the Sanctuary Movement: Defining a Social Movement's Rhetorical Situation." Ph.D. Dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, 1993.
- McArthur, Harvey. *The Quest through the Centuries*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966.
- McAteer, Michael R., and Michael G. Steinhauser. *The Man in the Scarlet Robe: Two Thousand Years of Searching for Jesus*. Ontario: The United Church Publishing House, 1996.
- Meier, John. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 2. New York: Doubleday, 1994.
- Meier, John P. "'the Five Gospels, the Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus,' Book Review by John P. Meier." *Bible Review* X, no. 3 June (1994): 14-15.
- Miller, Brett A. "The Sacred Art of Verbal Self-Defense: Image Restoration Discourse in Christian Rhetoric." University of Missouri - Columbia, 1999.
- Miller, Kevin D. "The War of the Scrolls." *Christianity Today* 41, no. 11 (October 6, 1997): 38-45.
- Miller, Robert J. "Battling over the Jesus Seminar: Why the Ugly Attacks?" *Bible Review* xiii, no. 2 (April 1997): 18-22.
- . *The Jesus Seminar and Its Critics*. 1st ed. Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 1999.
- , ed. *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*. rev. and exp. ed. Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1994.
- Mitchell, Stephen. *The Gospel According to Jesus: A New Translation and Guide to His Essential Teachings for Believers and Unbelievers*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990.
- Nelson, Randy Wayne. "The Jesus Seminar's Search for the Authentic Sayings of Jesus: An Examination of Phase One of the Seminar's Quest for the Historical Jesus." Ph.D. Dissertation, Rice University, 1999.

- Oberschall, Anthony. *Social Conflicts and Social Movements*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
- Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1979. Reprint, 1989.
- Patterson, Stephen J. *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*. Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1993.
- Pearson, Birger A. "Examining the Five Gospels." *Religion* October, no. 25 (1995): 317-38.
- . *The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar* [Website]. [cited October 7 2001]. Available from <http://id-www.ucsb.edu/fscf/library/pearson/seminar/home.html>.
- Price, Ronald D. "The Rhetoric of Counter-Subversion: A Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Anti-Communism Speeches of U.S. Senator Karl E. Mundt." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Kansas, 1994.
- Quarles, Charles Leland. "The Authenticity of the Parable of the Warring King: A Response to the Jesus Seminar." Paper presented at the 49th National Conference of the Evangelical Theological Society, Santa Clara, California, November 20-22, 1997.
- Reimarus, Hermann Samuel. *Fragmente Eines Ungenannten*. Edited by Charles H. Talbert. Trans. Ralph S. Fraser. ET ed, *Reimarus: Fragments*. Braunschweig: Lessing, 1776-78. Reprint, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970.
- Riley, Martha W. "A Rhetorical Biography of Senator James D. Phelan of California Concentrating on the Ways in Which His Rhetoric Constructed Images and Ideas About Asian Immigrants to the United States." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1992.
- Robinson, B. A. *The "Jesus Seminar"* [Website]. *Religious Tolerance*, December 8, 1999 July 5, 1998 [cited October 7 2001]. Available from [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_jsem.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_jsem.htm).
- Robinson, James M. *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*. 2nd ed. Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1979.
- Rueckert, William H. "A Field Guide to Kenneth Burke-1990." In *Extensions of the Burkeian System*, edited by James W. Chesebro, 16-17. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1993.
- . *Kenneth Burke: And the Drama of Human Relations*. Minneapolis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963.

- Sanders, E. P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.
- . *Jesus and Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.
- Sanders, E. P., and Margaret Davies. *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989.
- Sapp, David Wayne. "An Analysis of the Criteria Used by the Jesus Seminar to Establish the Authenticity of the Parables of Jesus." Ph.D. Dissertation, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998.
- Sartori, Shirley. "Conflict and Institutional Change: The Ordination of Women in the Episcopal Church." Ph.D. Dissertation, State University of New York at Albany, 1978.
- Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1906. Reprint, 1998.
- Scott, Brandon B. "From Reimarus to Crossan: Stage in a Quest." *Canadian Review of Biblical Studies* 2 (1994): 253-80.
- Senior, D.P. "The Never Ending Quest for the Historical Jesus." *TBT* 34 (1996): 141-47.
- Shanks, Hershel (moderator). *The Search for Jesus: Modern Scholarship Looks at the Gospels*. Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994.
- Sheehan, Thomas. *How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity*. New York: Random House, 1988.
- Shipley, David S. "The Rhetorical Drama of Lyndon B. Johnson: A Burkeian Analysis." Louisiana State University, 1986.
- Shorto, Russell. *Gospel Truth: The New Image of Jesus Emerging from Science and History and Why It Matters*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1997.
- Shultz, Kara. "Breaking the Sound Barrier: The Rhetoric of the "Deaf Power" Movement." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Denver, 1991.
- Sills, David L., ed. "Dramatism." Vol. 7, pp. 445-446., *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*.
- Smith, Mahlon H. *Fellows: The Professional Base* [Website]. Rutgers, [cited October 7 2001]. Available from <http://religion.rutgers.edu/jseminar/complete.html>.

- . *The Jesus Seminar* [Website]. Rutgers, [cited October 7 2001]. Available from <http://religion.rutgers.edu/jseminar/westar.html>.
- . *Reactions to the Jesus Seminar* [Website]. Rutgers, [cited October 7 2001]. Available from <http://religion.rutgers.edu/seminar/reaction.html>.
- Soards, Marion. "The Five Gospels." *Theology Today* 52, no. 2 (1995): 272.
- Spong, John Shelby. "A Call for a New Reformation." *The Fourth R* 11, no. 4 (1998).
- . *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How a New Faith Is Being Born*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.
- . *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.
- . *Resurrection: Myth of Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.
- . *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.
- Stanton, Graham. *Gospel Truth? New Light on Jesus and the Gospels*. Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995.
- Stewart, Susan. "The Rhetoric of Alcoholics Anonymous." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1990.
- Strimple, Robert. *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus: An Introductory Survey of the Historical Roots of Gospel Criticism*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1995.
- Strother, Karen E. "On the Rhetoric of Asante's Afrocentricity." Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio University, 1995.
- Suwarno, Peter. "The Rhetoric of Unity and Freedom: Burkeian Analysis of Soekarno's Selected Writings, 1926-1933." Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio University, 1991.
- Tatum, Barnes. W. *In Quest of Jesus: A Guidebook*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.
- . *John the Baptist and Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar*. Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1993.
- . *In Quest of Jesus: A Guidebook*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982.
- Tuckett, Christopher Mark. *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 67 (1991): 346-60.

- . *Journal of Theological Studies* 46 (April 1994): 253.
- Vermes, Geza. *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*. Rev. ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.
- . *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.
- Weaver, Richard. *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.
- Westar. *Fellows of the Jesus Seminar* [Website]. Westar Institute, 2001 [cited 9/26 2001]. Available from <http://www.westarinstitute.org/Fellows/fellows.html>.
- . *Published Periodicals* [Website]. Westar Institute, 2001 [cited 9/26 2001]. Available from <http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/periodicals.html>.
- . *Westar Institute Description* [Website]. Westar Institute, [cited September 26 2001]. Available from <http://www.westarinstitute.org/Westar/westar.html>.
- "Westar Institute Membership Form." 2000.
- Wilkins, Michael J., and James Porter Moreland, eds. *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Re-Invents the Historical Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Willimon, William, and Marcus Borg. "Encountering Jesus: An Exchange between William H. Willimon and Marcus Borg." *Christian Century* 114, no. 31, Nov. 5 (1997): 1009-11.
- Witherington III, Ben. "Battling over the Jesus Seminar: Buyer Beware! Sentaionalist Claims Sold Here." *Bible Review* Xiii, no. 2 April (1997): 23-25.
- . *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995.
- . "The Wright Quest for the Historical Jesus." *Christian Century* 114, no. 33, Nov. 19-26 (1997): 1075-78.
- Wolin, Ross. *The Rhetorical Imagination of Kenneth Burke*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001.
- Wright, N. Thomas. "Five Gospels but No Gospel: Jesus and the Seminar." In *Crisis in Christology: Essays in Quest of Resolution*, edited by William R. Farmer. Livonia, Michigan: Dove Booksellers, 1995.
- . *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

———. *Who Was Jesus?* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.

Yee, Danny. *Danny Yee's Book Reviews: Review of "the Historical Jesus," by John Dominic Crossan* 1993 [cited July 9, 2002 2002].

## VITA

Melissa Hopson Sparks was raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1991 she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in speech communication from Louisiana State University. In the fall of 1991, she attended the Bradford University in Bradford, England, and studied philosophy and Shakespeare. In 1992, she commenced her study of rhetoric and performance studies at Louisiana State, and in 1995 she received her Master of Arts degree in speech communication. In late 1995, she began her doctoral studies in communication studies at Louisiana State under the tutelage of Dr. Andrew King. In 2003, Melissa Hopson Sparks received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in communication studies. She now resides in New Orleans and teaches in the Communications Department at Xavier University of Louisiana.