

Jesus Seminar Opening Remarks

The opening remarks of Jesus Seminar founder Robert W. Funk, presented at the first meeting in Berkeley, California, March 21-24, 1985.

We are about to embark on a momentous enterprise. We are going to inquire simply, rigorously after the voice of Jesus, after what he really said.

In this process, we will be asking a question that borders the sacred, that even abuts blasphemy, for many in our society. As a consequence, the course we shall follow may prove hazardous. We may well provoke hostility. But we will set out, in spite of the dangers, because we are professionals and because the issue of Jesus is there to be faced, much as Mt. Everest confronts the team of climbers.

We are not embarking on this venture in a corner. We are going to carry out our work in full public view; we will not only honor the freedom of information, we will insist on the public disclosure of our work and, insofar as it lies within our power, we shall see to it that the public is informed of our judgments. We shall do so, not because our wisdom is superior, but because we are committed to public accountability.

Our basic plan is simple. We intend to examine every fragment of the traditions attached to the name of Jesus in order to determine what he really said—not his literal words, perhaps, but the substance and style of his utterances. We are in quest of his *voice*, insofar as it can be distinguished from many other voices also preserved in the tradition. We are prepared to bring to bear everything we know and can learn about the form and content, about the formation and transmission, of aphorisms and parables, dialogues and debates, attributed or attributable to Jesus, in order to carry out our task.

There are profound and more obvious reasons we have decided to undertake this work. The more profound and complex reasons may be deferred until a subsequent session of the Seminar. A statement of the more patent motivations will serve this occasion adequately.

We are launching these collective investigations in the first instance in response to our students, past, present, and future. Once our students learn to discern the traditions of the New Testament and other early Christian literature—and they all do to a greater or lesser extent under our tutelage—they want to know the ultimate truth: what did Jesus really say? Who was this man to whom the tradition steadily refers itself? For a change, we will be answering a question that is really being asked.

Make no mistake: there is widespread and passionate interest in this issue, even among those uninitiated in the higher mysteries of gospel scholarship. The religious establishment has not allowed the intelligence of high scholarship to pass through pastors and priests to a hungry laity, and the radio and TV counterparts of educated clergy have traded in platitudes and pieties and played on the ignorance of the uninformed. A rude and rancorous awakening lies ahead.

What we 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. It is for the latter that we labor.

We are forming this Seminar in the second place because we are entering an exciting new period of biblical, especially New Testament, scholarship.

We have new and tantalizing primary sources with which to work, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Apocryphon of James*, the *Dialogue of the Savior*, and we stand on the verge of new study instruments, such as the *New Gospel Parallels*, the new *Sayings Parallels*, and perhaps even a new and more tolerable translation of other New Testament apocrypha.

Beyond these advances, we have learned to transcend the paradigms of scholarship set for us early in this century. We have learned our textual criticism, our source and form and redaction criticism, we have taken in the best—and some of the worst—of our German and English and French predecessors. But we are now moving on to different paradigms: to parables and aphorisms as metaphors and poetry, to narratology, to reader-response criticism, to social description and analysis, and to many other promising ventures. We are laying new foundations in editing and publishing primary source materials, new and old, and are building new edifices of interpretation on those foundations.

Perhaps most important of all, these developments have taken place predominantly, though not exclusively, in American scholarship. We need not promote chauvinism; we need only recognize that American biblical scholarship threatens to come of age, and that in itself is a startling new stage in our academic history. We may even be approaching the time when Europeans, if they know what they are about, will come to North America on sabbaticals to catch up, rather than the other way around. It is already clear that Europeans who do not read American scholarship are falling steadily behind.

The acknowledgment that a bonafide tradition of American New Testament scholarship is aborning brings me to the second large point of these introductory remarks. Creating a tradition of scholarship means that our work must finally and firmly become cumulative.

Cumulative is defined in law as evidence that gives greater weight to evidence previously introduced. In banking, cumulative interest is interest on both principal and accumulated interest. Scholarship is cumulative that lays down successive layers of evidence and interpretation of preceding layers.

I invite you to ponder the more than sixty books written by Fellows of this Seminar and its patron saints (Amos N. Wilder, Norman Perrin, Fred O. Francis). In some important respects these books represent cumulative effort: in and through these works a new tradition of scholarship is being formed. But in many respects, our work remains fragmented and isolated. We too often set about reinventing the wheel for each new vehicle we attempt to design and build. We are too often ignorant of each other's achievements. As a consequence, we tend to repeat the same major projects. Yet this phase of our history is coming to an end, as the emergence of this Seminar will attest.

In order to abet cumulative scholarship, I want to propose two preliminary steps. First, I am requesting Fellows of the Seminar to prepare prose accounts of their careers to be published in the *Forum*. These autobiographical sketches should indicate something of one's intellectual odyssey as well as the principal stations of endeavor along the way. In other words, we need to know the movements and pauses of our colleagues, in order better to understand how we got where we are. And it would make these sketches more interesting reading were they to include hints of the human.

As a second step, I am requesting that each Fellow provide a comprehensive bibliography of his or her publications for *Forum*. With the appearance of these bibliographies, Fellows need no longer be ignorant of the work of colleagues.

Beyond these two items, I am further suggesting that we review, in some depth, works of Fellows that are relevant for the Seminar. We have begun with Crossan's *In Fragments and Four Other Gospels*. These reviews will be published in *Forum*, of course. We should proceed to other works. I am subsequently going to propose that we tackle M. Eugene Boring's *Sayings of the Risen Jesus* and the recent work of Werner Kelber. But that will be only the beginning. I am herewith inviting Fellows to submit reviews of any works published by other Fellows for publication in *Forum*. If our work is to become genuinely cumulative, we must become acquainted with everything that has been produced.

These are only provisional steps that should lead up to the work of the Seminar itself. In making an inventory of the Jesus tradition and evaluating the items in that inventory, we must lay the foundations carefully. And we must then build painstakingly on those foundations. Only so will our work stand the tests of consensus and time.

Our endeavors must be cumulative and reciprocal in the last analysis in order to frame our individual proclivities and eccentricities by the highest degree of scholarly objectivity. My idiosyncrasies will be counterbalanced by your peculiarities. Our common finitude will be baptized in collective wisdom. (That does not make us gods, but it does obscure the consequences of original sin.) The result will be a compromise: not a sacrificing of integrity, but an acquiescence in the best informed common judgment. Our end product may look like a horse designed by a committee, that is, like a camel, but at least it will be a beast of burden tough enough to withstand the desert heat of powerful adverse criticism.

To heighten the risk of our program, I am proposing that we conduct our work in full public view. If we are to survive as scholars of the humanities, as well as theologians, we must quit the academic closet. And we must begin to sell a product that has some utilitarian value to someone—or which at least appears to have utilitarian value to someone. We could begin with our students—not a bad place to begin—but we could also undertake to advise our president, who regards himself as a Koine Kowboy, about the perils of apocalyptic foreign policy. And we might conceivably do so on the basis of this Seminar, to the extent that he is willing, not just to cite, but actually to heed, the words of Jesus. At all events, we must begin earnestly to report on our work to a wider public and then to engage that public in conversation and conference.

I come now to the final point. It is a rather large one and can be made here only in the skimpiest outline. It lies central to all the other points I have made or will try to make in the course of our investigations together.

Since we are Bible scholars, let us begin with the Bible as a whole. The Bible begins, we are wont to say, at the Beginning and concludes with a vision of the heavenly city, the ultimate End. Traditionally, the Bible is taken as a coherent structure: the Apocalypse is thought to bring things around again to their original state; the evil introduced into the garden in the first instance is eradicated in the last. And the beginning and end are viewed as wholly consonant with the real events that occur between them. Thus, the Christian savior figure is interpreted as belonging to the primeval innocence of the garden and yet predicting and precipitating the final outcome.

There are two things to be said about this scheme. First, we are having increasing difficulty these days in accepting the biblical account of the creation and of the apocalyptic conclusion in anything like a literal sense. The difficulty just mentioned is connected with a second feature: we now know that narrative accounts of ourselves, our nation, the Western tradition, and the history of the world, are fictions.

Narrative fictions, aside from recent experiments in "structureless" novels, must have a beginning and an end and be located in space. They must involve a finite number of participants and obviously depict a limited number of events. Moreover, it is required of narratives that there be some fundamental continuity in participants and some connection between and among events that form the narrative chain. It is in this formal sense that the Bible is said to form a narrative and to embrace in its several parts a coherent and continuous structure. And it is also in this same sense that the Bible, along with all our histories, is a fiction.

A fiction is thus a selection—arbitrary in nature—of participants and events arranged in a connected chain and on a chronological line with an arbitrary beginning and ending. In sum, we make up all our "stories"—out of real enough material, of course—in relation to imaginary constructs, within temporal limits.

Our fictions, although deliberately fictive, are nevertheless not subject to proof or falsification. We do not abandon them because they are demonstrably false, but because they lose their "operational effectiveness," because they fail to account for enough of what we take to be real in the everyday course of events. Fictions of the sciences or of law are discarded when they no longer match our living experience of things. But religious fictions, like those found in the Bible, are more tenacious because they "are harder to free from mythical 'deposit,'" as Frank Kermode puts it. "If we forget that fictions are fictive we regress to myth." The Bible has become mostly myth in Kermode's sense of the term, since the majority in our society do not hold that the fictions of the Bible are indeed fictive.

Our dilemma is becoming acute: just as the beginning of the created world is receding in geological time before our very eyes, so the future no longer presents itself as naive imminence. Many of us believe that the world may be turned into cinder one day soon without an accompanying conviction that Armageddon is upon us. But our crisis goes beyond these terminal points: it affects the middle as well. Those of us who work with that hypothetical middle—Jesus of Nazareth—are hard pressed to concoct any form of coherence that will unite beginning, middle, and end in some grand new fiction that will meet all the requirements of narrative. To put the matter bluntly, we are having as much trouble with the middle—the messiah—as we are with the terminal points. What we need is a new fiction that takes as its starting point the central event in the Judeo-Christian drama and reconciles that middle with a new story that reaches beyond old beginnings and endings. In sum, we need a new narrative of Jesus, a new gospel, if you will, that places Jesus differently in the grand scheme, the epic story.

Not any fiction will do. The fiction of the superiority of the Aryan race led to the extermination of six million Jews. The fiction of American superiority prompted the massacre of thousands of Native Americans and the Vietnam War. The fiction of Revelation keeps many common folk in bondage to ignorance and fear. We require a new, liberating fiction, one that squares with the best knowledge we can now accumulate and one that transcends self-serving ideologies. And we need a fiction that we recognize to be fictive.

Satisfactions will come hard. Anti-historicist criticism, now rampant among us, will impugn every fact we seek to establish. Every positive attribution will be challenged again and again. All of this owes, of course, to what Oscar Wilde called "the decay of lying;" we have fallen, he says, into "careless habits of accuracy." And yet, as Kermode reminds us, "the survival of the paradigms is as much our business as their erosion." Our stories are eroding under the acids of historical criticism. We must retell our stories. And there is one epic story that has Jesus in it.