Seven Problems with the Jesus Seminar by N. T. Wright

The Jesus Seminar, so-called, has been running out of steam. Its two flagship projects on the words of Jesus and the deeds of Jesus recently have been completed. The chairman, Robert Funk, has great agendas for reconstructing the whole of the first five centuries of Christianity, showing that the creeds and theology of St. Paul were mistakes. Funk wants to produce a very odd, thinned-down version of Christianity to replace traditional Christianity, but most of the significant members of the Jesus Seminar, like John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, are not following his lead.

The reason for the popularity of the Jesus Seminar, at least for a short time, was not because it was brilliant, cutting-edge, top-notch scholarship. Rather, its popularity lay in that it was saying something many Americans wanted to hear. The Jesus Seminar sounded scientific, while appealing to the popular imagination. These scholars were saying there is a different way of construing Christianity, which is neither the right-wing Protestantism nor the right-wing Catholicism with which we grew up — and it is certainly quite unlike televangelism.

The Jesus Seminar teaches that there is a different way of being Christian, which just involves having Jesus as a kind of “guru figure,” an interesting, savvy teacher who had some sharp things to say from time to time. Jesus made many people feel good about themselves and then left us to carry on with that same task. Obviously, such a presentation of Jesus Christ won’t do. There are seven problems with this interpretation. Ultimately though, the mistakes of the Jesus Seminar lead us away from the seminar itself to wider problems of biblical interpretation that have been unsettled for some time.

Jesus and the Story of Israel

The first problem is the danger of a methodology that takes Jesus out of the context of the story of Israel. First-century Jesus, for all their wide variety, were living within a story, a controlling narrative. It was the story of how Israel’s God would address, bless, and judge the world. They told that story in Scripture and sang it in their psalms. They retell their story in books like Maccabees; we see it in many texts from the first century — and we see it lived at Qumran. The Jesus Seminar, however, and many others beside, have said that all we know about Jesus are fragmentary sayings — a little nugget about this, a little wise saying about that, and a fragment of a parable here — that do not actually retain the stories. These were all made up later! The is a de-Judaizing of Jesus, a phenomenon that happened originally in postwar German scholarship as a way to reconstruct Jesus as a great teacher about the kingdom of God. The present wrenching of Jesus from his Jewish context has happened for a very different reason. The great prophet of postmodernity, Frederick Nietzsche, deconstructed big stories into collections of aphorisms, little fragments to try to make sense of a life. The Jesus of the Jesus Seminar has become a Nietzschan Jesus who is deeply non-Jewish-and actually deeply non-Christian. This is why the so-called Gospel of Thomas has been so popular, precisely because it gives you a set of detached aphorisms. It is what part of our culture wants. But, in the end, it is a lousy way of doing history.

The second problem that must be confronted is taking Jesus out of a Jewish apocalyptic worldview. In the first century, the book of Daniel was extremely influential, not because it was about the end of the world but because it was about how God was going to vindicate Israel and thus bring justice to the world. It was about God’s future for the world, not how He would end it. The world is good; God made it, and He wants it to be redeemed. Jewish apocalyptic, properly understood, was about history reaching the climax of the kingdom of God. The Jesus Seminar has completely relativized and set aside this teaching because it does not like fundamentalism-and it does not like 20th-century apocalyptic preaching. But the world of first-century Judaism is the world to
which Jesus belonged. He, too, was telling, and living by, and retelling the story of the book of Daniel. But He did it to say that the kingdom of God was coming in and through His work and that of His followers, and especially in and through His own fate, which would be unique.

### Messianic Movements

A third and very serious problem is that the Jesus Seminar takes Jesus out of the context of first-century messianic movements. It is often said that Jesus was not a would-be messiah at all—Jesus did not think of Himself as messiah. Most of His first followers, we are told, did not think of Him as messiah. Don’t believe it! Jesus belongs on the map of first-century messianic movements. There were at least a dozen messianic or quasi-messianic movements within 100 years before and after Jesus’ life. Jesus said, “Many will come in my name saying I am the one.” and “False messiahs will arise.” Jesus knew that would happen and had happened. Some people have thought that the words “Jesus Christ” were Jesus’ Christian name and Jesus’ surname. Jesus is His personal name, the name He has in His human nature—Jesus of Nazareth. Conversely, Christos means “the messiah,” the one who sums up God’s purposes for Israel in Himself and brings them to their destiny. To be truly understood, Jesus must be viewed in the context of first-century messiahs. If you ignore that, you misunderstand and misread Jesus, and the apologetic and evangelistic task will suffer.

The fourth problem, which again is not limited to the Jesus Seminar, is the attempt to reinvent Jesus as a wandering cynic teacher. The cynics were a school of philosophers who called themselves cynics, the Greek word for dog, because they went around barking and snapping at the heels of the righteous, religious, and respectable. They were socially subversive, living counterculturally to thumb their noses at the establishment. Crossan, in a dangerous phrase in his book *The Historical Jesus* (1991), refers to Jesus and His followers as “hippies in an age of Augustine yuppies.” I think he has probably regretted that phrase.

### Controversial Figure

The fifth problem presented by the scholarship of the Jesus Seminar lies in exactly the opposite direction—and it, too, is quite prevalent in some circles. It is the concept of the “noncontroversial Jewish Jesus.” To be historically credible, you have to picture a Jesus who is both comprehensible and crucifiable within first-century Judaism. That, simply stated, is a problem history must always deal with. Jesus was not simply a nice Jewish boy who taught nice Jewish truths about God and general truths about the kingdom to other Jews and who would have been horrified to think of a Church established in His name, with people worshipping Him and having a special meal where they broke bread and said that it was His body. This has been stated again and again. Often, the people saying this have been from among our own selves and who still, in some measure or other, consider themselves Catholic, Protestant, or whatever. They have lived all their lives with a docetic Jesus, that is a Jesus in fairyland, going about wearing a halo. When such people study history, they discover that Jesus was a Jew! They discover that it was exciting to be a first-century Jew; much happened in that historical epoch, and we can understand much about Jesus. If we are to be true to historical data, we arrive at a Jesus who is both comprehensible and crucifiable within the world of Judaism. Frankly, that is a most difficult task in a post-Holocaust world, when what we say is scrutinized and can result in the retort, “I think your Jesus is anti-Semitic; you must make sure your Jesus is not anti-Semitic.” But, how can one truly arrive at a Jewish Jesus who is anti-Semitic? Such an invention would be nonsensical. Rather, what you have in Jesus is critique from within, which is the noblest, oldest, and most Jewish form of critique.

The sixth problem to confront is a new and very powerful myth of Christian origins, one envisioning Jesus as a type of cynic teacher. Such a Jesus neither thought He would die a redemptive death nor rise bodily from the dead. The early Church, in turn, became divided between those who
followed Jesus the cynic teacher and those who invented this thing called Christianity. When they invented Christianity (which evolved into Paul and then into the Gospels that we have in the canon), they were inventing something more socially and politically comfortable, in contrast to the quite dramatic and subversive cynical or Gnostic teaching that Jesus actually gave. It is only then that we see the Church settling down at the end of the first generation into the steady line of thought that would take them to the settlement of Constantine when the Church became part of the empire. This, then, was when they had achieved their aim. This account of Christian origins is historically mistaken at every point.

The seventh problem is that most reconstructions of Jesus, including those most traditional, have great difficulty in integrating Jesus’ public career with His death and resurrection. The creeds tell the story of Jesus as though His public career did not exist. Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried and on the third day raised—what happened to the bit in the middle? Were Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wasting their time telling us about Jesus’ public ministry? Does it matter for our faith? The creeds happened for certain specifiable, historical, doctrinal, and theological reasons. But they do not tell the whole story. Indeed, in some of today’s liturgies, we have developed ways of telling the story that put the Gospels back in. Yet, still when we think of Jesus first being born of a virgin, we talk of the incarnation; when we think of Him teaching about the kingdom, we talk about social justice and ethics; and when we think of Him dying on the cross, we talk about atonement. But we never integrate the picture.

Putting Jesus Back Together Again

This brings us to one of the biggest problems that overshadows the whole quest for the historical Jesus—right-wing, left-wing, Catholic, Protestant, atheist, agnostic, you name it: What do we say historically about Jesus’ death? What do we say about His resurrection? How do they go with the agendas of His ministry? Simply stated, we have to put Jesus back together again. There is a huge cost: we have to face that pain. But if we, the people of God in Jesus Christ, cannot face pain in the power of the Spirit, then we are of all people the most to be pitied.

I propose seven steps to lead us forward in our quest.

First, we must integrate the things we do with the Gospels and allow them mutually to inform one another.

Second, at the personal level, each one of us must integrate our thinking and our praying. This will be deeply challenging. At the beginning of the book that Marcus Borg and I wrote together, we set ourselves the task of addressing the quest: How do we know about Jesus? I began by stating that we know about Jesus in two ways—history and faith. At once, I could feel friends and colleagues on either side of that great divide shaking their heads sorrowfully and saying, “You just can’t do that.” Some said, “If you bring faith in, you are no longer a historian,” while others said, “If you bring history in, you are no longer a man of faith.” This is like a three-story house, not like Bultmann’s three-decade universe, but a three-story house with an attic and a basement. The attic is where people live who want to live a long way from terra firma. They live by faith, but please don’t talk with them about history. The basement is where people live who do history all the time. They have their hands dirty with the reality of history, but they are never quite sure if there will ever be a staircase up to faith.

I want to live on the main floor of the house. I want all the treasures from the basement, and I want all the view from the attic. I want to live in that house and for it to be one house. Instead, I get shot at by people who live in the basement because they suspect that, because I am in the middle, I might actually be in the attic. I also get shot at by people in the attic because they think I am too near the earth. I want to have the best of both worlds, because it is God’s world, it is one world, and it is our world. We have to integrate history and faith.
More particularly, and third in terms of my suggestions, we must integrate the story of Jesus’ ministry with His death and resurrection. Here I follow Albert Schweitzer to this extent: by seeing Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God, which is at a moment in time of great crisis gathering over God’s people, Israel. This crisis is one that He has to confront alone. Here, Schweitzer was correct. Jesus knew that the storm clouds were gathering and that they were not simply wacky apocalypticisms. They took the form of Roman soldiers who crucified Jews outside the walls of Jerusalem. Jesus went ahead of His people to take the messianic tribulation upon Himself, and all the lines of the ministry point toward that moment. Once you make that move, breathtaking though it is, it has the force of a huge, historical screen — suddenly, the whole picture makes sense.

**Theology in History**

Fourth, we have the task of integrating history and theology; that is, of bringing together what we say about our historical research and what we say about God. If you take the historical picture of a Jesus who is announcing the crisis coming on Israel and the world, there is a straight line to Christian atonement theology. He took the biggest incarnational symbol existing and applied it to Himself. Israel’s God returning to Zion—what will that look like? Jesus literally staked His life on His belief that when Israel’s God returned to Zion, it would be neither with a flash of lightning nor like Ezekiel’s whirling wheels coming back through the desert; it would look like a young prophet riding on a donkey over the Mount of Olives in tears. There is a straight line from there to the highest incarnational Christology you could ever possibly want: Jesus is divine and human. It is earth-shattering.

The fifth step is to integrate all of that with our proclamation to the world. We have to retell the story of Jesus in drama, music, and poetry within “post-postmodernity,” which is where we’re moving toward quickly. Hurling dogmas at people’s heads will not do. Actually, it never really did. We can only tell the story by using story, symbol, and all the means available to us. There is wonderful talent out there, not just to do theology in an abstract sense but to live it profoundly. We must integrate all those tasks and pray for the grace to take this extraordinary, many-layered story, which as historians we can get our hands on better and better, and make it live for the world.

The sixth step is then to integrate this theology and action of evangelism with the healing and social justice ministries of the Church. One of my great joys as dean of Litchfield was that we had the chance to do in the cathedral what not all parish churches are able to do—explore symbolic ways of doing what I am proposing. One thing we did, which was a great joy to me personally, was a series of broadcast Advent services under the theme of “From Darkness to Light.” We invited a fine, blind theologian, John Hull, from Birmingham, England, to share on live television his experiences of our theme as a blind person. It was most moving and sent signals to the community quite different from the signals the Church sometimes sends. It was a symbolic way of telling the story that the world has been redeemed in Christ and now the message must go out to all: the marginalized, the poor, and those on the wrong side of the tracks.

**Liturgical Purpose**

Ultimately, using the Gospels in worship and prayer is not about coming back to a safe place. It is coming back to the place that is the lightning rod, the place where you are likely to find God uncomfortably at work. How do we know Jesus Christ in the Gospels? In all the ways we have examined, but supremely when we come together in worship and read the Gospels again and again to invoke Jesus. After all, what are we doing in the liturgy when we read the Gospels? We could give a stock answer: “We are reminding ourselves about the parable Jesus told.” It is a peg to hang a sermon on.
No, the Gospels in the liturgy are an invocation of Jesus, a celebration of Jesus, a giving thanks to God for Jesus. It is a way, both symbolic and actual, of being shaped by Jesus so that when we stretch out our hands to receive the body of Christ, it makes sense, because we know Jesus as historians and as people of faith, as people working in the places where society is hurting. It comes together: Jesus, the Gospels, God, and us. We bring that explosive combination together, with all our critical historical faculties awake. After all, God gave us a mind to use, not to leave at the church door when we come in. It is then that we find ourselves moving forward, by God’s grace, to the Jesus who comes to meet us both in the Eucharist and in the day of His appearing.

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