

Preface

The discipline of New Testament studies began the twenty-first century still unable to answer the basic question facing history-of-Jesus research: “How do we separate what belongs properly to Jesus from what is the material of the primitive community.” Nonetheless the failure of the discipline to solve that problem has not discouraged scholars from writing “biographies” of Jesus, which include both a confident extensive “course of life” and in-depth psychological studies of the man—all of this without first critically laying out for the reader’s evaluation exactly where they draw the line between the good-intended machinations of the early community and Jesus himself. In other words, they fail to specify in a separate analytical statement precisely what specific data their Jesus studies are based on.

In the two-hundred-and-fifty-year history of New Testament scholarship, only once has it happened that a group of scholars has gathered to debate this issue in the public eye, reached a consensus on what originated with Jesus, and then published the results with justifying rationale to support their decisions. This study, one would have supposed, should have become the point-of-reference where all future critical studies of Jesus began, either by building on it and arguing for additional sayings and/or arguing for the rejection of some of the Seminar’s accepted sayings. Such a dialogue never really began. The report of the Jesus Seminar in general was treated at best with benign indifference by the guild, and Jesus studies continued apace still without precise documentation of the specific sources relied on. In other words, the basic problem of Jesus studies is routinely simply ignored.

The results of the Jesus Seminar six-year study in one sense were negative in that most of what is attributed to Jesus in the gospels was found to have originated in the early faith communities—but not everything. Some bits and pieces of the sayings tradition in the collective judgment of the Fellows of the Seminar probably did originate with Jesus.

Since publication of the findings of the Seminar in 1993, in general only members of the Seminar in varying degrees have made use of the

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results. What is perhaps more surprising is that the rigorous historical-critical methodology used by the Seminar for identifying probable sayings of Jesus from the tradition appears not to have influenced the guild at large, judging from the spate of Jesus books published at the end of the twentieth century.

This study of the wisdom of Jesus is based on the findings of the Jesus Seminar. In the main I agree with the judgments we reached in our deliberations, but like all Fellows of the seminar I disagree here and there. In this study, however, readers will find all the sayings the Seminar found to originate with Jesus, plus a few others, including my rationale for adding some to the corpus while challenging others.

When compared to the language used by the sages of Israel and the apostles of the church, the language of Jesus is surprisingly different; little continuity exists between the three groups as represented by the literature. A primary aim of this study was to free the sayings of Jesus from the interpretive contexts of the evangelists and the explanations of modern scholars in order to encourage a reader's hearing of Jesus in his own idiom. In this study readers will find much analysis but little synthesis. Jesus is to be found, if at all, in the unglossed bits and pieces; diverse opinions are found in the syntheses.

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