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THE CHALLENGE OF THE JESUS SEMINAR TO BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP IN AFRICA

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In this article Dr. Je'Adayibe addresses the controversial Jesus Seminar and the critical views that have become rampant in western New Testament studies. Instead of embracing western scholarship wholesale, Dr. Je'Adayibe challenges African New Testament scholars to engage in New Testament scholarship with their own questions and seek their own answers from Scripture.

INTRODUCTION

The Jesus Seminar has emerged in the last two decades as the most controversial arm of New Testament scholarship. From 1985, the Jesus Seminar is the most celebrated offshoot of a spate of Jesus Studies which "has made Jesus into a media event."[1] The very critical and controversial views and methodologies adopted by the Jesus Seminar have once again brought the need for closer New Testament studies into the front burner. The precursors of critical New Testament Studies produced the various "quests" for the "historical Jesus" with Rudolf Bultmann and Albert Schweitzer as its indisputable champions.

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[1] James R. Edwards, "Who do scholars say that I am?" *Christianity Today*, March 4, 1996, p. 15.

Following in this wave have been similar controversial works that have added to the critical scholarship of the New Testament. Some of these works include: Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child and Sophia's Prophet*; Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins;* Barbara Thiering's, *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Unlocking the Secrets of His life*; and her, *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls*; Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*; John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography;* Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician*; and similar others.[2] These works seem to have provided the launching pad for the Jesus Seminar adventure.

Several observations and questions have been raised in respect of the objectivity, methodology and scholarship merit of the Jesus Seminar. One of such concerted reactions is the *Jesus Under Fire*, edited by Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, in which several evangelical biblical scholars have reacted variously to the Jesus Seminar, laying bare the Seminar's spurious arguments, methodology and their conclusions. Even Ben Witherington III has devoted a chapter on the "Jesus of the Jesus Seminar" in his *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth.*[3]

As the new discourse on the "Jesus Quest" or the "Jesus Debate" rages on, "what is rather striking is that it leaves out many older scholars, including many from Europe and the Third World."[4] The main interest and the thrust of this paper is drawn from the fact that, again, it is from the so-called West that this critical and some what "dangerous" scholarship is being born, nurtured and sustained, for the possible exportation to the Third World, including Africa. Any serious Biblical scholar in Africa, therefore, needs to be worried about the transportation of this approach to biblical scholarship in our Seminaries, Bible Colleges and Universities. This paper seeks to discuss the Jesus Seminar, their origin, aims, methodologies and

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[2] *Ibid.*, p. 16. N.T. Wright has also documented a list of critical scholars in his, *Who was Jesus?* to support this fact.

[3] Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, New Expanded Edition, Inter-Varsity Press, Illinois, 1997, pp. 42-47.

[4] *Ibid.*, p.43.

their fallacies, in order to provide information and safeguards to unguarded Biblical scholarship which may be dangerous to us in Africa.

The insights drawn therefrom might also help us to re-appraise new trends in New Testament scholarship generally.

THE JESUS SEMINAR

Origin

The Jesus Seminar began in 1985 led by Robert Funk. Other Board Members include: John Dominic Crossan, Fred Francis, Burton Mack, and Robert Tannehill. These and other members (Fellows) of the Jesus Seminar are mostly liberal scholars, trained in the most liberal theological institutions in America.[5] As Craig L. Blomberg has noted, "the Jesus Seminar does not come anywhere close to reflecting an adequate cross-section of contemporary New Testament scholars."[6] At best, the Seminar "involves not only Protestants and Catholics, but also Jews, New Agers, and people of no religious commitment, including Marxists and Atheists."[7]

The members of the Jesus Seminar derive their motivation from some basic aims and presuppositions which guide their methodology as well.

The Aims Include:

i. To find out the "real facts" about Jesus, that is, it's own version of the so-called "quest of the historical Jesus."

ii. To consider the identity of Jesus and the authenticity of the Gospel records.

iii. To replace the Church's picture of Jesus with a reconstruction it deemed more historically adequate and more serviceable to life in the world today.

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[5] Tim Lahaye, *Jesus: Who is He?* (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1997), 17.

[6] Craig L. Blomberg, "Where do we start studying Jesus?," In Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire* (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1995), 20.

[7] James R. Edwards, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

iv. Funk says of the Jesus Seminar, that, "we need a new narrative of Jesus, a new gospel, if you will, that places Jesus differently in the grand scheme, the epic story."[8]

The Presuppositions Are That:

i. The supernatural cannot occur. Thus, they deny the historic Christian faith, including the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, His substitutionary atonement, His resurrection from the dead and His ascension into heaven.[9]

ii. The witness of the gospels' writers cannot be accepted because they are passionately committed to what they are saying. Passionate witnesses, the Fellows assume, distort the evidence.

iii. The traditional Christianity is simply a colossal mistake, and the gospels are gross misrepresentations of Jesus.

Thus, the Jesus Seminar "hails itself as liberator from the 'tyranny,' 'oppression,' and 'blindness' of Jesus' Babylonian captivity by Orthodox Christianity."[10]

Today, the two famous published works under the auspices of the Jesus Seminar summarise their goals, methodology, findings and conclusions. They are: *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus – A New Translation and Commentary* (Macmillan 1993); and *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus,* (Harper Collins, 1998). They are their own standard translation called the *Scholars Version* (SV) of the Bible. These two books provide us some highlights into understanding the Jesus Seminar and their "successes" so far, which have also elicited reactions from other Biblical scholars. Other similar works have been published by some Fellows of the Jesus Seminar. A look at their methodology will help to give us a clue as to their observations, findings and conclusions.

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[8] Marianne Meye Thompson, "The Jesus Seminar." In *Theology News and Notes*, Vol. 46, No. 2, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, June, 1999, p. 16.

[9] Tim Lahaye, *op, cit.*, p. 18.

[10] James R. Edwards, *op. Cit.*, p. 15.

Methodology

What has attracted considerable interest to the Jesus Seminar is their methodology of research which has resulted into their findings and conclusions.

The Jesus Seminar uses the historical method of research along with the social-scientific criticism. The computer also plays an important role in their calculations. The Jesus Seminar meet to present papers, discuss texts, and "then, with self-conscious theatricality, vote on blocks of text (sometimes as entire section, sometimes as little as a word or two) using coloured beads."[11] The colour codes signify the following:

i. Casting a red bead means that the scholar thinks Jesus said this or at least something very much like it.
ii. Pink signals that he probably said that.
iii. Gray means that Jesus probably did not say this, but maybe something of his thought hides obscurely behind the passage.
iv. Black means that Jesus did not say this at all.

D.A. Carson has provided a hint as to how their calculations are made: On the grade point average scheme, Red = 3, Pink = 2, Gray = 1 and Black = 0. The ballots are added up and divided by the number of votes cast in order to ascertain the weighted average. The scale is then converted to percentages. For a text to be printed in red, it has to rate .7501 or higher. Pink print reflects .5001 to .7500, gray ranges from .2501 or .5000, and black .2500 or under.[12]

After subjecting the gospels to this method, the following were their findings:

i. In the overall, 82% of Jesus' words in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were judged inauthentic.
ii. Only 18% of the sayings of Jesus are lettered red, that is, those that Jesus is believed to have truly said. They form the fifteen sayings of Jesus, all of which are short and pungent remarks.

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[11] D.A. Carson, "Five Gospels," in *Christianity Today*, April 25, 1994, 30.
[12] *Ibid.*

iii. Only one saying in Mark makes the red letter. That is Mark 12:17 which says, "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

iv. That Jesus did not teach the Lord's prayer.

v. For the Gospel of John, the "Fellows" of the Jesus Seminar were unable to find a single saying they could with certainty trace back to the historical Jesus. The Seminar in fact regards "the Fourth Gospel as alien to the real Jesus, the Carpenter from Nazareth."[13]

vi. 16% of the acts attributed to Jesus could be coloured red or pink, and hence were likely actions done by or to him.

Their outline of Jesus' life is summarized as: He was baptized by John, had followers, but did not "call" them, was arrested, tried and crucified as a public nuisance. But Jesus did not walk on water, feed the multitude, change water into wine, or raise Lazarus from the dead, neither did he himself rise bodily from the dead.[14] Here, Jesus emerges neither as a miracle worker, eschatological prophet, nor even the Messiah.

The Fellows reluctantly admitted that Jesus probably functioned as today's "faith healer" and that the only "unusual curative powers" Jesus performed were in the realm of the psychosomatic and not the miraculous.[15] Surprisingly, the Seminar loves the "Q" which it has not seen more that Mark.

It also patronizes the Gospel of Thomas, an apocryphal Gnostic material which contains 114 sayings. Robert Funk, the leader of the Seminar has now called for a Canon Council to meet with the Jesus Seminar to "discuss whether the Book of Revelation should be retained as part of the New Testament, in view of the recent tragic events in Waco, Texas, and the rising abuse of the last book in the New Testament."[16]

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[13] James R. Edwards, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

[14] Marianne Meye Thompson, *op.cit.*, p. 18.

[15] D.A. Carson, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

[16] *Ibid.*

A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE JESUS SEMINAR

A look at the Jesus Seminar will show, as N.T. Wright has rightly noted that, "research into Jesus himself has long been controversial, not least among devout Christians."[17] In fact, "many Jesus scholars of the last two centuries have, of course, thrown scripture out of the window and reconstructed a Jesus quite different from what we find in the New Testament."[18] At best, these critical approaches to New Testament studies are refurbished and revised ideas concocted by French sceptics and German rationalists, in the likes of Voltaire, Rousseau, Hegel and others.

A critical appraisal of the Jesus Seminar shows some of their flaws which have in turn informed their conclusions. To reduce the sayings of Jesus into colour beads is to over-dramatise and simplify the Jesus story which has survived two millennia. Also to reduce the gospel material into twentieth century instruments of research including the computer techniques to a world in which these techniques were non-existent is grossly unfair and the results obviously predictable.

Understanding Jesus today entails a thorough background of the first century Palestinian world in which Jesus came involving political, social, religious and even economic contexts in which the gospel material evolved.

The presuppositions on which the Jesus Seminar derive their strength are also faulty. To assume that Jesus' disciples and other witnesses of the early Christian witness could not be relied upon, contradicts the main essence of eyewitness accounts in validating historical occurrences.

In the first place, even to attempt a reconstruction of the Jesus of the Seminar from the gospels entails an appreciation of why the evangelists wrote what they wrote. John 20:13 provides the essence: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." Unfortunately, the Seminar rejects Johannine materials entirely which it sees as "inauthentic." Of course, the major aim of John's writing was to combat Gnostic and docetic

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[17] N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (SPCK, London, 2000), 3.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

tendencies of the first century Christianity which the Jesus Seminar seems to have resurrected with added severe extremes. It is also true that, "modern scholarship has correctly shown that the Gospels are not strict biographies, but the standpoint of faith and for the purpose of furthering faith."[19]

Today, the literary dependence on critical research cannot truly deny the fact that early Christian churches were oral communities before the gospels were written and they form part of the source reservoirs of the gospel material. The first century Palestinian was not one of the written word but of the spoken word. It was a culture of memory but where good reporting was also endured (see Lk. 1:3). The probability therefore that, "the first Christians were concerned to retain and pass on the memory of what Jesus said and did remains undiminished."[20] To deny this fact is to "cut Christianity off from its historical foundation and fountainhead."[21]

What the Jesus Seminar also missed was what Derell L. Bock has observed, that, "in examining the wording of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, we must distinguish between the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus ("his very words") and the *ipsissima vox* ("his very voice"), that is, the presence of his teaching summarised."[22] Here, the point is that it is probable that "Jesus gave most of his teaching in Aramaic, the dominant public language of first century Palestine where Jesus ministered, whereas the Gospels were written in Greek, the dominant language of the larger first century Greco-Roman world in which the Gospels were addressed."[23]

What was important was the sense of what Jesus had said, not a precision of the verbal form. And as Dunn concludes on this, "any one familiar with the range of modern translations of the Bible will take the point without difficulty."[24] This, the Seminar finds difficult to accept as reasonable argument.

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[19] James R. Edwards, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

[20] James D.G. Dunn, *The Living Word* (Fortress Press Philadelphia, 1987), 35.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

[22] Darell L. Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive or Memorex?" in Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, *op.cit.*, p. 77.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] James D.G. Dunn, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

For Ben Witherington III, the problem with the Jesus Seminar is not in their conclusions and affirmations, but what they omit. These include Jesus' parables, controversy dialogues and eschatological sayings. But the Seminar accepts a Jesus who was a travelling sage, who traded in proverbial wisdom. They contend that Jesus was not a controversialist, never initiated debates or controversies, and was passive until someone questioned or criticized him or his followers. He was not a prophet or a radical reformer.[25]

Again, these "omissions" raise more fundamental questions for the Seminar to address. That Jesus was a man of wisdom is true, but he was not just a wisdom man. That Jesus was not a controversialist but a pacifist contradicts the gospel portrait of Jesus. The opposition which climaxed in his crucifixion is a typical example of his so-called controversial life and teaching. And if the Scribes and Pharisees did not see Jesus as a radical reformer and a self-proclaimed prophet, then the Jesus Seminar needs to proffer reasons why these sects rejected Jesus, whom even the Zealots saw as a potential revolutionary to lead them in battle against the Roman imperialists (Jn. 6:15). The Seminar has raised more issues in which they have not sufficiently addressed. And as Carson has noted, "the real irony is that, in some ways, the Jesus Seminar has itself become a parody of what it rejects – in tone and attitude, in its reductionism and self-confident exclusivism."[26]

THE JESUS SEMINAR AND BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP IN AFRICA

From our discourse in the foregoing, it is quite obvious that the Jesus Seminar poses a major challenge to biblical scholarship in Africa. Biblical scholars in Africa have a major task to be able to confront the so-called critical approaches to New Testament studies. This, they can do through sieving the "wheat" from the "chaff." It is not everything about biblical scholarship today that is necessary for our situation. Instead, these critical approaches have rather compounded our scholarship which in turn depict the level of our dependence on ready-made western imported theories and principles

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[25] Ben Witherington III, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

[26] D.A. Carson, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

of doing biblical research. African scholars must be able to ask their own questions and provide answers in respect to their own understanding of the biblical text and how it conveys meaning to them. African biblical scholars must also reject unguarded biblical scholarship that does not conform to the universally acceptable standards and norms. It is even worse, when such endeavour does not involve the African voice in its "quest." Africans must rediscover their leading rule in charting a new course for biblical scholarship from a very "neutral" and "objective" perspective. The challenge to African biblical scholars also calls for a commitment to literary documentation of its own researches, observations, and conclusions. Africans must project their own voice in respect of biblical scholarship today and need to join in the new biblical scholarship that emphasises the understanding of biblical backgrounds for more effective study. For any meaningful contextual endeavour using the biblical text for the African milieu (which is the new emphasis in Africa today), this challenge cannot be better emphasised. Our understanding of the Bible world from its original sources and experiences will better equip us to understand and teach it much more from an informed background, than depending on ideas and opinions of scholars whose interests, goals and methodologies are tailored to serve their own interests.

CONCLUSION

The premises upon which the Jesus Seminar derives their strength are based on the popular scientific fallacy of the denial of the supernatural. And to subject the gospel material, written within the world in which the supernatural was held in high esteem, is to use wrong instruments in doing biblical research. That scientific method of doing research through observation, testing, proving and experimentation are inadequate in biblical research is a fact that cannot be denied. This is a point which the Seminar has not appreciated. This explains why the Jesus Seminar simply rejected the miraculous elements of Jesus' ministry and his apocalyptic prophecies, which do not fit into their own models of interpretation. These were the same reductionist methods of the previous centuries that have characterised critical biblical scholarship with all their inglorious past. Thus, the Seminar has failed to reconcile its

conclusions with the basic historic evidence upon which the gospel material evolved and upon which Christianity was founded, nurtured and sustained for the past two millennia.

The Jesus Seminar could as well learn from the rich resource material of biblical backgrounds which have been popularised of recent in the writings of F.F. Bruce, Merill C. Tenney, Bo Reicke, E.M. Baiklock, Robert H. Gundry, Ralph Martin, Bruce M. Metzger, N.T. Wright, Craig S. Keener, Ben Witherington III, R.T. Rance and Craig L. Blomberg, among others. A research into extra-biblical material will shed more light on our understanding of the biblical text than has have been done by some of these scholars mentioned above, and will provide more viable and effective methodologies for modern day biblical studies than what the Jesus Seminar has achieved.