

Discovering Jesus in the 1st Century – the contribution of scholars

By way of explanation:

Firstly to respond to this topic and in particular “the contribution of scholars” requires me to present an introduction into the scholarship that I will be referring to. Secondly this will be a brief examination of the scholarship that has been documented and published in the last 30 years. I will in this paper concentrate only on the scholarship from North America, this is not to deny the scholarship of people in the UK or Australia such as Holloway, Armstrong, (although she works more out of the US than the UK), Keith Ward and Richard Swinburne. Much of what I will say about the influence of scholarship in North America has a parallel in the UK and more recently in Australia and New Zealand. The work of Geering, Jenks, Webb, Morwood, Leaves, Parkinson and Bodycomb and others are having a significant impact not only on the Australian/New Zealand scene but internationally as well.

Introduction:

The other day I was introduced to a neighbourly friend of my daughter. His name is Hugh and he is in his late 50's it was over a cup of coffee that I discovered that Hugh was not only erudite he was also analytical. Hugh's questions always led logically to more questions so I asked him what he did for a living. He runs a small business building and selling amplifiers and his background has been in engineering in the armed forces. He asked what I did for a living and when I told him he then made this statement: “I could take religion more seriously if it allowed itself to be subjected to scientific rigor. Where is the scholarship that explains, and attempts to understand or at least puts in context the contradictions, variations and inconsistencies of the Bible?”

As I said to Hugh, “It is there and whilst its influence is not mainstream it is gradually beginning to have an impact.” There are many Christians who will question the need for a scientific rational approach to matters of faith, however there is also a growing number seeking answers to their many questions and concerns. The rise in ‘progressive’ Christianity although small compared to the traditional church is making some ground.

Where is this influence coming from and why has it been so well received albeit by a minority of faith seekers?

To attempt to make sense of this influence in the time available I will concentrate in particular on the influence of the Jesus Seminar scholars from the Westar Institute. Who are they what are they about and why have they fostered our imagination? I will also attempt to explain the of this research popularity by drawing on the information of its scholars. Further, I will parallel this information with the journey of faith that most of us are travelling.

What is the Jesus Seminar and what has been its contribution? Why has this critical scholarship resonated with so many people?

Let me first begin with a Borg quotation used by Dominic Crossan in his ground breaking book, "The Birth of Christianity"

"The Gospels are literally the voices of their authors. Behind them are the anonymous voices of the community talking about Jesus. And embedded within their voices is the voice of Jesus as well as the deeds of Jesus. Constructing an image of Jesus – which is what the quest for the historical Jesus is about – involves two crucial steps. The first step is discerning what is likely to go back to Jesus. The second step is setting this material in the historical context of the first century Jewish homeland."
(p149)

In the late 1970's and early 80's there was a re-emergence of interest in the historical Jesus. Robert Funk and Dominic Crossan, frustrated with the controlling seminary and academic institutions and with the support of about thirty other scholars, established the Jesus Seminar under the umbrella of the Westar Institute. Their aim was to establish a method for the exchange, debate and research of critical New Testament scholarship of the historical Jesus. By critical I mean they are scholars who base their findings on empirical and factual data. They agreed to meet twice a year to initially analyze the gospels and to mutually share information so as to build a credible body of knowledge around the historical Jesus. Their scientific rigor led them to accept only that information that would pass the test of the rules of evidence. Their research was further examined by their thirty colleagues at the twice yearly meetings. (The experience of these meetings)

How did they achieve this? What was their method?

Firstly, as David Galston reports they started with the words of Jesus or as he explains it with a 'voice print'. The question they asked was, "what did Jesus say?" Because they believed that, "The quest for the historical Jesus starts not with a theory of history, but with the more unassuming task of hearing a voice." Therefore history, they concluded, emerges out of the construct of what is said and not as Schweitzer believed out of an historical model.

The first task of the Seminar was to make an inventory and classify all the words attributed to Jesus from the first three centuries CE. They collected more than 1500 versions of approximately 500 items. Not only did they examine the canonical gospels they also examined independent sources including those of Jewish Historians. In addition to the four canonical gospels the Seminar included all other known non-canonical gospels in their deliberations. The significant find at Nag Hammadi which included 'Sayings of Jesus' and a complete Coptic Gospel of Thomas, added significantly to their research. Further it was assumed by the scholars that for a period of some years stories about Jesus were circulated by word of mouth and it is possible that more than 10 years would have elapsed before anything was written down. It was perhaps another ten years before they were collated into the gospel form of Thomas. The members of the Seminar agreed to review each of these 1500 statements with the aim of determining which of them could be ascribed to Jesus, with a significant degree of probability.

As Dominic Crossan states in the DVD "Victory and Peace or Justice and Peace": "If we don't get the first century right then we won't get the 21st century right." Later in the DVD he also states; "If we don't get the theology of the first century right then we won't get the theology of the 21st Century right."

The Jesus Seminar established a set of criteria that determined what statements should be included in the list of 1500 they then canvassed widely in an attempt to ensure that they got it right they then developed criteria.

But first the seminar classified all of these statements into four categories being:

Parables

Aphorisms

Dialogues

Stories – containing the words/deeds of Jesus

From this data the Seminar now had to agree on two questions, firstly, they had to decide how they would reach decisions and secondly, how they would report their findings to a general public who were not familiar with critical New Testament scholarship.

In response to the first question the Seminar fellows agreed to adopt a method of voting as the most efficient way of achieving consensus regarding any given statement.

The second agreement reached was to use a method adopted from the King James Version of the Bible that is to print the 'authentic' words of Jesus in a red-letter edition. Being scholars many did not agree with an either/or classification, and determined that there should be more than one option available. It was finally agreed to have four categories rather than two. There are several versions of these categories but basically they can be represented as follows:

Red indicates: This statement accurately represents what Jesus said or did.

Pink indicates: This statement is likely to represent what Jesus said or did.

Gray indicates: This statement basically represents the thoughts of the author, but it may contain a kernel of accuracy.

Black indicates: The author imagines this was said or happened, or perhaps it is the author's attempt by metaphor to teach a truth.

One of the scholars suggested an unofficial version:

Red: That's Jesus

Pink: Sure sounds like Jesus

Gray: Well, maybe.

Black: There's been some mistake.

The Seminar used coloured beads dropped into a voting box in order for all members to vote in secret. Whilst there has been some criticism about this method it certainly allowed the Seminar members to gain a consensus and to move forward.

The results of these deliberations were later recorded in the 1993 Polebridge Publication "The Five Gospels – What did Jesus Say - The search for the authentic words of Jesus?" by Bob Funk Roy Hoover and Seminar members. Bob Funk and the Jesus Seminar followed this publication up with the "The Acts of Jesus" released in 1998.

It is important at this stage to make a qualification and to so I will use the words of Dominic Crossan; "this research to achieve it's aim of portraying the 1st century Jesus required the removal of sedimented layers to find what Jesus actually said and did and to do this with scholarly integrity and some methodological validity? This does not in any way conclude that the layers removed are illicit, invalid, useless or detrimental. It would be a mistake to claim that the first layer is "authentic" as if the other two layers were inauthentic." (The Historical Jesus" (p xxxi) "It is perhaps best to talk of 'original development' and "compositional layers" than authentic and inauthentic interpretations." (Borg's support of the post-Easter biblical account in John's gospel)

It is this research and the collective collegiality of the Jesus Seminar scholars that provided the material for the many books in the late 20th and early 21st Century. The implications of the original work of the Jesus Seminar over the last fifteen years has been and continues to be a valuable resource for exploring the historical Jesus. Why is it that these scholars and these writers have had such a profound impact on our understanding of Christianity? And why have some people in mainstream Christian Churches responded so positively?

The title of Marcus Borg's book "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time" captured for many the vision that grew from this research. People were indeed exploring the person of Jesus of Nazareth from a different perspective and for many it was a unique experience.

But why did it resonate with them? Why was this approach attractive?

Primarily this approach raised for many the unresolved questions that had plagued them for many years. For some it was the first time that scholars were supporting the right to question long held tenets of faith.

The historical Jesus was being portrayed more as a revolutionary sage than a divine being. Jesus points to the saving power of God to transform and heal rather than to claim this ability for himself. He is

egalitarian and inclusive in his table fellowship. He made forgiveness reciprocal and he advocated that the relationship with God does not require a broker. The research also indicates that Jesus had to be set free from the confines of the creeds and doctrines, in particular the doctrine of atonement. Jesus death as a blood sacrifice was in reality a later layer of information that had no basis in the findings of the Seminar. The research portrayed a radically different figure of Jesus than the one presented by orthodox Christianity. It in turn challenged our understanding of God as portrayed in traditional Christianity. These scholars paint a portrait of Jesus as an enlightened human being; a teacher of enlightened wisdom that came from his intimacy with God. He was a healer, whose healing powers came from his relationship with the divine and his understanding and experience of this reality. He was a social visionary and this came from his concern for the human misery he witnessed and the exploitation of the marginalized that he observed. Further that this plight was brought about by the power systems that pervaded all of life.

David Galston, the Canadian theologian mentioned earlier, writes in the Fourth R that the significant detailed research of the Jesus Seminar embraced the person – the historical Jesus and not a religious theme. He even goes further to suggest that the Jesus Seminar view compliments a post-modern understanding where Jesus is known by what he says and does and not who he is. This approach affirms that history emerges out of a construct of what is said and done.

A second, but equally valid reason for the Seminar Scholars popularity is that the scholars spoke and wrote in a language that could be understood by a wider audience. Theology was not just for the theologians. Let me just for a few moments recall some of the important phrases that have resonated with us. There are many great one liners from Bishop Spong such as: “believers in Exile”, “The church alumni”, “Every preacher should have an illuminated sign behind them that continually flashes metaphor, metaphor”, “Jesus embraces life and not a religion” or the favourite of many “To love wastefully and be all that one can be”. They have become part of the language we use to illustrate where we differ from mainstream Christianity.

B.B Scott’s title of his book “Re-imagine the World” explains that the parables of Jesus are in fact asking each hearer the question, “what would the world be like if God was in control and not Caesar

Augustus.” Scott invoked us to put ourselves in the position of an eye-witness and in so doing allowed us to experience the vitality of the message. Anna Funda in her book “All that I am” says “How else can we know anyone, love anyone but by imagining ourselves inside their skin.” “By imagining we make the events of history real again.

Robert (Bob) Funk scholar, pioneer of the Seminar along with John Dominic Crossan and writer of such books as, “Honest to Jesus” and “A Creditable Jesus” began to paint a picture of the historical Jesus. His work on “the Acts of Jesus” is a hallmark of research. He distilled, to a manageable form, the implications of the Seminar’s research into the historical Jesus in his book “Honest To God”, in which he lists 21 important aspects of the research and it’s importance for future generations. Funk’s thought pattern is logical and coherent and as with many of these scholars his work is easy to read and digest. He is committed to the concept of ‘Intellectual Integrity’ and this is clearly displayed in his work.

Marcus Borg holds a special place for many people in the progressive movement I think because of his reasoned and reasonable approach to the scholarship. His early writings such as “The God We Never Knew” and “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time” were ground breaking as was his explanation of the ‘pre and post Easter Jesus’ and the ‘Earlier and Emerging Church’. We can recall his one-liners such as the “Thin Places” where Borg encourages to us look for the sacred in the ordinary. Both he and Dominic Crossan coined the term “I do not believe this ever occurred but I do believe it to be profoundly true”, which made so much sense to those of us who were searching for meaning and relevance in the traditional Bible stories. Many of you have studied Borg’s book “The Heart of Christianity” and some of you had difficulty in putting the book down until you had read it.

I wish now to turn to the scholar who has had the most influence on my thinking - John Dominic Crossan. The first book I read of Crossans was “Jesus a Revolutionary Biography”. I was immediately taken by its measured frankness and the way that Crossan employs the concept of “matrix” that is to put the events at the time of Jesus into their social, economic, cultural, military and religious context. The multiplicative nature the elements of the matrix need to be understood if we are to put into context the life of Jesus. His terms “Companionship of Empowerment” and “Open Commensality” have become common phrases for us.

These writers and many others have taken the early research and introduced us to the logical progression these findings take us. They have provided us with practical ways of living out our faith in liturgy and in the everyday practicalities of making sense of our lives.

However all of the information derived from this disciplined scholarship could only have impact if the mood of audience is sufficiently in sync to resonate with it. On considering this matter I became aware of an interesting parallel between the information being supplied to the general Christian community and the growth in the individual's spiritual development which I have termed "From, Doubt to Deconstruction to Discovery". One of the members of our Network explained that he was about to abandon the church when by chance he heard Bishop Spong delivering an address in Canada in 1996. He speaks of this event as a renaissance. Many of you had been questioning the orthodox interpretation of the life of Jesus you questioned the miracles, the virgin birth, the resuscitated body at the resurrection. Many people embarked on an attempt to achieve at least a modicum of 'intellectual integrity' by employing what Wesley refers to as "Reason" and "Experience" and to use these instruments in conjunction with Scripture and tradition to increase your understanding of the sacred. Wesley claimed that 'reason' should be employed to understand what scripture declares and if scripture conflicts with 'experience' ask why.

People who declared their doubts were ostracized for doing so, some were even forbidden to raise these matters in the confines of their church. Of course when people discovered that the theological seminaries had for many years questioned traditional interpretation of scripture but had not declared these doubts publically, they asked the question, sometimes in anger, "Why weren't We Told?" or in some cases the anger was directed to clergy, "Why didn't you tell us?"

The Jesus Seminar scholars along with others have offered us a way of "Living the Questions" they justified our doubts, encouraged us to discuss and debate even the most fundamental tenets of our faith and they helped us deconstruct in a positive way. In fact their research gave us the evidence to support the doubts we had harboured for years. More than this we discovered the message of the historical Jesus without many of the layers of interpretation and this is a liberating and empowering experience. So as we have travelled along our spiritual journey from Doubt to Deconstruction to

Discovery the work of the scholars has supported, justified and enlightened us. It has been a powerful resource, but most importantly it has changed our view of Jesus and called into question our image of God.