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A Solid Foundation?

The Seven Pillars of
the Jesus Seminar
Re-examined



A DARE BOOKLET

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Second printing 2001

Designed by Julia Soong

Published by Digory Designs
#2-5311 Lackner Crescent
Richmond, BC
Canada V7E 6B7

Printed by Lulu Island Printing Ltd, Richmond BC

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A couple of years ago, my husband and I visited an Episcopal church in San Francisco whose priest claimed to interpret the New Testament, 'according to the assured results of modern scholarship.' You may not be surprised to learn that this rector was aware of only one school of modern scholarship—that associated with the California-based Jesus Seminar—and that he had never read or even considered the dissenting views of scholars who are uncomfortable with the

Seminar's assumptions, methods and conclusions. This was particularly ironic since this church prided itself on its inclusiveness in many ways, yet its tolerance was married to a kind of fundamentalist liberalism about Jesus research!

To hear the newspapers, and to read the popular tomes on Jesus today, one would indeed assume that there is a consensus on what Jesus said—only about 18% of what is recorded in the four gospels found in the Bible, say the specialists. In fact, no such broad negative consensus on the New Testament exists among the scholars. Books and articles that present a unified picture of 'received opinion' do so by claiming to represent the views of 'reputable' or 'serious' scholars—and then leaving out careful work done by such well-known writers in the field as E.P. Sanders, Ben Meyer, Bruce Chilton and N.T. Wright, all of whom are much more optimistic about the usefulness of the New Testament for historical research on Jesus. My first caution, then, in evaluating research into Jesus is to watch out for over-ambitious statements which claim to speak for everyone in the field, for scholarly 'of courses' and 'no doubts' that refuse to acknowledge and, indeed, obscure the fact that there are many different views among scholars engaged in Jesus research.

Just before Christmas 1993, the Jesus Seminar made public its first set of findings in a book entitled *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. We need to ask three questions of this work: What are the writers' reasons for their work, both explicit and implicit? Why are they writing? Second, how accurate is the general picture of first century society and of the New Testament gospels sketched by these writers? Finally, what picture of Jesus emerges in this presentation? We will incidentally consider the scholarly tools being used by the writers, and we will also consider for whom this book (and others by the same group) is written.

A modernist work

Before inspecting these, however, let's pause to hear the tone for the message of *The Five Gospels*. It is sounded from the very outset with this subtitle: *The Search for the Real Jesus: Darwin, Scopes and All That*. With this title, and the opening words that follow it, the message of the book is presented, not as a single study within a particular, isolated scholarly field, but as part of a larger movement—of liberation from the tyranny of the church, and from the tyranny of anti-scientific, Christian prejudice and superstition. Ben Meyer, a New Testament scholar but not a member of the Jesus Seminar, comments ironically:

*Leading scholars...have here cast themselves in a heroic truth-telling role, battling dark forces in the cause of honesty on the Bible. (This in our anything-goes world? So it seems.)*¹

So, the introduction speaks of 'this scientific age' in which

*[t]he Christ of creed and dogmas, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope.*²

In this way, against an Enlightenment and rationalistic backdrop, the editors, Funk and Hoover, set the scene for their discussion of the 'tumultuous search for the Jesus behind the Christian facade of the Christ'²—finishing, of course, with the 'state of the art' in this search: what else but the results of the Jesus Seminar? Moreover, they explain that, unlike their predecessors, who have hidden contemporary results from the public for fear of reprisal from the religious, they intend their work to be an 'open window' to the public, braving the disapproval of the fundamentalists and dogmatics.

This, then, is a thoroughly 'modern' project: I count the word 'modern' at least five times in the first five pages, and

note the constant use of attendant words like ‘factual’, ‘contemporary’, ‘reality’ and ‘fictional.’

Why this project?

As we open the first pages of *The Five Gospels*, we find that it uses the metaphor of a building, and speaks of ‘the seven pillars of scholarly wisdom’ upon which the building is erected. These pillars are a curious conglomerate, but an examination of them will show the ‘why’ of the research project, exposing both the overt and more implicit reasons which have brought these scholars together.

Pillars 2, 3 and 4 set out principles that are unremarkable since they are almost universally accepted in the mainstream of Biblical scholarship. Pillar 2 states that the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are closer than that of John to the historical Jesus. Pillar 3 suggests that Mark was the first gospel to be written, and that it then had an influence on the writing of Matthew and Luke. Pillar 4 restates the hypothesis of a lost document called ‘Q’ which explains the relationship between the gospels of Matthew and Luke. (Q is the fifth gospel of the book’s title.) With these three pillars, the Seminar makes explicit, for the benefit of the theologically uneducated reader, the presuppositions used by most New Testament scholars in their work.

The authors fail to point out, however, that some recent scholars have argued for authentic historical memories in the seemingly ‘spiritual’ gospel, John, that there are still a few scholars who are not convinced that Mark was the first gospel to be written, and that it is mainly in North America that Q as a distinct document has been given the status of fact rather than theory. In a sense, these are technicalities, but they also

provide a warning that even here we have not reached absolute bedrock consensus in New Testament studies.

Much more interesting is the first key pillar: their writing, they explain, is based on the ‘basic distinction between the man Jesus and the Christ of the creeds’,² a distinction first made by the 18th century sceptic, Reimarus. The Seminar has adopted Reimarus’ challenge—that Christianity is based on a colossal mistake—and transformed it into a pillar, or an assumption.

The seventh and last pillar is equally bold, if slightly crumbling: Pillar 7 declares that the burden of proof no longer lies with those who seek to demonstrate that the gospels are non-historical. Rather it lies with those who wish to prove that they *are* historical. That is, tradition and the Bible are, according to the Jesus Seminar, unhistorical until proved otherwise. Although this may describe the prejudices of many who engage in Jesus research, it is certainly not established as a given among scholars. Rather, the sane advice of New Testament scholar Willi Marxsen speaks to those doing historical work from within and from outside of the Christian tradition:

*If I want to declare something to be historical, I must prove it. If I want to declare something to be unhistorical, I must prove that too.*³

Pillars 1 and 7, then, expose the presuppositions of the Jesus Seminar. They assume a great disparity between the Jesus of history (the person who actually lived) and the Christ of faith (the spiritual figure Christians worship), and that the gospels should be considered non-historical, until proven otherwise. In building upon these statements, these scholars see themselves in a battle to free the naive and uneducated who are ‘held captive by prior theological commitments’⁴—that is,

those who prefer not to face facts because they fear their beliefs will be disturbed. The 'why', then, is partially answered for us: this building is being erected in order to provide an alternative place for those escaping 'fundamentalism' (however this is defined).

The end in the beginning

The answer to 'why build' becomes even more clear when we examine the purpose behind pillars 5 and 6 and how the Jesus Seminar proposes to build.

Pillar 5 states that Jesus should not be understood as having preached about the end of the world and the events surrounding it (*eschatology*) or about an impending cataclysm (*apocalyptic*). Pillar 6 notes the difference between our 'print culture' and ancient 'oral culture', and says that the actual words of Jesus will be found not in long dialogues, but in 'short, provocative, memorable, oft-repeated phrases, sentences and stories'.⁵ Taken together, these two statements actually build into the starting point the picture of Jesus which the Seminar seemingly finds at the end. In other words, the authors appear to have decided beforehand what they are going to find in their research. But this is a picture that needs to be argued, not assumed.

Fellows of the Jesus Seminar, notably Robert Funk, Dominic Crossan and Burton Mack, reject a Jesus who spoke eschatologically or apocalyptically. Many other scholars through the ages and into today, however, have understood that Jesus spoke in exactly such a manner. Some have believed that he intended to predict the end of the physical world, as Albert Schweitzer believed. Others understand Jesus to have been proclaiming judgment against his own nation and against the Temple in Jerusalem—that is, he was speaking about the end

of the order of things as the first century Jewish community knew it. This is the view of scholars such as E.P. Sanders and N.T. Wright. This picture of a non-apocalyptic Jesus, then, can hardly be assumed without any argument as a 'pillar' of New Testament research when it has been a point of contention for at least a hundred years!

Having cleared the way by removing the prophetic, apocalyptic-sounding Jesus, the Seminar presents to us instead a Jesus who speaks wise, brief words. Of course, scholars who believe that only this form of teaching can be accurately remembered in an oral culture would expect to find exactly this kind of Jesus.

So then, these pillars point to our 'why'. The Jesus Seminar erects its building as an alternative to a dangerous edifice they would like to see evacuated, a building which they consider to be built on the pillars of apocalyptic and fundamentalist thinking. Many fellows of the Seminar have been in vocal reaction against today's popular American stress on the 'end times'. In a way, we can see their work as a serious backlash, an attempt to rescue the figure of the historical Jesus from apocalyptic theology. They perceive that apocalyptic thinking in the U.S. is sociologically and politically dangerous, that writers like Hal Lindsay⁶ and Grant Jeffrey⁷ have indoctrinated the American religious right, and that Jesus could never have indulged in what they consider such unethical teaching.

For an interesting 'revelation' of the motives shared by these scholars, consider Burton Mack's fearful words concerning the 'kinky logic with which apocalyptic Christian mentality has rationalized authority, power, innocence and violence' in North America.⁸ I am sympathetic to their assessment of the shallow thinking of popular writers in this area. However, for them this defines apocalyptic, and, in their view, Jesus could never have spoken this way, in judgment against his contem-

poraries—even though his predecessor John the Baptist did. ‘Jesus rejected that mentality’ when he returned from the desert, and instead he went on to shock the urbane inhabitants of Galilee with wise and provocative words about a new society of members equal within God’s kingdom.

Why the Jesus Seminar project? To erect a new building, out from under the controlling inspection of the Church (as though this exists today!), to avoid dangerous thinking about the end of the world and judgment, and to salvage for the 20th century a Jesus who will not feed the fantasies of fanatics. Thus this book (and others like it) are not, as they would like to claim, simply providing an ‘open window’ into the neutral and dispassionate world of modern scholars who use scientific and skillful methods to find whatever kind of Jesus naturally emerges from their neutral study. Like every other investigator of a significant and timely topic, the Jesus Seminar comes to its study with its own hopes and fears. In fact, it has a missionary aim running alongside its claims to neutrality and rationality. Why this study? To let the public in on the methods and result of their studies—yes; but also to convince the public of this way of looking at Jesus, a Jesus cleansed of apocalypticism, prophetic judgments and totalizing claims.

Palestinian society in Jesus’ time

What about the building that is constructed upon these pillars? One of the curious aspects to this new building is that it stresses the Græco-Roman character of society in first century Palestine, rather than the Jewish background with which many readers of the New Testament are more familiar. Thus, for the Seminar, in order to understand Jesus, a familiarity with classical philosophy and rhetorical ways of argumentation will

be as important as, or more important than, an understanding of the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish milieu. Jesus for them is best understood not as a figure like the Old Testament prophets, but as a peasant philosopher, speaking to his brothers and sisters who lived in a society deeply influenced by Greek thought and culture.

From this perspective, peasants in Galilee, far removed from Judah, would have been far more concerned with social problems in their own neighborhood than with the fate and fortune of the Temple far away in Jerusalem. Their problems made them wide open to a preacher like Jesus who came with a vision of a radical, simple lifestyle, intending to reform the Galilean villages, suggesting that they could be happy hippies in an Augustan yuppie age. In line with this view of a completely Hellenized culture, the writers of *The Five Gospels* actually question⁹ whether or not Jesus spoke mainly in Aramaic or in Greek—this, despite the reminiscences in the gospels of Jesus speaking in Aramaic (for instance, *Talitha cum* and *Ephphatha*),¹⁰ and the early Christian Aramaic prayer (*Maranatha*).¹¹ It may be interesting to speculate about the bilingual capacities of Jesus: but to seriously suggest that Greek has an equal claim to Aramaic in our picture of Jesus and his contemporary Galileans and Judeans is absurd! It is the sort of question that drives us to wonder about the accuracy of the Seminar’s picture in general. Think of what we know about minority groups in huge monolithic cultures: they do not easily lose their identity. Is it likely, therefore, that a Jew reading Torah and the Hebrew Bible would have forgotten his or her roots, even in the heyday of the Roman Empire? Is there, perhaps, some unconscious anti-Semitism operative here, as scholars find the ancient Jewish world of prophecy, lamentation and judgment so very bewildering in the light of our upbeat age?

A new picture of Jesus?

So, what kind of Jesus emerges after this work? A Jesus who speaks the beatitudes ('Blessed are the poor' etc.)¹² but none of the corresponding 'woes' ('Woe to you, hypocrites' etc.).¹³ Colourfully, *The Five Gospels* substitutes 'Congratulations' for 'Blessed are you' and 'Damn you' for 'Woe to you'—and then comments that Jesus, who instructed his disciples to love their enemies, would never have told people to 'go to hell'.¹⁴ In the teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount, we will be happy to see a Jesus who calls us to 'love your enemies',¹⁵ who tells us to 'turn the other cheek',¹⁶ and who told the parable of the good Samaritan,¹⁷ about loving our neighbour. However, Jesus, according to the Jesus Seminar, gives no words of judgment, makes no claim to be 'Son of Man' or to have a special relationship with God as his Father. He says nothing about his inevitable suffering or death,¹⁸ and never told his disciples to pick up their cross and follow him.¹⁹ Jesus might have seen Satan fall like lightning from heaven,²⁰ but probably did not promise his disciples that some would see God's rule come in power.²¹

Decisions about these sayings were made by the fellows on the basis of such criteria as these: whether Jesus speaks them in several places, in different kinds of gospels (those found in the Bible and those found outside); second, by determining whether a saying whose authenticity is uncertain fits with other things Jesus definitely said; and third, on the basis of whether the sayings seem to reflect earlier Jewish or later Christian thinking. The problem with this last criterion is that if you have, for instance, already determined that John the Baptist spoke with judgment and apocalyptic flair, then when similar sentiments are found on the lips of Jesus, you will use this 'tool of dissimilarity' to discredit the authenticity of Jesus' saying because it could have come from Jewish or later

Christian thought, not from Jesus himself. You may well conclude that you know for certain at least some of what Jesus said, but the Jesus you end up with will be an idiosyncratic, peculiar Jesus—a 'Jesus' who spoke in terms completely unlike those of his predecessors, and whose teaching was never repeated later by his disciples. It is as if we were to analyse the speech of any famous person today—or indeed our own speech—and discount as inauthentic anything that had been said by someone beforehand, or that was repeated by anyone else afterwards. The researcher would end up with a very short, quirky list of 'authentic' quotations, totally divorced from the social or historical environment. In some cases, scholars might even conclude that we did not exist at all because we had said nothing totally original!

We need to realize, too, that this consensus picture of the Seminar actually obscures strong disagreements about the authenticity of the words of Jesus. Fellows could vote on the words by using red, pink, grey and black beads, suggesting a range of opinion from strong acceptance down to strong rejection of the words as authentic. The voting was weighted, with an overall colour emerging that may disguise sharp discrepancies in voting: a grey vote (perhaps Jesus said this) might well have emerged from those who voted red and those who voted black.

At any rate, the picture that emerges of Jesus is the picture of a wise, sharp-tongued and droll teacher, who calmly but astutely questioned the status quo, and who pointed his listeners to an egalitarian society in which no one was needed to mediate God's grace or truth any more, but in which each individual had autonomy and equal dignity.

The idea of Jesus' resurrection (which could not have happened; after all, moderns know better) is no longer central. Neither is the crucifixion: Jesus' earliest followers could not

have looked to their leader as a mediator between themselves and God because (according to the Seminar) he had pointed beyond himself to an egalitarian rule of God, in which his death had no special role. The accounts of Jesus' suffering and death, which play such a prominent role in all four gospels in the New Testament, form no part of the historical picture, but were a later addition, based on what Crossan calls the 'Cross Gospel'—a gospel which he has reconstructed from a passage of a second century document known as The Gospel of Peter.

As a laconic, retiring sage, Jesus did not initiate debate or dialogue, nor offer to cure people, nor did he make pronouncements about himself, especially any claims to be God's Anointed. Rather, he told stories and spoke terse words that cut against the social and religious grain and shocked his contemporaries, and used humour, exaggeration and paradox, as well as everyday imagery, to point people towards a new vision of life. Strictly speaking, he himself was not necessary, but it was his words which made his followers see new possibilities for themselves.

I should explain that I have filled out some of the details in *The Five Gospels* by reference to other, more complete, pictures of this 'cynic philosopher' Jesus made popular now by Dominic Crossan and Burton Mack, among others.²² Nevertheless, the 'rules of evidence' about what Jesus did and did not say are taken directly from *The Five Gospels*, and represent the biases of these writers as a whole.

It is important to notice at this point that the picture of Jesus recovered here depends wholly on decisions about what he did or did not say. There is no discussion about the actions of Jesus, about the stories of his action in the temple, his cursing of the fig tree, his blessing of children, nor of the overall shape of his life, his ministry, death and resurrection. In fact the Jesus Seminar gives priority in terms of historical reliability

to the hypothetical gospels, not included in the Bible, which contain the words of Jesus but not the life context in which they were spoken. Pride of place is given to the theoretical gospel Q, especially its first 'layer' or earliest edition (for scholars have now been excavating this hypothetical gospel for different layers, or editions) and to parts of The Gospel of Thomas, a second-century collection of Jesus' sayings. These are often looked to for authentic words, on the grounds that they present simply the words of Jesus, unembellished by fabricated settings or stories.

The fellows have been now for some time moving beyond an analysis of words of Jesus to engage upon a voting process about his activities. Their findings are available in various reports, beginning with a comparison of John the Baptist and Jesus.²³ It should not be surprising that events such as the crucifixion do not figure significantly in their interpretation of Jesus' actions, since these have already been disqualified *a priori* as not germane to his message. However, a question we could ask about memory is: Do we tend to remember disembodied words of the people we love? Is it not more natural to say something like, 'I remember, when my friend, or grandfather, was doing such and such a thing, he used to say this and that'?'²⁴ That is, perhaps the whole view of oral tradition and memory is in error here. We tend to remember stories with words included rather than discrete, detached sayings. The entire enterprise of judging words in isolation may well be inadvised.

Most ironic of all is that, in attempting to free the reader from the 'tyranny of the Church', the Jesus Seminar has, in effect, set up for us a new caste of priest—the specialist in New Testament and Christian Origins. The implication is that we needed the whole slew of late nineteenth and twentieth century specialists, culminating in the Jesus Seminar, to tell us

what Jesus really was like, to peel away the great layers of conspiratorial myth from our gospels, and to lead us into all truth. Moreover, this is *noblesse oblige*. Funk declares:

Academic folk are a retiring lot. We prefer books to lectures, and solitude to public display. Nevertheless, we have too long buried our considered views of Jesus and the gospels in technical jargon and in obscure journals. We have hesitated to contradict TV evangelists and pulp religious authors for fear of political reprisal and public controversy. We have been intimidated by promotion and tenure committees to whom the charge of popularizing or sensationalizing biblical issues is anathema. It is time for us to quit the library and speak up.²⁵

So, they have spoken up—but often at the risk of generalizing about scholarly agreement, and almost always at the risk of simplifying difficult issues in favour of a clear and attractive picture. Those of us involved in the discipline have questions to ask about the decisions taken, the assumptions made, the methods applied, the dating suggested for various gospels, inside and outside of the Bible. Every reader should have questions about the view of Jesus that emerges in this new building project. It seems, in sketching a non-assuming, non-judgmental, bright, always egalitarian Jesus, that the builders have forgotten their own caution: ‘beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you.’²⁶ No doubt they were addressing church members, warning them against finding only the traditional saviour and mediator kind of Jesus. But where except in the world of the late 20th century, postmodern academy would a figure like the Seminar’s Jesus fit so easily? He calls individuals to immediate and un-mediated connection with the divine, he gives no priority to a life of humility and suffering, and he pokes fun at the establishment. He never claims a particular role in salvation, nor utters a word of judgment. He has no

vital interest in the Jewish Temple, but reminds everyone that ‘what the world needs now is love, sweet love.’

We are left with a sanitized, thoroughly academic Jesus who dares to challenge, but will never be ill-bred enough to pronounce judgment, nor to speak of his own unique role in God’s plan. He teaches about an egalitarian society, but is uninterested in service and humility. He is integrated with the social realities of Roman empire, but disconnected from the old Jewish Temple and its traditions. Only the Jesus Seminar specialists can open this world to us, because the gospel writers themselves, victims of ‘a massive misunderstanding’ of Jesus, have clouded over the true picture.²⁷ But I doubt that, in the final analysis, this Jesus, unlike the original one, will provoke much controversy or attract many followers. For we have heard this story many times, and do not need to hear it on the lips of Jesus.

We see, I think, the limitations and near-bankruptcy of projects like this that are built on reaction—reaction against fundamentalism, patriarchalism, the theology of sacrifice, and apocalyptic thinking. Reaction does not make a good foundation.

The Jesus we see in the gospels is a beckoning and bewildering figure, the keystone that the builders rejected, a person who fulfills but also explodes convenient or congenial moulds such as the Seminar’s cynic Jesus, or their teacher of an unmediated spirituality.

A fresh look

Considering the false starts in views of Jesus and history that we have considered, should we just scrap the building project? Why bother our heads about Jesus and history at all?

Why not just read the Bible? The fact is that none of us simply 'reads the Bible': all of us, consciously, or unconsciously, stand within a tradition of interpretation, and see the stories, the words, the events of the gospels through a certain set of spectacles. So 'doing history' is not a choice. We all do it, either consciously or unconsciously, badly or well, just as we all 'do theology' and 'interpretation', whether we are aware of it or not. We cannot, after all, escape this, because the Bible is a book that brings together theological and historical concerns, not to mention ethical and social concerns as well. Perhaps we do well to consider some of the challenges of the Jesus Seminar and seek to read the Bible with our whole heart and soul and mind. Again, as we have seen that no one does historical or theological work in a vacuum, that no one works from an entirely neutral stance, we should beware of our own unexamined assumptions. We each work from a perspective. The danger is not our viewpoint, but the unacknowledged smuggling of that viewpoint into a portrait of Jesus which we sketch or re-formulate on our reading of the Bible.

This is why, despite the many false starts and resultant white elephants, the historical question of Jesus remains utterly important. The impression given by some scholars is that we can ask questions about Jesus and history in a totally dispassionate way. As we have seen, this is not true. Other people may say that 'knowing' Jesus is a private, spiritual experience in which I read the Bible individually and 'meet' him in an ahistorical realm unhampered by scholarly debate. These two views appear to be on a collision course, but seem in fact to begin from the same starting point—the assumption that one can simply 'read the evidence' or 'read the Bible' and discover truth, whether historical or spiritual. Our talk and thinking about Jesus takes place within the public sphere, which includes what historians, theologians, believers and sceptics

have had to say, and still have to say. It is not good enough to throw up our hands at the absurdity or contradiction of some of the pictures and say, They all conflict—so much for historical research or for theological inquiry! Rather, we can evaluate and appreciate each picture by asking questions about the edifice that is built: why, what kind, and how does the figure of Jesus fit into this particular scenario? We do well, then, to consider carefully some of the findings of the Seminar, such as the emphasis on Jesus' surprisingly sharp words, while we also give our ears to other interpretations of the gospels, including our own readings. Together we need to do hard thinking about Jesus and history if only because of the significance of his story for many who have lived and continue to live among us.

What if, as we pose our questions, we find the figure of one who surprises us all, both in terms of history and in terms of his significance for today? Could it be that Jesus did not come proclaiming only an internal kingdom of God, nor announcing the imminent end of the world, nor suggesting a radical individualistic lifestyle to shake up the economic status quo of Palestine villages? What if he came announcing a new beginning, a new era of God's rule, there concretely in himself? There, in his preaching, healing and living with others, there in his death and astonishing resurrection, and there in the 'mythic' sounding story of the ascension, we see the drama unfold. *And here is the answer to the Jesus Seminar's fear of apocalyptic terrorism, of the rigid right that sees itself as having all the answers, and that smugly expects to escape the time of trial: the One who came to us reversed the old order, and made provision for all, together with him, to be glorified with him. This is a glory that does not avoid humility and service, but which comes through this very unlikely route.*

Two stories

Let me tell you two stories: or rather, let me tell you one story, but from two different perspectives. First, the historical tale (inspired by the writings of N.T. Wright). Israel, as a nation, had enacted, not surprisingly, the general stance of human rebellion against God rather than embracing her destiny to become a light to the world (Isaiah 49:6, Micah 4:1-4). The earthly ministry of Jesus, concentrated in Galilee and Judea, called attention to the problem of Israel as a messenger who had not fulfilled her destiny, and implored God's people to join in God's new way to reach and enlighten all of humankind. As a creative and compelling prophet, Jesus spoke in a way that recalled two strains in the Hebrew prophetic writings: he spoke as the mysterious Son of Man from Daniel²⁸ who would receive power and authority from God, and would be recognized by God as representing Israel where the shaky structures of other nations who did not know God would ultimately fail; and he spoke the language of Isaiah's Servant, who must face suffering.²⁹ Bringing together these two prophetic pictures about Israel, the Son of Man and the Suffering Servant, Jesus indicated his own expectation and understanding of his own death. He was to face the trial and suffering meant for Israel, a tribulation at the hand of the Romans, but sent by the hand of God. Such a death would usher in the long-awaited reversal of fortune for God's people: 'Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down'.³⁰ This reversal began, in fact, with the surprising resurrection of the One who had died, but was to continue in another surprising way. God's people were themselves to be reordered into a community that included outsiders as well as insiders, Gentiles as well as Jews, the misfits as well as the pure. And so Jesus comes, confirming the hopes of many, but also disturbing their expectations, speaking in bizarre and intense ways about

the destruction of God's house, and the building up of a new one. This story has its roots in Israel, in the long saga of God's dealing with a particular people—but it is also the story of any who are engrafted into the new Israel of God.

And now, let me tell you the story again, using different language.

[There is a God who]...does not jealously hoard his power. As a husband he does not beat his unfaithful wife but cries out with the pain of a jilted lover and redoubles his efforts to win her back (Hosea 2). As Father he 'did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all' (Romans 8:32). As Son he did not claim the prerogatives of power and lord it over his subjects but 'emptied himself, taking the form of a servant... He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross' (Philippians 2:7-8). As Spirit he incorporates us into the mystical body of Christ, in whom 'there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female' (Galatians 3:28). As king he does not isolate himself in heavenly splendor but wills to dwell with his people. And he will come to 'wipe away every tear from their eyes' and to deliver them from all that oppresses them, even from death itself (Revelation 21:4).³¹

So, the problem is not with the story. The problem is not with the building. It is in not hearing the story, in not exploring the building thoroughly enough. Many have found that the story of the gospels is full and deep and incisive enough to cut through mere wooden legalism and literalism, to chase away patriarchalism and to create a people of love, humility, service and freedom for God. And there is a rumour that this building has vistas, hidden courtyards, towers and secret rooms enough to keep us busy for eternity. Could it be, as some say, that Jesus, 'the stone that the builders rejected,' is in fact 'the cornerstone' and himself the 'builder' of a house that will never crumble?

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Notes

1. Ben Meyer, 'Review of *The Five Gospels*', *Interpretation* #48 (1994), pp. 405-6.

2. Funk, Robert W., Hoover, Roy W., and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: MacMillan, 1993), p. 2.

3. Willi Marxsen, *The Beginnings of Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 26.

4. *The Five Gospels*, p. 5.

5. *The Five Gospels*, p. 4.

6. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

7. Grant Jeffrey, *The Signature of God* (Toronto: Frontier Research Press, 1996).

8. Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 376.

9. *The Five Gospels*, p. 2, but compare a different view on pages 27-28.

10. The Gospel of Mark, chapter 5, verse 41 and chapter 7, verse 34.

11. The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 16, verse 22.

12. The Gospel of Luke, chapter 6, verses 20 to 23.

13. Luke, chapter 6, verses 24 to 26.

14. *The Five Gospels*, p. 320.

15. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, verse 43.

16. Matthew, chapter 5, verse 39.

17. Luke, chapter 10, verses 25 to 37.

18. Mark, chapter 8, verse 31.
19. Mark, chapter 8, verse 34.
20. Luke, chapter 10, verse 18.
21. Luke, chapter 9, verse 27.
22. See especially J. Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) and his popular *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), as well as Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993) and 'Q and a Cynic-Like Jesus' in *Whose Historical Jesus?* eds. Arnal and Desjardins (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press: 1997), pp. 25-36.
23. Jesus Seminar (Oct 24-27, 1991, Edmonton), *John the Baptist and Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar* (Polebridge Press: Sonoma, CA, c1994).
24. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 418ff.
25. *The Five Gospels*, p. 34.
26. *The Five Gospels*, p. 5.
27. This phrase has been suggested by Professor Larry Hurtado of the University of Edinburgh to describe the Seminar's view, one which Professor Hurtado does not share. See L. Hurtado, "A Taxonomy of Recent Historical-Jesus Work," in *Whose Historical Jesus?*, Arnal and Desjardins, eds. (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), p. 290.
28. The Book of Daniel, chapter 7, verses 13 to 14.
29. The Book of Isaiah, chapter 52, verses 13 to chapter 53, verse 12.
30. Isaiah, chapter 64, verse 1.