

## CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARS' VIEWS ON THE HISTORICAL JESUS

### I. E.P. SANDERS

#### A. Sanders' Method

##### 1. Stresses the Synoptic Gospels

Sanders has more confidence in the authenticity of the Gospel than most historical Jesus scholars. He says, "We should trust this information unless we have good reason not to do so; that is unless the stories in the Gospels contain so many anachronisms and anomalies that we come to regard them as fraudulent."

Sanders' strategy is to look for major trajectories and emphases in the Jesus tradition, rather than obsessive micromanagement of the traditions. This attitude is the opposite of the Jesus Seminar.

Sanders' works seems to rely a great deal on the canonical Gospels. It shows no influence from the non-canonical sources, such as the Gospel of Thomas. Sanders portrait of Jesus looks quite a bit like the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels.

##### 2. Social world of first-century Palestinian Judaism

The key to understanding Jesus is to place him in the social world of first-century Palestinian Judaism. Christians have a tendency to describe Jesus over against Judaism rather than within Judaism, and this has resulted in some misconceptions.

#### B. Sanders' Portrait of Jesus

##### 1. "Almost" Indisputable Facts about Jesus

- Jesus was born c. 4 BC, near the time of the death of Herod the Great
- He spent his early childhood and early adult years in Nazareth of Galilee
- He was baptized by John the Baptist
- He called disciples
- He taught in towns, villages, and countryside of Galilee (but not in cities)
- He preached 'the kingdom of God'
- About the year 30, Jesus went to Jerusalem for Passover
- He created a disturbance in the Temple area
- He had a final meal with the disciples
- He was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities
- He was executed on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate

Equally secure facts about the aftermath of Jesus' life:

- His disciples at first fled
- They saw him (in what sense is not certain) after his death
- As a consequence, they believed he would return to found the kingdom

- They formed a community to await his return and sought to win others to faith in him as Messiah.

## 2. Two Symbolic Actions by Jesus

E.P. Sanders believes that at the end of Jesus' life, Jesus went to Jerusalem during the time of Passover, when thousands of people were there celebrating, and performed two symbolic acts—(1) riding a donkey into Jerusalem and (2) overturning tables in the Temple area.

First, when Jesus arrived at Jerusalem, he deliberately chose to ride a donkey through the gates. Jesus had read the prophecy of Zech 9:9 about the coming King and he decided to fulfill it. Zech 9:9 says:

**21:5 "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." [Zech 9:9]**

By riding into Jerusalem in this way, Sanders believes that Jesus saw himself... in some way... God's representative of the coming Kingdom.

Second, Jesus went to the Temple and made some kind of disturbance that was perceived to threaten the Temple. The Synoptic Gospel talk about Jesus overturning the moneychangers table and driving out the animals. Whatever Jesus did, Sanders believes it was *not a symbolic cleaning* of the Temple... but *a symbolic destruction* of the Temple.

Sanders does not think that Jesus was trying to start a reform movement to root out the corruption in the Temple. The Temple was a major aspect of Jewish life: Temple tax, agricultural tithes, minor agricultural offerings (first fruits), redemption of first-born sons and animals, sin and guilt offerings, festivals, and other miscellaneous offers all took place in the Temple. If Jesus thought that the entire system was corrupt, Sanders believes that we would have more material pointing in that direction. If Jesus was really attacking this central Jewish institution, we would have more evidence (Jesus paid Temple tax in Mt 17:24-27).

Sanders believes that Jesus was making a prognostication that the Temple would be destroyed by Israel's enemies. Jesus overturned the tables in the Temple to symbolize the coming destruction. Jesus predicted the *complete* destruction of the Temple—not one stone would be left standing (Mk 13:1); however, we know that part of the Temple still stands today—the Wailing Wall. When "prophecies" are written after the event, the prophecy and the event are in perfect harmony. But, here they are not. That means that Jesus really did predict the destruction of the Temple before it was destroyed in 70 AD. Jesus probably thought that God would destroy the existing Temple as part of the full arrival of the Kingdom of God when a New Eschatological Temple would be built—a Temple "not built with human hands" (Mk 14:58; Mt 26:61).

Sanders argues that Jesus thought God was going to *replace* the old Temple with a new one—a *new earthly temple*—an event that would involve the *restoration of Israel*.

## 3. The Twelve Disciples = New Israel

Jesus called the "twelve" but there were as many as 15 names associated with the "twelve" so Sanders believes that it was a symbolic number indicating the restoration of a New Israel.

The 12 tribes would be reconstituted when the present world came to an end and God inaugurated a new kingdom. Jesus is quoted in Matthew as saying that his disciples will judge or rule the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28).

#### 4. Jesus was the Eschatological Prophet

“Jesus looked for an imminent direct intervention of God in history, the elimination of evil and evildoers, the building of the new and glorious temple, and the reassembly of Israel with himself and his disciples as leading figures in it.” The restoration of Israel was near, so Jesus ministry focused on:

(a) Preaching about the kingdom

(b) The miracles and healings of Jesus (Sanders is hesitant to explain these stories in light of modern scientific knowledge) were viewed as signs of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus rejected the title of “messiah”. He saw himself as God’s viceroy: “God was King, and Jesus represented him and would represent him in the coming kingdom.”

Jesus favored the whole law—ritual and ethical—but he did not demand repentance or obedience with regard to any of it.

#### 5. Jesus Resurrection?

“That Jesus’ followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgment, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know.”

“Without the resurrection, would [Jesus] disciples have endured longer than did John the Baptist”? We can only guess, but I would guess not.”

## II. MARCUS BORG AND JOHN DOMINAC CROSSAN

Video Clip: *The Jesus Summit: The Historical Jesus and Contemporary Faith*. The Episcopal Cathedral Teleconferencing Network. 74 Trinity Place, New York, NY 10006.

### A. Borg (*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*)

There are two foundational points and then five-stroke sketch of the pre-Easter Jesus

1st foundation--Jesus was a deeply Jewish figure; didn't intend to start a new religion; he was doing something within Judaism

2nd foundation--context; the social world of 1st cent. Palestine; a domination system; a hierarchical and stratified society; **peasant society** dominated by elites; **purity society** with sharp social boundaries centered in the Temple; **patriarchal society**, a hierarchical society some men ruled over other men and all women and children

1st stroke is that he was a religious ecstatic. He had personal, mystical experiences of God

2nd stoke is that he was a healer; nature miracles are symbolic narrative; "I don't think Jesus did these"; Jesus did healings and exorcism

3rd stoke is that he was a wisdom teacher; he told aphorisms and parables

4th stoke is that he was a social prophet; social critic; challenges the politics of purity and advocated a politics of compassion, an egalitarian and inclusive social vision

5th stoke is that he was a movement founder; not the starter of an institution, but the founder of a following of people who embodied the alternative social vision of Jesus, the "open table fellowship of Jesus"

The 1st stoke is the most important; Jesus had a deep spiritual connectedness to the Spirit of God

### **B. Crossan (*The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*)**

## **III. THE JESUS SEMINAR**

### **A. History**

**Robert Funk started the Jesus Seminar in 1985.** He gathered about 70 biblical scholars for the purpose of "examining every fragment of the traditions attached to the name Jesus in order to determine what he really said." Over the years, more than 200 scholars have been involved with the Seminar, though only about 30-40 ever take part in a single meeting.

The Seminar met about twice per year to discuss their findings and to vote on whether a given saying ought to be regarded as authentic. They classified sayings according to color (see chart #1).

<b>Red</b>	Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it—"That's Jesus"
<b>Pink</b>	Jesus probably said something like this—"Sure sounds like Jesus."
<b>Gray</b>	Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own—"Well, maybe."
<b>Black</b>	Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition—"There has been some mistake."

### **B. Phase One: The Sayings of Jesus**

**After several years of meeting, the Jesus Seminar published its first book—*The Five Gospels*<sup>1</sup>—which focused on the sayings of Jesus.** The book contained what they believed Jesus actually said. The name of the book indicates that they not only used the canonical Gospels of Matthew, mar, Luke, and John, but also the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. Their results can be seen in chart #2.

<sup>1</sup> See Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

<b>Chart # 2</b>					
	<b>Total Number of Sayings</b>	<b>Red Sayings</b>	<b>Pink Sayings</b>	<b>Gray Sayings</b>	<b>Black Sayings</b>
<b>Matt</b>	420	11	60	115	234
<b>Mark</b>	177	1	18	66	92
<b>Luke</b>	392	14	65	128	185
<b>John</b>	140	0	1	5	134
<b>Thom</b>	201	3	40	67	91

Only 18% of the sayings can be attributed to Jesus (red and pink).<sup>2</sup> Some favorite Bible verse are classified as less than certain, such as Jesus’ words about being the salt to the earth (Mat 5:23 is pink), bearing the cross (Mk 8:34 is black), and being born again (Jn 3:3 is black). The verses that were thought to be most authentic are in chart #3.

<b>Chart # 3</b>
<b>The following verses garnered the <u>most</u> votes for authenticity by the Jesus Seminar</b>
1. “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matt 5:39). 2. “If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well” (Matt 5:40). 3. “Blessed are you who are poor. For yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk 6:20). 4. “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile” (Matt 5:41). 5. “Love your enemies” (Lk 6:27).

The Jesus Seminar is often viewed as very skeptical. For the last 10 years or so, the media, which likes to sensationalize, has tended to report the negative findings of the Seminar’s voting. But that is somewhat of a misunderstanding.

Fifty or sixty years ago, biblical scholars (like Bultmann) thought that we could know almost nothing about the historical Jesus. All we had were the four Gospels and they were written through the eyes of faith; that is, they were biased toward seeing Jesus through the lens of the Risen Christ. Their biases prevented us from seeing who the Pre-Easter Jesus was.

Now the Jesus Seminar believes that we can know—with a degree of certainty—some very important things about the Pre-Easter Jesus. If the Jesus Seminar, which tends to be skeptical, believes we can know something about the historical Jesus, then that is a very positive turn.

The gray votes are often misunderstood as weak black votes, but in reality it should be understood as a “maybe yes” vote. For example, the parable of the two sons in Matt 21:28-31 ended up being printed in gray-type even though only 11 percent of the voters cast gray votes for it—32 percent voted black and 58 percent voted either red or pink. The large number of gray sayings, then, represent sayings where the “verdict is not clear.”

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<sup>2</sup> See *the Five Gospels*, 5.

### C. Phase Two: The Acts of Jesus

In 1998, the Jesus Seminar published *The Acts of Jesus*,<sup>3</sup> which focused on 176 reported events. The Fellows examined 387 reports of 176 events, in most of which Jesus is the principal actor, although occasionally John the Baptist, Simon Peter, or Judas is featured. Of the 176 events that were studied, the Fellows gave each event a red, pink, gray, or black rating (see chart # 4).

Chart # 4	
<b>Red</b>	The historical reliability of this information is virtually certain.
<b>Pink</b>	This information is probably reliable.
<b>Gray</b>	This information is possible but unreliable.
<b>Black</b>	This information is improbable.

Of the 176 events, only 10 were rated “red” and only 19 were “pink”—so only 16 percent (29 of 176 events) were rated at “authentic” to the historical Jesus.

### D. Phase Three: The Person of Jesus

In 1998, the Seminar began the third phase of their project, that of describing the man Jesus. A collective portrait of Jesus may be difficult to produce. Crossan says, “There could be hopeless disagreement. Bob Funk’s Jesus is quite different from mine.” Still, given the voting method of the past, some consensus will be reached. At the moment, the Seminar has published a report of the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus.

According to that consensus, the Fellows agree about five things about Jesus.

**1. Jesus was a disciple of John the Baptist**, but eventually he rejected the ascetic life of John the Baptist and he rejected John’s message of a coming judgment that was suppose to motivate people to repent and adopt an ascetic lifestyle.

In stead, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God (Imperial Reign of God) was already a reality, here and now, and Jesus made a deliberate practice of eating and drinking in what was considered a profane style, quite contrary to John the Baptist’s program.

**2. Jesus was an iconoclastic poet**, attacking established beliefs and institutions. He fraternized shamelessly with social outcasts and mocked the empty values on which human behavior can be based. Favorite targets included: reliance on wealth, uncritical respect for blood relatives, and the pomposity of religion.

For Jesus, temples, priests, and all other trappings of religion were unnecessary, as were, ultimately, earthly possessions and family.

**3. Jesus told parables and aphorisms that challenged the usual ways of thinking.**

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1998).

He became a traveling sage who wandered from village to village offering his brand of teaching in exchange for handouts. He did not call on people to repent or fast or observe the Sabbath. His message was primarily a challenge to social convention. He was a social critic and ridiculed those who claimed to have answers.

#### **4. Jesus attracted followers**

His followers maintained that Jesus was able to exorcise demons and cure diseases. Jesus went along with this and was able to affect some psychosomatic cures.

#### **5. Jesus was eventually executed**

At one point, Jesus and his disciples went to Jerusalem, where he instigated some kind of incident in the Temple during a festival. He was arrested and quickly executed without a trial.

### **E. Implications**

The historical Jesus that emerges from the Jesus Seminar has been characterized as “a dirt-poor, illiterate peasant sage from Galilee influenced perhaps by Greek Cynic philosophers.”

He is a “non-Christian” Jesus—a man who displays no interest in the end of the world, resurrection, or redemption—a “no-frills” Jesus—a Jesus with little supernatural baggage, but a lot of respect for cultural diversity. Jesus looks more like David Letterman than Pat Robertson. Funk agrees: “Jesus was perhaps the first stand-up Jewish comic.”

Funk believes that the Jesus Seminar is laying the foundation for a new reformation and it will reinvent Christianity. The Jesus of the Jesus Seminar is very different than the Jesus of traditional Christianity.

The Westar Institute is also planning a “Canon Seminary,” a “Creed Seminar,” to produce a film on Jesus, and to publish its own New Testament.

### **F. Critics and Criticisms**

#### **1. Critics**

Craig Blomberg—a professor of NT at Denver Seminary—appeals to the work of the Holy Spirit and the doctrine of inspiration to argue that the Gospels are accurate and are above critical analysis.

Luke Timothy Johnson—a Roman Catholic professor of NT at Emory University—advises people to ignore questions about the historical Jesus altogether and, if they need validation of the faith, to look at the quality of the life demonstrated by those who confess it.

Richard Hays—a professor of NT at Duke University—accuses them of “reprehensible deception.”

#### **2. Criticisms**

**a. The *motives* of the Jesus Seminar are challenged**

Some of the leading members of the Seminar are considered lapsed Christians. Funk was a former Baptist Evangelist and Crossan was a former Catholic priest. The implication is that the Seminar is a way for them to work out their frustrations born of their own crises.

But this criticism is not warranted. The academic credentials of the group and its founders are impeccable. (Funk's book on Greek Grammar; Crossan book on Parables are widely accepted).

**b. The *tactics* of the Jesus Seminar are disparaged**

Robert Funk and the Seminar have deliberately appealed to the media, used the media, to hype their work and publications. Over the last 10 years, the Jesus Seminar has deliberately played the media. We have seen banner headlines such as "Bible Scholars Say Jesus Didn't Promise to Return" or Scholars say that Jesus never Claimed to be the Messiah."

The problem is that the use of the media is this way:

- Does not allow for counterarguments from other scholars,
- It over simplifies,
- It opens the door for sensationalism (distortion),
- It presents material that the public (because of this lack of expertise) is not able to evaluate.

[Yet there is nothing wrong with scholarly knowledge becoming common knowledge—we see this all the time with science and medical experts.]

**c. The *membership* of the Seminar has been questioned**

The members are primarily, white, male, and North Americans. The vast majority of them received their Ph.D. from only five schools

14 from Claremont  
9 from Vanderbilt  
8 from Harvard  
5 from Chicago  
4 from Union

This leaves out scholars from Duke, Yale, Princeton, and other major Universities. There are no evangelicals and no fundamentalist scholars in the Seminar. Thus the Seminar is charged with a having the same ideological slat or bias. D. A. Carson says that they espouse a "left-wing ideology."

The group is hostile to traditional understandings of Jesus.... this is hard to rebut since Funk maintains that the goal of the Jesus Seminar is “to set Jesus free from the scriptural and creedal prisons in which we have entombed him.”<sup>4</sup>

**d. The *portrait* of Jesus is not sufficiently Jewish.**

For example:

- Non-eschatological Jesus
- Has no adequate explanation for Jesus’ death; if he was basically a passive, witty spouter of aphorisms, why was he crucified?

**e. The *methods* of the Seminar are criticized.**

- They rely too heavily on the criterion of dissimilarity as the test of authenticity (thus a non-eschatological Jesus; but John the Baptist was and so was the early apostolic community).
- They rely too much on “orality” as a test of authenticity; thus short, pithy sayings are considered more authentic and Jesus looks more and more like a Cynic.
- They use Thomas
- Rely heavily on reconstructions of Q.

**f. They *equate* "unverifiable" with "unauthentic."**

For example, most historians would grant that the virgin birth of Jesus cannot be established as a historical event, because it is not open to historical investigation.

However, the Jesus Seminar goes further; they claim that it is a historical fact that Jesus was conceived when his mother had sexual relations with a human male.

In other words, the lack of support for a claim is interpreted, as evidence that the claim is false!

So Seminar also describes its work in positivistic terms, claiming to offer “the assured results of historical-critical scholarship.” In this way, they give the impression that their work is “objective and unbiased.” But no scholar is ever completely objective.

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Sheler et al., “In Search of Jesus,” 48; cf. *Honest to Jesus*, 300.