

After selective reading of technical & popular Jesus Seminar publications as they've come off the presses, I'm unburdening myself:

1 More than two years ago (14June94 #2682), I gave as favorable a review of the Jesus' Seminar's project as I've ever managed. Since then, it's been all downhill. Downhill: reminds me of rolling snowballs downhill till they got so big that I, a child, couldn't push them any farther. Suppose, now, that I'd've tried to roll the roll up the hill till I had in my hands the original, hands-size snowball I started with.

That's the J.S. project. I developed my parable in §5 of #2682: "...[J. Dominic Crossan, THE SAYINGS PARALLELS, Fortress/86] refers to 'layers of talk' (3-6)." There, I rolled the snowball downhill. Now let's try rolling it uphill. The 1st layer to come off (would it?) would be (Crossan's words) "Community talking about itself talking about the disciples talking about Jesus talking about the kingdom of God." 2nd layer: "Community talking about the disciples talking about Jesus talking about the kingdom of God." 3rd layer: "The disciples talking about Jesus talking about the kingdom of God." The **original snowball**: "Jesus talking about the kingdom of God."

2 The modern **historical** project is a legitimate, helpful effort to roll snowballs back uphill. Off comes Pastor Weem's sermonic fiction about little G. Washinton & the cherry tree ("I cannot tell a lie, I did it with my little hatchet."). That fiction, since we otherwise know of Washington's honesty, is not lie but faction, truth rhetorically rendered impressive. To roll off that layer (1) reinforces our justified belief that our first President was an honest man, & (2) teaches us something about the importance of rhetoric in general &, in particular, the art of preaching, & (3) to beware of literalism. The historical project adds to human knowledge & wisdom.

3 But the **historicist** project subtracts. It's the dogma that "nothing but" the original snowball is true, i.e. factual. It's based on a scholastic Enlightenment artificial-disastrous split between the empirically verifiable (="fact") &, at a lower level, the merely appreciable (="value"). Since the personal is not empirically verifiable, persons not holding still to test for repeatability, reality was reconceived to be impersonal (so "reality" would fit the "scientific" paradigm, whose holophrase was/is "the laws of nature").

A dramatic way to see this is in what's happened to Jn.3.8, which analogizes from nature (wind) to "the Spirit" (same wd. in Gk.) (NRSV): "The wind blows where it chooses, and...you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." The so-called laws of nature, through satellite meteorology, have for us peeled of what we now call the personification of wind: we cannot any longer speak of weather as "choosing." But historicism, the radicalization of modern historiography, reduces reality to materiality: personality (God, angels, demons, people--in a word, "spirit" or "Spirit") can no more choose than can the wind: "will" is an illusion from the to-date failure to finish the job of bringing all reality under the criterion of empirical verifiability, though falsifiability is far advanced. Quantum theory &, more recently, chaos theory, have exposed this materialist dogma; but the schools are lagging, reluctant to teach this latest unbelief, in both the natural & the human sciences. The J.S. mentality is an instance of the "scientific [really, scientistic] history [really, historicism]" lag.

But if we enter into the mind-&-spirit of the Fourth Gospel, we feel the wordplay in 3.8: we read "The wind-spirit-Spirit blows where it chooses." Now see the truths in "you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (a theme taken up, in the case of Jesus, in 7.26-29, 8.14, & 9.28-30). Now what becomes of the J.S.'s efforts to peel off mystery from the "historical" Jesus?

4 Cover-p.4 of the current 356-p. announcement of the 1996 Annual Meeting of the Am. Academy of Religion & the Society of Biblical Literature has an InterVarsity-Press ad for Markus Bochmuehl's THIS JESUS: Martyr, Lord, Messiah, with this blurb from an excellent scholar, Peter Stuhlmacher: "This rendering is historically far better founded than the artificial construct of the North American Jesus Seminar,

that Jesus was only a wandering wisdom teacher." A still earlier **backlash** book was Luke Timothy Johnson's *THE REAL JESUS: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (HarperCollins/95), on which J.D.Kingsbury said, "NT scholars who would affirm both critical biblical study and the creeds and historical faith of the Christian church are no longer content to concede the field of Jesus research to their radical counterparts." Each of the three modern "historical Jesus" waves, + the backlash of each, has left, however, a good compost-layer. Each backlash-corrective has rightly indicated the high subjective component in the (successive) Jesus portraits. Mind therapists, esp. some psychoanalysts, speak of the "transitional" world where objective & subjective factors/forces meet-merge-clash: with some training in that disciplinary area, I'm alert for evidences, in the J.S. literature, of these scholars' transitional world. Somebody before long will get a PhD on something like *THE COMPARATIVE TRANSITIONAL WORLDS OF THE SCHOLARS OF THE THREE HISTORICAL-JESUS WAVES*.

One doesn't have to be sophisticated to realize that "the relics of the true Cross" in Catholic reliquaries & altars would bulk up to a forest of crosses. You get an early start on wising up, learning suspicion, when as a child you notice that Santa Claus has been cloned for usability. Any historical-Jesus scholar can present you with a plausible portrait, but how different the portraits were you to see them all in one gallery! You might even become so suspicious as to conclude that each portrait is a ventriloquist's dummy: the particular scholar's Jesus sounds peculiarly like the scholar, says what the scholar wants his or her Jesus to say....

5 ....but that would be cynical. The facts don't justify either the bleak picture of radical subjectivity or the low view of these scholars' motivation. They earnestly want to "see Jesus" (Mt.17.8, Heb.2.9) *κατὰ σάρκα kata sarka*, "in person," lit. "according to the flesh"; twice in 2Cor.5.16)--& what Christian doesn't share the line in the Sunday school song, "I should like to have been with him there"?

But when we think about that childhood fantasy, are we sure we'd say yes if given opportunity to be with Jesus in [*pre-resurrection*] *person* for five minutes? I'd say "Thanks, but no thanks. Jesus has presented himself to me as he wishes to, viz. as the resurrected Lord. It would be as discourteous to go behind his self-presentation as it would to enter a neighbor's bedroom to see how the neighbor is dressing for self-presentation outside the house."

6 The same for **canon**, the limitation of "Bible" to the books in it since the late 3rd c. Here we should distinguish between the scholar's proper desire to maximize sources--as in *THE COMPLETE GOSPELS*, ed. R.J.Miller, forewd. R.W.Funk, the Jesus Seminar's founder (HarperPB/94), the twenty complete/partial gospels from the 1st 3 cs.--& the historicist's desire to minimize, to reduce the sources down to their "authentic" base--as in R.W.Funk's *HONEST TO JESUS: Jesus for a New Millenium* (HarperHC/96), which claims that the revitalization of Christianity depends on abandoning the Christ of the NT & the creeds, & becoming a disciple of Jesus the social critic, rebel, & sage--the iconoclast who became an icon. Marcus Borg agrees with Funk on becoming disciples of Jesus (*JESUS A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and The Life of Discipleship* [Harper/87/91]), but on his personal "nature mysticism" base makes poetic use of some traditional Christian locutions, e.g. "the risen Lord," expressions we Christians affirm as revelational (from God), not just poetic: he is, like Funk & many other Jesus Seminar scholars, not a Christ-ian but a *Jesus-ian*, disciple of a tailor-made "historical" (actually, historicist) Jesus, one of many such Jesuses. I doubt neither his motive (which is to present a more usable Jesus to "follow") nor his malign influence in subverting the Christian Faith, replacing it with a look-alike, Cross-less (atonement lacking) substitute.

7 Remember the "Jesus Freaks" of the '60s & early '70s? They were a hippie version of authentic, canonical-orthodox Christianity. The new Jesus freaks, the Jesus Seminar scholars & those who follow them, are at least as much belief-perverts as the hippie Jesus Freaks were behavior-perversers. What good I could say of the Jesus Seminar--& the good is real--I said in #2682, which I now see as having been overgenerous. The Church will, I hope, absorb the good, including the legitimate criticism of the churches' failures to follow Jesus Christ, the living Lord.