

Spring Meeting 2010

Report from the Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins

Stephen J. Patterson, Chair

The Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins convened on March 19–20 to consider some remaining issues associated with Antioch, and to air out some long-standing questions associated with the work of the Jesus Seminar. It was a remarkable meeting.

The first two papers both dealt with the question of how story and ritual contribute to the process of social formation. Helmut Koester's essay, "Story and Ritual as the Foundation of Nations," began with the observation that in the ancient world people were knit together through the possession of a common story and the performance of common rituals. This was true in Greece and Rome, as well as in the political formation of the people of Israel. Koester's thesis is that when we observe this also among the first followers of Jesus—the development of a common story and a common ritual—we should notice that the Jesus movement began not as a new form of piety, but as a more self-consciously political movement. The Jesus movement was not a new religion, but a new "nation," established by the prophetic preaching of Jesus and his followers about a new kingdom coming into being. It is deliberations the Seminar came to endorse this view with Koester (red). But he argued further: as time passed the Jesus movement gradually adopted the personal piety and morality of Roman world, and like all good citizens, became "religious." In this sense, Koester argued, what finally won the day in early Christianity was Gnosticism, with its focus on personal

Explanation of voting

Black	not true (0–.25*)
Grey	probably not true (.2501–.5)
Pink	probably true (.5001–.75)
Red	true (.7501–1) *Weighted average

Ballot 1 *Story and Ritual as the Foundation of Nations* Helmut Koester

Q1 Story and ritual are the religio-political foundations of the founding of nations in Antiquity. This is demonstrated in brief survey of the founding of the nations of the Hellenes, of Israel, and of imperial Rome.

Fellows	0.88 Red	0.75 %R	0.20 %P	0.00 %G	0.05 %B
Associates	0.86 Red	0.68 %R	0.27 %P	0.00 %G	0.05 %B

Q2 The beginnings of the early Christian movement are political rather than "religious"; Paul wants to create a new nation of justice and equality opposed to the unjust hierarchical establishment of imperial Rome. This is discussed with reference to John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul.

Fellows	0.58 Pink	0.15 %R	0.55 %P	0.20 %G	0.10 %B
Associates	0.61 Pink	0.18 %R	0.45 %P	0.36 %G	0.00 %B

Q3 As early Christians churches tried to find their place as a "religion" in the Greco-Roman world they soon began to become conform with the morality and citizenship of the Roman society.

Fellows	0.78 Red	0.50 %R	0.35 %P	0.15 %G	0.00 %B
Associates	0.80 Red	0.55 %R	0.32 %P	0.14 %G	0.00 %B

Q4 In the struggle to find a self-definition for themselves Christians were more likely to opt for piety and morality than for the prophetic-political eschatology of the beginnings.

Fellows	0.75 Pink	0.45 %R	0.35 %P	0.20 %G	0.00 %B
Associates	0.78 Red	0.52 %R	0.33 %P	0.10 %G	0.05 %B

Q5 Gnosticism finally carried away the victory in defining Christian piety and provided the appropriate language, especially evident in Christian hymnology.

Fellows	0.67 Pink	0.25 %R	0.55 %P	0.15 %G	0.05 %B
Associates	0.76 Red	0.43 %R	0.43 %P	0.14 %G	0.00 %B

morality and salvation in the next world, rather than eschatological revolution in the present. On this, too, the seminar thought Koester might just be right (pink).

Ted Weeden's extended study of the stories and rituals associated with early Christian meals covered some of the same ground, but with another question in mind. Weeden's paper, "Christianity's Death Tradition: Its Antioch Origin, Its Pauline Adoption, and Eucharistic Accretion," began with the observation made several years ago by John Dominic Crossan that there were really two early Christian story/ritual traditions in earliest Christianity: a "death tradition," which focused more on the death of Jesus, and a "life tradition," which focused on Jesus' life and teachings. But while Crossan located the "death tradition" in the early Jerusalem community, Weeden argued that it was probably at home in Antioch. The Jerusalem community, with its continued Hasidic devotion to the Temple cultus, would

Ballot 4
Christianity's Death Tradition
Theodore Weeden

Q1 The Death Tradition originated in the church at Jerusalem.

Fellows	0.36	Gray	0.17	%R	0.17	%P	0.25	%G	0.42	%B
Associates	0.15	Black	0.00	%R	0.11	%P	0.22	%G	0.67	%B

Q2 The seeds of the Death Tradition were planted at Antioch.

Fellows	0.44	Gray	0.08	%R	0.33	%P	0.42	%G	0.17	%B
Associates	0.69	Pink	0.28	%R	0.52	%P	0.20	%G	0.00	%B

Q3 The appearance tradition of 1 Cor 15:5b–7 was formulated at Antioch.

Fellows	0.39	Gray	0.00	%R	0.42	%P	0.33	%G	0.25	%B
Associates	0.61	Pink	0.08	%R	0.71	%P	0.17	%G	0.04	%B

Q4 The eucharist liturgy found in Didache 9:1–4 was composed at Antioch.

Fellows	0.42	Gray	0.00	%R	0.45	%P	0.36	%G	0.18	%B
Associates	0.63	Pink	0.04	%R	0.80	%P	0.16	%G	0.00	%B

Q5 The eucharistic tradition of 1 Cor 11:23–25 is an etiological legend created by Paul.

Fellows	0.33	Gray	0.08	%R	0.25	%P	0.25	%G	0.42	%B
Associates	0.65	Pink	0.31	%R	0.35	%P	0.35	%G	0.00	%B

not have found much use for the idea of Jesus' death as a sacrificial atonement. Moreover, there is little evidence in the traditions most closely associated with James, the leader of the Jerusalem community, for the death tradition. The Epistle of James is little concerned with it; the Gospel of Thomas (see saying 12, which appeals to James' authority) ignores it altogether. On this point, the Seminar was inclined to endorse Weeden's view: the death tradition probably did not originate in Jerusalem. But the Fellows were less tempted to follow Weeden further, that the death tradition originated in Antioch, where stories about the slain Maccabean martyrs would have provided the structure for an early passion narrative and the ritual language found in Didache 9 and 1 Corinthians 11. Weeden argued that our commonly repeated Eucharistic words were composed first in Antioch, but then expanded and refined by Paul for use in the cities of the Roman Empire, where the veneration of slain heroes was a commonplace. At issue was Weeden's contention that Paul had essentially created 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, the so-called Eucharistic words of Jesus.

With the next two papers the Seminar turned to consider a difficult matter of method. We are scholars of texts, primarily. Texts are, after all, our best portal into the world of Antiquity. But texts do not tell the whole story. And sometimes, something that defies explanation will turn up in a text, something with some implied cultural reality lurk-

Ballot 2
That by His Passion
He Might Purify the Water
Charles Bobertz

Q1 Mark's narrative purpose in the depiction of the baptism of Jesus by John is historical rather than theologically driven.

Fellows	0.33	Gray	0.14	%R	0.18	%P	0.23	%G	0.45	%B
Associates	0.28	Gray	0.10	%R	0.10	%P	0.31	%G	0.48	%B

Q2 There is good reason to conclude that the ancient Christian ritual of baptism was understood as a place enveloped in cosmological struggle.

Fellows	0.74	Pink	0.36	%R	0.55	%P	0.05	%G	0.05	%B
Associates	0.61	Pink	0.11	%R	0.64	%P	0.21	%G	0.04	%B

Q3 The ancient creed cited by Ignatius of Antioch in Ephesians 18:2 is part of the larger phenomenon of a combat myth—cosmological conflict—between God and the demonic depicted in Jewish and Christian sources from the fifth century BCE to the fifth century CE.

Fellows	0.80	Red	0.55	%R	0.36	%P	0.05	%G	0.05	%B
Associates	0.81	Red	0.52	%R	0.41	%P	0.07	%G	0.00	%B

ing behind it that does not come to expression. Charles Bobertz's paper dealt with an obscure phrase in Ignatius' Letter to the Ephesians, where the bishop of Antioch says that Jesus was "born and baptized that by his suffering he might *purify the water*." Puzzling indeed. Bobertz argued that this must have been a reference to the role of water in the ancient combat myth, where it represents the forces of chaos that must be conquered. As Bobertz formulated it, "the ancient Christian ritual of baptism was understood as a place enveloped in cosmological struggle." To this the Seminar gave its mild assent (pink). Then Bobertz turned to the Gospel of Mark and its depiction of Jesus' baptism by John. Bobertz rejects the common notion that the scene owes to some historical event, where Jesus was actually baptized by John. Instead, Bobertz contends that, for Mark, this would have been the opening salvo in a long unfolding cosmic battle between Jesus and the forces of evil, represented by demons. This, too, proved convincing to the Fellows (red).

Finally, Susan (Elli) Elliott's paper drew the Seminar deeper into the cultural milieu of Syria and ancient Anatolia to explore just how important it is to describe the world of Christian beginnings in the thickest way possible. Why, she asks, could Paul tell the Galatian believers that Hagar is a mountain (Gal 4:25), and that anyone who becomes circumcised is associated with her (Gal 4:21–5:1)? There is little in Jewish or nascent Christian tradition that would illuminate this oddity. But in the Central Anatolian highlands, where Paul's audience lived, every mountain

Ballot 5
Choose Your Mother, Choose Your Master
Susan Elliott

Q3 From the first generation, non-Jews were included among Jesus' followers. The development of the early Christian movement was affected not only by the non-Jews' presence as an issue to be resolved from a Jewish perspective but also by the particularities of the various religious and ethnic identities they brought into the movement.

Fellows	0.97 Red	0.91 %R	0.09 %P	0.00 %G	0.00 %B
Associates	0.95 Red	0.85 %R	0.15 %P	0.00 %G	0.00 %B

Q4 Just as we critique the old paradigm of nascent Christianity for its preoccupation with contemporary theological concerns, we should avoid replacing it with a paradigm defined by contemporary political and ideological concerns. A new paradigm needs to accommodate non-theological, non-political, and non-ideological concerns and worldviews divergent from those usually found in the cultural milieu of academic biblical scholarship. Attention should be given to popular religiosity, ritual and other aspects of the ancient world as well as theological-ideological issues.

Fellows	0.97 Red	0.91 %R	0.09 %P	0.00 %G	0.00 %B
Associates	0.91 Red	0.77 %R	0.19 %P	0.04 %G	0.00 %B

Q5 As we develop a new paradigm of Christian origins, we should seek a pluralistic (not dualistic) model for interpretation of nascent Christianity in its context. The Seminar should not aim simply to replace a monolithically constructed "Judaism" of the previously prevailing paradigm with the Roman Empire.

Fellows	0.97 Red	0.91 %R	0.09 %P	0.00 %G	0.00 %B
Associates	0.94 Red	0.81 %R	0.19 %P	0.00 %G	0.00 %B

Q6 For Paul, the primary issue in the circumcision controversy was circumcision.

Fellows	0.71 Pink	0.45 %R	0.36 %P	0.05 %G	0.14 %B
Associates	0.78 Red	0.50 %R	0.35 %P	0.15 %G	0.00 %B

was a woman—a mountain mother—who offered protection to her children living at its base. And very commonly her devotees showed their devotion by genital mutilation—castration, which ancients associated with the custom of circumcision. So, when Paul says that Hagar is Mt. Sinai, where the Law was given, and that those who circumcise themselves become the devotees of Hagar and are enslaved to the Law given on her flanks, Paul could expect that the Galatians would know exactly what he was talking about—even if we don't! Elliott's paper was one of the best illustrations of the work the Seminar has set before itself: setting texts more firmly in their places.

On Saturday morning the Seminar gathered to air out an older, very controversial question from the early days of the Jesus Seminar: did Jesus expect that his life and teaching were related to an imminent apocalyptic moment

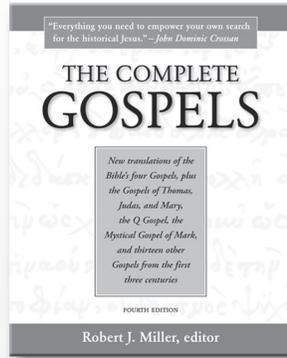
of destruction and judgment, or did he reject that way of thinking in favor of a present kingdom being realized in the lives of those who chose to follow him? The Great Apocalyptic Debate. Defending the older apocalyptic view was Dale Allison, whose lecture the evening before offered an overview of the position for which he is so well-known in historical Jesus scholarship. Joining him on that side of the question was Gerd Lüdemann. On the other side of the question were Robert Miller and Stephen Patterson. The format called for each participant to make a brief presentation addressing the question, and then for a wider discussion to open up among Fellows and Associates in conversation with the principle participants. In the end, the Seminar would vote.

Dale Allison spoke first. His argument was as impressive as it was simple. Working from a seven-page handout, Allison piled up example after example of passages, phrases, words, concepts, etc., from every part of the Jesus tradition that indicate an apocalyptic perspective. In his list were passages like Mark 9:1: "there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power"; or Matthew 23:34–35//Luke 11:49–51 (from Q): "all the blood shed from the foundation of the world will be required of this generation"; or Matthew 10:15/Luke 10:12 (also from Q), which speaks of the coming day of judgment; or Matthew 24:37–39//Luke 17:26–30 (Q), which speaks of a destruction like unto Noah's flood or Sodom's destruction, both of which are associated with the last judgment in Jewish lore. Even the Gospel of Thomas has a few marks of latent apocalypticism (for example, Thomas 111). The evidence is so widespread, and so pervasive, that it is simply hard to dismiss it all as not historical.

Robert Miller followed Allison. He focused first on the material in Q, and how unlike typical apocalyptic its judgment material is. There are no developed apocalyptic scenarios in Q; and in this material God is still in charge of the world, watching over the birds of the air and counting the hairs on each person's head. Is it possible that we have misread the judgment material in Q? Miller argued that in Q, themes of persecution and judgment are more prophetic in character than apocalyptic; in fact, Q 17 counsels people *not* to listen to apocalyptic scenarios! Miller then turned to the parables, a part of the Jesus corpus often left out of the apocalyptic hypothesis. He noted how un-apocalyptic many of the parables are. He focused especially on the Mustard and the Leaven. Here the kingdom is the very antithesis of apocalyptic. Its coming is not at all sudden or dramatic, not at all like a thief in the night. Rather, the kingdom comes slowly, almost unnoticed, sneaking in while no one is looking. This, he argued, is an anti-apocalyptic image.

Then Lüdemann made his case. He followed principally the argument that Allison has made on many occa-

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sions before: that if Jesus followed John the Baptist, and was followed by Paul, both of whom shared apocalyptic expectations, then Jesus most certainly must have shared those expectations as well. He then focused on specific sayings he believes to be authentic—the beatitudes, for example, which he reads apocalyptically. The change they expect is tied to future judgment. Finally, he argued for the historicity of the choosing of the Twelve, and noted that the restoration of the twelve tribes was part of current apocalyptic scenarios (Sirach 36:13; Psalms of Solomon 17:26–29, etc.).

Stephen Patterson made the last argument. Following the argument he made in an essay that recently appeared in the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, he called attention to the ambiguity in every layer of the tradition on the matter of the kingdom's coming. Paul, for example, believes that the dead will rise soon, but his argument is with other followers of Jesus who reject this notion (1 Corinthians 15:12). In the Gospel of Mark Jesus is made to reject the idea that apocalyptic signs accompany the kingdom (Mark 8:12), but later (Mark 13) he offers a host of signs. In Luke 17:20–21 Jesus rejects apocalyptic ideas, but in 17:22–37 he seems to endorse them. Why is the tradition so divided over this issue? Perhaps it was because Jesus himself was not so clear about it. If he was a follower of John, and shared John's apocalypticism, what happened when John was killed? Did Jesus re-think all that he had learned from John? And in the short time before Jesus himself was killed, would he have developed a consistent view of every issue that arose in that turbulent time? Patterson's guess is that Jesus did not, or could not have. A more realistic historical view would allow that perhaps Jesus left behind an ambiguous, or in some cases, an inconsistent record of preaching.

So after all these years, how did the Fellows finally vote on this matter? It was surprising. On the proposition: "Jesus was expecting the end of the age," the vote was "gray," but very close to being evenly divided. In fact, there were an equal number of red and black votes cast on this question. On the proposition, "Jesus was ambiguous on the issue of the end of the age," the vote again was "gray," but the vote on either side of the black/red spectrum was exactly the same. The Seminar is still quite divided on this issue, it seems. **4R**

Apocalyptic Jesus Debate

Q1 Jesus was expecting the end of the age.

Fellows	0.44	Gray	0.27	%R	0.05	%P	0.41	%G	0.27	%B
Associates	0.29	Gray	0.14	%R	0.08	%P	0.28	%G	0.50	%B

Q2 Jesus was ambiguous on the issue of the end of the age.

Fellows	0.42	Gray	0.14	%R	0.36	%P	0.14	%G	0.36	%B
Associates	0.66	Pink	0.33	%R	0.44	%P	0.08	%G	0.14	%B