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 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 that in the Greco-Roman world they soon began to become conform with the morality and citizenship of the Roman society.

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
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 gave its mild assent (pink). Then Bobertz turned to the Gospel of Mark and its depiction of Jesus’ baptism by John is historical rather than theologically driven. 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
The Fourth R 23–5
September–October 2010

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 discussion 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 hand-out, 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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The Fourth R 23–5

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