On the Voting Results for The Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins

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On March 20–21 the Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins met in Santa Rosa to continue exploring the origins of Christianity in Syria. Scholars of the New Testament are generally not well-versed in the history of this region, despite the fact that all four of the canonical gospels may well have been written there, and the earliest accounts of early Christian community life derive from events that transpired in its largest city, Antioch. Most of us are more than a little fuzzy on the details of early Christian history in Syria once we move beyond the first century. Syria is perhaps the best illustration of how our traditional focus on texts has led us to overlook important aspects of place in the formation of early Christianity.

To help us better understand the history of Christianity in Syria the Seminar invited one of the subject matter’s real authorities, Susan Ashbrook Harvey, the Willard Prescott and Annie McClelland Smith Professor of Religious Studies at Brown University. Harvey offered the Fellows a sweeping tour of Syrian Christianity, from its beginnings in early centers like Antioch, to its flowering in great diversity in the fourth and later centuries. There are strong themes that run through the long arc of this development, especially the idea of bodily health and wholeness as a correlate of salvation. Early Syriac Christianity is embodied Christianity: healing of the soul is related to the healing of the body, and this is understood as being healed of bodily mortality. Later Syrian Christians would look to the wandering mendicant, who heals the body and cares for the poor, as the apostolic ideal. Syria, where so much began, remains to most historians of Christian origins a mysterious and unexplored place.

Q1 The Dura-Europos Christian building (or Domus Ecclesiae) reflects an intermediate stage of architectural and liturgical formalization consistent with the 3rd century.
Fellows 0.97 Red
Associates 0.98 Red

Q2 The Dura evidence seems to reflect one stream of Greek-speaking Syrian Christianity with possible Anatolian-Antiochene connections in the tradition of Tatian.
Fellows 0.86 Red
Associates 0.83 Red

Q3 The Dura evidence shows no direct connection to the Q-Matthew-Didache trajectory, nor to the Q-Thomas trajectory.
Fellows 0.67 Pink
Associates 0.73 Pink

One of the texts of chief importance in understanding the emergence of Christianity in Syria is the Didache, or the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. Clayton Jefford, of St. Meinrad School of Theology, who has written extensively on the Didache, offered the Seminar a paper working through most of the basic issues associated with this text in Syria. Is it indeed a Syrian text? (Yes, probably from Antioch). Is it dependent on Matthew? (No, but it is closely related to Matthew). Does it contain old materials? (Yes, some of its teachings are among the oldest materials we possess.) As we go forward the Didache will be one of our most valuable sources for describing the origins of Christianity in Syria.

Syria also is the home of the oldest extant Christian church, a “house church,” or domus ecclesiae. The domus ecclesiae, according to L. Michael White, the Ronald Nelson Smith Professor in Classics and Christian Origins at the University of Texas, occupies an intermediate stage between the small gatherings in private homes that seems to have characterized earliest Christian community life, and later, more formal buildings for public worship. The domus ecclesiae was a house whose interior was remodeled to serve as a place of worship. In 1931 such a house...
church was discovered in the ruins of Dura Europus, in eastern Syria on the banks of the Euphrates River. This remarkable find is unique in many ways. First it is datable. Since the city of Dura was destroyed by the Sassanians in 256 CE, we know that this church must have been built in the first half of the third century, at the latest. Second, because of the destruction of the city, no other subsequent buildings—say, a larger church or later mosque—were built on top of this structure to replace it. Third, the church was actually buried in a fortification wall prior to the destruction of Dura, so that the church itself was not destroyed, but left remarkably intact. Michael White has studied the Dura house church extensively and introduced all of this to the Seminar.
communal table sharing became the occasion for Jesus followers to experiment with new kinds of social commitments, to form a new identity, to develop songs and stories to reflect on how they came to be, and why, and to screw up their courage to resist the imperial surround of force in which they were living. Taussig’s work received broad endorsement from the Seminar. Riggs’ paper traced how the common meals of the Jesus movement gradually began to assume formal and ritualized elements, eventually becoming the symbolic sacred occasion of the Eucharist. He finds clues to this development in the meal prayers of the Didache. Here one can see for the first time the table being fenced off from common space, and the food—the bread and the wine—becoming in the imagination of the participants a kind of “divine food,” which must be dispensed by those in authority, bishops.

Finally, in a special session the Seminar took up the question of the much-disputed and controversial Secret Gospel of Mark. Since it was introduced to the scholarly world by Morton Smith in 1973, scholars have debated whether the newly-discovered fragments of an esoteric version of the Gospel of Mark thought to have been used in Alexandria in the second century are indeed authentic. The fragments are quoted in a then unknown letter of Clement of Alexandria—this is what Smith actually discovered—that had been copied onto extra leaves of a seventeenth-century edition of the letters of Ignatius. The question is, did Smith really discover this new manuscript, or did he or someone else forge it? The controversy was recently fanned to life again by a new book by Stephen Carlson, a lawyer, entitled: Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith’s Invention of Secret Mark (Waco: Baylor, 2005). The new evidence Carlson brings to the table is an analysis of the handwriting in the manuscript itself, arguing that it betrays the marks of a forger. The matter was explored for the Seminar by Charles Hedrick, Marvin Meyer (both of whom regard the manuscript as authentic), and Dennis MacDonald (who regards it as a forgery). None of the panelists (all of them experts in ancient manuscripts) gave much credence to Carlson’s argument. They simply did not trust Carlson’s modern forensics on a pre-modern Greek hand. Hedrick, who has done his own investigation of the Smith case, has gathered impressive evidence from those most closely associated with Smith, and who consulted with him on specific problems in its interpretation. If Smith forged it, Hedrick argued, it was a hoax he per-
The default historical context for early Christian social formation was the dining room in the house church.

The community meal of early Christians followed the model of the Greco-Roman banquet.

The worship of the community took place at the table during the symposium portion of the meal.

Early Christians gathered for meals because that is what groups did in the Greco-Roman world.

Stories about meals of Jesus were generative of early Christian community meals.

Stories about meals of Jesus arose in the context of early Christian meal gatherings.

There was no trajectory of historical practice extending from the meal practice of the historical Jesus to the meal practice of the early church.

Early Christian groups adapted the Greco-Roman banquet in diverse ways.

The so-called Secret Gospel of Mark has come under criticism in recent years, accused of being a hoax perpetrated by Morton Smith, who in 1972 first proposed the existence of this ancient variation of Mark when he published a previously unknown fragment of a letter by Clement of Alexandria. Since Morton Smith died several years ago and can no longer defend his arguments, and since the original manuscript which he published in transcription is no longer available for scholarly study, the debate about the authenticity of Secret Mark has become particularly dicey.

Three papers were presented on this issue. Charles Hedrick (“Evaluating Morton Smith: Hoaxer Outed or Colleague Slandered?”) and Marvin Meyer (“Secret Mark: The Debate Goes On”) argued that Secret Mark was not a hoax by Morton Smith. Dennis MacDonald (“The Naked Truth about the Naked Youth: Why the Secret Gospel of Mark is a Modern Hoax”) proposed that it was a hoax by Morton Smith, but rather than arguing for that position in detail he made a case that canonical Mark can be understood as is, without the variation provided by Secret Mark.

Hedrick answered the arguments recently proposed by Stephen Carlson (The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith’s Invention of Secret Mark, 2005). He noted that many of Carlson’s arguments are ad hominem in nature and so should be dismissed, since, whether or not Morton Smith was the misanthrope that Carlson and others take him to have been, that does not make him a dishonest scholar. As for the opportunity of Smith to create such an ancient manuscript, Hedrick points out the difficulty of doing so under the field conditions in which he was working. Furthermore, Hedrick argues, it is exceedingly difficult to develop the skill to forge an ancient document and those who knew and worked with Morton Smith testify that he did not have that skill.

Meyer takes up the argument from a different perspective, noting how scholars such as Helmut Koester and John