Defending the Historicity of Jesus Christ: An Examination of the Jesus Seminar

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In March 1985, a group of scholars convened in Berkeley, California, for the first meeting of the Jesus Seminar, organized under the auspices of the Westar Institute.¹ Led by co-founder Robert W. Funk, the Jesus Seminar considers its charter to search for the truth about the historical Jesus, as expressed in Funk’s opening remarks at the group’s first meeting:²

We are about to embark on a momentous enterprise. We are going to inquire simply, rigorously after the voice of Jesus, after what he really said.

In this process, we will be asking a question that borders the sacred, that even abuts blasphemy, for many in our society. As a consequence, the course we shall follow may prove hazardous. We may well provoke hostility. But we will set out, in spite of the dangers, because we are professionals and because the issue of Jesus is there to be faced, much as Mt. Everest confronts the team of climbers.

The Jesus seminar meets twice a year in their quest to separate historical facts from mythology. Their efforts have yielded, among other things, the conclusion that the following should be rejected as myth:³

- the resurrection of Jesus from the dead;

- the virgin birth;

- all Gospel miracles; and

- a full 82% of the teachings normally attributed to Jesus.

¹See http://westarinstitute.org/Jesus_Seminar/jesus_seminar.html.
²For a complete text of the opening remarks, see http://westarinstitute.org/Jesus_Seminar/Remarks/remarks.html.
Indeed, the fundamental support for their conclusions is the claim that the historical evidence for these beliefs is lacking. Their claim is illustrated in the title of an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Scholars Cite Lack of Resurrection Evidence,” with the subtitle: “Controversial Jesus Seminar evaluates New Testament, but members affirm that event’s religious significance does not hinge on the historical record.”

In the years since 1985, it has become the consensus among mainline Biblical scholars that the Jesus Seminar, far from being a defender of the truth about the historical Jesus, practices questionable scholarship and has influenced Christianity in the United States in adverse ways. In the words of Luke Timothy Johnson, their scholarship is “the purest poppycock.”

Exactly what is going on here? How can one group of scholars come to conclusions that are so disparate from orthodox Biblical scholarship? It should be noted that, contrary to popular reports, the 74 “scholars” of the Jesus Seminar do not represent the mainstream of Biblical scholarship. According to Luke Johnson, “only fourteen members of the Seminar qualify, including scholars like John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. Twenty others are recognizable names in the field. One quarter of the group, though, are complete unknowns (one is a movie producer), and half of them come from a cluster of three ultra-liberal schools: Harvard, Claremont, and Vanderbilt.”

The key to understanding how the Jesus Seminar arrives at their conclusions is to understand the assumptions that underlie all their analyses. These assumptions are clear in one articulation of their argument:

1. The Gospels record the occurrence of miracles, like dead people coming alive again and food multiplying.
2. But miracles cannot happen.
3. If miracles cannot happen, then the reports in the New Testament must be fabrications.
4. Therefore, the Gospels are not historical.

The heart of this argument is the assertion that miracles cannot happen. What possible support is there for this assertion? In fact, this assertion contains a suppressed presumption, that of naturalism. Naturalism is the philosophical presumption that physical reality is the only reality. Indeed,
as Koukl observes, the presumption of naturalism is evident in Robert Funk’s own writings: “The Gospels are now assumed to be narratives in which the memory of Jesus is embellished by mythic elements that express the church’s faith in him, and by plausible fictions that enhance the telling of the gospel story for first-century listeners...”¹⁰ Thus, the Jesus Seminar’s conclusions that the Gospels are inaccurate, supposedly based on scientific, historical, and literary scholarship, are instead based on a presupposition that is itself unproved and unsupported by evidence.

The presupposition of naturalism is overwhelmingly prevalent. Indeed, as Philip Johnson observes,¹¹

The most influential intellectuals in America and around the world are mostly naturalists, who assume that God exists only as an idea in the minds of religious believers. In our greatest universities, naturalism—the doctrine that nature is ‘all there is’—is the virtually unquestioned assumption that underlies not only natural science but intellectual work of all kinds.

When applied to the consideration of miracles, key to the Jesus Seminar’s analyses of the Gospels, naturalism leads inevitably to the conclusion that miracles must be relegated to the realm of magic. This sentiment is clear in the following typical dialog:¹²

Is it possible Jesus resurrection was real? No, it isn’t; at least not rationally and scientifically. Resurrections are magical. Resurrections are miraculous. Magic and miracle aren’t scientific. Magic and miracle aren’t rational or reasonable.

Yeah, yeah Poindexter. Is it possible Jesus’ resurrection was real? – Well, yes. But only if magical, miraculous, supernatural things are possible. And, when you think about it, that’s exactly the point of the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection. The miracle points up God’s power, proves there really is something supernatural going on.

But that’s not critical scholarship. That’s theology.

The dialog above illustrates yet another common sentiment about miracles, that they are fabrications with precisely the goal to suggest that God exists. The argument goes something like this:

1. The Gospels record the occurrence of miracles.
2. This is to be expected, because the Gospel authors have a vested interest in the propagation of such stories. They are fabrications with the goal to suggest that God exists.
3. Therefore, the Gospels are false.

¹²This quote is from http://www.medmalexperts.com/POCM/the_end_sailboat_in_the_basement.html.
This argument commits the *genetic fallacy*,\(^\text{13}\) that of exploiting a perceived defect in the origin of a claim, taking it to be evidence that discredits the claim itself.

Is it possible to find sufficient historical evidence to support Biblical miracles—the resurrection, say? In the shadow of naturalism, absolutely not. In the words of skeptical German New Testament critic Gerd Lüdemann, as quoted by William Lane Craig, “Historical criticism ... does not reckon with an intervention of God in history.”\(^\text{14}\) Thus, as Craig puts it, “the resurrection cannot be historically established; it is excluded before you even sit down at the table to look at the evidence.” Lüdemann’s only justification for this presupposition is the work of Hume and Kant, epitomized by Hume’s assertion that “no testimony is sufficient to establish” a miracle.\(^\text{15}\) But, as Craig points out, Hume’s arguments against miracles are not without refutation—for example, in the 18th century, by Paley, Less, and Campbell. Also, most contemporary philosophers reject it as fallacious, including philosophers of science Richard Swinburne and John Earman, and analytic philosophers George Mavrodes and William Alston.\(^\text{16}\)

Putting aside naturalism, there is indeed ample evidence to support the historical veracity of Gospel miracles.\(^\text{17}\) For example, the resurrection of Jesus, as an event in history, is not the kind of event for which we would expect to find evidence—yet, convincing historical evidence in support of this event is found in the Bible and in extra-biblical sources. For example, William Lane Craig provides a four-point program to demonstrate that the resurrection took place:\(^\text{18}\)

1. After his crucifixion, Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb.

2. On the Sunday after the crucifixion, Jesus’ tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.

3. On multiple occasions and under various circumstances, different individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead.

4. The original disciples suddenly and sincerely came to believe that Jesus was risen from the dead despite their having every predisposition to the contrary.

The veracity of each event above is itself supported by well-studied evidence. According to Luke Johnson, “some sort of powerful, transformative experience is required to generate the sort of movement earliest Christianity was.”\(^\text{19}\) Similarly, eminent British scholar N. T. Wright concludes,

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\(^{13}\)See http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/genetic-fallacy.html.


\(^{16}\)Supporting references are provided by William Lane Craig in *God, Are You There?*, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, 1999.

\(^{17}\)In “The Jesus Seminar Under Fire,” Koukl argues that not being bogged down by naturalism, as is the case with believers, actually results in greater open-mindedness, not less.


“That is why, as an historian, I cannot explain the rise of early Christianity unless Jesus rose again, leaving an empty tomb behind him.”

In conclusion, the Jesus Seminar has no grounds to dismiss the Gospel accounts of Jesus, other than the philosophical presumption of naturalism. And what support is there for naturalism? At the heart of it, naturalism flows inevitably from a rejection of God and his interaction with our universe. Therefore, the arguments used to refute the historical accuracy of the Gospels, and hence the veracity of what they record about God’s interaction with humankind through Jesus, are ultimately no more than circular arguments.

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21To make clear the circular form: (1) God does not exist. (2) Therefore, naturalism is true. (3) Therefore, miracles do not happen. (4) Therefore, the Gospels are false. (5) Therefore, God does not exist.