

January 2005

## When the Trumpet Call is Unclear: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Speech That Launched the Jesus Seminar

Mathew A. Cabot  
*San Jose State University*, [matt.cabot@sjsu.edu](mailto:matt.cabot@sjsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/journ\\_masscomm\\_pub](https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/journ_masscomm_pub)



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mathew A. Cabot. "When the Trumpet Call is Unclear: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Speech That Launched the Jesus Seminar" *Journal of Communication and Religion* (2005): 286-306.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@sjsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@sjsu.edu).

# **When the Trumpet Call is Unclear: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Speech That Launched the Jesus Seminar**

Mathew Cabot

*Since the Jesus Seminar has become almost iconic in religious media coverage, it merits academic scrutiny. This article focuses on the Seminar's inaugural address given by founder Robert Funk on March 21, 1985, at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. In that address, Funk set forth the Seminar's mission and method that has guided the association ever since. The main thesis of this article is that clues to the Seminar's successes and failures may be found in Funk's inaugural address, which may be uncovered through a "text-in-context" analysis of the speech.*

*Keywords: rhetoric, Jesus Seminar, inaugural address, historical/critical, rhetorical history, metaphoric criticism, textual analysis.*

Since the Jesus Seminar was founded nearly 20 years ago, it has published two books, was featured in *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Reports*, and was the impetus for an ABC News/Peter Jennings Special called, "The Search for the Historical Jesus." To date, nearly 200 articles have been written about the Seminar in the popular press – a remarkable achievement for a small association of biblical scholars.

Because the Seminar has become almost iconic in religious media coverage, it merits academic scrutiny. This article focuses on the Seminar's inaugural address given by founder Robert Funk on March 21, 1985, at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. In that address, Funk set forth the Seminar's mission and method that has guided the association ever since. It is this author's belief that a "close reading" of Funk's address offers significant heuristic value.

First, the author operates on the assumption that rhetorical history can provide insight into various phenomena unavailable through other methodologies. Turner (1998) summarizes well its utility: "Far from engendering a kind of quaint antiquarianism, the melding of historical and rhetorical methodologies can contribute to an understanding of the complex latitudinal and longitudinal processes of social influence" (4).

Second, more so than any other text, Funk's speech offers a glimpse into the Jesus Seminar's mission and method directly from the words of its founder. Given the controversial nature of the Jesus Seminar, it is important to go back to the original text that explains its *raison d'être*.

Third, the main thesis of this article is that clues to the Seminar's successes and failures may be found in Funk's inaugural address, which may be uncovered through a "text-in-context" analysis of the speech.

### **Method of Analysis**

This article follows the basic rhetorical criticism approach of Andrews, Leff and Terrill, which advocates three stages: (1) analysis of speaker and context, (2) analysis of the text itself (textual analysis), and (3) analysis of effect. During the second stage, the author will employ the use of metaphorical criticism as the main tool of analysis. Burghardt offers a description of this methodology:

Metaphoric criticism is not a unified method; rather, it is a perspective that places metaphor at the heart of rhetorical action. Traditional criticism analyzes metaphors as part of the classical canon of style. The metaphoric critic, however, believes metaphors are more than superficial ornamentation: they are the means by which arguments are expressed. Moreover, metaphors may provide insight into a speaker's motives or an audience's social reality. (335)

Funk's metaphors fit into the category Osborn called the "Light-Dark Archetypal Metaphor" (336). Archetypal metaphors

are those which, among other things, “[...] are grounded in prominent features of experience, in objects, actions, or conditions which are inescapably salient in the human consciousness” (336). As such, they are powerful rhetorical inventions that allow a speaker to immediately and effectively connect with his or her audience. While Osborn identifies four sources of archetypal metaphors (light and darkness, the sun, heat and cold, and the cycle of the seasons), he believes elements of the light-darkness metaphor are present in them all:

Light (and the day) relates to the fundamental struggle for survival and development. Light is a condition for sight, the most essential of man’s sensory attachments to the world about him. [...] In utter contrast is darkness (and the night), bringing fear of the unknown, discouraging sight, making one ignorant of his environment [...]. (337)

Ivie refers to the use of metaphors as “vehicles” of rhetorical invention (349). These vehicles carry the message or argument of the speech. The following details how the “light” and “dark” metaphors are woven into three major themes in Funk’s inaugural address: (1) a brave quest, (2) liberation of the laity, and (3) transcendence.

### **Context**

Robert Funk served as Annual Professor of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem and as chair of the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University. Additionally, he led the Society of Biblical Literature as its executive secretary from 1968 to 1973 ([www.westarinstitute.org](http://www.westarinstitute.org)). According to Jesus Seminar Fellow and author of *The Jesus Seminar and Its Critics*, Robert Miller says Funk was motivated to establish the Jesus Seminar because of “two frustrations” (10).

The first frustration was the lack of a “database” for the historical Jesus. In other words, there was no single repository of the scholarship done on the historical Jesus that included the evidence used to support their conclusions. The other frustration

was "the failure of biblical scholars to educate the public about the historical Jesus" (Miller 11). Indeed, at the heart of the Jesus Seminar's mission is a sense that the average lay Christian has been sheltered from the "truth" of biblical scholarship and that they need to be enlightened:

Scholars using the historical-critical approach have known for over a century that the gospels are a blend of historical remembrance and Christian interpretation, which means that not every deed and word attributed to Jesus in the gospels can actually be traced to him. Biblical scholars presuppose this in writings addressed to their peers. Yet almost no one, professors and clergy alike, tries to communicate this way of understanding Jesus to the public. [...] The Jesus Seminar aims to bridge that gap between scholars and the public by communicating results of its historical study clearly, honestly, and in terms understandable to a lay audience. (Miller 11)

It is clear from this paragraph that the Jesus Seminar's main audience is the laity. First, however, Seminar Founder Robert Funk would have to convince a group of scholars to join him in his mission to enlighten the laity. Consequently, in 1985, Funk organized the first meeting of what would become the Jesus Seminar and invited scholars to discuss contemporary issues in biblical scholarship. To Funk's surprise, 35 people showed up (Sullivan, n.p.).

At that meeting, the scholars encountered a new kind of academic conference. At this meeting, vigorous debates followed each presentation, and then the scholars voted using colored beads on the historicity of the saying attributed to Jesus. A red bead dropped into the voting box meant the scholar believed Jesus undoubtedly said this or something like this; a pink bead meant Jesus probably said something like this; a gray bead meant Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own; and, finally, a black bead meant Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition (Miller 12).

Those who would become members of the Seminar were clearly dissatisfied with the state of biblical scholarship in the mid-1980s, and they set out to make some radical changes. The Seminar's goal was to "assess the historicity of everything attributed to Jesus in all Christian sources from the first three centuries" (Miller 11). The Seminar pursued its goal in two phases: (1) the words of Jesus, (2) the deeds of Jesus:

The first phase began in 1985 and was completed by 1991. The results of this phase of the Seminar's work were published in 1993 in *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. The second phase was completed in 1997 and its results published the following year in *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus*. (Miller 11)

With its last book, the Jesus Seminar "officially" ended its project. However, the Seminar continues to meet annually in Santa Rosa, California, and members regularly lecture worldwide and participate in church workshops called "Jesus Seminar on the Road."

## **The Text**

### ***A Brave Quest***

Funk begins his 2,523-word speech with this pronouncement: "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." As mentioned above, a key idea that drives the Jesus Seminar is that the truth about Jesus has been systematically covered up by the church for the last century (since the advent of "higher criticism"), and that layer upon layer of tradition has distorted our picture of who Jesus really was and what he "really said." In fact, Funk uses the term "really said" three times within the first few minutes of his speech. To find the "authentic voice of Jesus," Funk believes they will need to ask a hard question, one he believes the church has been afraid to ask for fear of the consequences:

In the 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 Mount Everest confronts the team of climbers.

Funk is referring to the question: "What did Jesus really say?" Implicit in this question is that we do not know now what he said, and to find out what he said will take courage. Herein begins an important enthymeme that is woven throughout the entire speech: the church has known for over a century that Jesus did not say many of the things attributed to him the Bible, but it has been afraid to admit so publicly. In other words, clergy and biblical scholars up until that point had been cowards. The implicit question posed to Funk's audience, composed almost entirely of men, is whether they would have the courage to join the quest. Note the use of metaphors: "quest," "Mount Everest," "climbers," "launching investigations," "liberating millions," "heighten the risk of our program," "hazardous and dangerous," "venture," "rude and rancorous awakening." Funk is clearly laying out a challenge to his male audience. Taken together, these metaphors represent an emotional appeal to the audience, who must determine whether they have the courage to join the quest and liberate millions, even if the journey may be perilous.

Here is the first example of how the light-dark archetypal metaphor is used in Funk's speech. Prior to the launch of the Jesus Seminar, Funk believed the world was in the "dark" about what Jesus "really said." The goal of the Seminar was to "bring to light" the actual words of Jesus. The light-dark metaphor is also present in the idea that the church has been afraid to ask the tough questions. Cowardice is a "dark" term; bravery is a "light" term. By clearly presenting the challenge, Funk will also "expose to the light of day" those who are willing and unwilling to join the quest.

The light-dark metaphors may work particularly well with a religious audience, one that may be more comfortable talking about good and evil. God, in the Bible, is often characterized as light, while sin is associated with darkness:

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another [...]. (NRSV 1 John 1:5-7a)

### ***Liberation of the Laity***

According to Miller, the Jesus Seminar believes the laity has been kept in the dark about the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation. As a result, the laity is imprisoned by what Seminar members see to be antiquated and unsophisticated approaches to biblical interpretation. Funk believes the laity deserves to know. Although he thinks this will be a “rude and rancorous” awakening, he believes it will ultimately be liberating:

What we are about takes courage, as I said. We are probing what is most sacred to millions, and hence we will constantly border on blasphemy. We must be prepared to forebear the hostility we shall provoke. At the same time, our work, if carefully and thoughtfully wrought, will spell liberty for other millions. It is for the latter that we labor.

The light-dark archetypal metaphor is abundant here. First, since the laity has been “kept in the dark,” they are ignorant of these new ways of reading the Bible. “Ignorance” is a key component of the “dark” metaphor (Osborn 337). They are ignorant because they cannot “see.” There is a clear connection between seeing and ignorance in Funk’s speech. Funk mentions the need for new biblical “paradigms” or new ways of looking at

the Bible. Old paradigms, according to Funk, cloud one's ability to accurately see Jesus for who he really was.

In addition to being given new "lenses" so they may accurately apprehend their environment, the laity, according to the Jesus Seminar, must be liberated from the stranglehold of superstition. Those things which have unnecessarily kept people "afraid of the dark" must be unmasked and exposed to the light. Toward that end, Funk makes a commitment to public scholarship:

We are not embarking on this venture in a corner. We are going to carry out our work in full public view; we will not only honor the freedom of information, we will insist on the public disclosure of our work and, insofar as it lies within our power, we shall see to it that the public is informed of our judgments.

Again, this is a key message of Funk's speech, because he believes the laity has been purposefully kept in the dark:

The religious establishment has not allowed the intelligence of high scholarship to pass through pastors and priests to a hungry laity, and the radio and TV counterparts of educated clergy have traded in platitudes and pieties and played on the ignorance of the uninformed. A rude and rancorous awakening lies ahead.

This passage paints a picture of a "dark" religious establishment that is "starving" its constituents. Again, notice the use of the terms "ignorance" and "uninformed" to describe the laity, and the implication that any religious figure on the radio or television is not educated.

### ***Transcendence***

According to Miller, the first "frustration" that drove Funk to establish the Jesus Seminar was the lack of a "database" containing the articles, books, and works-in-process of biblical scholars pursuing the "historical" Jesus (11). Again, using the light-dark archetype, Jesus scholars were "in the dark" about each other's

work. Consequently, there was little cumulative scholarship and some unnecessary duplication. Funk wanted to change that. “Creating a tradition of scholarship means that our work must finally and firmly become cumulative,” Funk said in his speech. To help create a tradition, Funk uses the rhetoric of “transcendence,” couched, interestingly enough, in patriotism:

Perhaps most important of all, these develops [changes in biblical paradigms] have taken place predominantly, though not exclusively, in American scholarship. We need not promote chauvinism; we need only to recognize that American biblical scholarship threatens to come of age, and that in itself is a startling new stage in our academic history. We may even be approaching a time when Europeans, if they know what they are about, will come to North America on sabbaticals to catch up, rather than the other way around. It is already clear that Europeans who do not read American scholarship are falling steadily behind.<sup>1</sup>

Funk’s audience members are being invited to be a part of a “startling new stage in our academic history,” a time when American biblical scholarship “threatens to come to age.” How is American biblical scholarship pulling away from its European roots? Funk explains:

[...] we have learned to transcend the paradigms of scholarship set for us early in this century. We have learned our textual criticism, our source and form and redaction criticism, we have taken in the best – and some of the worst – of our German and English and French predecessors. But we are now moving on to different paradigms: to parables and aphorisms as metaphors and poetry, to narratology, to reader-response criticism, to social description and analysis, and to many other promising ventures.

---

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that nearly 20 percent of the Fellows listed on the Jesus Seminar Web site ([www.jesusseminar.org](http://www.jesusseminar.org)) are not Americans.

Funk believes European biblical scholars who are not reading American scholarship will “fall steadily behind,” and that they will have to come to America on their sabbaticals to “catch-up.”

In sum, Funk’s first theme appeals to the scholar’s sense of adventure. He highlights the risk of the journey, and essentially says cowards need not apply. In the second theme, he talks about a laity, intentionally being starved of the truth by its religious establishment, which needs to be liberated. In the third theme, he calls the scholars to participate in something bigger than they – to be the framers of a new era in American biblical scholarship.

### **The Effect**

The final stage of analysis concerns the speech’s effect. Did Funk accomplish his objective – namely to launch a new movement in biblical scholarship? In its two decades of existence, the Seminar has achieved some successes and failures. In terms of successes, the Seminar has effectively used the media to raise awareness about its version of Jesus. Perhaps no other biblical scholarship group has garnered more attention in the popular press than the Jesus Seminar.

This is certainly in part because of the Seminar’s controversial positions on high-stake ideas (i.e., the identity of Jesus) with massive interest. It is important to note, however, that the media, in general, is not equipped to assess the intricacies or implications of the Jesus Seminar’s approach. They do, however, recognize conflict when they see it:

If a reporter lacks knowledge about various religious ideologies and theologies, it is much easier to fall back on traditional journalistic news criteria and cover religion on the basis of conflict and aberration. Journalism’s routines discourage delving too deeply into complex topics such as religion. (Willey, n.p.)

In addition to being against the establishment (dark), the Seminar is trying to “bring to light” something that the establish-

ment “has not allowed” to become public knowledge – namely the inevitable consequences of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation.

But has this notoriety translated into converts? The Seminar’s official Web site lists 120 churches worldwide that are “receptive to the work of the Jesus Seminar.” It also lists more than 100 biblical scholars as Jesus Seminar Fellows. However, one may deduce from reading Miller’s book that all scholars agree with the Seminar’s conclusions:

Some in the media have sensationalized this part of the Seminar’s work [the “re-envisioning” of Jesus], characterizing it as radical, provocative, or iconoclastic. But this is so only because the Seminar is stating publicly what scholars and theologians in mainline churches have known for decades. (23)

As mentioned in this paper’s introduction, Funk gave his speech at the Pacific School of Religion, one of nine seminaries in the Graduate Theological Union. The consortium includes a Unitarian Universalist seminary (Starr King), the denomination that comprises one-quarter of the member churches on the Seminar’s Web site. And yet, not one Starr King professor is listed as a Fellow on the Seminar’s Web site. For that matter, not a single professor (143 in all) from any of the nine GTU seminaries is listed as a Fellow on the Seminar’s Web site. That does not necessarily mean none is sympathetic with the Seminar’s conclusions, but it does mean none has chosen to ally him or herself with the Seminar through its Web site.

A close analysis of Funk’s inaugural address reveals a possible reason why more scholars and laypeople have not embraced the Seminar’s mission. As mentioned previously, Funk on numerous occasions during his speech referred to a laity that was in the dark about who Jesus *really* was and what he *really* said. And yet this more *modern* approach to biblical scholarship is undermined by a *postmodern* assumption declared by Funk during his speech:

[...] we now know that narrative accounts of ourselves, our nation, the Western tradition, and the history of the world, are fictions. [...] And it is also in this same sense that the Bible, along with all our histories, is a fiction. [...] In sum, we make up all our “stories” – out of real enough material, of course – in relation to imaginary constructs, within temporal limits.

This passage echoes one penned by Ernest Becker:

The most astonishing thing of all, about man’s fictions, is not that they have from prehistoric times hung like a flimsy canopy over his social world, but that he should have come to discover them at all. It is one of the most remarkable achievements of thought, of self-scrutiny, that the most anxiety-prone animal of all could come to see through himself and discover the fictional nature of his action world. (35)

Funk makes it clear in this part of the speech that what is needed is a “new fiction” – one in particular that “we recognize to be fictive.” While this notion is arguably problematic in and of itself, it is certainly inconsistent with the first few minutes of his speech when Funk seemed to imply they were after more than just a fiction. In addition to using the term “really said” three times within the first few minutes of the speech, Funk said their students deserve to “know the ultimate truth: what did Jesus really say?” This statement seems odd in light of Funk’s insistence that all histories are fictitious. Is there ultimate truth or not? The audience may have been unclear in the aftermath of Funk’s speech. More significantly, this confused – if not contradictory – message may point to a serious limitation of the Seminar’s mission and method.

## **Conclusion**

While the Seminar has achieved enviable success in attracting the mainstream media, it has failed to convert a significant por-

tion of scholars and Christian laity to its vision of the Bible and Jesus. As this article has attempted to demonstrate, one possible reason for this disconnect is the unclear mission articulated by Funk in his address. If all interpretations of Jesus are “imaginary constructs” and “stories,” the use of terms such as “really said” and “ultimate truth” seem inappropriate. Likewise, Funk’s frequent use of light/dark metaphors seem to erect a dichotomy in biblical scholarship between those who share the Jesus Seminar’s conclusions (i.e., those who are right) and those who do not (i.e., those who are wrong). However, given Funk’s insistence that all histories are fiction, he would have been better served in his speech to recognize that the Jesus Seminar’s unique vision of Jesus was also a fiction. Instead, he gave the impression that while other interpretations of Jesus were fictions, the Seminar’s would be fact.

Even after 20 years, the Jesus Seminar’s official Web site continues to feature Funk’s inaugural address. It is a piece of rhetorical history that continues to serve as the main vehicle for communicating the Seminar’s mission and method. It also is the trumpet call to those would become foot soldiers in the Seminar’s battle. However, as this article has attempted to prove, that call perhaps lacked the clarity necessary to rally the troops. “And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for the battle?” (NRSV, 1 Cor. 14:8).

---

Mathew Cabot is an associate professor in the Journalism Department at California State University, Long Beach. He can be reached at [mcabot@csulb.edu](mailto:mcabot@csulb.edu).

### Appendix

*The opening remarks of Jesus Seminar founder Robert Funk, presented at the first meeting held 21–24 March 1985 in Berkeley, California*

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.

We are not embarking on this venture in a corner. We are going to carry out our work in full public view; we will not only honor the freedom of information, we will insist on the public disclosure of our work and, insofar as it lies within our power, we shall see to it that the public is informed of our judgments. We shall do so, not because our wisdom is superior, but because we are committed to public accountability.

Our basic plan is simple. We intend to examine every fragment of the traditions attached to the name of Jesus in order to determine what he really said—not his literal words, perhaps, but the substance and style of his utterances. We are in quest of his *voice*, insofar as it can be distinguished from many other voices also preserved in the tradition. We are prepared to bring to bear everything we know and can learn about the form and content, about the formation and transmission, of aphorisms and parables, dialogues and debates, attributed or attributable to Jesus, in order to carry out our task.

There are profound and more obvious reasons we have decided to undertake this work. The more profound and complex reasons may be deferred until a subsequent session of the Seminar. A statement of the more patent motivations will serve this occasion adequately.

We are launching these collective investigations in the first instance in response to our students, past, present, and future. Once our students learn to discern the traditions of the New Testament and other early Christian literature—and they all do to a greater or lesser extent under our tutelage—they want to know the ultimate truth: what did Jesus really say? Who was this man to whom the tradition steadily refers itself? For a change, we will be answering a question that is really being asked.

Make no mistake: there is widespread and passionate interest in this issue, even among those uninitiated in the higher mysteries of gospel scholarship. The religious establishment has not allowed the intelligence of high scholarship to pass through pastors and priests to a hungry laity, and the radio and TV counterparts of educated clergy have traded in platitudes and pieties and played on the ignorance of the uninformed. A rude and rancorous awakening lies ahead.

What we are about takes courage, as I said. We are probing what is most sacred to millions, and hence we will constantly border on blasphemy. We must be prepared to forebear the hostility we shall provoke. At the same time, our work, if carefully and thoughtfully wrought, will spell liberty for other millions. It is for the latter that we labor.

We are forming this Seminar in the second place because we are entering an exciting new period of biblical, especially New Testament, scholarship.

We have new and tantalizing primary sources with which to work, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Apocryphon of James*, the *Dialogue of the Savior*, and we stand on the verge of new study instruments, such as the *New Gospel Parallels*, the new *Sayings Parallels*, and perhaps even a new and more tolerable translation of other New Testament apocrypha.

Beyond these advances, we have learned to transcend the paradigms of scholarship set for us early in this century. We have learned our textual criticism, our source and form and redaction criticism, we have taken in the best—and some of the worst—of our German and English and French predecessors. But we are now moving on to different paradigms: to parables and aphorisms as metaphors and poetry, to narratology, to reader-response criticism, to social description and analysis, and to many other promising ventures. We are laying new foundations in editing and publishing primary source materials, new and old, and are building new edifices of interpretation on those foundations.

Perhaps most important of all, these developments have taken place predominantly, though not exclusively, in American scholarship. We need not promote chauvinism; we need only

recognize that American biblical scholarship threatens to come of age, and that in itself is a startling new stage in our academic history. We may even be approaching the time when Europeans, if they know what they are about, will come to North America on sabbaticals to catch up, rather than the other way around. It is already clear that Europeans who do not read American scholarship are falling steadily behind.

The acknowledgment that a bonafide tradition of American New Testament scholarship is aborning brings me to the second large point of these introductory remarks. Creating a tradition of scholarship means that our work must finally and firmly become cumulative.

Cumulative is defined in law as evidence that gives greater weight to evidence previously introduced. In banking, cumulative interest is interest on both principal and accumulated interest. Scholarship is cumulative that lays down successive layers of evidence and interpretation of preceding layers.

I invite you to ponder the more than sixty books written by Fellows of this Seminar and its patron saints (Amos N. Wilder, Norman Perrin, Fred O. Francis). In some important respects these books represent cumulative effort: in and through these works a new tradition of scholarship is being formed. But in many respects, our work remains fragmented and isolated. We too often set about reinventing the wheel for each new vehicle we attempt to design and build. We are too often ignorant of each other's achievements. As a consequence, we tend to repeat the same major projects. Yet this phase of our history is coming to an end, as the emergence of this Seminar will attest.

In order to abet cumulative scholarship, I want to propose two preliminary steps. First, I am requesting Fellows of the Seminar to prepare prose accounts of their careers to be published in the *Forum*. These autobiographical sketches should indicate something of one's intellectual odyssey as well as the principal stations of endeavor along the way. In other words, we need to know the movements and pauses of our colleagues, in order better to understand how we got where we are. And it would make these sketches more interesting reading were they to include hints of the human.

As a second step, I am requesting that each Fellow provide a comprehensive bibliography of his or her publications for *Forum*. With the appearance of these bibliographies, Fellows need no longer be ignorant of the work of colleagues.

Beyond these two items, I am further suggesting that we review, in some depth, works of Fellows that are relevant for the Seminar. We have begun with Crossan's *In Fragments and Four Other Gospels*. These reviews will be published in *Forum*, of course. We should proceed to other works. I am subsequently going to propose that we tackle M. Eugene Boring's *Sayings of the Risen Jesus* and the recent work of Werner Kelber. But that will be only the beginning. I am herewith inviting Fellows to submit reviews of any works published by other Fellows for publication in *Forum*. If our work is to become genuinely cumulative, we must become acquainted with everything that has been produced.

These are only provisional steps that should lead up to the work of the Seminar itself. In making an inventory of the Jesus tradition and evaluating the items in that inventory, we must lay the foundations carefully. And we must then build painstakingly on those foundations. Only so will our work stand the tests of consensus and time.

Our endeavors must be cumulative and reciprocal in the last analysis in order to frame our individual proclivities and eccentricities by the highest degree of scholarly objectivity. My idiosyncrasies will be counterbalanced by your peculiarities. Our common finitude will be baptized in collective wisdom. (That does not make us gods, but it does obscure the consequences of original sin.) The result will be a compromise: not a sacrificing of integrity, but an acquiescence in the best informed common judgment. Our end product may look like a horse designed by a committee, that is, like a camel, but at least it will be a beast of burden tough enough to withstand the desert heat of powerful adverse criticism.

To heighten the risk of our program, I am proposing that we conduct our work in full public view. If we are to survive as scholars of the humanities, as well as theologians, we must

quit the academic closet. And we must begin to sell a product that has some utilitarian value to someone—or which at least appears to have utilitarian value to someone. We could begin with our students—not a bad place to begin—but we could also undertake to advise our president, who regards himself as a Koine Kowboy, about the perils of apocalyptic foreign policy. And we might conceivably do so on the basis of this Seminar, to the extent that he is willing, not just to cite, but actually to heed, the words of Jesus. At all events, we must begin earnestly to report on our work to a wider public and then to engage that public in conversation and conference.

I come now to the final point. It is a rather large one and can be made here only in the skimpiest outline. It lies central to all the other points I have made or will try to make in the course of our investigations together.

Since we are Bible scholars, let us begin with the Bible as a whole. The Bible begins, we are wont to say, at the Beginning and concludes with a vision of the heavenly city, the ultimate End. Traditionally, the Bible is taken as a coherent structure: the Apocalypse is thought to bring things around again to their original state; the evil introduced into the garden in the first instance is eradicated in the last. And the beginning and end are viewed as wholly consonant with the real events that occur between them. Thus, the Christian savior figure is interpreted as belonging to the primeval innocence of the garden and yet predicting and precipitating the final outcome.

There are two things to be said about this scheme. First, we are having increasing difficulty these days in accepting the biblical account of the creation and of the apocalyptic conclusion in anything like a literal sense. The difficulty just mentioned is connected with a second feature: we now know that narrative accounts of ourselves, our nation, the Western tradition, and the history of the world, are fictions.

Narrative fictions, aside from recent experiments in “structureless” novels, must have a beginning and an end and be located in space. They must involve a finite number of participants and obviously depict a limited number of events. Moreover, it is

required of narratives that there be some fundamental continuity in participants and some connection between and among events that form the narrative chain. It is in this formal sense that the Bible is said to form a narrative and to embrace in its several parts a coherent and continuous structure. And it is also in this same sense that the Bible, along with all our histories, is a fiction.

A fiction is thus a selection—arbitrary in nature—of participants and events arranged in a connected chain and on a chronological line with an arbitrary beginning and ending. In sum, we make up all our “stories”—out of real enough material, of course—in relation to imaginary constructs, within temporal limits.

Our fictions, although deliberately fictive, are nevertheless not subject to proof or falsification. We do not abandon them because they are demonstrably false, but because they lose their “operational effectiveness,” because they fail to account for enough of what we take to be real in the everyday course of events. Fictions of the sciences or of law are discarded when they no longer match our living experience of things. But religious fictions, like those found in the Bible, are more tenacious because they “are harder to free from mythical ‘deposit,’” as Frank Kermode puts it. “If we forget that fictions are fictive we regress to myth.” The Bible has become mostly myth in Kermode’s sense of the term, since the majority in our society do not hold that the fictions of the Bible are indeed fictive.

Our dilemma is becoming acute: just as the beginning of the created world is receding in geological time before our very eyes, so the future no longer presents itself as naive imminence. Many of us believe that the world may be turned into cinder one day soon without an accompanying conviction that Armageddon is upon us. But our crisis goes beyond these terminal points: it affects the middle as well. Those of us who work with that hypothetical middle—Jesus of Nazareth—are hard pressed to concoct any form of coherence that will unite beginning, middle, and end in some grand new fiction that will meet all the requirements of narrative. To put the matter bluntly, we are having as much trouble with the middle—the messiah—as we are with

the terminal points. What we need is a new fiction that takes as its starting point the central event in the Judeo-Christian drama and reconciles that middle with a new story that reaches beyond old beginnings and endings. In sum, we need a new narrative of Jesus, a new gospel, if you will, that places Jesus differently in the grand scheme, the epic story.

Not any fiction will do. The fiction of the superiority of the Aryan race led to the extermination of six million Jews. The fiction of American superiority prompted the massacre of thousands of Native Americans and the Vietnam War. The fiction of Revelation keeps many common folk in bondage to ignorance and fear. We require a new, liberating fiction, one that squares with the best knowledge we can now accumulate and one that transcends self-serving ideologies. And we need a fiction that we recognize to be fictive.

Satisfactions will come hard. Anti-historicist criticism, now rampant among us, will impugn every fact we seek to establish. Every positive attribution will be challenged again and again. All of this owes, of course, to what Oscar Wilde called "the decay of lying;" we have fallen, he says, into "careless habits of accuracy." And yet, as Kermode reminds us, "the survival of the paradigms is as much our business as their erosion." Our stories are eroding under the acids of historical criticism. We must retell our stories. And there is one epic story that has Jesus in it.

—from Forum 1,1 (1985)

### Works Cited

- Andrews, James R., Michael C. Leff, and Robert Terrill. *Reading Rhetorical Texts: An Introduction to Criticism*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998.
- Becker, Ernest. "The Fragile Fiction." *The Truth About Truth: De-Confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World*. Ed. Walter Truett Anderson. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995.
- Burgchardt, Carl R. "Metaphoric Criticism." *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. Ed. Carl R. Burgchardt. State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 1995.

- "Dispatch from the Holy Land: Peter Jennings Reports on the Life and Times of Jesus." *ABCNews.com*. 20 June 2000. 21 Feb. 2003 [http://more.abcnews.go.com/onair/ABCNEWSSpecials/pjr000626\\_jesus\\_promo.html](http://more.abcnews.go.com/onair/ABCNEWSSpecials/pjr000626_jesus_promo.html).
- Funk, Robert W. "Opening Remarks." First meeting of Jesus Seminar, 21-24 Mar. 1985, in Berkeley, Calif. 21 Feb. 2003 [http://www.westarinstitute.org/Jesus\\_Seminar/Remarks/remarks.html](http://www.westarinstitute.org/Jesus_Seminar/Remarks/remarks.html).
- Funk, Robert W., and Roy W. Hoover. *The Five Gospels: In Search of the Authentic Words of Jesus*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1993.
- Funk, Robert W., ed. *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998.
- Griffen, Leland M. "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 38 (1952): 184-188.
- Holy Bible*. New Revised Standard Version. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Ivie, Robert L. "Metaphor and the Rhetorical Invention of Cold War 'Idealists.'" *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. Ed. Carl R. Burgchardt. State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 1995.
- Kvale, Steinar. "Themes of Postmodernity." *The Truth About Truth: De-Confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World*. Ed. Walter Truett Anderson. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995.
- Miller, Robert J. *The Jesus Seminar and Its Critics*. Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1999.
- Osborn, Michael. "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light-Dark Family." *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. Ed. Carl R. Burgchardt. State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 1995.
- Sheler, Jeffery L. "Bob Funk's Radical Reformation Roadshow." *U.S. News & World Report* 4 Aug. 1997: 55+.
- Turner, Kathleen J. Ed. *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1998.
- Walker, Williston, Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz, and Robert T. Handy. *A History of the Christian Church*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985.
- Westar Institute*. "Jesus Seminar on the Road Manual." Santa Rosa: Westar Institute, 2001.
- Willey, Susan. "Journalism and Religion." *Quill* 84 (1996): 28.

Copyright of *Journal of Communication & Religion* is the property of Religious Speech Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.