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"Reconsidering the 'Scholarly Death' of the Apocalyptic Jesus"

Introduction

In recent years, a few scholars have declared the "scholarly death" of the apocalyptic portrait of the historical Jesus established at the turn of the century by Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. Scholars such as Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Robert Funk have argued that this apocalyptic portrait has been overthrown by current Jesus research. Actually, what they state is that a non-eschatological Jesus is no longer viable today. By this, they mean that current scholarship has demonstrated that Jesus taught a kingdom that was completely present. This means, of course, that they must first dismiss as inauthentic all future sayings attributed to Jesus in the gospels. Beyond the methodological problems with reducing the kingdom sayings to a present reality, there appears to be a confusion in terms used by these scholars. The term eschatological, for example, is equated with the apocalyptic portrait of Jesus sketched by Weiss and Schweitzer. This is not only inaccurate, it is misleading. The apocalyptic portrait of Jesus that has dominated this century is one type of eschatological portrait. As we will see, some scholars, such as C. H. Dodd, have argued for a "realized eschatology," in which the future is brought fully to bear in the present kingdom. Other scholars, such as Bruce Chilton, adhere to an inaugurated eschatology where even though the kingdom of God is present, it will experience a future fulfillment or completion. This completion may or may not be apocalyptic,

depending upon the individual scholar.

I. Toward a Portrait of an Apocalyptic Jesus

A. The Consensus of the Old Quest

In the Old Quest for the historical Jesus (1776-1906), Jesus was portrayed as a teacher of kingdom ethics. Jesus taught, according to that Quest, that the kingdom of God was completely present in his life and ministry. Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), for example, argued that the essence of Jesus' gospel message was the presence of the kingdom of God, a kingdom characterized by love and ethics.¹ Harnack believed that this kingdom was the rule of God in the human heart, and that the church's purpose was to extend this rule until the whole of society was transformed into the kingdom of God. But what of the apocalyptic imagery in the gospels? Harnack argued that the early church had distorted the message of Jesus by proclaiming Jesus as the divine Son of God instead of proclaiming Jesus' message of the kingdom. Thus, the proclaimer became the proclaimed. The role of the historian, according to Harnack, is to extract the "kernel" (gospel of Jesus) from the "husk" (hellenized formulations of the church). For Harnack, the kernel was the rule of God in the human heart, while the husk was the apocalyptic language of a future kingdom.²

¹*What Is Christianity?* (Trans. Thomas Bailey Sanders. New York: Putnam, 1957). Originally published in Germany, 1901.

²*Ibid.*, 56.

Harnack's model of the proclaimer becoming the proclaimed was further developed by Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920), a member of the history-of-religions school. Bousset developed a sophisticated model that attempted to account for the transformation of the historical Jesus into the Christ of faith in the early church.³ This transformation, according to Bousset, occurred in four stages. First, the Palestinian church began to speak of Jesus as the apocalyptic "Son of Man." Second, the hellenistic churches portrayed Jesus as a divine mystical figure. Third, the apostle Paul borrowed from oriental mystery religions to portray Jesus as a preexistent divine being who died and rose again. Fourth, the author of the Gospel of John described Jesus in terms of the gnostic redeemer myth. Bousset argued that these four stages transformed Jesus from a teacher of present kingdom ethics into a mythical figure.

B. A New Consensus Emerges

³Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrious Christos: A History of Belief in Christ from the Beginning of Christianity to Irenaeus* (Trans. John Steely. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970). Originally published in Germany, 1913.

The image of Jesus as a teacher of present kingdom ethics dominated the Old Quest. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, this portrait met its demise, largely at the hands of Johannes Weiss (1863-1914) and Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965). In his book, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, Weiss investigated the "kingdom of God" sayings in the teachings of Jesus.⁴ Based upon his study, Weiss concluded that Jesus' prophetic proclamation of repentance in light of the imminent end of the world and the coming kingdom of God placed him within the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic. Jesus, according to Weiss, came to believe that he was the "Son of Man" who would come on the clouds of heaven. In contrast to the liberal portrait of Jesus as an ethical teacher, Weiss concluded that the historical Jesus is best understood as an apocalyptic prophet. This apocalyptic Jesus predicted not the improvement of society but its impending judgment and doom. Weiss concluded that even though an apocalyptic portrait of Jesus was historically accurate, it held no relevance for the modern world. Weiss' view made little impact on scholarship until it was incorporated into Schweitzer's landmark book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.⁵

Schweitzer weighed the scholarship of the Old Quest in a balance and found it wanting. Although he had overlooked Martin Kähler's 1892 book, Schweitzer nonetheless concluded with Kähler that scholars of the Old Quest had constructed the

⁴(Ed. and Trans. Richard Hiers and D. Larrimaor Holland. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1917). Originally published in Germany, 1892.

⁵*The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (Trans. W. Montgomery. New York: Macmillan, 1968). Originally published in Germany, 1906.

historical Jesus after their own image while attempting to make him relevant for the modern world. Like Kähler, Schweitzer recognized the anti-ecclesiastical agenda of the Old Quest: "The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma."⁶ Schweitzer observed that the historical Jesus of the Old Quest was "a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb."⁷

Building upon the work of Weiss, Schweitzer's concluded that the historical Jesus was a Jewish apocalyptic prophet who had proclaimed the imminent end of the world. Jesus' "consistent (thoroughgoing) eschatology," as Schweitzer called it, placed the messianic kingdom into the future when the "Son of Man" would appear. The kingdom of God for Weiss and Schweitzer, then, was entirely future. But how could the scholars of the Old Quest have missed the obvious apocalyptic elements in the gospels? Schweitzer concluded that their desire to make Jesus relevant for the modern world clouded their historical judgment.

⁶Ibid., 4.

⁷Ibid., 398. This classic quote from Schweitzer is second only to George Tyrell's comments that the historical Jesus of the Old Quest was "only the reflection of a liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well," in *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London: Longmans Green, 1910): 44.

Schweitzer agreed with Weiss that a portrait of the historical Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet does not hold theological relevance for the modern world. "The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma."⁸ Theological significance for Schweitzer was to be found in the risen Christ: "But the truth is, it is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time and can help us. Not the historical Jesus, but the spirit which goes forth from Him and in the spirits of men strives for new influence and rule, is that which overcomes the world."⁹

⁸Ibid., 399.

⁹Ibid., 401.

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) accepted the conclusion of Weiss and Schweitzer that the historical Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet and that this portrait held no relevance for the modern world. In agreement with Schweitzer, Bultmann believed that relevance was to be found in the risen Christ and not the historical Jesus.¹⁰ Most scholars of the twentieth century would follow in Bultmann's steps, even if they did not accept his existential hermeneutic and radical skepticism toward the gospels. Also, Bultmann's students, who initiated the New Quest, largely followed in the steps of their teacher.¹¹ It can be confidently stated, then, that the portrait of the historical Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet has dominated the twentieth century, even if there were some challenges.

C. Challenge to the New Consensus

One of the few scholars to challenge the new consensus was the British New Testament scholar, C. H. Dodd. In his writings, Dodd argued that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God as a completely present reality.¹² This "realized eschatology," of course,

¹⁰See Rudolf Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* (Ed. Robert Funk. Trans. Louise Petribone Smith. London: SCM Press, 1969); idem, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner, 1934).

¹¹The New Quest originated with a 1953 lecture, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," given by Ernst Käsemann to a group of "Old Marburgers" (Bultmannians). In contrast to Bultmann, Käsemann believed that the historical Jesus was important, for if no other reason, to establish continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith proclaimed by the church. Without such continuity, the church could be accused of docetism, the belief that Jesus only "appeared" to have human flesh. See Ernst Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in his *Essays in New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press, 1965): 15-47. For an acceptance of the apocalyptic portrait of Jesus in the New Quest, see Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Trans. Irene and Frasier McLuskey, with James Robinson. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1960). Originally published in Germany, 1956.

¹²C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1935); and idem, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (New York: Harper, 1961).

removed any future fulfillment from Jesus' teachings on the kingdom. Although Dodd's realized eschatology did not win the day, it continues to influence a number of Jesus scholars, especially in Britain.

II. The 'Scholarly Death' of the Apocalyptic Jesus

A. Marcus Borg's Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus

As early as 1984, Marcus Borg was arguing for a non-eschatological portrait of Jesus.¹³ Borg made a strong case for his position in a paper presented at the 1986 Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) conference.¹⁴ There Borg argued that the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus is not to be understood as temporal but metaphorical. The only temporality is that Jesus emphasized the present availability of the kingdom. Borg concluded from this that Jesus never proclaimed a future dimension (completion) to the kingdom of God.¹⁵ Rather, the kingdom of God is to be understood as a symbol pointing to the present kingship of God. "Jesus did not emphasize a future act of God (the end of the world), but emphasized the present kingly power of God and invited his hearers to 'enter' it and have their lives shaped by it." For Borg, the only valid portrait of Jesus is a non-eschatological one.

¹³*Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Mellen Press, 1984).

¹⁴This paper was later published as, "A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus," in *SBL 1986 Seminar Papers*, ed. Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986): 521-535.

¹⁵For Borg, eschatological means "the notion that the world itself will come to an end, including the traditional expectation of last judgment, resurrection, and dawn of the new age." Borg appears to lump together all scholars who adhere to a future dimension (completion) to the kingdom of God. As we will see, there is actually much difference between the positions.

Borg is convinced that Jesus scholars today have largely rejected the eschatological portrait of Jesus that was established by Weiss and Schweitzer. This conviction is based upon Borg's polling of two groups of Jesus scholars and his observations about recent trends in New Testament studies.¹⁶ The two groups of Jesus scholars polled by Borg were the Jesus Seminar (of which Borg is a member) and the Historical Jesus Society of the SBL. In the spring of 1986, Borg mailed a poll to thirty charter fellows of the Jesus Seminar and forty-two participants of the Historical Jesus Society. Borg asked this question: "Do you think Jesus expected the end of the world in his generation, i.e., in the lifetime of at least some of his contemporaries?"¹⁷ Borg offered four possible responses: strongly think so, inclined to think so, inclined to think not, and strongly do not think so. The implication seems to be that those who would respond in the first two ways would reveal an acceptance of an eschatological portrait of Jesus, while responses to the latter two options would indicate a rejection of that portrait. Before examining this implication,

¹⁶These recent trends include: "(1) The realization that the primary foundation of the eschatological Jesus is the 'coming Son of Man' sayings, and that these are commonly viewed by scholars as inauthentic--not part of the words of Jesus; (2) A second realization, namely that the understanding of the Kingdom of God as the imminent end of the world is without basis in the Kingdom texts themselves; imminence has to be imported from the coming Son of Man texts; (3) A rethinking of the Kingdom of God that seeks to place it in a framework other than the temporal paradigm of present/future which has dominated much of twentieth-century scholarship," in "A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus," 525.

¹⁷Ibid., 534. Borg clarified this single question with this comment: "I am not simply asking whether, for example, Jesus expected a drastic change in the life of Israel, or whether he was referring to a dramatic internal or subjective change that might be referred to as 'end of the world' for one who experienced it. Rather, I am asking whether you think he thought the end was near, understood as a cataclysmic change in the 'objective' world, however we might interpret that expectation or proclamation today," in "A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus," 534n.

we need to consider the voting outcomes.

Of the eighteen participants of the Historical Jesus Society who responded to Borg's poll, three strongly thought that Jesus expected the end of the world in his generation, three were inclined to, six were inclined not to, and six strongly thought not. By way of implication, six participants (33%) affirmed the eschatological portrait of Jesus and twelve (66%) rejected this portrait. The fellows of the Jesus Seminar were evenly divided on the four responses: six strongly thought so, four were inclined to, five were inclined not to, and six strongly thought not. This implies that while ten fellows (49%) accept, eleven fellows (51%) reject the eschatological portrait of the historical Jesus. Combining the results of these two polls, Borg concludes, "More than half of us [59%] share a fundamental perception that Jesus probably did not expect the imminent end of the world."¹⁸ But is this a reasonable conclusion from Borg's poll?

At the very least, Borg's question is confusing. In the question itself, Borg asks if Jesus expected "the end of the world in his generation," while in his clarification he says that he is asking whether or not Jesus thought "the end was near." He then concludes from this that a majority Jesus scholars deny that Jesus expected "the imminent end of the world." Borg seems to suggest that these three phrases are interchangeable. This suggestion, however, confuses imminent with immediate. In the question itself, Borg asks whether or not Jesus expected an immediate end to the world. Albert Schweitzer, of course, would have strongly agreed with this question, but that is not the issue. The issue is this: Do most Jesus scholars today who adhere to a future completion (fulfillment) of

¹⁸Ibid., 534.

the kingdom believe that Jesus expected an immediate end to the world? The answer is no. By "imminent" most current Jesus scholars mean at any time or impending. Some scholars adhere to a theophonic, rather than apocalyptic, fulfillment of the kingdom, e.g., Bruce Chilton. Other scholars, whether they adhere to a consistent eschatology or inaugurated eschatology, would say that Jesus expected an imminent but not necessarily immediate end of the world. Borg's conclusions from his poll, then, are much too simplistic.

B. Contribution of the Jesus Seminar

Borg repeated his poll at the fall 1986 Jesus Seminar meeting in Notre Dame. Of the thirty-nine fellows in attendance, thirty (77%) said they did not think that Jesus expected the imminent end of the world.¹⁹ That this was a strike against the eschatological Jesus can be seen in this comment by James Butts, a fellow of the Jesus Seminar:

If the position of these thirty scholars is at all representative of trends among biblical scholars generally, then a significant shift in scholarly understandings of Jesus is occurring. The view of Jesus as the proclaimer of the eschatological kingdom of God is no longer dominant as it once was. The eschatological kingdom of Jesus' proclamation is disappearing. Not surprisingly, the voting at Notre Dame on the kingdom sayings reflects this loss of the eschatological Jesus. This impact is most apparent in the fact that almost all of the kingdom sayings contained in the thoroughly apocalyptic Gospel of Mark ended up being excluded from that material to be used for determining who Jesus was and what he said about the kingdom of God.²⁰

¹⁹"A Renaissance in Jesus Studies," *Theology Today* 45 (1988): 285n.

²⁰"Probing the Polling: The Jesus Seminar on the Kingdom Sayings, *Forum* 3 (1997): 111.

As with Borg, there appears to be a blurring of the distinction between eschatological and apocalyptic. Further study of the Jesus Seminar demonstrates that even though most of the fellows reject the apocalyptic portrait of Jesus, a majority acknowledge a future fulfillment to the kingdom of God.

At the Seminar's spring 1989 meeting, the fellows responded to a straw poll about eschatological questions.²¹ Statement two read: "Jesus expected the world to come to a cataclysmic end in the near future." The response was as follows: zero fellows strongly agreed, one agreed, zero disagreed, and twenty-nine strongly disagreed. A near consensus of Seminar fellows agreed that Jesus never expected a cataclysmic end of the world in the near future. Statement 4b read, "Jesus announced the presence of the Kingdom of God." To this statement, twenty-five fellows strongly agreed, zero agreed, one disagreed, and two strongly disagreed. The implication again appears to be that not only the apocalyptic portrait of Jesus but future fulfillment of the kingdom is no longer tenable for Jesus scholars.

²¹The list of questions and the resulting record of votes were printed on a Jesus Seminar flyer entitled, "General Questions on Jesus and the Future." Although the Seminar used its trademark method of voting, via four different colored beads, the colors conveyed different meanings than usual: red = strongly agree; pink = agree; gray = disagree; black = strongly disagree.

Statement 9 of this straw poll, however, raises some questions about this implication. Statement 9 reads: "There will be a future fulfillment of the Kingdom proclaimed (inaugerated) by Jesus." In response to this statement, seven fellows strongly agreed, seven agreed, one disagreed, and eleven strongly disagreed. This means that while twelve fellows (46%) deny any future component to the kingdom of God, fourteen fellows (54%) understand the kingdom of God to have a future fulfillment. Interestingly, statement 9 includes the word "inaugerated." Bruce Chilton, a member of the Jesus Seminar, describes his understanding of the kingdom of God in this way: "The future-oriented, eschatological aspect of the kingdom is therefore to be acknowledged in my view, but it stems from Jesus' view of God, not from a particular (apocalyptic) expectation for the future."²² Chilton, and it appears the majority of Seminar fellows, adhere to an inaugerated eschatology, one that sees a future theophanic (non-apocalyptic) fulfillment of the kingdom of God.

The voting record of the Jesus Seminar reveals an aversion to apocalyptic. In fact, in *The Five Gospels*, Funk identifies "Seven Pillars of Scholarly Wisdom," assured results of modern scholarship. Pillar # 5 states, "The liberation of the non-eschatological Jesus of the parables and aphorisms from Schweitzer's eschatological Jesus."²³ A year earlier Funk had declared, "The view that Jesus expected the world to end momentarily,

²²"The Kingdom of God in Recent Discussion," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994): 258.

²³Robert Funk, et al, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1993): 4.

made popular by Albert Schweitzer nearly a century ago, has died a scholarly death.”²⁴

Again, there appears to be a confusion between eschatological and apocalyptic.

Schweitzer clearly argued for an apocalyptic portrait of Jesus, but as we have seen a majority of the fellows accept an eschatological portrait, one that sees a future theophanic fulfillment to the kingdom.

III. Rethinking the "Scholarly Death" of the Apocalyptic Jesus

A. Problems with Declaring the "Scholarly Death" of the Apocalyptic Jesus

²⁴"The Jesus That Was," *The Fourth R* 5 (1992): 2.

Aside from the problems associated with Borg's poll,²⁵ there a number of problems with declaring the "scholarly death" of the apocalyptic portrait of Jesus. One such problem is the false dichotomy that has been drawn between a kingdom that is completely present and a completely future kingdom. Richard Hays, one of the many scholars to question the Seminar's insistence on overthrowing the apocalyptic portrait of Jesus, writes,

This must be deemed a 'methodological problem' because the Jesus Seminar employs its conviction that Jesus was a non-eschatological thinker as a stringent criterion for sorting the authenticity of the sayings material. Everything that smacks of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology is firmly consigned black. A 'cameo essay' explains the reasons for this decision roughly as follows: the gospels contain sayings proclaiming God's rule as both present and future; Jesus could not have said both things, the future eschatology appears to be 'bombastic and threatening'; therefore, Jesus must have spoken of God's rule only as a present reality.²⁶

But the questions remains: Are these the only two options?

²⁵One problem is the ambiguity of the single question in Borg's poll. A second problem is that scholarly trends are not determined by polls but by publications. Third, there are statistical problems with Borg's poll, e.g., too small of a sampling, lack or representation, and problematic interpretations.

²⁶Richard Hays, "The Corrected Jesus," *First Things* (May 1994): 45.

Following World War II a mediating position was offered by Werner George Kümmel.²⁷ Kümmel observed in Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God a fulfillment in the present as well as a promise in the future. Side-by-side in the teachings of Jesus were sayings that announced the inauguration of the kingdom and sayings that predicted a future consummation of the kingdom. Oscar Cullman not only adopted Kümmel's understanding of Jesus' inaugural eschatology but he provided a helpful analogy: D-Day and V-Day.²⁸ In casting out demons, Cullmann asserts that Jesus demonstrated the defeat of evil powers by the kingdom of God even though he anticipated a future completion of that victory. The inauguration of Jesus' victory is comparable to D-Day (June 6, 1944) when the Allied troops invaded the beaches of Normandy. For all practical purposes, this event signaled the defeat of Germany. The actual victory, V-Day (May 8, 1945), would occur only after some mopping-up operations. In like manner, Cullmann reasoned, the return of Christ will see the consummation of an already active kingdom. George Eldon Ladd furthered the insights of Kümmel and Cullmann, arguing that the Greek word for "kingdom," *basileia*, means "reign" or "rule," rather than "realm." From this, Ladd argued, God's reign is now only partly realized awaiting a future fulfillment.²⁹

²⁷Werner George Kümmel, *Verheissung und Erfüllung: Untersuchungen zur eschatologischen Verkündigung Jesus* (Basel, 1945); ET: *Promise and Fulfillment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus* (trans. D. M. Barton. London: SCM Press, 1957).

²⁸See, Oscar Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit: Die urchristliche Zeit--und Geschichtsauffassung* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946); ET: *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950).

²⁹George Eldon Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); Revised as *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

From this brief historical survey it would seem that Marcus Borg and the Jesus Seminar have created a false dichotomy between either a completely future kingdom or a completely present kingdom. In fact, the Seminar argued that future elements in the teaching of Jesus could automatically be dismissed as secondary, thus making this a criterion for authenticity. Although this criterion was called “social formation,” it was essentially the criterion of dissimilarity. This is troubling since the Seminar is well aware that a third alternative exists, namely, an inaugurated eschatology. In fact, as we have seen, at the Seminar's spring 1989 meeting a straw poll revealed that more than half of the fellows seemed to hold to an inaugurated eschatology in their understanding of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom.³⁰

³⁰See, "Table 4: Voting Record on Eschatological Questions at Westar Meeting" in chapter one.

Another problem can be observed specifically in the work of the Jesus Seminar. This is the false dichotomy that has been created between sayings that are apocalyptic and those that are sapiential. Research in recent years has demonstrated that there is no clear demarcation between apocalyptic literature and wisdom literature. Ben Witherington writes, "The old form-critical categories of either Wisdom or prophetic, or either Wisdom or apocalyptic, must not be too rigidly applied to the Jewish or Christian literature at the turn of the era."³¹ Wisdom sayings can be observed in apocalyptic literature and apocalyptic sayings can be observed in wisdom literature. George Nickelsburg states, "Although Israelite wisdom texts like Tobit, Sirach, and Baruch hold the Mosaic Torah in high regard and contain much (proverbial) instruction about (sometimes Torah-related) human conduct, they also have a high regard for the *prophetic* tradition, including its concern about future events, and they place the sage, scribe, or teacher in the role of an inspired spokesman of God and interpreter of Torah and prophets."³² While scholars of apocalyptic and wisdom acknowledge the blurring of distinction, the Jesus Seminar utilizes a false dichotomy to dismiss the apocalyptic sayings of Jesus and thus create a portrait of a non-eschatological, sapiential Jesus.

The third and final problem observed in the declaration of the "scholarly death" of the apocalyptic Jesus is circular reasoning. As stated earlier, apocalyptic sayings were consistently rejected as inauthentic for no other reason than the fact that they were

³¹*Jesus the Sage: the Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994): 384.

³²George Nickelsburg, "Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Early Judaism: Some Points for Discussion," *SBL 1994 Seminar Papers*, ed. Eugene Lovering, Jr (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994): 719.

apocalyptic. This flawed methodology has not gone unnoticed. Ben Meyer correctly points out that Pillar #5 of the Jesus Seminar is more a supposition than a pillar of scholarly wisdom. Meyer writes,

Still pillar #5 was honored through the last century until in 1892 Johannes Weiss appeared to topple it. Who has reestablished it? The Jesus Seminar merely supposes it. But since the Jesus Seminar systematically dismisses all those words of Jesus conveying eschatological themes and motifs, mere supposition is hugely problematic.³³

By what evidence, Birger Pearson likewise inquires, does the Jesus Seminar completely dismiss the eschatological sayings of Jesus?

³³Ben Meyer, Review of *The Five Gospels*, in *Bible Review* 10 (June 1994): 405.

The 'evidence' leading to the 'erosion' of the eschatological Jesus paradigm is not cited, for the very good reason that it does not exist! On the contrary, all of the real evidence that has come to light since Weiss and Schweitzer--the massive evidence now available in the Dead Sea Scrolls is probably the most important--only serves to confirm the fact that the apocalyptic worldview was pervasive in 1st-century Jewish Palestine. And this evidence is of direct relevance to the study of the historical Jesus. So one begins to wonder about a possible 'hidden agenda' in the rejection of eschatology by the Jesus Seminar.³⁴

Pearson is right in his observation about the apocalyptic milieu of Jesus' day. It is difficult to imagine how Jesus' contemporaries would have interpreted him in a non-apocalyptic way, especially since there is no evidence that Jesus qualified his statements about the kingdom. It again becomes clear that the Jesus Seminar is relying upon circular reasoning, assuming the conclusion in the premise.

B. The Current Landscape of Jesus Scholarship

³⁴Ibid., 323.

More important than Borg's poll of Jesus scholars is the actual landscape of current Jesus scholarship. Borg himself acknowledges that the apocalyptic portrait of Jesus continues to dominate German scholarship.³⁵ Contributions to the Third Quest by German scholars is indicative of this, e.g., Martin Hengel (1968),³⁶ Oscar Cullmann (1970),³⁷ Joachim Jeremias (1971),³⁸ Gerd Theissen (1977),³⁹ Rainer Riesner (1981),⁴⁰ Peter Stuhlmacher (1988),⁴¹ Marius Reiser (1990),⁴² and Joachim Gnilka (1990).⁴³ Jesus

³⁵"A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus," 522.

³⁶*Nachfolge und Charisma* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968); ET: *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* (Trans. J.C.G. Greig. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981); idem, *War Jesus Revolutionär?* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1970); ET: *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?* (Trans. William Klassen. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

³⁷*Jesus und die Revolutionären seiner Zeit: Gottesdienst, Gesellschaft, Politick* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1970); ET: *Jesus and the Revolutionaries* (Trans. Gareth Putnam. New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

³⁸*Neutestamentliche Theologie: I. Teil: Die Verkündigung Jesu* (Gütersloh: Mohr, 1971); ET: *New Testament Theology, Volume 1: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner's, 1971).

³⁹*Soziologie Der Jesusbewegung: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Urchristentums* (Munich: Kaiser, 1977); ET: *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Trans. John Bowden. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); idem, *Der Schatten des Galiläers: Historische Jesusforschung in erzählender Form* (Munich: Kaiser, 1986); ET: *The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form* (Trans. John Bowden. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

⁴⁰*Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981).

⁴¹*Jesus von Nazareth--Christus des Glaubens* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1988); ET: *Jesus of Nazareth--Christ of Faith* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1988).

⁴²*Die Gerichtspredigt Jesu: Eine Untersuchung zur eschatologischen Verfündigung Jesu und ihrem frühjüdischen Hintergrund* (Munster, Germany: Aschendorff, 1990); ET: *Jesus and Judgment: The Eschatological Proclamation in Its Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,

as an apocalyptic prophet is still considered to be one of the assured results of German scholarship.

1997).

⁴³*Jesus von Nazareth. Botschaft und Geschichte* (Basel: Herder, 1990). ET: *Jesus of Nazareth: Message and History* (Trans. Siegfried Schatzmann. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1997).

How has the apocalyptic portrait of Jesus fared in other geographical locations? In Britain, where C. H. Dodd first proposed his realized eschatology, Jesus scholars are evenly divided. A number of scholars accept Dodd's understanding of the present kingdom in the teaching of Jesus, e.g., G. B. Caird (1965),⁴⁴ John Riches (1980),⁴⁵ and F. Gerald Downing (1987).⁴⁶ Other British scholars accept the apocalyptic portrait, e.g., Anthony Harvey (1982),⁴⁷ Sean Freyne (1988)⁴⁸ Maurice Casey (1991),⁴⁹ and Marcus Boehmuhl (1994).⁵⁰

⁴⁴*Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (London: SCM Press, 1965).

⁴⁵*Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1980).

⁴⁶*Jesus and the Threat of Freedom* (London: SCM Press, 1987); idem, *The Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988); idem, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992).

⁴⁷*Jesus and the Constraints of History* (London: SCM Press, 1982).

⁴⁸*Galilee, Jesus, and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988).

⁴⁹*From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1991).

⁵⁰*This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994).

Is the portrait of Jesus as an eschatological, yet alone apocalyptic, prophet still tenable in American Jesus scholarship? As might be expected, the results are nearly as diverse as the scholars themselves. In spite of this, the apocalyptic portrait continues to dominate. James Charlesworth observes, "most experts on Jesus and the Judaism of his day have concurred that he was significantly influenced by apocalyptic thought and that his message was eschatological."⁵¹ The portrait of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet can be seen in the works Richard Hiers (1973),⁵² Ben Meyer (1979),⁵³ E. P. Sanders (1985),⁵⁴ James Charlesworth (1988),⁵⁵ Paula Fredriksen (1988),⁵⁶ Graham Twelftree (1995)⁵⁷ and

⁵¹"Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity," in *Images of Jesus Today*, ed. James Charlesworth and Walter Weaver (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1994): 10.

⁵²*The Historical Jesus and the Kingdom of God: Present and Future in the Message and Ministry of Jesus* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1973); idem, *Jesus and the Future: Unresolved Questions for Understanding and Faith* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1981).

⁵³*The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979).

⁵⁴*Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1985); idem, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Press, 1993).

⁵⁵*Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries* (New York: Doubleday, 1988); idem, ed., *Jesus' Jewishness: Exploring the Place of Jesus within Early Judaism* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); idem, ed., *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); idem, ed., *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Doubleday, 1992); and idem, ed., *Hillel and Jesus: Comparison of Two Major Religious Leaders* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

⁵⁶*From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁵⁷*Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995).

John Meier (1991).⁵⁸ Most of these scholars adhere to an inaugurated eschatology, but one that understands the future fulfillment of the kingdom of God in apocalyptic terms.

⁵⁸*A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Volume 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); idem, Volume 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994). Volume three of this three-volume set remains to be published.

Within the Third Quest as a whole, however, new images of Jesus are emerging. For some scholars the historical Jesus is best understood as a Charismatic Miracle-Worker. This can be seen in the work of Geza Vermes, Morton Smith, Gerard Sloyan, Marcus Borg, Sean Freyne, Irving Zeitlin, and Gaalyahu Cornfeld.⁵⁹ Other scholars identify the historical Jesus as a Jewish Religious Leader: David Flusser, John Bowker, Harvey Falk, and Bruce Chilton.⁶⁰ Still others view the historical Jesus as a Social Prophet, e.g., Gerd Theissen, Donald Goergen, and Richard Horsley,⁶¹ or a Political Revolutionary, e.g., S. G. F. Brandon, George Buchanan, and Alan Segal.⁶² Interestingly,

⁵⁹Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*; idem, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*; and idem, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*. Vermes sees parallels between Jesus and other Jewish *hasid*, "holy men," e.g., Honi the Circle-Drawer and Hanina be Dosa. Smith, in *Jesus the Magician*, refers to Jesus as a "magician." Sloyan refers to the historical Jesus as a "teacher" and a "mystic," in *Jesus in Focus*. Freyne, in *Galilee, Jesus, and the Gospels*, uses the Hebrew word *hasid* ("holy man") to describe the historical Jesus. In *Jesus and the Judaism of His Time*, Zeitlin identifies the historical Jesus as a "charismatic religious virtuoso" and a "pious Palestinian Jew." In *The Historical Jesus*, Cornfeld refers to Jesus as a Galilean *hasid*, "holy man."

⁶⁰Flusser identified the historical Jesus variously as a "Jewish preacher," a "Jewish miracle-worker," and a Pharisee of the liberal-wing of the Hillel School. See his *Jesus*. Bowker, in *Jesus and the Pharisees*, refers to Jesus as a "rebellious Jewish elder." Falk refers to Jesus as a "Pharisee of the Hillel School," in his *Jesus the Pharisee*. In *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible*, Chilton identifies Jesus as a "Galilean rabbi," who proclaimed a realized eschatology.

⁶¹Theissen prefers the terms "social reformer" and "itinerant prophet." See his *Sociology of Palestinian Christianity* and *The Shadow of the Galilean*. Goergen portrays the historical Jesus as a "compassionate sage" and a "non-eschatological prophet." See his three-volume set on the historical Jesus, *A Theology of Jesus*. In *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs* and *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, Horsley calls Jesus a social prophet, a resister, and a liberationist.

⁶²Brandon, in *Jesus and the Zealots*, argues that even though Jesus was not a Zealot, he became associated with the Zealot movement, which ultimately led to his death by the Romans for insurrection. See also Buchanan, *Jesus: The King and the Kingdom*, and Alan F. Segal, "Jesus, the Political Revolutionary," in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus' Jewishness: Exploring the Place of Jesus within Early Judaism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1991): 199-225. The portrait of Jesus as a political revolutionary has been greatly challenged in

many of these scholars do not hold their portrait of Jesus in exclusion to an eschatological or apocalyptic portrait, e.g., Gerd Theissen, Richard Horsley, and Bruce Chilton. Ben Witherington, for example, writes, "This role as sage must not be narrowly defined so that the eschatological and prophetic ideas are thought to be necessarily inauthentic."⁶³

Conclusion

There has never been a consensus in Jesus scholarship, if by consensus one means full agreement. There has indeed been a consensus in the sense of a general agreement. Perhaps the term consensus is too confusing. A better term might be dominant or prevailing, which removes any questions about the degree of agreement. Having said this, it is clear that the apocalyptic portrait of Jesus presented by Weiss and Schweitzer has dominated the twentieth century. The question for us is: Does this apocalyptic portrait continue to dominate? It would seem that an overwhelming majority of Jesus scholars affirm an eschatological portrait of Jesus. Given the growing number of portraits of the historical Jesus, it is difficult to say that the apocalyptic portrait still dominates. It would be safe to say that many Jesus scholars today still find this to be a viable portrait of the historical Jesus. In this sense, the apocalyptic portrait has not been overthrown or experienced a "scholarly death."

recent years. See, for example, Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule, eds., *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁶³*Jesus the Sage*, 385.