

Jesus, Abba, and the Seminar

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Abstract

Ron Huggins takes another look at the Jesus Seminar. After giving a brief summary of the work and methods of the seminar, he examines the assumptions and presuppositions of its members. The article effectively demonstrates how the beliefs and past influences of the members color their choices with respect to the authenticity of Jesus' sayings in the Gospels.

Robert W. Funk is dead. Even as I report the fact a pun flutters near at hand begging me birth it in print. Out of respect for the dead and delicacy over the tender feelings of certain of my readers I resist to return once again to my original point: Robert W. Funk is dead.

But it wasn't always so.

Yes, I know: that goes without saying, since being dead implies you were once alive, as in the well known sepulchral epitaph: *sum quod eris, fui quod sis* (or as a memorial brass in St. Olave, Hart Street, London puts it: "as I am you shall be, As I was, so be ye").

For a long time during my scholarly transversions Funk seemed more than a little alive, indeed bigger than life, and at no time more evidently so than when he gave his opening remarks on "The Issue of Jesus," at the very first meeting of the once infamous and now sometimes recollected Jesus Seminar. His words, delivered in some auditorium or other in or around Berkeley, California, on that early spring day of 1985,¹ still retain some of their original pretentious grandeur, even now more than twenty years after they were given and even though we now know that what they promised so confidently would never come to pass. Was I right even back twenty years ago in imagining I detected a tinge of megalomania when first I read the following words from that address?

What we are about takes courage...We are probing what is most sacred to millions, and hence we will constantly boarder on blasphemy. We must be prepared to forebear the hostility we shall

¹ The first meeting was held 21-24 March 1985.

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.²

I never doubted that the Jesus Seminar would sell a lot of books. But there is more to “liberating millions” than selling books, and although we should always be in favor of liberation, providing of course it is liberation *from* something *bad* and *toward* something *good*, we still need to ask, do we not, what it was exactly that the Jesus Seminar wanted to liberate us from? And when we do the answer (or at least part of it) isn’t hard to discover: they wanted to free us from believing that the Lord’s Prayer, or the vast majority of it anyway, came from Jesus.

Those who remember the Jesus Seminar (actually they’re still around, just not as much in the news lately) will recall how they voted on the authenticity of the various sayings of Jesus. For any given saying each member would vote with a bead of one of four different colors, each of whose meanings one popular summary described as follows:

red: That’s Jesus!

pink: Sure sounds like Jesus

gray: Well, maybe.

black: There’s been some mistake. No way!³

Naturally this conclusion of the Seminar’s about the alleged inauthenticity of the Lord’s Prayer made good copy and was therefore widely noised about already long before the Seminar produced what is very likely to become the relic for which it is best remembered as a footnote to the history of biblical scholarship and of human heroism or folly (depending how you look at it): *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (1993).⁴

² Robert W. Funk, “The Issue of Jesus,” *Foundations & Facets Forum* 1.1 (March 1985): 8.

³ Robert W. Funk, “The Emerging Jesus,” *The Fourth R* 2.6 (Nov 1989): 1. Essentially the same list (minus “No Way!” on the last one) appears in *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (trans. and ed. by Robert W. Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar; A Polebridge Press Book; New York: Macmillan, 1993), 37.

⁴ The original title was given by Teryne D. Bell as “A New Red-Letter Edition of Five Gospels” (Teryne D. Bell, “Will the REAL Jesus Please Stand Up?” *The New Westar Magazine* 1.1 [Feb 1987]: 9), and Marcus Borg as *The New Red-Letter Edition of the Five Gospels* (“What Did Jesus Really Say?” *Bible Review* [Oct 1989]: 19).

In 1988 an article appeared in the *New York Times* by Ari L. Goldman announcing in its title: “Lord’s Prayer Isn’t His, Panel of Scholars Says.”⁵ The article reported that the “vote on the Lord’s Prayer—which appears in somewhat different forms in the Gospel of Matthew (6:9-13) and the Gospel of Luke (11:2-4)—fell solidly in the grey area.” The same article further noted Jesus Seminar member Hal Taussig’s, “predicting that the vote would be widely accepted by biblical scholars. ‘The scholarly community will follow it.’”

A year later, the *Bible Review* told a somewhat different and more detailed story: “According to the Jesus Seminar,” it said,

The first words of the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Our father who art in heaven’ (Matthew 6:9a) are “almost certainly not” authentic, therefore, these words will be printed in black... (Luke’s shorter introduction—“Father” [Luke 11:2]—will be printed in red; the seminar considers this wording to be authentic.)”⁶

When *The Five Gospels* finally arrived, however, things weren’t presented in precisely the way the two earlier reports led us to expect. As predicted in *Bible Review* we do find that “Father” is the only word in Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer that is printed in red. However, contrary to earlier predictions, “Our Father” in Matthew’s version is printed in red as well.⁷ What is especially surprising about this is not that “Father” is printed in red—I might have expected that (see further below)—but that “Our,” is printed in red as well. In its discussion of that passage, *The Five Gospels* offers no justification of, nor indeed does it even mention, the red-letter status of “Our.” Given my own familiarity with the procedures and methodologies of the Jesus Seminar I felt sure that it was not the *Bible Review* that had gotten it wrong, but *The Five Gospels* itself, which I presumed must have printed “Our” in red by mistake.

Further research confirmed that suspicion. In reviewing the Jesus Seminar’s own published accounts of that vote I found that everything points to the conclusion that at best only “Father” was to be printed in red.⁸ The original vote took place at the 13-16 October 1988 meeting of

⁵ Ari L. Goldman, “RELIGION NOTES; Lord’s Prayer Isn’t His, Panel of Scholars Says,” *New York Times* (Sunday, October 23, 1988) <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/10/23/nyregion/religion-notes-lord-s-prayer-isn-t-his-panel-of-scholars-says.html>.

⁶ Marcus Borg, “What Did Jesus Really Say?” *Bible Review* (Oct 1989): 22.

⁷ Again, as the only thing in the prayer to be printed in red.

⁸ The qualification “at best” will be explained further below.

the Jesus Seminar in Atlanta, Georgia. In a report dated 6 December 1988 and published the following month in the Jesus Seminar's magazine, *The Fourth R*, Funk informs us that the issues related to the Lord's Prayer had been set before the assembled Seminar members in a paper by Hal Taussig—then of Philadelphia's St. Joseph's University and Reading's Albright College and now a visiting professor at New York's Union Theological Seminary—and that "Most Fellows found Taussig's analysis convincing in its principal tenets."⁹

Taussig's original paper was also published in December 1988 in the Jesus Seminar's journal, *Foundation & Facets Forum*, and in it we do find that he clearly argued against printing "Our" in red in the first line of Matthew's Lord's Prayer, when he said that the "Our...in heaven"... is to be considered...as Matthean," that is to say, as originating with the author of Matthew not Jesus.¹⁰

That the Seminar confirmed Taussig's suggestion was revealed when the results of the actual Seminar vote were published in June 1989 in an article by Robert J. Miller. According to Miller the fellows voted that "Father" be printed in red, but that the rest of the line, "Our...who art in heaven," be printed in black.¹¹ Also, in confirmation of the *New York Times* article, he indicated as well that the prayer as a whole was given a gray vote.¹²

Curious about the discrepancy, I emailed Miller asking him if he knew why, contrary to his reported decision, *The Five Gospels* had printed "Our" in red. He kindly responded as follows:¹³

It is puzzling. Since my article was written a week or so after the seminar meeting where this was voted, I suspect that my report is accurate and the *Five Gospels* is in error. However, the book was printed several years after the meeting and it is possible that the seminar reconsidered the issue and had a new vote.

⁹ Robert W. Funk, "The Lord's Prayer: Does it Go Back to Jesus?" *The Fourth R* 2.1 (Jan 1989): 1. Funk says nothing about whether "Our" ought to be printed in red letters or not, although his methodological discussion implies that it should not.

¹⁰ Hal Taussig, "The Lord's Prayer," *Foundations & Facets Forum* 4.4 (Dec 1988): 30.

¹¹ Robert J. Miller, "The Lord's Prayer and Other Items From the Sermon on the Mount," *Foundations & Facets Forum* 5.2 (June 1989): 185.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Email from Robert J. Miller to the author (1 May 2009).

Miller's suggestion of some further decision intrigued me. Was there any evidence that the Jesus Seminar had revisited its position between the publication of Miller's report in 1989 and the appearance of *The Five Gospels* in 1993? The question led me to seek additional evidence.

The first piece, which was relatively inconsequential in nature, was that the cover of the November 1992 *The Fourth R* featured an artistic rendering of the word "Abba," patterned after "an eighth century manuscript in the library of Durham Cathedral," which was intended to highlight an article in that issue by Funk in which he remarked upon how "a vast majority of the members of the Seminar are convinced that Jesus employed the intimate term "Abba" ("Father"), for God."¹⁴

More significant was a series of cumulative reports of the Jesus Seminar's voting record in the 1990-1991 *Foundations & Facets Forum*, sorted variously by gospels (chapter and verse),¹⁵ weighted average,¹⁶ gospels (weighted average),¹⁷ clusters (weighted average),¹⁸ and alphabetical titles.¹⁹

In each case it was indicated that the Seminar had voted that Matthew 6:9c, which was given the listing name "Lord's prayer: Father," was to be printed in black, and that the decision had been made at the 1988 Atlanta meeting. Up to that point then, there had been no new vote on the matter.²⁰ Apart from these items there was nothing of further significance reported prior to the 1993 appearance of *The Five Gospels*. Finally in the May-June 1998 *The Fourth R*, Hal Taussig published

¹⁴ Robert W. Funk, "The Jesus That Was," *The Fourth R* 5.6 (Nov 1992): 3. See the "On the Cover" note for that issue.

¹⁵ *Foundations & Facets Forum* 6.1 (March 1990). On Matt 6:9c see, p. 35.

¹⁶ *Foundations & Facets Forum* 6.2 (June 1990). On Matt 6:9c see, p. 168.

¹⁷ *Foundations & Facets Forum* 6.3-4 (Dec. 1990). On Matt 6:9c see, p. 284.

¹⁸ *Foundations & Facets Forum* 7.1-2 (March-June 1991). On Matt 6:9c see, p. 57.

¹⁹ *Foundations & Facets Forum* 7.1-2 (March-June 1991). On Matt 6:9c see, p. 136.

²⁰ In an email to the author (29 April 2009) Hal Taussig commented on the problem being dealt with by saying that "it was not a printing question. It was a matter of what level of the text we decided we could differentiate in the color coded voting. At that stage in our work we did not allow ourselves to vote one color for an adjective or adverb and one color for a noun or verb. So we did not allow the option to vote on "Our." It was probably a mistake, and one that we later nuanced." Interestingly these later voting tallies do not specify the various differing votes for the various words in "Our Father who art in heaven." Perhaps this is what Taussig has in mind. It must be remembered however that at the time of the earlier reports of Miller it was already indicated that "Our" should be printed black but "Father" red.

another article on the Lord's Prayer in which he comments that the "Seminar voted against the historicity of the prayer text as an entirety, but voted red on the fragment prayer 'Abba/Father.'" ²¹ Conclusion: Robert J. Miller was right, his report was correct and *The Five Gospels* was in error.

This whole question as to whether "Our" was printed in red on purpose or by mistake represents a side issue to the main point of this study, namely the question of the Jesus Seminar's view of the Lord's use of "Abba" and its meaning in relation to his prayer. Still it represented an important side discussion as it cleared the ground to consider the word "Father" as the only word the Jesus Seminar intended to print in red.

Eighty Two Percent of Jesus' Sayings Not from Jesus?

The introduction of *The Five Gospels* tells us that "Eighty-two percent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the gospels were not actually spoken by him." ²² Given that the Jesus Seminar voted so few passages red, we may wonder why they thought the word "Father" in the Lord's Prayer ought to be one of them. I ask the question on the assumption that the legitimacy of their methodology might be tested equally well by examining why they confidently affirm that one saying comes from Jesus as by examining why they confidently affirm that another saying does not.

Did Jesus use the term "Abba" when he taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer? According to *The Five Gospels*,

Jesus undoubtedly employed the term "Abba" (Aramaic for "Father") to address God. Among Judeans the name of God was sacred and was not to be pronounced (in the Dead Sea Scrolls community, a person was expelled from the group for pronouncing the name of God, even accidentally). Yet Jesus used a familiar form of address and then asked that the name be regarded as sacred—a paradox that seems characteristic of Jesus' teachings. ²³

The gist of the argument here is that it was so unusual for ancient Jews to use God's name (Yahweh) that it would have been even more unusual for them to use the more intimate and familiar term "Abba." Their argument in saying that Jesus did use "Abba," represents in part an

²¹ Hal Taussig, "Behind and Before the Lord's Prayer," *The Fourth R* (May-June 1998): 3.

²² *The Five Gospels*, p. 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

appeal to a criterion of authenticity called *dissimilarity*. A classic definition of this criterion was given by Norman Perrin who formulated it as follows “the earliest form of a saying we can reach may be regarded as authentic if it can be shown to be dissimilar to characteristic emphases both of ancient Judaism and of the early Church.”²⁴ Because of its dual reference (ancient Judaism / early Church) this criterion is also sometimes referred to as *double dissimilarity*. Perrin considered it “the fundamental criterion for authenticity upon which all reconstructions of the teaching of Jesus must be built.”²⁵ Similarly Rudolf Bultmann’s eminent student Ernst Käsemann considered that only in the case of results arrived at by the application of this criterion do “we have more or less safe ground under our feet.”²⁶

So then, was the use of “Abba” as rare among first century Jews as the Jesus Seminar suggests? Apparently not, or at least so says a number of Jewish scholars. Geza Vermes, a Jewish scholar who specializes in Historical Jesus studies, writes that “the representation of the Deity as ‘Father’ is a basic element of Old Testament theology. Ancient biblical names like Abiel (God is my Father), Abijah (Yah [Yahweh/Jehovah] is my Father), Eliab (My God is Father), etc., all testify to this concept. They proclaim a parental relationship between God and individual members of the Jewish people. ‘Is not he your father?’ asks Deuteronomy 32:6.”²⁷ Similarly, Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine writes:²⁸

Still popular is the view that only Jesus would have dared to call God “Father” and that only Jesus would have done so with the daring use of the Aramaic term *Abba*, meaning “Daddy.” The claims are hopelessly flawed. In Jewish thought, the designation of the deity as “Father” develops substantially during the Second Temple period, that is, after the return from the Babylonian exile in 538 BCE. For example, Malachi 2:10 states: “Have we not all one

²⁴ Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 39. ²⁵ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, revised version, (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company 1996) 135-137.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁶ Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 37. See also Borg’s discussion of this criterion in connection with its use by the Jesus Seminar in “What Did Jesus Really Say?” p. 23.

²⁷ Geza Vermes, *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 2004 [orig. 2003]), 223.

²⁸ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 42-43.

father?" The Mishnah (*Berakhot* 5:1) states that the ancient holy ones (called Hasidim) spent an hour in preparation prior to prayer, "in order to direct their hearts toward their Father who is in heaven." This understanding of God as Father continues in synagogues today, where Jews speak of and to *Av ha-rachamim* ("merciful Father") as well as *Avinu malkenu* ("Our Father, our King") and proclaim, *Hu avinu* ("He is our Father")...Although it is better to think of *Abba* as a first-century Aramaic term than a Swedish rock band, the translation "Daddy" is incorrect. The term means "father," and it is not an expression associated primarily with little children. The New Testament writers themselves do not understand it to mean "Daddy" either, for in each of the three uses the Aramaic *Abba* is immediately glossed with the Greek vocative *o pater*, "Father." The only place in the Gospels Jesus himself is said to use the address *Abba* is Mark 14:36; in Gethsemane, he prays, "*Abba*, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

The assertion we have all, no doubt, heard in sermons—that "*Abba*" means "Daddy"—figures into our discussion here in that its use implies so great an intimacy and familiarity on the part of its user that presumably no Jew of Jesus' day would have dared to use "*Abba*" to refer to God. But again as Neusner and Green note "Some assert that 'Abba' is unique to Jesus and displays a special intimacy (i.e., daddy), but neither claim is supported by textual and philological evidence."²⁹

Vermes gives us some sense of the range of usage for "*Abba*" in a story he relates from the Babylonian Talmud concerning Hanan, the grandson of the first-century Jewish wonder-worker, Honi the Circle-Maker:³⁰

When the world was in need of rain, the rabbis used to send school-children to him, who seized the train of his cloak and said to him, *Abba, Abba*, give us rain! He said to God: Lord of the universe, render a service to those who cannot distinguish between the *Abba* who gives rain and the *Abba* who does not.

²⁹ "Abba," *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period 450 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.* (2 vols. in 1; ed. by Jacob Neusner & Scott Green (Peabody Mass; Hendrickson 1999 [orig. edition: New York: Macmillan, 1996]), 2.

³⁰ Babylonian Talmud, *Taanit* 23b, quoted in Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 211. For a more complete discussion on the question of *Abba* meaning daddy, see James Barr, "Abba isn't 'Daddy'," *JTS* 39.1 (April 1988): 28-47.

It seems difficult to imagine how the Jesus Seminar got this so wrong. Yet it appears that they indeed made the very elementary mistake of assuming that since ancient Jews avoided pronouncing the divine name, they would also have avoided calling God “Abba.” Not so apparently. This becomes even more interesting when we consider the fact that even Rudolf Bultmann, in many ways the spiritual father of the Jesus Seminar, and the actual teacher of Jesus Seminar members Helmut Koester and James M. Robinson,³¹ had noted in his 1934 work *Jesus and the Word*, that “Jesus does not intend to teach any new conception of God and does not announce the fact of man’s sonship to God as a new and unheard-of truth. The view of God as Father was in fact current in Judaism, and God was addressed as Father both by the praying congregation and by individuals.”³²

Other Evidence?

Given the fact that the appeal to dissimilarity with Judaism does not in the end provide the kind of confidence we see reflected in the red-letter status of the word “Father” in *The Five Gospels*, we may ask further whether the Seminar offered any *further* significant arguments or evidence in support of its red-letter decision for “Father.” And as a matter of fact, as we examine the scholarly paper trail underpinning the decision we do find the Seminar appealing to a second line of evidence described, for example, in Funk’s original summary of the Seminar’s vote:³³

That Jesus addressed God as “Father” is taken to be a very strong link with the actual words of Jesus, since the New Testament preserves the Aramaic term “Abba” elsewhere (Mark 14:36, Jesus in Gethsemane; Rom 8:15, Gal 4:6).

³¹ “Both authors studied under Rudolf Bultmann. Both are involved in the current indigenization of the Bultmann tradition on American soil” (James M. Robinson, “Introduction: The Dismantling and Reassembling of the Categories of New Testament Scholarship,” in James M. Robinson & Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971], 1).

³² Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (trans. by Louise Pettibone Smith & Erminie Huntress Lantero; New York: Scribner’s, 1934), 191.

³³ Robert W. Funk, “The Lord’s Prayer: Does it Go Back to Jesus?” *The Fourth R* 2.1 (Jan 1989): 5-6.

Such an argument may be meaningful in a world where a modicum of confidence exists regarding the integrity of early Christian reports about Jesus. It is hard to regard it as meaningful however within the world, or perhaps better yet within the language game, of the Jesus Seminar, where the Jesus of early Christian reportage is as much the product of some ecclesiastical committee's imagination (or lack of imagination) as of real historical accounts of what Jesus actually did and taught. Hence for them the quest has to do as much with using their critical methods to get at the truth that ostensibly lies *behind* the evidence as it does with attending to what lies *on the face* of it.

The difficulty with this procedure is that our confidence in what the Jesus Seminar allegedly "discovers" and puts forward as its "assured results," can rise no higher than our trust on the one hand in the validity of their methodologies and on the other in their ability to effectively apply them. Beyond this there is no way for us to know whether the very interesting Jesus *supposedly* invented by an ancient committee is simply being replaced for us by the comparatively uninteresting Jesus *actually* invented by a latter-day committee.

Ultimately this second line of evidence also falls short of being persuasive. In the first place, Funk's comment about "Abba" being preserved "elsewhere" in the New Testament, might cause us to forget that it is not *actually present* in either version of the Lord's Prayer. It may be that it stood behind the Greek word *Pater* there, but *how can we be sure?*

Secondly although it is true that we find Jesus using the word Abba in Gethsemane in Mark 14:36, Funk's appeal to it would ultimately be nullified when the Seminar later voted the particular saying containing it off the lips of Jesus, as Philip Sellew explained in *Foundations and Facets Forum*: "The narrational setting makes a pre-Markan origin implausible, despite what some see as typical Jesus language (*abba*)."³⁴ Hence when Jesus prays in Mark 14:36 to his "Abba," saying to him, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will," *The Five Gospels* prints it in black, indicating, as the reader will recall, that "There's been some mistake. No way!" i.e., there is no way its Jesus; or again, in the more formal statement of the significance of sayings printed in black: "Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition."³⁵

³⁴ Philip Sellew, "Aphorisms of Jesus in Mark: A Statigraphic Analysis" *Foundations & Facets Forum* 8.1-2 (March-June 1992): 157.

³⁵ *The Five Gospels*, p. 36.

This same decision to print in black was followed as well in the earlier Jesus Seminar publication *The Gospel of Mark: Red Letter Edition*.³⁶

The reason given in both the *Mark: Red Letter Edition* and *The Five Gospels* for the black-letter-status of Mark 14:36 is the fact that nobody could have heard the Gethsemane prayer.³⁷ This relates to what Funk describes as one of the “rules designed to exclude” inauthentic material: “as a matter of principle, no words or thoughts ascribed to Jesus when no auditors were present to hear or remember them were accepted [by the Seminar] as authentic.”³⁸ As his exemplar of this principle Funk actually appeals to this same prayer of Jesus:³⁹

His prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane, for example, went unheard except for God. His disciples had fallen asleep. The arrest and the flight of his friends followed immediately. How could the evangelist have known what he said on that occasion?”

Yet may we not wonder whether the principle as stated and exemplified here really reflects authentic critical rigor as claimed by the Jesus Seminar, or merely a basic lack of historical imagination? In the first place Funk tacitly admits a qualification to the principle, does he not, when he notes that the “arrest and the flight of his friends followed immediately.” In other words, there would have been no opportunity for Jesus to talk to his disciples about the burden on his mind in the garden or what he had prayed, unless of course we wanted to suggest that he talked about it after the resurrection, an idea that Funk and his colleagues would object to on other grounds.⁴⁰ Yet by the same token Funk’s remark implies that at other times Jesus might well have spoken about what he had said on occasions where there were no outside auditors. A classic example of this is the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, to

³⁶ Robert W. Funk, with Mahlon H. Smith, *The Gospel of Mark: Red Letter Edition* (Sonoma, Cal.: Polebridge Press, 1991), 216.

³⁷ *The Five Gospels*, p. 120, and Funk & Mahlon, *Mark: Red Letter Edition*, p. 216.

³⁸ Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (A Polebridge Book; HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 138-139.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁴⁰ See the tenth of Funk’s 21 theses: “The resurrection of Jesus did not involve the resuscitation of a corpse. Jesus did not rise from the dead, except perhaps in some metaphorical sense” (Robert W. Funk, “Twenty One Theses,” *The Fourth R* 11.4 (July-Aug 1998): 8. See then rule of evidence N4 in Funk & Mahlon’s *Mark: Red Letter Edition*, p. 49: “Statements attributed to the risen Jesus are not admissible as evidence for the historical Jesus.”

which we find the principle of no-auditors again applied in the discussion of the passage in *The Five Gospels*.⁴¹

Nobody other than the devil and Jesus were present, to be sure, which means that the report cannot be verified. The Fellows were unanimous in the view that all of the sayings in this narrative were created by the author of Q.

But again is the Seminar here displaying its critical acumen or its lack of imagination? There is no doubt that its anti-supernaturalistic disposition would have disinclined it from regarding Jesus' encounter with the devil seriously as a real event in history, no matter what context they happened to find it in or how well attested it was from the point of view of the criteria of authenticity.⁴² Yet that same disposition intermixed with a healthy dash of historical imagination ought to have suggested other plausible life settings for the story. In one of his books, Jesus Seminar member and Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong said: "In the world that I inhabit, miracles do not occur."⁴³ Having read his books, and to some degree followed his career, I believe that here the bishop speaks nothing but the unvarnished truth! (even though I don't personally happen to inhabit that world). In the same context, Spong goes on to say that "supposed supernatural invasions to break the laws by which the universe operates are sheer delusion." And yet even if Spong and his colleagues in the Seminar believe they inhabit a world in which there are no devils, still he/they would still have to admit that there continue to be people who are so benighted (take myself for example) as to believe in devils, and sometimes even suspect they have actually encountered demonic activities on one level or another during the course of their daily lives. My own sympathies on this score runs on parallel lines to those of Malcolm Muggeridge when he said: "Personally, I have found the Devil easier to believe in than God; for one thing, alas, I have had more to do with him. It seems to me quite extraordinary that anyone should have failed to notice, especially during the last half century, a diabolical presence in the world."⁴⁴

⁴¹ *The Five Gospels*, p. 278.

⁴² The Jesus Seminar devoted the entire May 1992 issue of *The Fourth R* to the issue of demons.

⁴³ John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious: Discovering the Divine at the Heart of the Human* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 67.

⁴⁴ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus: The Man Who Lives* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 51.

Now to be sure Rudolf Bultmann while I was yet only a child had already once and for all established, in his view no doubt irrefutably, that the likes of Muggeridge and I simply could not exist—"It is impossible," he said, "to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles,"⁴⁵—and yet here we both were, availing ourselves of modern technologies, switching on and off electric lights, and whistling along to the "wireless" (that quaint olden-days word for what we now call the radio), and all the while believing in "the New Testament world of spirits and miracles." Hopefully by now Bultmann's spiritual children in the Jesus Seminar have come to face what for them might seem a difficult fact, namely that the electric light, the radio, and surgery, have not banished belief in spirits and miracle, but rather have allowed people to live longer, to see and hear better, and to stay up later cultivating such beliefs via increased access to books, television, radio, and—what Bultmann never dreamed of—the internet.

In any case, given current belief in the demonic realm, how much more should we expect to find such beliefs embraced during the first century.⁴⁶ Might not Jesus, as a first century person, have interpreted certain difficulties in his life as rooted in a struggle between himself and the devil? Throughout the Gospels we see him casting out devils. He speaks of Satan being sometimes operative in visiting sickness on people (Luke 13:16), and, in the parable of the sower, of attempting to keep people from receiving the message of the gospel (Mark 4:15). He also hears the voice of Satan behind Peter's voice, when the latter attempts to dissuade him from fulfilling his divine mission (Mark 8:38). He speaks familiarly of what Satan's bad intentions with regard to Peter were, implying that he himself could, as it were, see what was going on behind the scenes (Luke 22:31). And on one occasion he even has the audacity to assert: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18). Interestingly this last remark by Jesus even rose to the level of being printed in pink in *The Five Gospels* ("Sure sounds like Jesus"). So then if Jesus might have said a thing like that, if he was ready to assert that he had actually seen Satan falling from heaven, then surely he was capable of describing seeing him and arguing with him in the wilderness.

⁴⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth* (ed. by Hans Werner Bartsch; trans. Reginald H. Fuller; New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 5.

⁴⁶ Not helped along in the belief by the electric light and radio programs, they were at least not discouraged from it by a pervasive uncritically held dogmatic secularism.

So then in the case of Jesus' prayer in the garden we are again confronted with a troubling lack of historical imagination. Even granting that the three disciples (identified as Peter, James, and John) fell asleep while Jesus prayed, that scarcely means they heard nothing of his prayer. Nor does it rule out the possibility that some other inquisitive auditor might have borne witness to Jesus praying, such as, for example, the mysterious youth mentioned in Mark 14:31, who "fled naked" from the garden after the soldiers had gotten hold of his linen garment, which was the only thing he'd been wearing. Many through history have supposed that youth to have been none other than the author of the gospel of Mark. If that be the case, the report of Jesus calling God "Abba" in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane is based on eyewitness testimony! And from that perspective it is entirely proper to ask what Jesus' use of Abba there might mean when thinking about his use of *Pater* in the Lord's Prayer. However the Jesus Seminar were not looking at the issue from that perspective, nor were they able to arrive at that perspective pursuing the question in the way they did. Either they lacked the imaginative power, or their methods lacked the explanatory power to negotiate the issue adequately. Still granting their own decision on the in-authenticity of Mark 14:36, we must insist that they ought to have taken that into account before using that passage as evidence for the authenticity of Jesus' use of *Pater* in the Lord's Prayer.

On the Importance of Being Aramaic

A key idea to note in the Jesus Seminar decision here is the fact that the supposed link between the word "Father" in the Lord's Prayer and "Abba" in other parts of the New Testament really did need to figure significantly in the decision to print "Father" in red. This due to the fact that the supposition brought into play another supposed criterion of authenticity, namely that since Jesus spoke Aramaic, a saying in which Aramaic either directly appears or reflects in Semiticized Greek, it is deemed more likely to be authentic, to go back to Jesus. Those who would rely on this criterion however need always to keep in mind that just because a particular saying goes back to an early Aramaic speaking community, it doesn't necessarily mean it goes back to Jesus. By the same token, just because a saying has been translated into good Greek doesn't mean it doesn't go back to Jesus. When there is no confidence in the integrity of the early Christian tradition as a reliable witness to Jesus, if the early Church promiscuously read its own teaching back onto the lips of Jesus, then the mere appearance of an Aramaic word here and there proves nothing beyond the fact that some early Christians (or perhaps only one Christian) knew Aramaic. For those who see integrity

in the early record, the fact that Paul uses Abba twice (Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6) is significant. For those who do not, such as the Jesus Seminar, the fact that Paul uses it may even imply that Mark—written says Funk and Mahlon, by “an anonymous author...shortly after the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E.—may be indebted to him for it.”⁴⁷ Given the dating, Paul would have long since gone on to his reward by the time the author of Mark took up his pen. According to Funk and Mahlon, further, “Paul’s gospel was in general circulation when Mark composed his story of Jesus.”⁴⁸ So then if the anonymous author of the gospel of Mark read Paul’s gospel back onto Jesus’ lips (as Funk and Mahlon go on to say he did at Mark 8:31, 9:31, and 10:33-34), then why shouldn’t we think that Mark’s anonymous author might just as easily have transferred “Abba” from the lips of Paul’s to the lips of Jesus’?

Conclusion

What then may we say in conclusion of our side trip down a rather poorly paved byway of interpretive history? Well, it has at least been a journey of discovery. We have learned that in at least for the instance we have been looking at:

- (1) That the colors assigned to the sayings of Jesus do not match those actually decided upon through the voting of the Seminar (i.e., by the printing of “Our” as well as “Father” in red at Matthew 6:9).
- (2) That decisions based on earlier votes have not been updated on the basis of the results of later votes (i.e., the original appeal to the “Abba” in Mark 14:36 when arguing that Lord’s Prayer’s “Father” ought to be printed in red, was undercut when the seminar voted Mark 14:36 inauthentic)
- (3) The criteria of authenticity adhered to by the Jesus Seminar actually tends to blunt historical sensitivity and imagination (i.e., as in the case the unimaginative adherence to the no-auditor criteria in the instance of both Jesus temptation in the wilderness and his prayer in the garden.
- (4) That in printing the word “Father” in red, the Jesus Seminar was being far more confident than their arguments and justifications for doing so warranted (i.e., after the difficulties we have discussed can the Jesus Seminar, given the

⁴⁷ Funk & Mahlon, *Mark: Red Letter Edition*, p. 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

perspective they start from justify printing “Father” in pink, or even gray?)

We have seen the Jesus Seminar being too optimistic in declaring a certain saying of Jesus authentic. We have also seen them being too pessimistic in declaring others inauthentic. Why did the Jesus Seminar print “Father” in red when given their own methods they had no solid justification for doing so? Was it because they loved their methods so much that they became blind to their weaknesses? Or was it that they somehow wanted to think that Jesus called God “Abba” whether they had good reasons for thinking it or not? Did the long shadow of Jeremias’s insistence that “*there is as yet no evidence in the literature of ancient Palestinian Judaism that ‘my Father’ is used as a personal address to God*”⁴⁹ fall across the voting box that fateful October day? Or was there perhaps an impossible but not entirely unwelcome ectoplasmic visitation from a bespectacled ghost with bushy eyebrows and mustaches, a haunting, that is to say, from no less important a spectral worthy than that lugubrious old academic Adolph von Harnack himself, whispering authoritatively into the ears of their subconscious minds as they were getting ready to cast their colored beads: “Es giebt nichts in den Evangelien, was uns sicherer sagt, was Evangelium ist...als das “Vater-Unser”... Nach diesem Gebet ist das Evangelium Gotteskindschaft, ausgedehnt über das ganze Leben.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (trans. by John Bowden, Christoph Burchard & John Reumann; London: SCM Press, 1967), 29 (italics Jeremias’s).

⁵⁰ Adolf Harnack, *Das Wesen Christentums* (Leipzig: J. C. Heinrichs, 1902), 42; ET: “There is nothing in the Gospels that tells us more certainly what the Gospel is...than the Lord’s Prayer...It shows the Gospel to be the Fatherhood of God applied to the whole of life” (Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* [trans. by Thomas Bailey Saunders; intro by Rudolf Bultmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 65]).