

Scriptural (N.T.) Authority and the 3rd Quest

David A. Fiensy—S-CJ Conference, 2020

Three phases

I. The Old Quest (18th-early 20th)

THE GAP

II. The New Quest (post-WW 2)

III. The Third Quest (1980-?)

The “Third Quest” was a new era

Third Quest: 1980s-today

By the 1980s, something new was happening. Theological concerns diminished, and scholars used scientific historical methods to discover the Jesus who actually lived in history. New Testament scholars joined with experts in ancient Judaism, textual critics, sociologists and archaeologists.



The 1990's were the most contentious

1990's

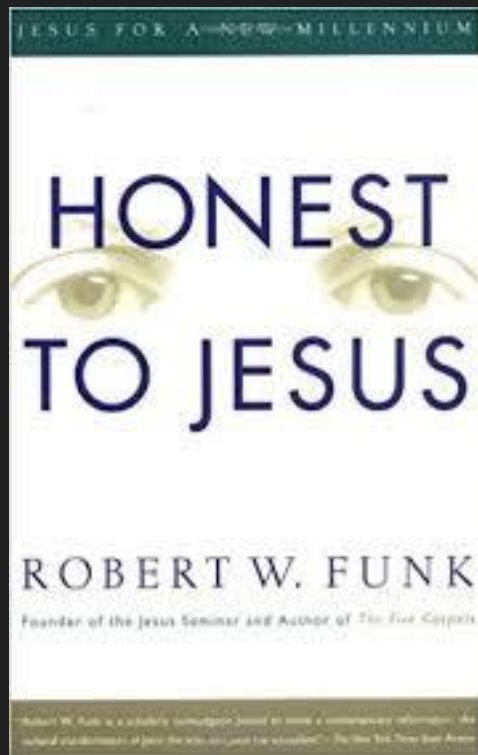


1980's

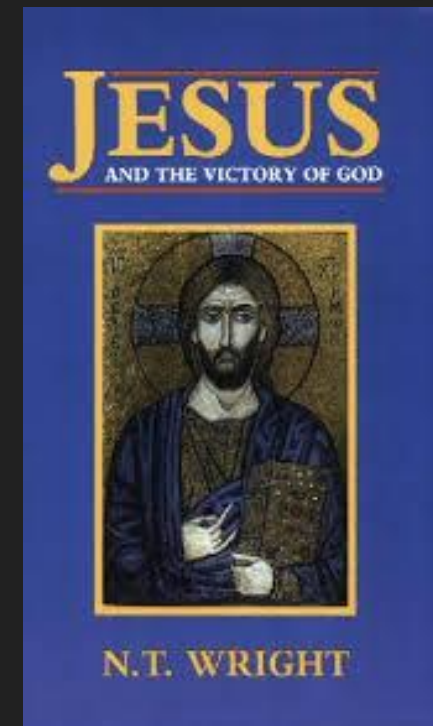
2000-present

1996 was the high point

Robert Funk



N.T. Wright



Jesus Seminar?

- A separate branch or emphasis of Third Quest? (Meier)
- A throwback to the New Quest? (Wright)
- A throwback to the Old Quest (Craig Evans)

The “Third Quest” may be over

1990's



1980's

2000-present

SBL Historical Jesus Program Unit, 2020

The Historical Jesus program unit organizes three sessions for the Annual Meeting. We are welcoming papers for a special session dedicated to answering the question of "Is the Third Quest Over?" Several scholars have pronounced the Third Quest over, but there has been no real resolution on the issue, which is complicated of course by arguments over the three-quest schema. We are inviting contributors to engage with this issue.



**View
From
30K
feet**

Let's consider more than:

- Liberal/conservative,
- My criteria/your criteria,
- My sources/your sources
- New Quest/Third Quest/Jesus Seminar,
- Galilee was Jewish/Galilee was Pagan,
- Apocalyptic/Cynic
- Socio-economic movement/religious movement,
- My personal agenda/your agenda

Four perspectives: What is authoritative for the Christian?

- 1. The canonical-creedal**
- 2. The Jesus-core as authoritative**
- 3. The contemporary leading of the Spirit** (sometimes against the N.T.)
- 4. The open canon**

The categories are squishy



Our questions

- **What is it?**
- **Antecedents?**
- **Representatives?**
- **What happened?**
- **What is our task?**
- **What is authoritative?**
- **What are some problems?**
- **What are some benefits?**

The representatives?

All are confessional

#1

Canonical-Creedal

What is it? The authority is:

- The New Testament as interpreted by the *regula fidei*

- *Prima scriptura*

Antecedents?

- Catholic Church
- Protestant Reformers

Spectrum

(Robert Fennell, Hans Küng)

Only scripture

Scripture
and tradition
are equal

Anabaptists,
JW, Armstrong

Orthodox
Protestantism

Luther
Calvin

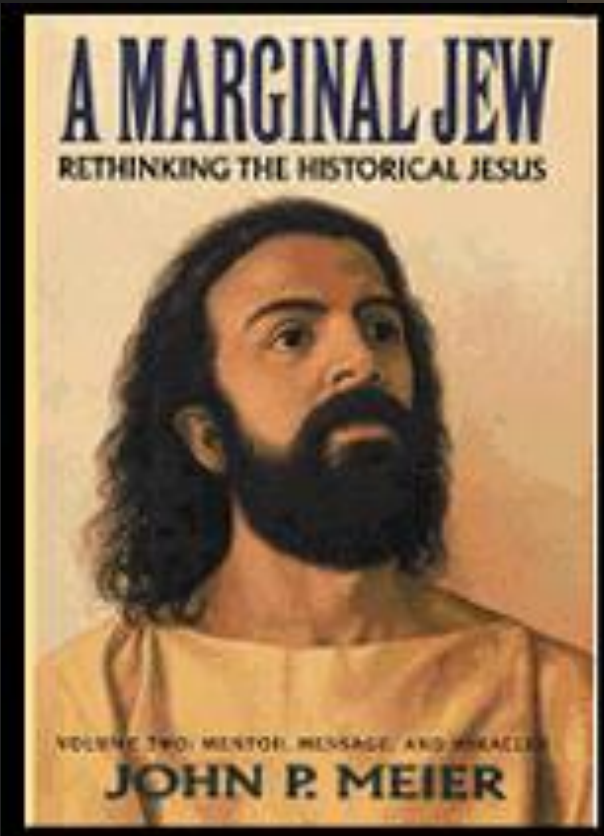
Most
Catholics

Catholic
traditionalists

Representatives?

- John Meier
- Luke Timothy Johnson
- N.T. Wright

Read John P. Meier's "The Present State of the Third Quest"

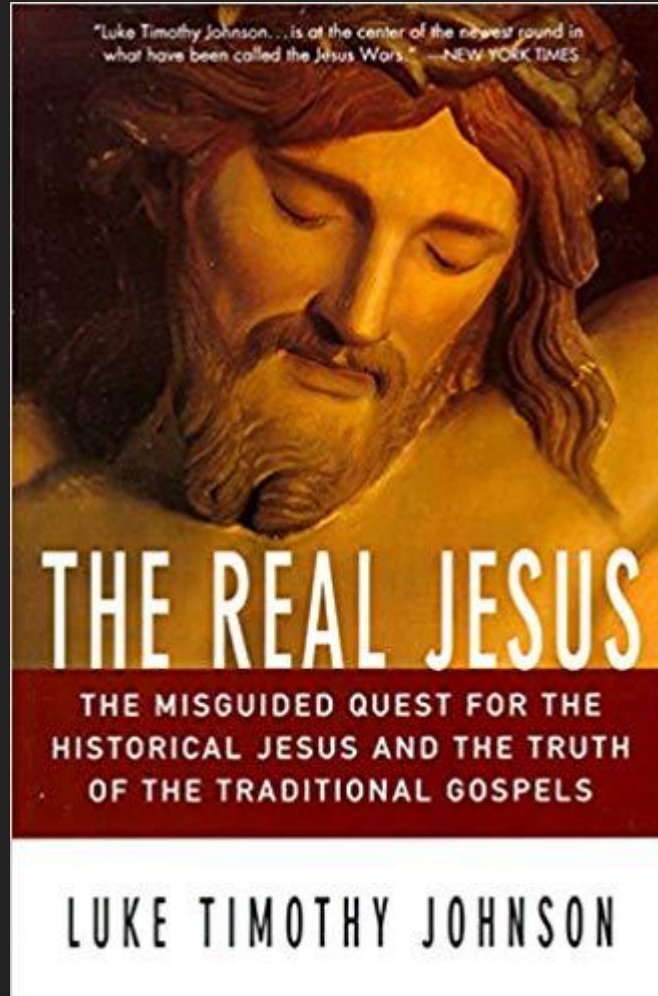


1991-2016

- John Meier, author of the 5 vol. work, *A Marginal Jew*
- Books have *imprimatur*
- Cites Chalcedonian formulation



Luke Timothy Johnson (1997)

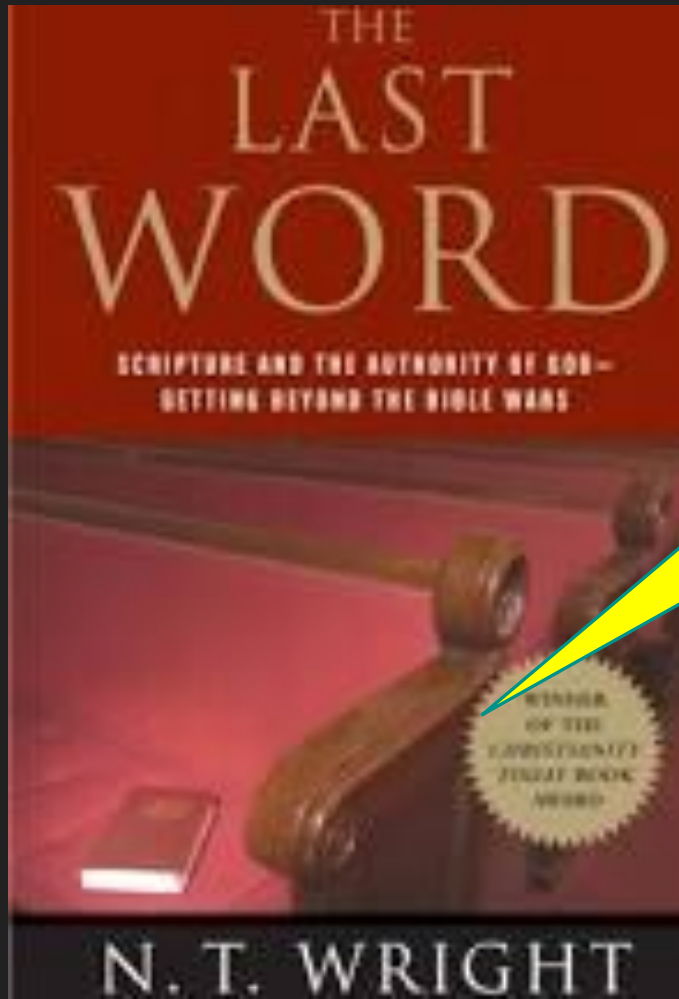


- “The real Jesus is the resurrected Jesus.”
- It is irrelevant if Jesus knew he was the Messiah.

N.T. Wright (1996)

- *Jesus and the Victory of God*
- Merges:
 - Albert Schweitzer
 - E.P. Sanders
- Conservative and very creative





Church is like an orchestra. Free to improvise but not to play off key = Rule of Faith



What happened?

- Holy Spirit guided writing of the **N.T. AND** the church in developing the **Rule of Faith**
- Paul, Mark, et al. did not corrupt Jesus' message.
- Jesus was God incarnate, died for sins of world (whether he knew it or not)
- Trinity

Our task?

- **Teach and preach New Testament within the Rule of Faith**

What is authoritative?

- The New Testament (as viewed through lense of Rule of Faith)
- Some make room for canon within a canon

Problems?

- Why make the Rule of Faith standard?
- Some in this group trivialize Jesus' teachings as incidental and unimportant (e.g. Bultmann)
- Canon-within-canon can be excessive

Benefits?

- The New Testament as a whole emphasizes catholicity.
- Rich variety inhibits radicalness.
- No need for conspiratorial yarn spinning
- Rule of Faith gives structure to biblical exegesis.

#2

Core Teachings

What is it? The authority is:

- The teachings of the historical Jesus

- *Ipsissima vox Iesu*
(*sola?*)

J.S. Semler (1725-1791): Material in NT
not conforming with teachings of
Jesus **not authoritative** for Christians

Antecedents?

W. Wrede (1905)

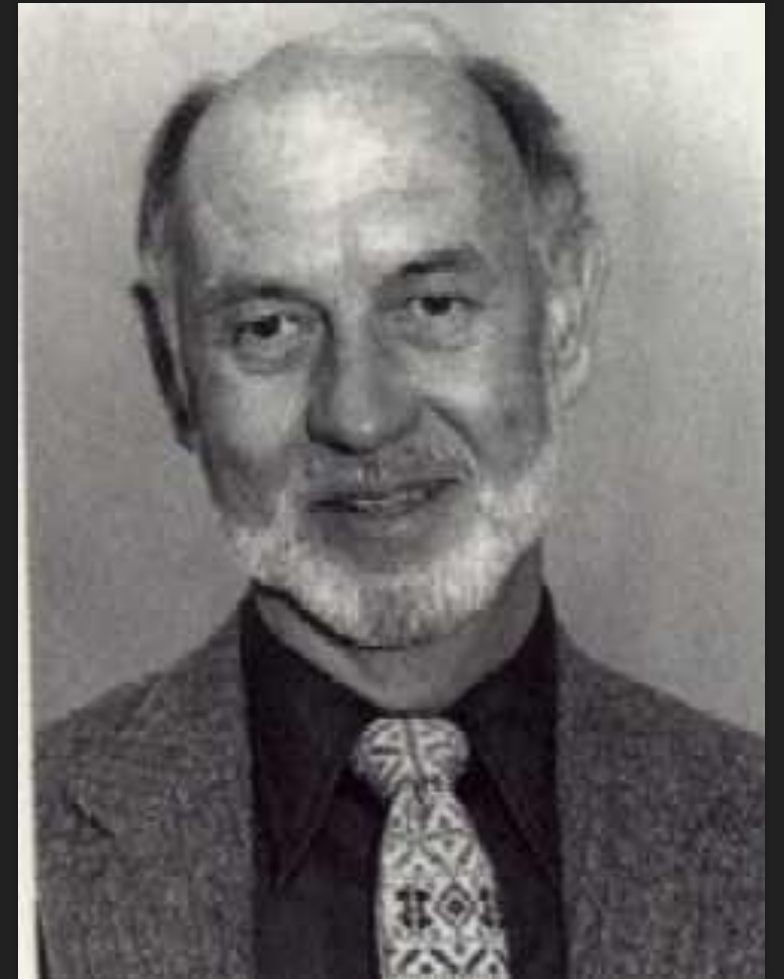
- Paul was actually the second founder of Christianity
- The individual piety of Jesus was transformed into a present redemption through the death-resurrection of a Christ-god.
- Watchword of 19th cent.? **“Back to Jesus and away from Paul.”**

Recent Representatives?

- **Burton Mack, John Dominic Crossan**

Burton Mack (1988)

- *A Myth of Innocence*
- Jesus was a wise-cracking, popular sage; shocked people
- Not teach doctrine
- Everything in Gospels contrary to this is relegated to myth-making (Mark did it first)
- Privileges **Q, layer 1**



Only Q layer 1?

- Cf. J.G. Eichorn
- True apostolic authority is found only in the **Urgospel**



(1752-1827)

John Dominic Crossan (1991 book)



- Gives prominence to Q, GT, GP, Secret Mark
- Miracles ruled out: **“People are not raised from the dead”** he states
- Kingdom of God is a new family, not eschatological community at end of age
- Jesus was a peasant, Jewish, Cynic

Crossan: Jesus was a(n)

1. Social revolutionary.
2. Egalitarian feminist



Gerd Theissen

“For Crossan, Jesus looks more Californian than Galilean”

What happened?

- Paul and the early church stopped preaching the message of Jesus and preached the message about Jesus
- Went from the simple message of the Galilean Cynic to the myth of the Son of God

What is our task?

- We must peel back later layers of mythologizing and get at the core of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Go behind the N.T.
- A form of radical Protestantism

What is authoritative?

- **The teachings of the historical Jesus**
(which come from looking behind the N.T. (at Q; and may come from extra-canonical sources)

Problems?

- Who decides the core? Much disagreement.
- No revelation after Jesus?

Benefits?

- Sharpens our thinking to take Jesus' teachings themselves seriously

3

Contemporary Leading of Spirit

What is it? The authority is:

- The Holy Spirit guiding the church today so that the church is free to disagree with the N.T., creeds, church fathers, and reformers.

*Consensus
ecclesiae*

Antecedents?

- Montanists: Spirit over the Scripture
- Deists: Remake Christianity
- Nazis: Change to Aryan faith

Representatives

○ Robert Funk, John Shelby Spong

Bob Funk's radical Reformation roadshow

Taking a controversial gospel to the people



Bible scholar and seminar founder Robert Funk wants to revamp Christianity and "set Jesus free."

BY JEFFERY L. SHELER

For 12 years, a notorious band of Bible scholars has riled the religious community by declaring that Jesus is grossly misquoted and misrepresented in the Gospels. Now, the Jesus Seminar is taking its controversial message on the road, dispatching teams of scholars to conduct public forums throughout the country. The goal, says Robert Funk, the seminar's founder and head of the Westar Institute in Santa Rosa, Calif., is to "raise the public literacy level," disseminating knowledge he says has been hoarded by scholars for years. It is time, Funk says, "to set Jesus free ... from the scriptural and creedal and expe-

riential prisons in which we have incarcerated him." If a "radical reformation" of Christianity should happen to be ignited in the process, he adds, so much the better.

Talk of launching a new Reformation may sound presumptuous. But it won't come as any surprise to Funk's critics, who long have questioned the Jesus Seminar's work. When the group, made up of about 50 religion professors from around the country, began its "quest for the historical Jesus" in 1985, it was chided by other academicians for using "gimmickry"—the professors cast colored beads to vote on the accuracy of Scripture passages. Conservative scholars complained that the seminar was composed of skeptics and ideologues, out to undermine the Bible

and Christianity. Applying both conventional methods of text analysis and other more disputed rules of evidence, the seminar scholars eventually concluded that no more than 20 percent of the sayings—and even fewer of the deeds—attributed to Jesus in the New Testament Gospels are authentic. Among the castoffs are the Lord's Prayer, the sayings of Jesus on the cross and his claims to divinity, the virgin birth, most of Jesus's miracles, and his bodily resurrection. More recently, the seminar has turned its attention to revising the Christian creeds and canon and evaluating the authenticity of the writings of St. Paul. Meanwhile, filmmaker Paul Verhoeven, director of *Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls* and a voting member of the seminar, is planning a movie on the life of Jesus, based in part on the group's work.

Reinventing Jesus. It is the seminar's evangelistic fervor, however, more than its unorthodox views, that sets the endeavor apart from mainstream biblical scholarship. In his lectures and in a 1996 book, *Honest to Jesus*, Funk makes clear that he envisions a "reinvention of Christianity" that would supplant traditional Christian theology and practice. In its place, Funk advocates a faith built on what he believes is a more rational and historically accurate view of the life and teachings of Jesus. This new Christianity, says Funk, "would among other things emphasize Jesus as a teacher rather than as a divine being. It would replace the Eucharist with a common meal, emphasize forgiveness and freedom over punishment and piety, and endorse protected recreational sex among consenting adults."

Funk and his seminar have always had a penchant for publicity. Unlike many scholars who write mainly for academic consumption, the Jesus Seminar has tried to address the public directly through popularized books, such as its bestseller, *The Five Gospels*, and its soon-to-be-published *The Acts of Jesus*. But now Funk's group is reaching out to the masses even more directly, through its community forums. Meetings already have been held in Chicago; Boise, Idaho; Tulsa, Okla.; Miami and Sarasota, Fla.; and Palm Springs, Calif. Other sessions are planned later this year in Long Beach and Sacramento, Calif., and Toledo, Ohio.

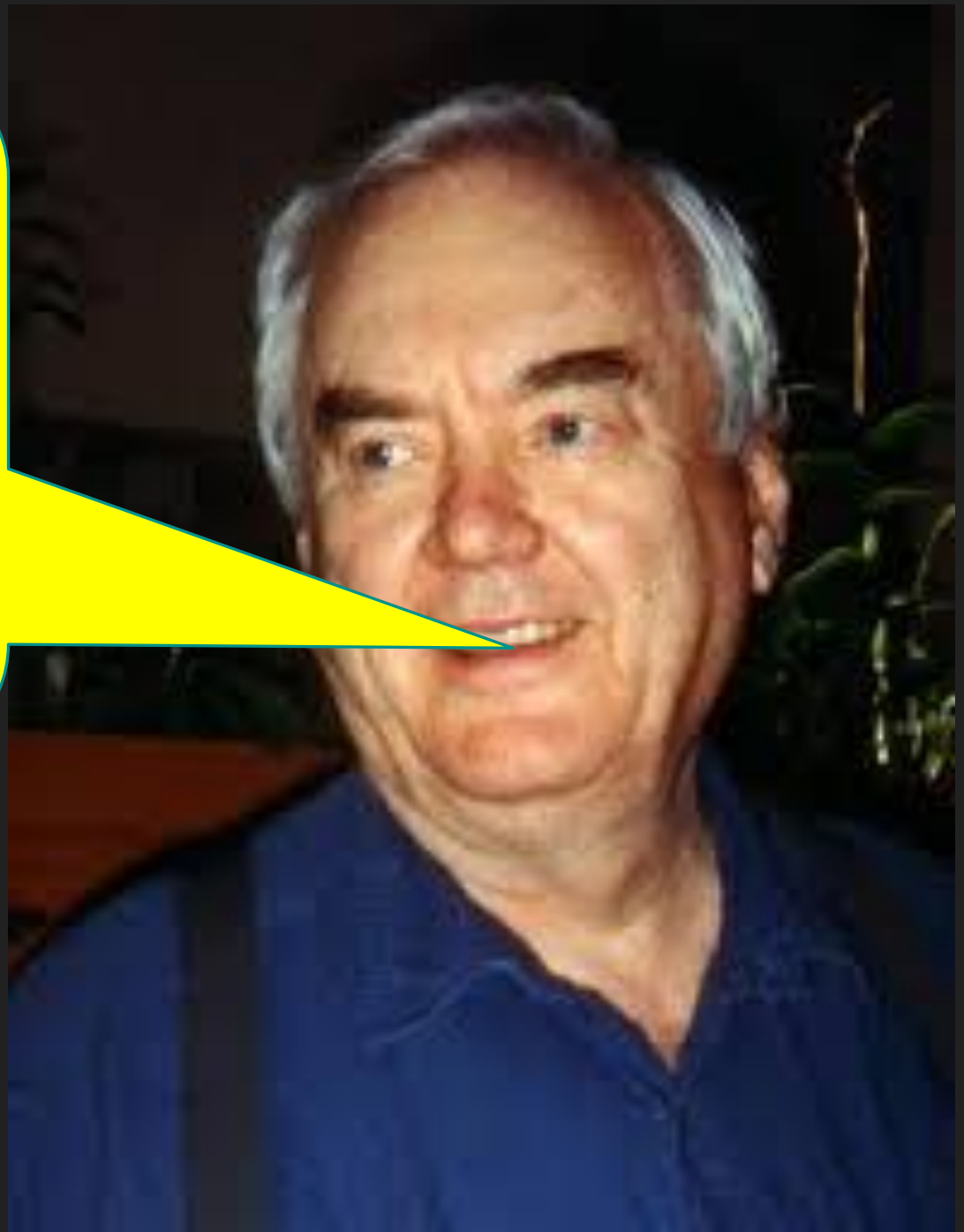
So far, the audience for these sessions has been small but receptive—and gener-

21 theses

[REDACTED] This new Christianity, says Funk, would among other things emphasize Jesus as a teacher rather than as a divine being. It would replace the Eucharist with a common meal, emphasize forgiveness and freedom over punishment and piety, and endorse “protected recreational sex among consenting adults.”

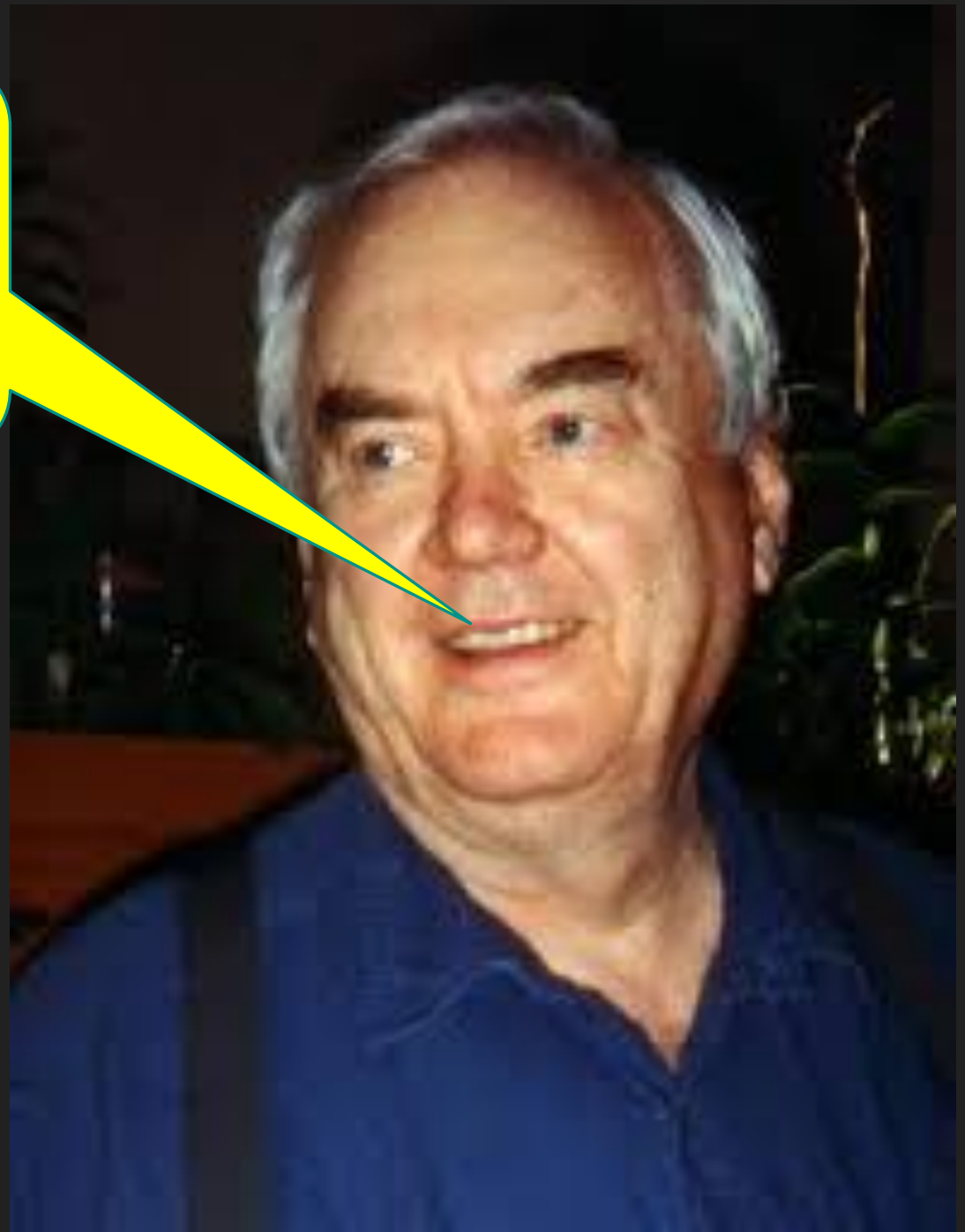
The Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope.

[The Five Gospels]



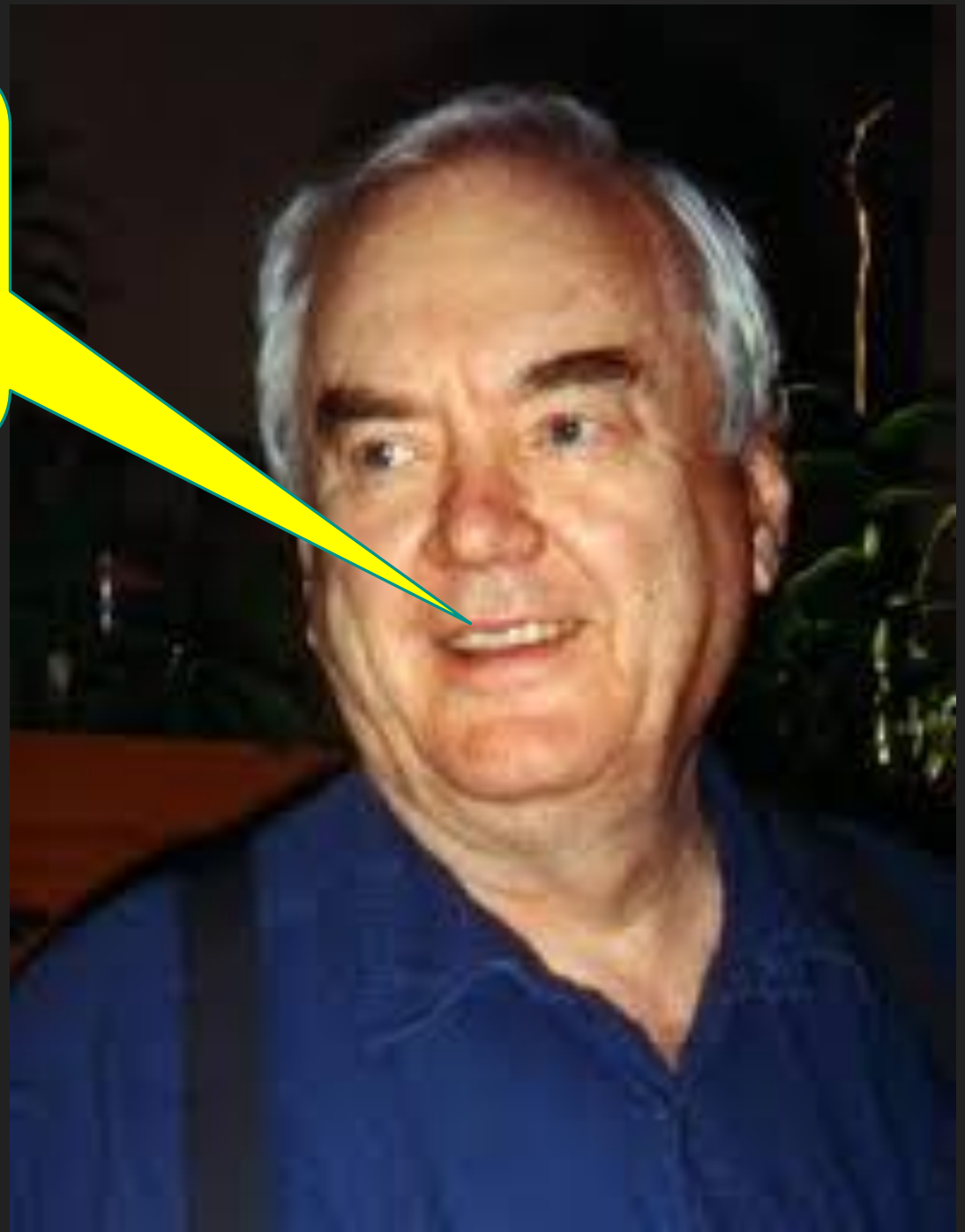
**The Bible is a
cultural artifact**

[The Five Gospels]



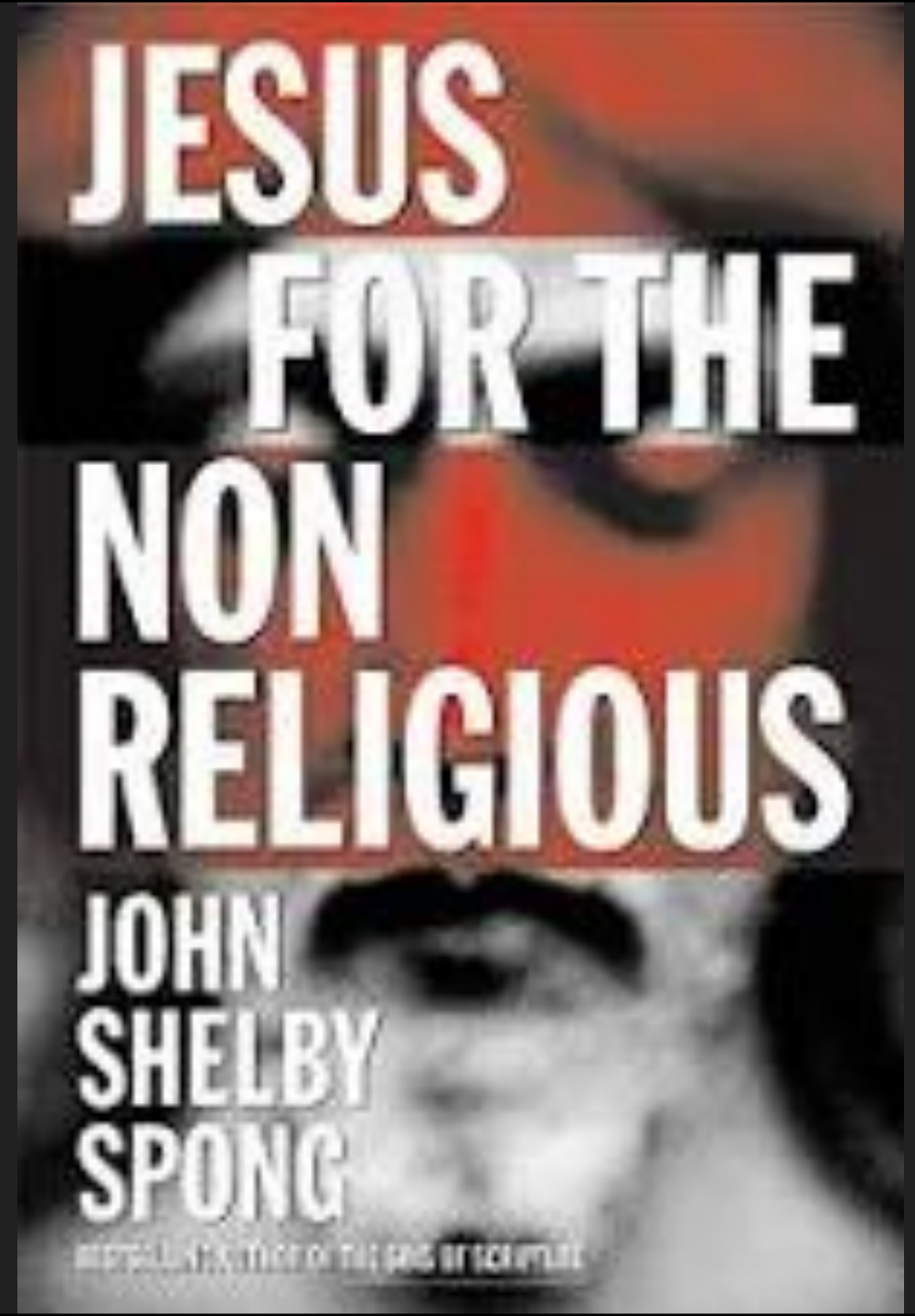
**We must liberate
Jesus from the
Gospels**

[The Five Gospels]



Spong

- Mainline churches face crisis of faith
- In Jesus the iconoclast became the icon
- This is the end of the Christianized age



**We can no longer
respect the
old creeds**



**I have a lively
hope that a new
Christianity can
grow out of the
death of the old
supernatural
forms**



**We will treasure
the Bible but
supplement it by
more recent
thinkers.**



**We will hear
what the spirit is
saying to the
church**



What happened?

- The church outgrew the N.T.'s presentation of Christianity and of Jesus.
- That view is outdated.

What is our task?

- We must re-interpret Christianity for the post-Modern world
- See Funk's 21 theses and his new reformation
- Christianity needs an overhaul
- See Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*

What is authoritative?

- What the Christian community (mostly the western “mainline” and enlightened community) agrees on is authoritative

Problems?

- Christianity becomes a very changeable religion
- If we look at the Christian community worldwide, we see it does not agree with these representatives.
- They really mean the HS is guiding their U.S. and European groups

Benefits?

- Always a good thing to re-think and apply your faith in a new generation

#4

Open Canon

What is it? The authority is:

- The open canon.

- Thus we can add
GT, G. Mary, GP,
Secret Mark, and
others

- *Plurimae
scripturae*

Antecedents?

- The **Gnostics** who sought to insert their sacred texts into the mainstream of Christian worship and teaching
- **Walter Bauer** (*Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 1934, 1971; *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*)

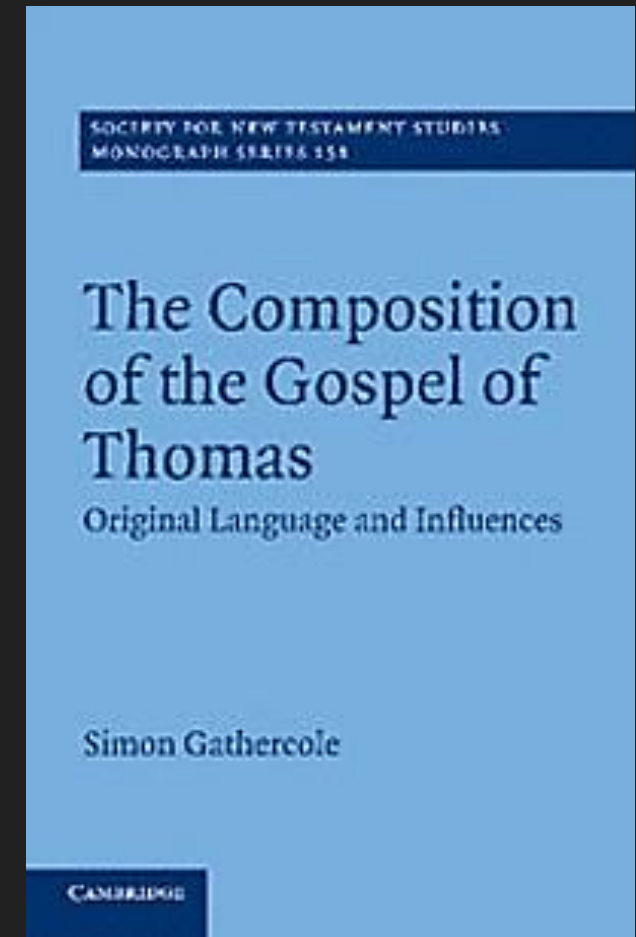
Representatives?

○ Karen King, Elain Pagels

Book about G. Thomas (2012)



The Gospel of Thomas was composed based on **Matthew, Luke,** and the Epistle to the **Romans.** It is no independent source for the life of Jesus.



Secret Mark



- Allegedly found in 1941 in the Mar Saba monastery.
- Purports to be a letter from Clement of Alexandria
- Says there were three versions of Mark
 - 1. Public Mark** (canonical Mark)
 - 2. Heretical Mark** (Gnostic perversion)
 - 3. Secret Mark** (new version made by Mark for the spiritually elite)

The Gospel of
Mary
of Magdala

JESUS AND THE FIRST
WOMAN APOSTLE



KAREN L. KING

Mariam

Magdala

Qadishta

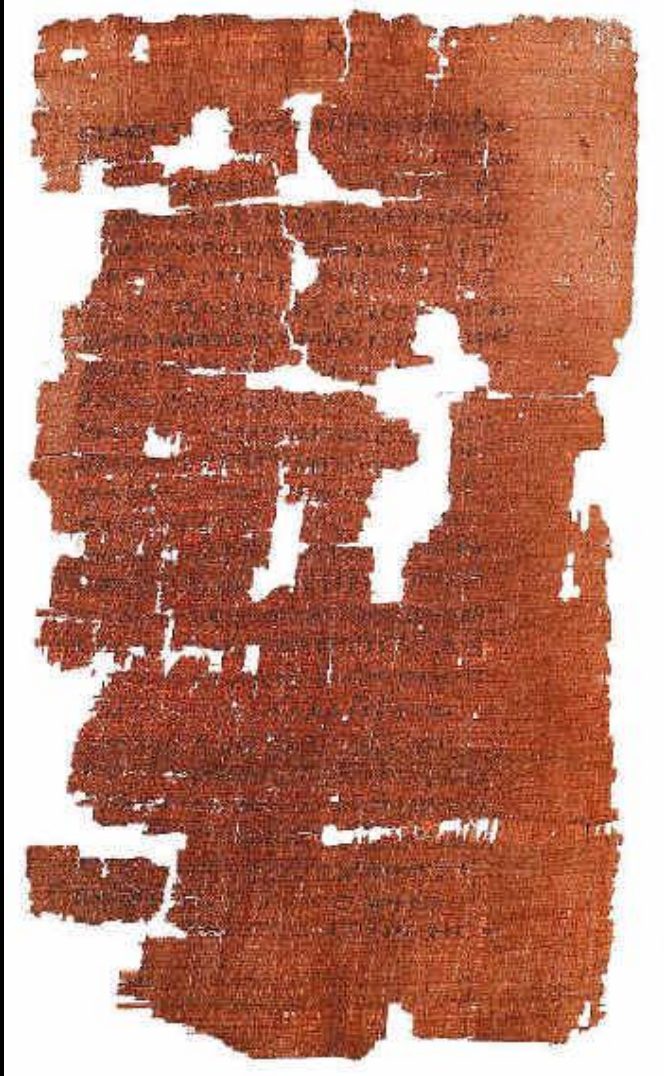
**Gospel Mary
of Magdalane**

Saint

Mary

Magdalene

Gospel of Judas

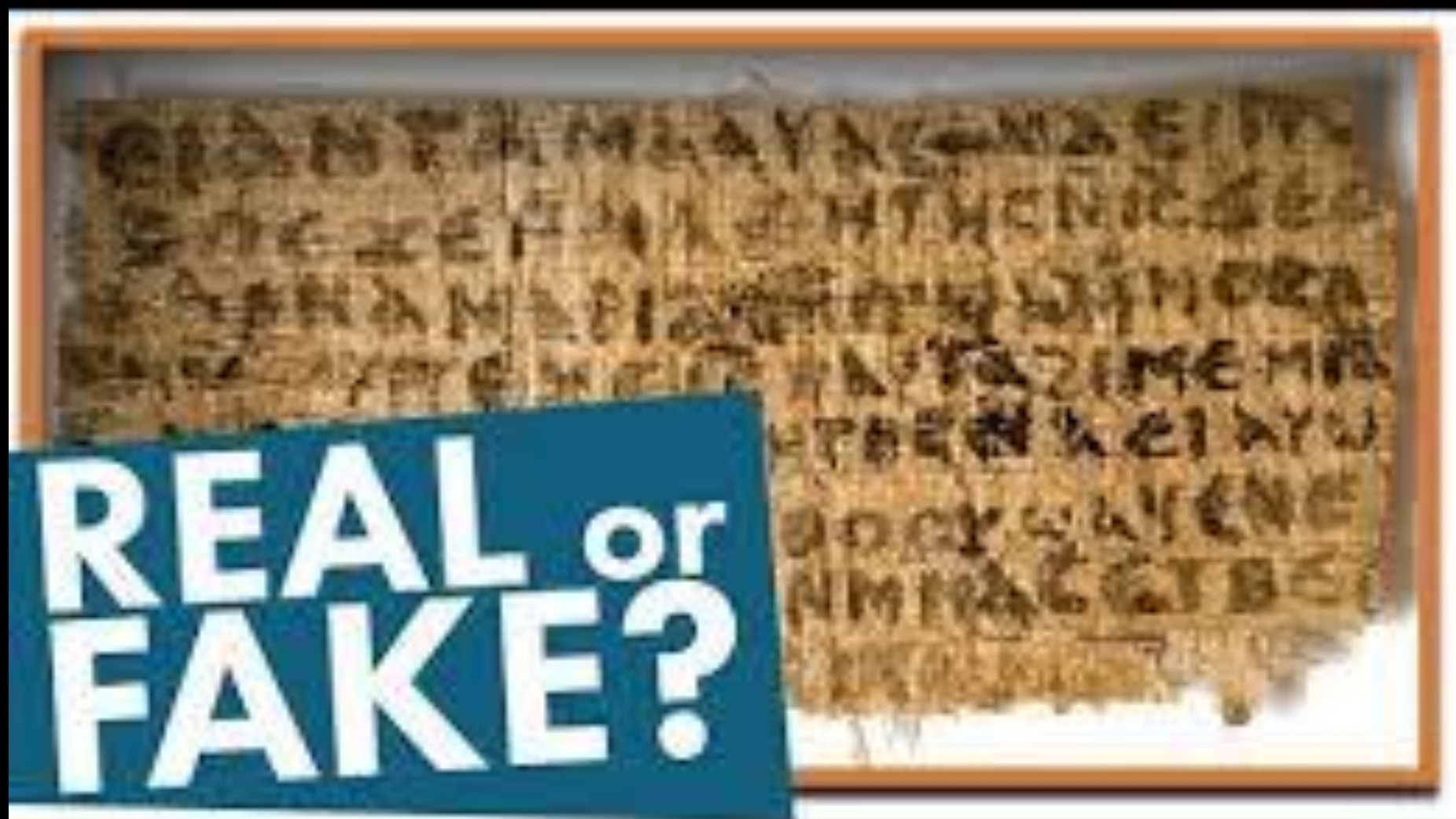


- ✦ **Text dates from c. AD 150**
- ✦ **Gnostic.**
- ✦ **Original translators presented Judas as hero**
- ✦ **Recent translations have changed interpretation substantially**

Karen King maintained it was written in 2nd cent. And this Coptic translation text is from the 4th cent.

The Gospel of Jesus' Wife

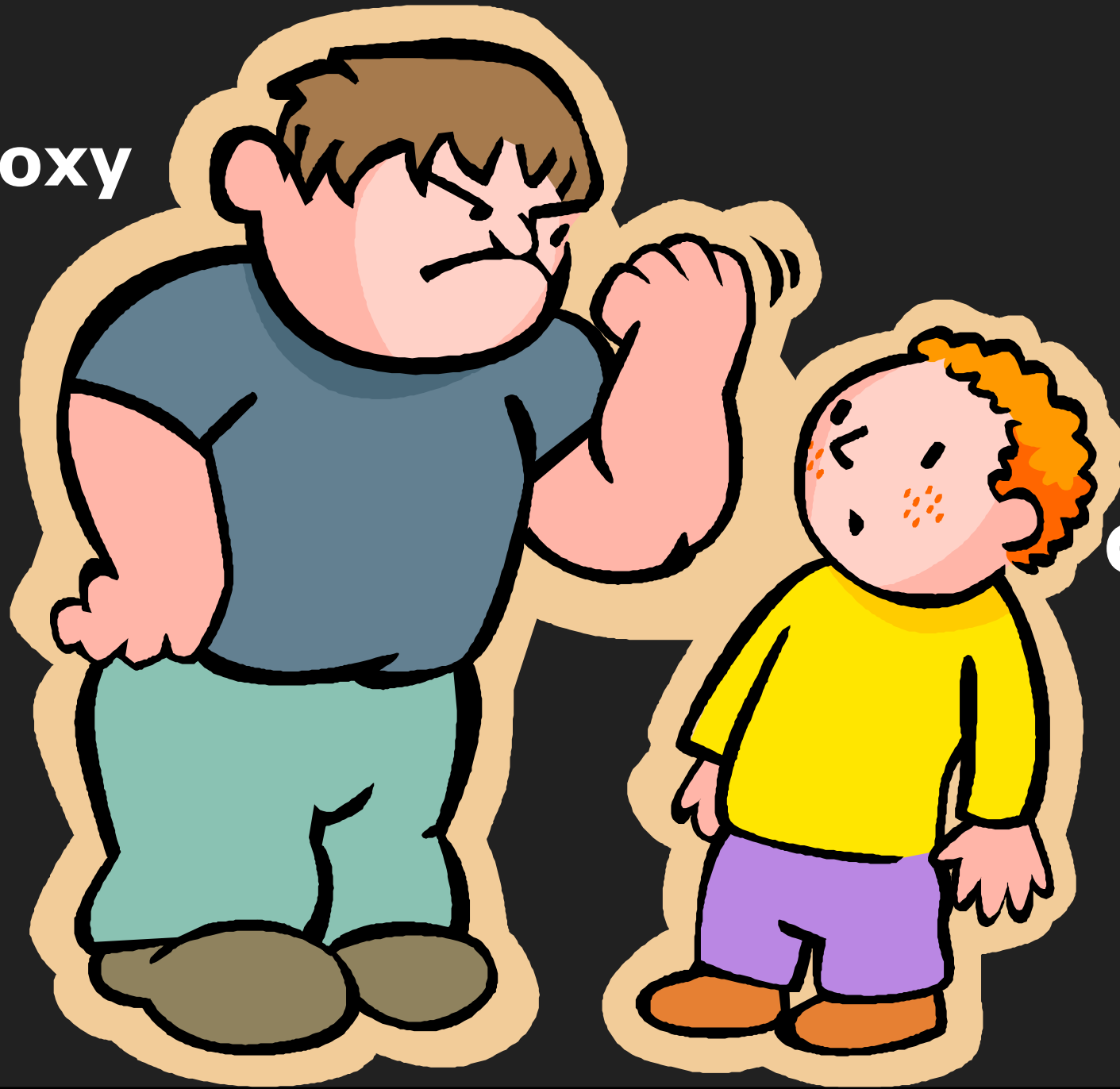




What happened?

- The ancient church pushed out “alternate voices” by strong arming them.
- The Gnostic voice was silenced by a power play.

Orthodoxy



Gnosticism

**The N.T. is
suppressive of
liberative voices**



Elaine Pagels

Two views:



**Thomas Oden (stresses
Early church fathers)**



**Karen King (stresses
Gnostic texts)**

Two views

- **Thomas Oden** (III, 71)

- *“As the NT became consensually canonized, the church understood itself to stand under the norm of apostolic proclamation”*

- **Karen King** (Gos. Mary Mag)

- *“The norm of early Christianity was theological diversity, not consensus.”*

What is our task?

- We must return to these ancient voices that were silenced by political power play.
- We need to allow them into the Christian canon.

R

THE
RESTORED NEW TESTAMENT

A New Translation with Commentary, Including
the Gnostic Gospels Thomas, Mary, and Judas



What is authoritative?

- Sometimes get impression that existing N.T. is to be rejected and the “alternate voices” are authoritative.
- At other times, impression is that existing N.T. plus other “voices” together are authoritative

Problems?

- Some of these treasured new documents (Secret Mark, G. Jesus Wife) may be frauds
- Were they really excluded out of political motives?

Benefits?

- Never hurts to think about the canonization process

In conclusion: Lessons?

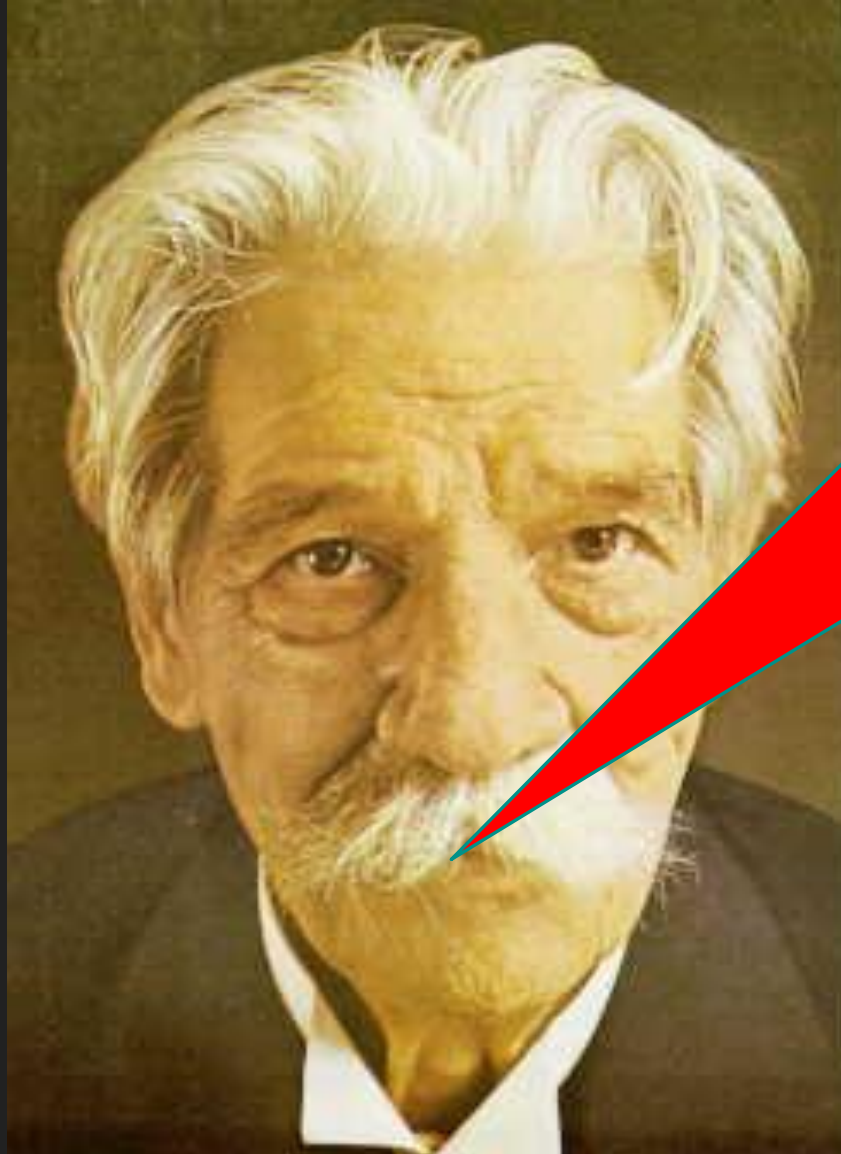
- 1. Many of the differences in approach to Jesus research begin with authority of scripture.**
- 2. It is not just about respect for Bible but also respect for “orthodox” church**



There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a life of Jesus.

[Schweitzer, Quest. p. 6]

Revised



There is no historical task which so reveals a person's **view of scripture** as the writing of a life of Jesus.