QUESTION:

Does the Jesus Seminar also reject the claim that the Baptist was an apocalypticist?

RESPONSE:

This is a great question, and I’m afraid I don’t know the definitive answer – in part because the Jesus Seminar did not have one and only one view on many topics. The Seminar was made up of a group of scholars who got together twice a year to discuss which aspects of the traditions found in the Gospels (mainly the canonical Gospels along with the Gospel of Thomas) were more likely to be authentic, and which, as a corollary, were likely to have been later creations of the early church as they told their stories about Jesus. The members of the seminar would then vote on each tradition – after extensive, learned discussion, and publish the results of their votes.

I should say that on many of the very broad and most important issues about the historical Jesus I was/am in complete agreement with the seminar: we all agree that the Gospels contain numerous discrepancies, contradictions, historical and implausibilities; we all agree that one needs to examine each Gospel tradition carefully and critically to see if it is historically authentic; we all agree that this requires the rigorous application of historical criteria; we all agree that the most likely authentic material is to be found in the earliest layer of the tradition so that, for example, material found only in John is less likely to be historically accurate than material in, say, Mark or Q or even better Mark and Q, and so on.

At the same time, I fundamentally disagree with the view that emerged out of the Jesus seminar, which insisted that Jesus was not to be understood as an apocalyptic preacher of the imminent end of history as we (or he) knew it. In my view, as seen in my recent posts, that’s precisely who Jesus was. In their view, not.

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