

# Matthew Arnold & the Jesus Seminar\*

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“Arnold’s biblical criticism,” says Ruth apRoberts in *Arnold and God*, “may be his best *literary* criticism.”<sup>1</sup> It is, without doubt, his most vulnerable criticism, as it concerns a body of literature that has been subject to unceasing critical scrutiny of such depth and detail and by so numerous a band of scholars, as no other literature has had to endure. Despite this vulnerability—or rather *because* of it, we might find that Arnold’s biblical criticism best reveals his strength as a critic.

Unfortunately, it has also been his most neglected criticism. Owen Chadwick, in *The Victorian Church*, correctly observes that “few Victorian churchmen were attracted to his proposals,” perceiving them merely as a religion of aesthetics or marking a halfway position on the road to agnosticism.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, agnostics regarded Arnold’s efforts as a vain attempt to redeem religion by cloaking it in the prestige of science. Arnold’s work has suffered even further neglect, as apRoberts notes, “because of the nervousness of literary academicians in approaching the Bible and because of the nervousness of the theological establishment in dealing with nonsupernaturalists like Arnold.”<sup>3</sup>

We may locate Arnold’s biblical criticism somewhere between the religious and the modern secular approach, and there—“between two worlds”—we find, if not the very best of both, at least a *congenial synthesis*. Certainly, his attempt, in both *Literature and Dogma* (1873) and *God and the Bible* (1875), is, as he himself declares, “an attempt conservative, and an attempt religious,”<sup>4</sup> but it is also an attempt liberal, and an attempt secular—secular, that is, in the sense that it seeks to

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1. Ruth apRoberts, *Arnold and God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 213.

2. Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966-70), 2:129.

3. apRoberts, 213.

4. R. H. Super, ed., *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, 11 vols. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970-72), 7:398.

distinguish in the Bible what can be accepted on either historical or experiential grounds, without recourse to metaphysics or ecclesiastical tradition.

Many of the conclusions that Arnold reached in his biblical criticism, particularly in his treatment of the New Testament, appear now as having been prophetic of a future assessment. Both Basil Willey, in *More Nineteenth Century Studies*, and Ruth apRoberts, in *Arnold and God*, have noted the striking similarity between Arnold's non-supernaturalism and Rudolf Bultmann's "demythologizing" agenda. Also, it should be noted that both Arnold and Bultmann complained of the nineteenth-century "negative-critical" approach to the Bible—that is, the sort of criticism that destroyed the mythological foundations or historical realism of the New Testament without attempting to preserve the spiritual or ahistorical truths towards which the myths pointed. Arnold was particularly critical of David Friedrich Strauss in this regard, whose *Life of Jesus* had been translated into English by Mary Anne Evans (later, "George Eliot") in 1845 and published the following year. Bultmann, in his attempt to rescue the *kerygma*, or that element of proclamation that is essential in making the Christian message a unique message, was, like Arnold, offering a criticism that was both "conservative" and "religious."

Nevertheless, we will see that Bultmann, in his quest for the authentic or historical Jesus, arrived at a conclusion that was directly opposite of Arnold. The Jesus Seminar, on the other hand, has adopted a method of rhetorical analysis in its quest for the historical Jesus that is strikingly similar to Arnold's method; and, furthermore, by applying this method, the Seminar has discarded the dominant scholarly conception of Jesus, which had been supported by Bultmann, and has arrived again at the conclusion reached by Arnold.

In my presentation to you today, my intention is to look first at the similarities between Arnold's and the Jesus Seminar's method in their efforts to locate the authentic Jesus, and secondly to look at the most striking conclusion that links the Jesus Seminar convincingly to Arnold.

*To begin, then:*

Any effort to locate the historical Jesus, as opposed to the Jesus of the gospels, must concern itself with the difficulties of establishing some criteria with which to determine authenticity in the sayings that have been attributed to Jesus. Although Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar created quite a stir in 1993—which, apparently, has yet to settle—by publishing *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, Arnold had been seriously engaged in such a search over a century previous. In *God and the Bible* Arnold tells us that the premise that he keeps before him as "a constant guide in reading the Gospels" is that, regardless of whether the gospels were actually written by eye- or ear-witness reporters, the writers were, in any case, incapable "of rendering Jesus perfectly; he was too far above them."<sup>5</sup>

Arnold provides a key to identifying the actual sayings, or *logia*, of Jesus. From the pseudo-Clementine Homilies (xvii.6), he finds a useful “description of the style of his sayings”: “They were *concise utterances* touching the things of *concernment to the truth*. . . . What distinguished his direct teaching was this, its *gnomic* or maxim-like character.” While reading the Gospel of John, it is important to bear in mind, Arnold tells us, that “Jesus did not make continuous speeches, jointed and articulated after the Greek fashion. He uttered pregnant sentences, gnomic sayings.” Arnold also recognizes the “parabolic and figured teaching” as an authentic form of Jesus’s discourse, yet because he thinks that the character of this speech form “tells its own story,” he leaves the parables virtually untouched.<sup>6</sup> Attributions to Jesus are, he warns, not to be rejected as inauthentic merely because “they seem strong and harsh,” not “because they are profound, and over their hearer’s heads,” nor even because “they accommodate themselves to the materialism of the disciples.” Rather, they are to be rejected only when they “contradict the known manner and scope of Jesus, as his manner and scope are established for us by the mass of the evidence existing.”<sup>7</sup>

Arnold emphasizes that the gospel writers misunderstood and misrepresented Jesus. He believes that, if Christianity is to be of benefit to modern Culture, it is the necessary task of critics to rescue the authentic Jesus from the mire of superstition and metaphysics. Yet, he is far from regretting the manner and method in which the gospels were written. The disciples’ misunderstanding of Jesus was absolutely necessary, he tells us, to the preservation of Jesus’s words, even though his sayings have been distorted by the disciples’ misapprehension and conflated by many words of their own. Ironically, the superstition and ignorance of the early disciples actually served to reinforce what Arnold identifies as “their real love to their Master and zeal to propagate his doctrine.”<sup>8</sup>

The reader who is accustomed to modern biblical criticism and to the treatment of the Bible as literature may not recognize just how advanced Arnold’s thought is for his time. Charles Kingsley’s approach to the Bible is more typical of the period. In one of his sermons, “The Transfiguration,” Kingsley passionately declared that the four authors of the gospels were “telling a plain and true story, and dared not alter it in the least; and, again, a story so strange and beautiful, that they dared not try to make it more strange, or more beautiful, by any words of their own.”<sup>9</sup> Although Kingsley will not go so far as to commit himself to the doctrine of plenary

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5. *Ibid.*, 313, 242.

6. *Ibid.*, 308, 327.

7. *Ibid.*, 358-59.

8. *Ibid.*, 322.

9. Charles Kingsley, “The Transfiguration,” *Town & Country Sermons*, in *The Works of Charles Kingsley*, 28 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1880-85), 21:207-12, 212.

inspiration, he does believe that the gospels were composed in the meeting of divine providence and human reverence and selflessness. Kingsley believes that, as supernatural works, the gospels cannot be approached in the same fashion as other and mere literary works.

Arnold, however, recognizes not only that each gospel writer altered the words of Jesus while providing for them “a setting and a connexion,”<sup>10</sup> but also that the gospels themselves continued to be “liable to changes, interpolations, additions” until sometime towards the end of the second century. It was not until then, Arnold tells us, that the gospels, “by ever increasing use and veneration, . . . passed into the settled state of Holy Scripture.”<sup>11</sup>

Arnold emphasizes his point to the would-be biblical critic that, despite the changes made to the gospels during their formative period, it is yet impossible to reconcile them with one another, to make what he calls “one exact, concordant and trustworthy history out of them.”<sup>12</sup> Any attempt to create such a “harmony” of the gospels will not only result in failure, but, Arnold warns, “It will impair the understanding of all who make it, it will mar the reputation of every critic who makes it, and yet will disappoint them after all.”<sup>13</sup>

Although the Western Church has never officially accepted any single attempt at creating a harmony of the gospels, the practical implication of the doctrine of the inerrancy of scripture is that a harmony does in fact already exist. Tatian, a second century scholar of the Syriac Church, began the practice of creating harmonies with his Diatessaron, and when Strauss published his *Life of Jesus* in 1835, critics were still working under the assumption that there was a single “life” or biography of Jesus, the account of which could be discovered by placing the gospels side by side and considering them together as a unit

Johann Griesbach had resolved only part of the problem when, in 1776, he proposed viewing only the first three of the canonical gospels together. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are, thus, the “synoptic” gospels (from “synopsis,” meaning “view together”). Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, much of the work that would ultimately contribute to the quest for the historical Jesus was spent not in harmonizing the synoptics, nor in attempts to get behind the myths and miracles of the gospels to find the real Jesus, but rather in resolving what was called “the synoptic problem”—or the problem of textual relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

In 1838 Christian Wilke established the “priority of Mark”; in other words, Mark was now recognized as having been the first of the three synoptic gospels

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10. Super, 7:327.

11. Ibid., 291.

12. Ibid., 362.

13. Ibid., 168.

composed. In the same year, Hermann Christian Weisse proposed the “two document hypothesis”—namely, that Matthew and Luke composed their gospels independently of each other, while making use not only of Mark, but of some other *source* as well. This other *source* was evident by the number of sayings in Matthew that were identical to sayings in Luke, but were altogether absent from Mark.

It may be said that Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* had become out of date only three years after it was published, for ultimately the Jesus of history was not to be found in any harmonizing or demythologizing approach to the synoptics, but rather in a recognition of the priority of Mark and of the existence of an unidentified second *source* or “*Quelle*” (German for “Source”), which would henceforth be simply identified as “Q.”

Nevertheless, the two-document hypothesis, including the Q hypothesis, was not initially accepted by the scholarly community, largely because of strong attachment to Matthew and because nobody could then imagine the significance that Q might have, even if the hypothesis could be proved. It was not until 1863, the year that Arnold published his critical essays on “Marcus Aurelius” and “Heinrich Heine,” that Q received scholarly support, after H. J. Holtzmann published the results of an exhaustive investigation in which he put the Q hypothesis to the test. At this time Q was still regarded merely as a sayings source, not as a gospel in itself, since there was no evidence that it belonged to a genre of early gospel literature. Evidence, however, became available in 1945, when a complete text of the Gospel of Thomas was discovered in the unearthing of the Nag Hammadi library in upper Egypt.

Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus. As Robert Funk notes in *Honest to Jesus* (1996), “Thomas looks very much like the hypothetical Sayings Gospel Q, now embedded in Matthew and Luke. There is an approximate 40 percent overlap between the sayings found in Thomas and those found in Q.”<sup>14</sup> There are 62 sayings in the complete Q—sayings which now appeared to comprise a text with its own essential integrity.

Arnold, as I have already noted, had remarked that one of the tasks of the gospel writers was to place Jesus’s sayings into a “setting and connexion.” This, we have seen, is what Matthew and Luke did with the sayings of Q, by placing them into the context of changing scenes and encounters typical of travel narratives. According to Funk, originally the words of Jesus “circulated for twodecades or more by word of mouth. As a result, only sayings that were short, pithy, and memorable were likely to survive,” the sort of sayings that Arnold called *gnomic*. These sayings, however altered, were ultimately written down in the form of *gnomologia*, or collections of

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14. Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 71.

sayings. In addition, Funk tells us, “Christian evangelists imagined things for him to say—things that gave voice to their own beliefs. For these reasons, the Jesus Seminar concluded on a case-by-case basis that less than 20 percent of the words attributed to Jesus in the gospels were actually spoken by him.”<sup>15</sup>

Burton Mack, in *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q & Christian Origins* (1993), explains the common procedure by which sayings were attributed to legendary sages, poets, or founders of schools. The scholarly enterprise of collecting sayings was governed by an interest in *ethos* or character. The known sayings of Jesus would have been understood as being an expression of his character. Furthermore, Mack relates, “Since sayings were assessed as the expression of a particular view of life, and since word and deed were understood to match in the ideal character, the ascription of sayings to ideal figures was a matter of appropriateness.”<sup>16</sup> Additional sayings would, therefore, have been added to the Jesus *gnomologia* as a matter of course as they met the criteria of being appropriate to the Jesus *ethos*.

Much of the effort to identify the authentic sayings of Jesus has involved scholars in the work of recognizing layers of development in the *gnomologia*, particularly in Q, that can be explained by the changing social conditions of the early Jesus movement. Although I will discuss this development in more detail shortly, it is useful to bear in mind, as Funk notes, “The tendency, from the very beginning, was to make Jesus’ wisdom *conform* to popular expectations, to assimilate his vision to conventional wisdom and thus to ordinary ways of seeing and saying.” In other words, Jesus’s sayings were “domesticated”<sup>17</sup> in what was, according to Mack, essentially a “move towards an accommodation of Jewish sensibility.”<sup>18</sup>

The task for the Jesus Seminar, a task that Funk denominates, “the quest for the rhetorical Jesus,” was very much the same as it was for Arnold—the task of recognizing Jesus’s distinctive voice. Funk tells us, “The traits we can observe in his language represent in a general way the ‘brush strokes’ of his style as a word artist. Taken together they provide a kind of voice print.”<sup>19</sup> The Jesus Seminar relies heavily upon Q, Mark, and Thomas in determining the unique “voice print” of Jesus.

Although the quest for the historical Jesus in the nineteenth century focused on the synoptics, Arnold’s primary concern was with the Gospel of John. This was not, of course, because Arnold was ignorant of the direction of gospel studies. There are two obvious explanations for Arnold’s critical focus on John. First, he recognized that the most important contribution that he could make to the quest was not one

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15. Ibid., 40-1.

16. Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q & Christian Origins* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 195.

17. Funk, 241.

18. Mack, 176.

19. Funk, 144.

more analysis of the synoptic problem, but was instead a demonstration of the importance of a critical concern with the rhetorical Jesus, and the Gospel of John provided the text by which he could most clearly demonstrate the distinction between the language of Jesus and the language of his disciples. As Arnold explains in *Literature and Dogma*, “The moment Jesus speaks, the metaphysical apparatus falls away, the simple intuition takes its place; and wherever in the discourse of Jesus the metaphysical apparatus is intruded, it jars with the context, breaks the unity of the discourse, impairs the thought, and comes evidently from the writer, not Jesus.”<sup>20</sup> Although Arnold admits in *God and the Bible* that “to determine what is John’s and what is not is a delicate question” and “a question which we must sometimes be content to leave undetermined,” he nevertheless is certain about the method by which authenticity is determined: “Where the *logia* are suited to the character of Jesus, they come from Jesus.”<sup>21</sup>

A second explanation for Arnold’s focus on the Gospel of John is his belief that the writer of this gospel better understood the significance of Jesus. The “culture and mental energy” of the author is evident not only in the introduction of metaphysical discourse into his gospel, but also in his ability “to seize and reproduce the higher teaching of Jesus.” Just as Plato can be considered as both worse and better than Xenophon at representing Socrates—worse in that he sophisticated the language of Socrates, better in that he was guided by a more comprehensive grasp of Socrates’s meaning—so too is John both worse and better than the authors of the synoptics at presenting Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

In a negative criticism of Arnold’s conclusions, we might note that the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar, in their study of John, were unable to find a single saying of Jesus that they could confidently rate as authentic. Moreover, Arnold’s method of determining authenticity is—as we have seen—the same method by which sayings were added to the Jesus *gnomologia*. Arnold would identify as “authentic” any saying that is in keeping with Jesus’s “character” or *ethos*. However, it was a common process among schools to attribute “sayings” to a master that were judged to be in the manner or *ethos* of the master. Thus, “character” cannot be a reliable indicator of authenticity. The problem with Arnold’s search for the rhetorical Jesus is, then, not that it was a *rhetorical* quest, but rather that it was a quest that began with the canonical Gospels instead of the earliest texts of the Jesus movement.

In view of the conclusions reached by the Jesus Seminar, one of Arnold’s best critical assessments is that the historical Jesus was not apocalyptic. It is this conclusion that most conspicuously links Arnold with the Jesus Seminar. Arnold correctly notes that the “popular religious belief and expectation of the Jews” in

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20. Super, 6:272.

21. Super, 7:292, 325.

22. Super, 6:272-73.

Jesus's day was formed by the apocalyptic literature of the late and post-Old Testament period, but particular by the books of Daniel and Malachi. The Jews, Arnold tells us in *Literature and Dogma*, had "lost the intuition, and they had thrown themselves, heart and soul, upon a great extra-belief, or *Aberglaube*."<sup>23</sup> Arnold defines *aberglaube* as "belief beyond what is certain and verifiable," such as the predictions of Daniel—which, Arnold says, are "an embarrassment to the Bible."<sup>24</sup> It is these apocalyptic predictions which fueled the Messianic expectations of the Jews during their oppression in the Greco-Roman period. Arnold goes on to explain that, since Jesus's disciples were on a par with their countrymen "in intellectual conceptions and habits, . . . we can understand these men inevitably putting their own eschatology into the mouth of Jesus." Although Jesus himself did not make apocalyptic pronouncements, "his discourse about the kingdom of God and the troubles in store for the Jewish nation" was too far above his hearers' understanding, and they inevitably placed Jesus's discourse in the context of apocalyptic thought that was familiar to them.<sup>25</sup>

Arnold's vision of the non-apocalyptic Jesus was lost to scholars for nearly a century, beginning in 1892 with Johannes Weiss's book, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*. Weiss put together two themes found in the Jesus sayings of the synoptics, the kingdom of God and the future judgment. He recognized that these two themes had their source in the apocalyptic literature that was popular in Jesus's day, and then he concluded that Jesus, being a product of his time, was an apocalyptic visionary. Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), in his influential study, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), popularized Weiss's conception of Jesus and concluded that Jesus was a noble but mistaken martyr to Jewish apocalyptic expectation, that he had, in fact, willingly sacrificed himself in an attempt to inaugurate the final judgment of God upon the world.

The sayings source Q offered support for *both* the Jesus of an apocalyptic tradition *and* the Jesus of a wisdom tradition, and many scholars were perplexed as to how the historical Jesus could have merged such different views of the world in a single message. Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), writing in the 1920s, resolved the problem by assuming the conclusion exactly opposite to Arnold, identifying the apocalyptic sayings as authentic and regarding the wisdom sayings as additions made by the early Jesus movement. This rather important disagreement between Arnold and Bultmann has, as far as I have seen, been overlooked by critics who have compared the two.

The apocalyptic Jesus went virtually unchallenged within scholarly opinion until the 1960s, when James Robinson's genre studies on early Christian

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23. *Ibid.*, 283-84.

24. *Ibid.*, 212-13, 236.

25. *Ibid.*, 260.

*gnomologia* revealed that Q belonged to a common form of wisdom literature. John Kloppenborg then compared Q with the genre of the hellenistic handbook of instruction and concluded, in *The Formation of Q* (1987), that the only difference between Q and the wisdom handbook common to the period was the inclusion in Q of apocalyptic sayings. Kloppenborg, then, made the argument “that Q had taken shape in stages, that it had a history of collection and composition,” and that the apocalyptic sayings could belong to a latter stage of development.<sup>26</sup>

John Dominic Crossan, who is the co-founder with Funk of the Jesus Seminar, takes the point of view in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1995) that Jesus may have begun as an apocalyptic believer, following John the Baptist, but he “emerged from John’s shadow with his own vision and his own program.”<sup>27</sup> Funk suggests that not only Jesus, but his disciples as well, were originally followers of the Baptist, and “after Jesus died, his disciples, who had not understood his sophisticated notion of time, reverted to what they had learned from John and assigned the same point of view to Jesus.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, starting from Arnold, scholarship has come full circle on the question of Jesus’s apocalypticism, but has, of course, gathered much information along the way.

There remains, nevertheless, a consensus that Jesus was eschatological; that is, his radical criticism of culture constitutes a “fundamental rejection of the world’s values and expectations.” Eschatological believers, says Crossan, typically “imagine another and more perfect world whose alluring vision trivializes the one all around them.”<sup>29</sup> Apocalypticism is only one form that eschatology sometimes takes. Utopianism is another; yet, because utopianism looks forward to an ideal future, rather than offering an alternative that is immediately realizable, C. H. Dodd coined the term “realized eschatology” to describe Jesus’s program. However, as Crossan notes, Jesus’s eschatology is essentially of the same sort as the eschatology of the contemporary Cynicism.<sup>30</sup>

It is at this point, in the discussion of Cynicism, that the Jesus Seminar has the most to add by way of a critique of Arnold’s historical Jesus. Arnold understood Jesus as representative of the Hebrew genius. For Arnold, it was Paul and not Jesus that mediated between Hebraism and Hellenism. However, recent studies in Q, together with historical research on Galilee and comparative criticism of ancient *gnomologia*, have uncovered an historical Jesus that is far more Hellenic than Arnold could have suspected. By the time the synoptic gospels were being written,

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26. Mack, 34-6.

27. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 47-8.

28. *Ibid.*, 145-46.

29. *Ibid.*, 52.

30. *Ibid.*, 117.

forty to sixty years after Jesus's death, the Jesus of Galilee had already been "domesticated" in conformity with the Jewish experience of Jerusalem. Arnold, having only the canonical Gospels before him, rightly perceived that Jesus had been domesticated, but failed to realize the full extent of that process.

Funk suggests that Jesus probably would have learned to speak Greek in "the pagan environment that surrounded him in Galilee, especially in Sepphoris, a hellenistic city located only four miles from his home village," Nazareth.<sup>31</sup> Mack recognizes a Jesus who was not only bilingual, but was enculturated into a composite of Hellenism and Judaism.<sup>32</sup>

There appear to have been two crucial influences upon Jesus's development as a teacher, one deriving from Galilean Hellenism, the other from Galilean Judaism. From Hellenism Jesus picked up the example of the Cynic sage. Crossan observes, "We use *cynicism* today to mean belief in nothing or doubt about everything, but what it means philosophically is theoretical disbelief in *and* practical negation of ordinary cultural values and civilized presuppositions."<sup>33</sup> Cynics fulfilled an important social role for nearly a millennium, from the fifth century B.C.E. to the sixth century C.E., as critics of conventional values and of oppressive governments. Mack notes, "Their gifts and graces ranged from the endurance of a life of renunciation in full public view, through the courage to offer social critique in high places . . . , to the learning and sophistication required for the espousal of Cynic views at the highest level of literary composition."<sup>34</sup> Jesus would have been familiar with itinerant cynic teachers from the nearby towns of Sepphoris or Gadara.

One of the virtues of the Cynics as itinerant sages was self-sufficiency. According to Crossan, self-sufficiency was the one Cynic trait that Jesus forbade his disciples. Crossan suggests that an important part of Jesus's mission was to create not individual independence for some Jews, but rather to foster a national independence through commensality. Furthermore, as Crossan writes, "Since commensality is not just a technique for support, but a demonstration of message, they could not and should not dress to declare itinerant self-sufficiency but rather communal dependency."<sup>35</sup> Burton Mack, however, suggests that the instruction forbidding self-sufficiency belongs to the second layer of development in Q, after the Jesus movement shifted from the public arena to individual homes, and that the historical Jesus was very much a sage of itinerant self-sufficiency.<sup>36</sup>

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31. Funk, 34.

32. Mack, 53-8.

33. Crossan, 115.

34. Mack, 114-15.

35. Crossan, 118-19.

36. Mack, 129.

From Galilee Jesus also picked up a wisdom tradition of Jewish culture. Marcus Borg, in *Jesus: A New Vision* (1987) suggests that the historical Jesus “was a Spirit-filled person in the charismatic stream of Judaism.” He notes that there were a number of charismatic holy men active in Galilee during Jesus’s lifetime and in the century both before and after Jesus, such as Honi the Circle-Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa, men who “had power over demons, who recognized and feared them,” were famous for their healings, and were compared by their contemporaries to the prophet Elijah. Some of these charismatics “were even heralded as ‘son of God’ by a ‘heavenly voice,’” according to traditions recorded in the Babylonian Talmud. The particular charismatic tradition that Jesus drew from is *merkabah* or “throne” mysticism, in which “contemplative prayer was the vehicle for ascending through the heavens to the ultimate vision of beholding the throne of God—that is, of experiencing the kingship of God.”<sup>37</sup>

Apparently, Jesus’s practical devotion to these two traditions, Hellenic Cynicism and Judaic mysticism, together with his unique ability to combine them in his teaching and practice, made him an especially charismatic teacher. Both traditions play an integral role in the content of his teaching. However, what we learn from this, and what is most significant for a critical evaluation of Arnold’s thought on religion and culture, is that the Jesus of history was *already* a synthesis of Hebraism and Hellenism, that Paul had merely *re-introduced* Hellenism into the Jesus movement after it had already passed through several stages of Hebraisation.

Arnold’s Jesus has much in common with the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas, a text which the Jesus Seminar dates to the decade 50-60 C.E., before any of the narrative gospels were written. It reveals an early Jesus group that placed an emphasis upon correct knowledge. For this particular movement, “the significance of [Jesus’s] teachings lay in their capacity to enable an individual to withstand society’s pressures to conform” and to “develop self-awareness, selfconfidence, and self-sufficiency.” In this gospel, Jesus tells his disciples “that true knowledge is self-knowledge, and that true self-knowledge is a state of being untouched by the world of human affairs, a state of being in touch with a noetic world of divine light and stability.” This is certainly a Jesus that remained strongly Hellenistic while the Jesus of Peter and James and the other disciples in Jerusalem became more and more Hebraic. Mack supposes that the Thomas people broke off from the larger Q movement when the latter began its descent into popular religion, retreating “behind a smokescreen of apocalyptic pronouncements.”<sup>38</sup>

As important as the Christ of Christian experience is, certainly the object of the quest for the authentic words of Jesus is to facilitate a better understanding of who

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37. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 25, 30-1, 44.

38. Mack, 180-82.

the historical Jesus was. Arnold was concerned with Christian experience since it, rather than the truth of dogmatical proposition, validated the teachings of the historical Jesus. Most of Arnold's writing on the person and work of Jesus is found in *Literature and Dogma*. He defines Jesus's mission in one terse phrase: "He came to restore the intuition";<sup>39</sup> that is, contrary to the fundamentalism of the Pharisees and the Essenes, sects that sought holiness through separateness and a rigid interpretation and application of scripture, Jesus taught that the way of righteousness was to change the condition of the "heart" so that the law written on the heart could be not only discernable, but understood. In Broad Church terms, Jesus taught the priority of the Reason or apprehending faculty over scripture. In fact, it might be said that Jesus's mission was to inaugurate a Broad Synagogue movement. Jesus's "method" was to look inward for God's law. This is what Arnold calls "the very ground-principle in Jesus Christ's teaching." The key to Jesus's success as a teacher lay in his "new and different way of putting things," a way that Arnold describes as Jesus's *epieikeia* or "sweet reasonableness." Furthermore, by recommending and providing an example "of the two qualities by which our ordinary self is indeed most essentially counteracted, *self-renouncement* and *mildness*, he made his followers feel that in these qualities lay the secret of their best self."<sup>40</sup> Thus, Jesus's message was that righteousness has "its essence in *inwardness*, *mildness*, and *selfrenouncement*. This is, in substance," says Arnold, "the word of Jesus."<sup>41</sup>

Arnold notes that the Old Testament references to the Suffering Servant were never understood by the Jews as pertaining to the Messiah, but rather to "God's chastened servant, the idealised Israel." Jesus alone took up this "way obscurely indicated in the Old Testament, the one only possible and successful way for the accomplishment of the Messiah's function:—*to bring in everlasting righteousness*," and so his followers are entirely justified in making him the Messiah. Whether Jesus actually used terms such as "Messiah" or "Son of God" to designate himself Arnold is doubtful, but believes that Jesus would have "certainly preferred" the term "Son of Man."<sup>42</sup> Having defined God as "the Eternal that makes for righteousness," Arnold claims that Jesus is "the offspring or outcome" of this power. Therefore, "speaking as the Bible speaks"—that is, "as if this power lived, and breathed, and felt"—Arnold can confidently say that "Jesus is verifiably the Son of God."<sup>43</sup> The relationship of Jesus to God can, then, be known or verified only through the experience of following his "method" and "secret"; as a mere creedal proposition, apart from experience, the statement that Jesus is the Son of God is meaningless.

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39. *Super*, 6:285.

40. *Ibid.*, 218-20.

41. *Ibid.*, 228.

42. *Ibid.*, 214-15, 308.

43. *Super*, 7:235.

Current thought on the teachings of the historical Jesus gives support to some of Arnold's criticism. Jesus was at least as much opposed to what Arnold calls "Philistinism" as was Arnold himself. He was, says Funk, "unacquainted with the straightjacket of literalism and dogmatism" and "concerned with . . . knowledge that lies beyond the practical." Like the ideal critic, "His attention was riveted . . . on the way things really are rather than on the way they seem to be."<sup>44</sup> Borg concedes: "His challenge is an *invitation* [as opposed to a *requirement*] to see things as they really are-- namely, at the heart of everything is a reality that is in love with us." This sense that reality is "ultimately gracious and compassionate"<sup>45</sup> makes Jesus comparable to the first generation of English Romantic poets, particularly the early Wordsworth, the pre-"Dejection" Coleridge, and the Blake of *Songs of Innocence*. It is not coincidental that the early English Romantics exercised considerable influence upon Arnold.

The cultural values of Jesus's contemporaries were family, wealth, honor, and religion, the very values of which Jesus was most critical. His constant theme was the "kingdom" or domain of God, and his call was "to center in Spirit," not in the prevalent culture. His diagnosis of the human condition was that people were preoccupied with conventional wisdom, which made them "anxious to receive what they believed they deserved, anxious about holding on to what they had, anxious about social approval." The images that Jesus used to speak of the cure for this human illness were "a *new heart, centering in God, and the way of death*."<sup>46</sup> Arnold, we may recall, directed his contemporary "Philistines" away from the dogmatism of religion, toward Jesus's "method" of inwardness and his "secret" of self-renunciation. Arnold's struggle against the conventional wisdom of his day was, like Jesus's struggle, a conflict "between two ways of being religious," a way "that depended upon observance of externals (the way of conventional wisdom) and a way of being religious that depended upon inner transformation"<sup>47</sup>—or, as Arnold would say, a way of developing one's best self.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine Arnold giving his approval to the social agenda of the historical Jesus, this illiterate artisan who, though certainly not a Hyde Park rough, sought to initiate a leveling of society far more radical than democracy. Crossan identifies Jesus's mission as radical egalitarianism, "an absolute equality of people that denies the validity of any discrimination between them and negates the necessity of any hierarchy among them." Jesus's "open commensality," which he demonstrated most clearly in his table fellowship, was "the symbol and embodiment" of his mission. Whereas the political expression of democracy is the ballot

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44. Funk, 19, 160.

45. Borg, 115, 100.

46. *Ibid.*, 111, 106-08.

47. *Ibid.*, 110.

box, egalitarianism could only be expressed by a lottery, which would leave the decision up to God, such as we see in the election of Saul as king over Israel in 1 Samuel. Crossan comments, “The open commensality and radical egalitarianism of Jesus’ Kingdom of God are more terrifying than anything we have ever imagined, and even if we can never accept it, we should not explain it away as something else.”<sup>48</sup> Certainly, we should not make Jesus’s manner of more significance than his message by focusing merely on his *epieikia* or “sweet reasonableness,” nor should we “reduce Jesus to words alone, to replace a life lived with a preached sermon or an interesting idea,” thus removing what is “radically subversive, socially revolutionary, and politically dangerous from Jesus’ *actions*.”<sup>49</sup>

Arnold was not, of course, in a position to discern the political implications of the historical Jesus as well as modern scholars, and it would be unfair to suppose that Arnold deliberately or selectively chose to develop only those aspects of Jesus’s mission that were in agreement with his own view of Culture. Nevertheless, any assessment of Arnold’s criticism, including his ideas regarding Jesus’s relation to Culture, must bear in mind the best that has been and is being said in the world of ideas. A. N. Wilson, in *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (1997), argues that the “Jesus-religion”—prior to its integration of the Pauline notion that the *exousia* or “authority” of the State is divinely appointed—would potentially have seen anarchism as an obligation.<sup>50</sup> Jesus’s message was, in other words, subversive to the type of authority, such as in Arnold’s England, which is hierarchically constituted. This is not to say that Jesus had no idea of the State as a collective whole; he appears, in fact, to have had in mind an ideal State, in which the members are equal and mutually dependent, making the whole, theoretically, more cohesive. Perhaps, then, it would be better to identify Jesus not as an anarchist, but as a revolutionary—one who would have changed the constitution of the State without destroying it. Even so, it appears impossible to reconcile Arnold’s idea of the State with Jesus’s.

One theme in some of the New Testament literature that is closely related with eschatology is the theme of resurrection. Arnold finds in the Gospel of John an authentic tradition of resurrection sayings from Jesus, although the writer of this gospel misunderstood Jesus’s teaching and “presents it confusedly.” Jesus’s concept of “resurrection,” as “a phenomenon accomplishing itself in the believer’s consciousness,” is “so fruitful and profound” and is yet so clumsily presented by the Johannine author, that it is clear that the concept did not originate with this author.<sup>51</sup> Arnold points to two sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John that reveal Jesus’s actual concept of resurrection. One of these sayings, in John 8:51, in which

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48. Crossan, 71, 73-4.

49. *Ibid.*, 93.

50. A. N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 189.

51. Super, 7:314, 316.

Jesus tells the followers of his teaching that they “will certainly never die,” is rephrased in the next verse to read, “will certainly never taste death.” It is interesting to note that this “never taste death” theme is recurrent in the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of sayings with which the Johannine community may have been familiar. The other saying that Arnold points to, John 11:25-6, has Jesus make the self-identifying claim, “I am resurrection and life.” It has no parallels in any of the earlier gospel texts. According to Arnold, these *logia* of Jesus “passed from hearer to hearer, [were] repeated, brooded over, misapprehended,” until eventually there grew up around them the story of the physical resurrection of Lazarus.<sup>52</sup>

Arnold recognizes that the apostle Paul shared the common misapprehension regarding resurrection; however, unlike the writers of the gospels, “in nine cases out of ten when St. Paul thinks and speaks of resurrection, he thinks and speaks of it . . . in the sense of a rising to a new life before the physical death of the body, not after it.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, Paul alone of Jesus’s interpreters grasped the spiritual meaning of Jesus’s teaching on resurrection. For Paul, it was the inevitable result of having first possessed himself of Jesus’s “secret” of self-renunciation, which Paul identifies as “the word of the cross” or the doctrine of *necrosis*.<sup>54</sup> Paul’s experience with literature has, apparently, made him a more capable critic of Jesus than even the literary artists of the Johannine community.

Wilson calls Paul “the greatest poet of personal religion” and “the first romantic poet in history.” Paul’s letter to the Romans is even “the progenitor of the Romantic movement in literature.”<sup>55</sup> I have already suggested a certain ideological connection between Jesus and the Romantics, and, it would seem, there was something in Paul that reverberated to Jesus’s “Romanticism.” Yet, Paul was apocalyptic; perhaps, even more apocalyptic than most of his contemporary Jews. Crossan notes that Paul did not merely believe that the end of the world was imminent; he believed “that it *had already begun*.” The “general resurrection”—that is, the physical resurrection of all persons at the end of time—began, for Paul, with the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>56</sup>

The textual evidence suggests that belief in the continued presence of Jesus among his followers, after his death, was not originally expressed by references to a physical resurrection from the dead, but rather took the form of apparition stories. To the earliest members of the Jesus movement, “Jesus appeared in ecstatic

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52. *Ibid.*, 351.

53. *Super*, 5:183.

54. *Super*, 6:291.

55. Wilson, 220-21, 194. Wilson must be added to Arthur O. Lovejoy’s list of critics that find the first spark of “Romanticism” in various specific figures and epochs throughout history (“On the Discrimination of ‘Romanticisms.’” *Essays on the History of Ideas* [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1948], 228-53).

56. Crossan, 164.

revelations, in visions, and in dreams.”<sup>57</sup> The apparitions to Stephen at the time of his martyrdom in Acts 7 and to Paul at the time of his enlightenment in Acts 9 are of this sort. Crossan notes that the Gospel of Thomas does not speak of resurrection “but of unbroken and abiding presence.”<sup>58</sup> It appears to have been Paul’s emphasis on the apocalyptic resurrection that initiated or gave support to stories of Jesus’s physical resurrection. Those stories later became politically instrumental in the growing Jesus movement as a useful tool to define and limit apostolic authority to only those who had seen the resurrected Jesus *before his ascension*. As the Gnostics, towards the end of the first century, made apparitions of a knowledge-revealing Jesus uniquely their own domain, the tradition that was to become orthodox moved all of Jesus’s teaching to within the period before his death and added stories of Jesus’s ascension for the purpose of putting an end to his appearances. Funk explains, “This move had the effect of restricting the circle of insiders to those who knew Jesus during his lifetime; that of course excludes Paul.”<sup>59</sup> Both strands of the tradition can be discerned in the New Testament.

The Jesus Seminar does not recognize as authentic any of the gospel texts that Arnold points to as indicating Jesus’s metaphor of resurrection. However, they do recognize that “resurrection” began as metaphor and gradually moved to more concrete expression, such as the story of the resurrection of Lazarus. Crossan understands this story as “process incarnated in event;” that is, the process through which Jesus’s disciples came to experience new life is, in this story, expressed as a single event of resurrection rather than by means of the metaphor of resurrection. He adds, “While I do not think this event ever did or could happen, I think it is absolutely true”—true, of course, as process.<sup>60</sup> Arnold had made a similar observation in his criticism on the virgin birth stories of Jesus: “A thing may have important value as symbol, although its utterer never told or meant it symbolically.”<sup>61</sup>

It is easy to imagine Arnold, if he were alive today, as a leading contributor to the Jesus Seminar. He looked forward, in many ways, to the work that is being accomplished by modern biblical scholars. Yet, just as Arnold, as a literary critic of the Bible, is often neglected because his work falls “between two worlds” of thought, the literary and the biblical or the secular and the religious, so too are the members of the Jesus Seminar caught between two worlds. Funk complains, “The secular context is actually hostile to religion, even to religious questions addressed candidly; our former ecclesiastical homes are wary of us. We are trapped between

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57. Funk, 273.

58. Crossan, 163.

59. Funk, 270.

60. Crossan, 94.

61. Matthew Arnold, “A Comment on Christmas,” in *St. Paul & Protestantism* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1887), 147-71, 153.

the two.”<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, both the work of Arnold and of the Jesus Seminar suggest that the study of the Bible belongs very much to the university, and especially to departments of literature.

If the findings of modern biblical research had been available to Arnold, certainly he would have wanted to apply these findings to his theory of Culture and, probably, revise his representation of Christianity’s relation to Culture. Arnold had given paramount significance to the apostle Paul as the one who combined Jesus’s Hebraism with Hellenism and, thus, set the example for all Christians of applying, in a free flow of thought, the best that is being thought in the world. Wilson basically agrees with Arnold: Paul “had the most cavalier view” of scripture, angering his Jewish contemporaries by being “an outright nonbeliever in [their] ‘evangelical’ readings of the Bible.”<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the “essence of the Gospels”—that is, their notion of a spiritual savior—“is a wholly Pauline creation,” developed by a mind imbued with the religious significance of Mithraism and the Eleusian mysteries as well as the significance of his own experience of the human condition.<sup>64</sup>

Nevertheless, Arnold would have had to ask the question, “Is Paul really necessary if we can recover the teachings of an historical Jesus who had already integrated Hellenism into Hebraism?” I think the answer would have to be that, as an example, Paul still serves a very useful role, but that it is not necessary to supplement the ideas of Jesus with those of Paul. We can bring the best that is being thought to bear upon the teachings of Jesus in, for example, the Gospel of Thomas or Q, without resorting to Paul’s teaching at all—unless, of course, we are uncomfortable with Jesus’s radical egalitarianism. Paul was, perhaps, important to Arnold for a reason that he himself did not acknowledge, namely because Paul, like his Jewish contemporary Josephus (ca. 37-100), was a Roman sympathizer. As such, Paul espoused a doctrine of State authority, particularly in his letter to the Romans, that made compliance obligatory and validated its hierarchy, a doctrine that carries with it a certain reverence for authority that found its logical development in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the pseudo-Pauline letters. If the apostles Peter and James had domesticated Jesus in the direction of Jerusalem, Paul domesticated Jesus in the direction of Rome, removing the potential threat of anarchy.

Current thought of Jesus and Paul reveals that neither figure can be made to support what Arnold calls “Philistinism.” Both challenged the conventional wisdom of their day and, in the process, created many enemies. Arnold’s direct confrontation of his “fellow countrymen” bears certain resemblance to the Cynic boldness of Jesus. They were both highly critical of contemporary values and attempted to shift the

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62. Funk, 28.

63. Wilson, 172.

64. *Ibid.*, 75-6, 165-66, 124.

basis of religion—Jesus to the “heart,” Arnold to experience. Furthermore, Jesus’s alternative to the literalism and dogmatism of the leading Jewish sects might, as I have suggested, be thought of as a sort of Broad Synagogue movement, an attempt to place Judaism on a basis that would foster unity. Borg notes that, “As a revitalization movement within Judaism after [Jesus’s] death, the Jesus movement in an important sense *failed*,” since it did not capture the allegiance of the Jewish people or create unity among them.<sup>65</sup> Paul’s movement, on the other hand, which brought Jesus out of the parameters of Judaism, succeeded. If a parallel can be established, we might consider that the Broad Church movement in England, fathered by Coleridge, also failed in the sense that it remained a minority movement; however, Arnold’s contribution, which essentially takes the Bible and Jesus out of the churches and makes them accessible to non-supernaturalists, has succeeded.<sup>66</sup>

Although current biblical scholarship may make it impossible to accept completely Arnold’s perspective on Christianity’s relation to Culture, it also makes it as impossible to ignore Arnold’s critical acumen. The validity that modern scholarship has given to Arnold’s progressive insights regarding the Bible as literature and the authentic Jesus should encourage even his most outspoken critics to re-read him, reconsidering those perspectives that appear unconventional or contrary to current thought.

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65. Borg, 126.

66. I would make a correction to this statement. As Arnold himself suggests in his letters, the Broad Church movement remained a minority movement only among the clergy. In Arnold’s day, it became widespread among the laity—that is, among the Church minus the clergy.