

INTRODUCTION

The earliest witness to Jesus is not a person whose name we could name, but rather a collection of his sayings that we can reconstruct: The Sayings Gospel Q. This source contains the most important sayings that go back to Jesus himself, and hence is our primary source of information about what he was trying to say, and to do. If you really want to know about Jesus, this is the first place for you to turn.

The Sayings Gospel Q is a collection of Jesus' sayings brought together within what we might call the Jewish-Christian branch of Christianity before it disappeared from the pages of history. Fortunately for us, by that point the collection had already been incorporated into the Gentile-Christian church's New Testament, an ecumenical gesture of decisive importance. Let me explain how this happened.

Around 70 C.E., Jewish Christians were using a collection of Jesus' sayings as their "Gospel," whereas Mark had already been published among Gentile Christians as their "Gospel." Later in the first century, Matthew and Luke were composed as efforts to integrate these two "Gospels" and, in effect, the perspectives of these two Christianities, Matthew representing a more Jewish-Christian outlook, Luke that of a Gentile-Christian church at the turn of the second century.

This is how scholars have come to understand why Matthew, Mark, and Luke are, over against John, so very similar in what they present. Matthew and Luke had the same two sources, the Gentile-Christian Gospel Mark and the Jewish-Christian sayings source. Since the latter lacked a name, scholars at first referred to it simply as the second "source": in German, *Quelle*. The first letter of *Quelle*, Q, became the nickname of this source, to which we refer today as the Sayings Gospel Q in order to distinguish it from the Narrative Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. (For further details see "The Critical Edition of Q and the Study of Jesus," chapter 1.)

A generation ago, I organized an international team of scholars to reconstruct Q as best we could, word for word.¹ My English translation is reprinted here as an appendix so that you can read it for yourself. It is the oldest collection of Jesus' sayings that we have. Indeed, most of what we know about Jesus is found in these sayings.

Since Luke usually (though not always) follows Q's order, we have adopted the habit of using Lukan chapter and verse numbers to cite Q. Hence, for example, "Q 6:22-23" refers to the Q verses used in Luke 6:22-23 (and in the parallel verses in Matthew 5:11-12).

Jesus According to the Earliest Witness contains essays that I wrote during the actual work of reconstructing Q. I sought, year after year, to move behind the glorious picture of Christ with which we are most familiar from the Narrative Gospels of the New Testament to get back to the undomesticated, down-to-earth Jesus hidden behind that halo. The results are impressive—and surprising. If you are accustomed to the New Testament Gospels, you probably don't even realize what you have been missing until you catch sight of Jesus as he really was: what we might in modern terms call a pure idealist, a fully committed radical, a very profound person. He spoke for God straight out, and called on you to hearken as if your life depended on it. To readers steeped in the traditions of the church and its New Testament, I ask: please don't retreat behind doctrines about Jesus—but do let him get to you!

Why is it that we are so ignorant about Jesus? Actually, when you think about it, the gap in our knowledge of him is made painfully clear by the Apostles' Creed, which many of us have learned by heart. It begins with what was done *for* Jesus, "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary," and then skips to what was done *against* Jesus, "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and buried." But what is skipped in the middle is what was done *by* Jesus—as if that were not important enough to include in what we believe about Jesus! Did Jesus do or say nothing worth believing between Bethlehem and Golgotha? Yes, he most surely did! And that is what I want to lay out in

1. *The Critical Edition of Q: Synopsis including the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark and Thomas with English, German, and French Translations of Q and Thomas*, eds. James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, and Leuven: Peeters, 2000). See also the abbreviated edition, *The Sayings Gospel Q in Greek and English with Parallels from the Gospels of Mark and Thomas*, eds. James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology 30; Leuven, Paris, Sterling Va.: Peeters, 2001 and Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2002). The appendix in the present volume contains only the English translation of Q, which was published separately as *The Sayings of Jesus: The Sayings Gospel Q in English* (Facets series; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2001).

this book of essays.

To be sure, all Jesus was trying to say and do in Galilee was cut short by his utterly horrible death in Jerusalem. The twelve disciples must with a shock have realized that his call on them to trust in an ever-loving, caring God was a hope far too good to be true. In fact, they did run for their lives when Jesus was arrested, as if it were all over.

But then they ran into Jesus again! The two witnesses to the risen Jesus who actually wrote about what they saw described his appearance as a light shining like the sun (Phil. 3:21; Rev. 1:13-16). There followed many Easter stories with which we are more familiar: a gardener outside the empty tomb; a tourist on the way to Emmaus; a stranger at dawn by the Sea of Galilee advising fishermen where to throw their nets; an apparition suddenly showing up in a locked room; a person with a wounded body pointing to the wounds in his side and hands; a teacher eating and conversing for forty days with the disciples. These stories served as the antidote for emerging Gnostic texts, where Jesus appeared as a disembodied spirit. (I explore this sequence, and what it means for us, in “Jesus from Easter to Valentinus [or to the Apostles’ Creed],” chapter 2.)

But the real miracle of Easter is what Jesus resumed saying. Just consider where things had ended up, with Jesus hanging naked, dead on the cross. The disciples had every reason to be utterly disillusioned about all the wonderful things Jesus had assured them about being surrounded by a tenderly loving God: “even the hairs of your head are all numbered; do not be afraid—you are worth more than many sparrows” (Q 12:7). Put bluntly: All that Jesus had said was more than cancelled out by Jesus’ anguished cry at death: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Mark 15:34). But then the real miracle of Easter happened: What Jesus had said, impossible though it was, disproven though it had been, began to be said anew, again and again, by those utterly disillusioned disciples who had given up and gone back to fishing. Through them, Jesus continued to speak, incredible though it was. The resurrected Christ was not a ghost, not a disembodied spirit, not a myth like the dying-and-rising gods with which the ancient world was cluttered. He rose as the Word, who was with God, who was God (John 1:1).

Christianity was founded by Jesus rising into his Word, which his disciples experienced anew and launched into proclaiming in his name. (This is why their names are not mentioned in Q—the message is not what they have to say, but what Jesus has to say!) They attested Jesus’ resurrection not just as witnesses to his appearances, but as auditors to his sayings. His words were experienced anew, not as melancholy rec-

ollections of the failed dream of a noble, but terribly naïve person, but rather as his still valid trust in the heavenly Father, who rules not just in heaven, but also on earth. As a result, his words, his sayings, were remembered, updated, translated, collected into smaller and larger clusters, and finally written down to become the Sayings Gospel Q, the Sermon on the Mount, and eventually the sayings material in the New Testament Gospels. That message, put into practice in Christian soup kitchens, orphanages, and safe houses throughout the ancient world, was the power of the resurrection that ultimately converted the Roman Empire. (See “The Real Jesus of the Sayings Gospel Q,” chapter 3.)

The sayings of Jesus, rescued for the church in the Sayings Gospel Q, reveal the earliest stages of the effort to find for him adequate titles. We are familiar with the Christological titles that appear, already full-grown, in the Pauline letters written in the fifties: Jesus Christ the Lord, Son of God. It is easy to assume they had always been there, from the time of Jesus himself. But when one turns to the less-doctrinal Galilean followers of Jesus who reported his sayings, one finds only the beginnings of those titles. For these early followers, the issue was not which titles you might accord him, but what you do with what he told you to do. After all, the house built on bedrock consists of “everyone hearing my sayings and acting on them” (Q 6:47-48). For these early followers, Jesus’ name was simply “Jesus of Nazara,” the old spelling of Nazareth still attested in the Sayings Gospel (Q 4:16).

The term *Lord* occurs frequently in Q. This was used in the Old Testament to refer to God and, of course, Jesus used it in this sense to refer to God (Q 4:8, 12; 10:2, 21; 13:35). But this same Greek word is used in a purely human, secular sense, for example in parables, to mean no more than a human master, a slave owner (Q 12:42-46; 14:21; 16:13; 19:15-20). It was also used of a teacher (Q 6:40, 46; 7:6; 9:59), and as a form of address to a person one looked up to, such as “Sir” or “Master,” like the archaic form of address, “Milord” (Q 13:25). Only when the Old Testament use of *Lord* for God was carried over to Jesus did *Lord* become a Christological title. This is common in Paul, but not in Q. Paul was in this sense further down the path that led to the later church’s Christology than was the Sayings Gospel Q.

The term *Son of God* occurs in Q, but there it is not introduced as a Christological title but rather as a name for all the disciples of Jesus who, like God, cared even for their enemies. “Love your enemies and pray for those persecuting you, so that you may become sons of your Father, for he raises his sun on bad and good and rains on the just and unjust” (Q 6:22-23). Jesus was of course one of these children of God, but at first that term was not a Christological title reserved for him, but

referred to all those in his movement. It was probably only in the subsequent effort to persuade the disciples of John the Baptist to become disciples of Jesus that the invidious point was scored: “No one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and to whomever the Son chooses to reveal him” (Q 10:22).

A Jewish term for God acting on earth is used in Q: God’s *Wisdom*, which has been sending from time immemorial prophets to the chosen people. *Wisdom*, in Greek *Sophia*, is a feminine noun in Hebrew and Greek, and so indicates the feminine dimension of God. But just as she had sent the prophets of the Old Testament (Q 11:49-51; 13:34-35), just so she not only sent Jesus, but also John the Baptist. “Wisdom was vindicated by her children” (Q 7:35). The exclusive associations we have for the Christological titles were not present at the beginning. (See “Very Goddess and Very Man,” chapter 4.)

The idiom “son of man” was not originally a title either. It was just a Hebrew idiom meaning a human individual, much as “daughters of Jerusalem” simply meant female inhabitants of Jerusalem, and “son of peace” just meant someone who responded positively to Jesus knocking at the door with the greeting, “Peace,” to ask for bed and breakfast. Jesus used the idiom of himself in all modesty, to contrast foxes and birds who have a place to stay with him a human, a “son of man,” with no place to lay his head (Q 9:58). In the book of Daniel there is a vision of a series of beastly empires, symbolized by a series of beasts as rulers, followed then by a humane Jewish empire, symbolized by a human, a “son of man,” as ruler. Only when the idea began to emerge among Jesus’ followers that Jesus would return as a star witness at the day of judgment did that text from Daniel get picked up and applied to Jesus, and only then did the idiom gradually become a Christological title. (See “The Son of Man in the Sayings Gospel Q,” chapter 5.)

Nowhere in the Sayings Gospel Q is Jesus referred to as Messiah, “Christ.” As a matter of fact, it is a bit inappropriate to refer to the Jews who produced this Sayings Gospel as “Christians,” since that name emerged not in Galilee, but in Antioch in the Gentile-Christian church of Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11:26). Similarly, other dimensions associated with later faith in Jesus as the Messiah are missing: neither is Bethlehem mentioned, where David was born and hence his successor is to be born, nor is the holy family, much less the genealogies that trace Jesus back to the patriarchs.

Other key terms that we all too automatically associate with the earliest church are also only beginning to develop. None of the twelve apostles are mentioned by name. Though the terms *apostles* and *the twelve* are missing, one can see this development beginning, just as in

the case of the Christological titles. The noun *apostle* does not occur, but the participial form does occur, in referring to those “sent” (*apostalmenous*) by God (Q 13:34). And though “the twelve” are not mentioned as such, Q concludes with Jesus’ followers sitting on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Q 22:30). Here it is of course only a step to the inference that there must of course have been twelve disciples, one for each tribe.

In the earliest phase, Jesus did not point toward himself (as the Gospel of John has presented him), but to God acting in him to intervening, “reigning” in human lives (too woodenly translated “the kingdom of God”). When he healed the sick, it was because God reigning had reached that house (Q 7:9). When he cast out demons, it was “by the finger of God,” for “God’s reign has come upon you” (Q 11:20). (See “Jesus’ Theology in the Sayings Gospel Q,” chapter 6.)

Jesus came to grips with the basic intentions of people. He addressed them personally, as to what kind of people they were. He called on them. He did not just teach them ideas. His message was simple, for he wanted to cut straight through to the point: trust God to look out for you by providing people who will care for you, and listen to him when he calls on you to provide for them. God is someone you can trust, so give it a try. (See “What Jesus Had to Say,” chapter 7.)

Some talk today about following in the footsteps of Jesus. But we often talk the talk more than we walk the walk. At one time, I looked around among the Christian confessions and denominations for any that made a serious effort to implement in modern terms the lifestyle of Jesus in Galilee, but I was disappointed—until I discovered the liberation theologians of South America. (See “The Jesus of Q as Liberation Theologian,” chapter 8.)

Throughout half a century of scholarship I have been concerned with the problem of getting back to the historical Jesus. My book of 1959, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*,² reported excitedly about the then-new trend to return to studying the historical Jesus, after the major German effort between the two World Wars to rule that question both illegitimate and impossible. (See “The Image of Jesus in Q,” chapter 9.) A few years later, in an Introduction to the reprint of Albert Sch-

2. James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Studies in Biblical Theology 25; London: SCM, 1959; Naperville, Ill: Allenson, 1959).

3. James M. Robinson, “Introduction” to *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* by Albert Schweitzer (New York: Macmillan, 1968), xi-xxxiii, slightly revised reprint “Albert Schweitzer’s Quest of the Historical Jesus Today,” in *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 172-95.

weitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* I showed how Schweitzer had slanted his presentation of the quest of the historical Jesus throughout the nineteenth century in an inappropriate way, so as to support his own view of Jesus as an impossible apocalypticist.³ Then a generation of work oriented to the Nag Hammadi Codices resulted in a focus on the most important tractate among those writings, *The Gospel of Thomas*. It is a Sayings Gospel consisting of 114 sayings ascribed to Jesus that lack any such apocalypticism.⁴ This work led me to another major project, reconstructing the other Sayings Gospel, Q, where an early, pre-apocalyptic layer of Jesus traditions had also been identified. (See "The Q Trajectory: Between John and Matthew via Jesus," chapter 10.)

Although I had begun work on Q a generation earlier, my work on the Nag Hammadi Codices delayed the publication of *The Critical Edition of Q* until 2000. That publication provided the launching pad for a popularizing book on Jesus, *The Gospel of Jesus: In Search of the Original Good News*, which I published in 2005.⁵ Thus, all along this rather variegated academic career, I have in one way or the other retained a focus on Jesus, as is evident in the "Theological Autobiography" I wrote a decade ago (and include here as chapter 11).

Ten of the essays that follow have been published in a much more exhaustive volume of my collected essays on Q (937 pages long!).⁶ For both volumes I wish to acknowledge with appreciation the work of the Peeters volume editors, Christoph Heil and Joseph Verheyden, with whom I worked closely in editing each essay.

4. Stephen J. Patterson and James M. Robinson, *The Fifth Gospel: The Gospel of Thomas Comes of Age*, with a New English Translation by Hans-Gebhard Bethge et al. (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998).

5. James M. Robinson, *The Gospel of Jesus: In Search of the Original Good News* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

6. James M. Robinson, *The Sayings Gospel Q: Collected Essays* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005).