

A Tale of Two Gospels: The Gnostic Gospels of Thomas and Q

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For over 200 years, scholars of religion have been prying the Bible apart — much to the consternation of the sort of people who take Scripture literally — disassembling it carefully, like a fine watch, in an effort to figure out what makes it tick.

The tools they use to do this are called ‘the historical-critical methodologies’, or more usually ‘the higher criticism’. These are scholarly techniques that focus on discovering the *sources* of biblical material in order to determine *who* actually wrote it, when and where *was* it written, and *who* was its original, intended audience.

As an outcome of this treatment, the Hebrew Bible has revealed some interesting secrets, and an entirely different view of the history and the development of the Children of Israel has emerged. A great deal of the Books of Moses and the sagas of the early kings of Israel turn out to have been written after the Babylonian Exile. The writer of Job was a contemporary of the illustrious Greek playwrights of the Periclean age, and a surprising amount of the great biblical wisdom writings, like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, were written after Alexander’s conquests launched the urbane and cosmopolitan Hellenistic era.

Once the lens of ‘higher criticism’ was focused on the Gospels of the New Testament, it first became apparent that all four Gospels were written two or three generations after the events they depict, in the decades following 70 AD, after the Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed. On further

examination, it was determined that Mark was written first. Matthew and Luke followed, another 30 years later, and they seem to have drawn the material they have in common with Mark from that earlier Gospel.

But — Matthew and Luke share large sections of text that are not found in Mark. Subsequent research suggested that neither of these Gospels drew upon the other, but on a second common source, which the scholars began calling Q — short for *Quelle*, the German word for ‘source’. This hypothetical Q Gospel contains what Matthew and Luke share — sometimes in exactly the same words — but are not found in Mark — like the Three Temptations of Christ, the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer and many individual sayings. Dating techniques place the composition of various elements of Q in the 40s and 50s AD, with six specific wisdom teachings being written as early as the 30s.

This scholarly research had its origins in the Protestant critique of the Catholic Church — the claim that Catholic religiosity was a pagan adulteration of the true Christianity. In an effort to define true Christianity, Protestant reformers at first chose to locate its truth in the scriptures as a way to counter Catholic emphasis on post-biblical traditions.

But Catholics had no trouble with the Gospels. They had always read them as records of the very events that inspired their religion. Mary was there, and the story of the Virgin Birth. The miracles were there too, both in the public appearances of Jesus and in the great events that confirmed the significance of his life — his Baptism and his Transfiguration — the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

So Protestant scholars had to take another look. Upon closer reading of the Gospels, they agreed that the Gospels contained a great deal of mythology and far too many miracles for comfort. And that set the agenda for more than a hundred years of detailed investigation. The goal of the quest would be to get behind the myths and miracles of the Gospels and reconstruct the story of the Historical Jesus, as ‘the man he really was’.

Two problems immediately presented themselves. First, was the core of Christianity to be found in the person of Jesus and his message as it appears in the Gospels? Or was it contained in Paul’s interpretation of the Christian faith with its focus on *kerygma* — the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus? New Testament scholars found themselves embarrassed, not so much by the more-than-apparent contrast between Paul and the Gospels, but by the scholarly uncertainty about which should be given priority.

The second problem was the Gospel of John. Scholars recognized that the fourth Gospel was distinctly different from the first three. In John, Jesus sounded like a passionless god on a temporary mission from another world.

John’s writer had combined the narrative characteristic of the other Gospels with the spiritual order created by Paul’s letters, producing an image Jesus at the center of a universe pulsating with the powers of light and darkness, the miraculous and the banal, in an early projection of the mythic mentality that became characteristic of Medieval Christianity.

These elements of the Gospel of John set it apart from the other Gospels and gave it little claim as a reliable source of historiography. Scholars therefore placed only the first three Gospels side by side for comparison (or *synopsis*,

meaning ‘view together’) and began referring to them as the Synoptic Gospels. And thus began the quest into the order and the interrelationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke.

The idea that there must have been a text like Q was first thought of almost 200 years ago, but for two reasons its recognition as a document with its own distinctive history had to wait for the present generation of scholars.

New Testament scholars were originally determined to reconstruct the ‘life’ of Jesus. As a result, they were *preoccupied* with the narrative events of the Gospels, and *worried* about their miraculous features. Their studies were not focused on Jesus’ teachings, which they took for granted.

The other reason . . .

As the text of Q emerged from the careful deconstruction and comparison of the three synoptic Gospels, it first became apparent that this was a distinct and specific Gospel in its own right. But it was curiously incomplete. The Gospel of Q, as it emerged from scholarly analysis, contained no Miraculous Birth Narrative, no Crucifixion, and no Resurrection.

To 19th century scholars of religion, all devout Christians, and all working as the academic and tutorial employees of seminaries, this simply wouldn’t do.

About 130 years ago, this second problem was shunted to the sideline by a new interest in Jesus’ teachings. According to 19th century liberals like Adolf von Harnack, Jesus seemed like a remarkable teacher of an elevated and timeless humane ethic. Liberal Christians honoured Jesus for his

teachings and thought of themselves as fortunate to stand at the end of an illustrious history of enlightenment.

In the footsteps of Darwin, the history of the human race was imagined on the model of evolutionary education. The ages of pagan superstition and cultic religion had finally succumbed to the age of reason. For Protestant scholars, reason and faith had merged in the superior ethics of Christianity, and they saw themselves as pedagogues shining in the midst of a world that was unenlightened — but educatable.

By the early 1890s, though, with new interest in the Gospel themes of the Kingdom of God and Future Judgment, this noble edifice began to crumble. Suddenly Jesus appeared as a child of his time — the inheritor of the apocalyptic doomsday literature of Hellenistic Judaism — a portentous visionary proclaiming an imminent cataclysmic transformation of the world.

In the face of growing suspicion that apocalyptic language had indeed been the order of Jesus' day, Albert Schweitzer used this perspective to write, in 1903, his famous critique of the quest for Jesus as a teacher of humane ethics.

Schweitzer's picture of Jesus was deeply disconcerting. His Jesus was *fanatic* about the kingdom of God, *mistaken* in his announcement of its imminent appearance, *wrong* to instruct his disciples in their mission, and *all but suicidal* in his determination to change the course of history by dying willingly for the Kingdom's cause.

The focus of research changed again in 1919, when Karl Ludwig Schmidt published a careful study of the way the Gospel of Mark had been

composed. He was able to convincingly demonstrate that all the connecting links between the smaller stories in Mark were the Markan writer's own doing. This study effectively brought to an end the old quest for the historical Jesus with its desire for a biography and its unexamined assumption that an historical record could be derived from the basic plot of the narrative Gospels. With the finding that Mark was responsible for the Gospel plot, all that was left from the time before Mark were fragments of memory traditions, bits and pieces of oral lore, and perhaps a few collections of parables and stories that someone, for reasons as yet unknown, had hung together by theme.

'Bits and pieces of oral lore'? 'A few collections of parables and stories', 'hung together by theme'? Sound familiar? Overnight, interest in the Gospel of Q was revived, albeit tentatively, at least at first. But cultural change was in the air.

Over the next couple of decades, religious studies began moving away from theological seminaries to take up residence in the University.

Biblical scholars found themselves in conversation with the full range of the human sciences, and conventional Bible study began to give way to a literary criticism informed by contemporary theories of authorship and composition.

New Testament scholars learned about discourse, rhetoric, narrative imagination, and the relation of authorship to authority. When used to read the literature produced by early Christians, this new learning brought groups and movements into view that had had no place on the older map of Christian beginnings.

When read against the background of the feisty social histories of the Greco-Roman age, early Christian texts quickly lost their glaze of normative theological significance and fell into place as literary achievements crafted in the rough and tumble of exciting social experimentation.

The version of the Gospel of Q that emerged from this scholarly synthesis — and is now readily available in any number of editions, both online and ‘dead tree’ versions [show the Mack edition] — is full of material that is entirely familiar to even casual readers of the Synoptic Gospels. All the most beloved and appealing religious and ethical principles taught by Jesus are found there. What makes Q seem *unfamiliar* are the missing parts — those oddly out-of-focus biblical moments that defy our ability to produce a coherent picture of Jesus as teacher. The Jesus of Q blasts no trees. Nor is any man accused of committing adultery in his heart.

But the thorniest issue still remained. How could there be an early, more authentic Gospel in which no Miraculous Birth Narrative, no Crucifixion, and no Resurrection appear?

Q was merely a ‘Sayings Gospel’, a synthetic compilation. It might be true that in the ancient world, Jewish and Greco-Roman collections of sayings circulated widely. Compiled documents like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Wisdom of Solomon, are particularly prominent in Jewish wisdom literature.

But many New Testament scholars resisted the idea of Q, especially the notion of its prospective authority, because they thought there was no other example of this genre in early Christian literature. They could not imagine that early Christians would have written such a text.

And then — a stunning manuscript discovery changed everything. Among the Coptic-Gnostic texts found in 1945 near the village of Nag Hammadi, 350 miles upriver from Cairo, was, of all things, a collection of the sayings of Jesus called the Gospel According to Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas looked very much like Q, and almost half of the sayings in Thomas had their parallels in Q. Here was a text closely related to Q that proved the existence of the genre in early Christian circles.

The first thing scholars noticed is that the Gospel of Thomas is not fundamentally dependent upon other Gospels. The Gospel of Thomas presents the sayings of Jesus in a more original form than any of the New Testament gospels. In the New Testament, parables are followed by an allegorical interpretation (Mat 13:18-23, Mk 4:13-20, Lk 8:11-15) that applies the element of the parable to the life of the Church.

The early church produced these added interpretations as Christians attempted to apply the details of a parable about farming in rural Palestine to features of church life during the latter half of the 1st century. Their absence in connection with the parables in the Gospel of Thomas helped confirm that such elements were added later, and that Thomas was written first.

Furthermore, in addition to the ‘familiar, beloved, and appealing’ passages found in Q, more than half the sayings of Jesus found in the Gospel of Thomas are distinctly challenging, and some seem even downright weird.

Many sayings in Thomas suggest a provocative and radical sort of ‘counter-cultural’ wisdom that subverts the conventions of polite society. The Jesus of Thomas scoffs at the polite amenities of religious piety, and opposes a settled, comfortable life in favour of an unattached existence.

In much of Thomas, disciples ask questions, and Jesus responds — for the most part by demonstrating how inappropriate these inquiries really are.

Over and over again the disciples ask *when* the kingdom will come, how it will *be*, and whether *they* will be able to enter. In every case Jesus tells them that they have completely misunderstood his teachings about the kingdom. The kingdom, Jesus explains, is already present, and, if they were his true disciples, they would not need to ask.

The disciples also want to know whether and how they should fast, pray, give to charity, wash, diet, and whether circumcision is required. In every case Jesus takes the occasion to turn the ritual reference into a metaphor of the contemplative self-awareness characteristic of his true disciples.

Thus the tactic of dialogue is used to clarify the position of the followers of this Jesus on two fronts: first against those other contemporary followers of Jesus who had become apocalyptic, and second against those Jesus people who were struggling to work out an accommodation with the Pharisees' codes of ritual purity.

The aphorisms this Jesus uses remind scholars of the writings of the Cynics. The Cynics were popular philosophers of Jesus' day who emerged from the philosophical tradition of Socrates as social critics who lived a simple life and employed sharp, witty sayings in order to make people raise questions about their own lives.

Other sayings in Thomas show a more esoteric interest in transcending the world and identifying with the divine. Some scholars have considered such sayings to be representative of a Gnostic point of view. The ancient Gnostics

were religious people who sought true knowledge — regarding attainment of knowledge as the key to a kind of living salvation that emphasized the mystical awakening of the self, as a kind of indwelling divinity.

In contrast to the way Jesus is portrayed in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas performs *no* physical miracles, reveals *no* fulfillment of prophecy, announces *no* apocalyptic kingdom about to disrupt the world order, and dies for *no one's* sins. Instead Thomas's Jesus *dispenses* insight from the bubbling spring of wisdom, *discounts* the value of prophecy and its fulfillment, *critiques* end-of-the-world, apocalyptic announcements, and *offers* a way of salvation through an encounter with his sayings.

Highly metaphoric and largely enigmatic, the teachings of Jesus to his disciples tell them 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 world of divine light and stability. The Gospel of Thomas claims that these sayings themselves, when understood, communicate salvation, not in an afterlife, but in life itself. If we take our proper place, at the eternal beginning of things, then our mouths will be free of the taste of death.

What this Jesus offers *us*, that saves us, that makes us free, is true Gnostic wisdom. And the sayings set down by Thomas form a part of a Gnosis available to every Christian, every Jew, every humanist, and every skeptic, whoever we are. The trouble of finding, and being found, is simply the effort to clear ignorance away, to be replaced by the Gnostic knowing in which we are known even as we know ourselves.

We dwell in poverty, and we are that poverty, for our imaginative needs have become greater than our imaginations can fulfill. This Jesus speaks against the pervasive opacity that prevents us from seeing anything that really matters. Our ignorance is belatedness, and we are blinded by an overwhelming sense that we have come in after the event.

What the Gnostic Jesus warns against is retroactive meaningfulness. He has not come to praise famous men, nor our fathers who were before us. The normative nostalgia for the virtues of the fathers is totally absent in both Q and Thomas.

Those capable of knowing can come to see what Jesus insists is plainly visible before them and indeed all around them. This Jesus has not come to take away the sins of the world, or to atone for humankind. He urges his seekers to cease hastening to the temporal death of busyness that the world miscalls life. There is no haste in this Jesus, no apocalyptic intensity. He does not teach the end time, but rather a transvaluation of time, here, in the now of our moment.

This Jesus, who urges his followers to be passersby, is a remarkably Whitman-like Jesus, and there is little in Q or the Gospel of Thomas that would not have been enthusiastically embraced by Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau.

Harold Bloom finds this a parallel to his argument, in *The Book of J*, that the Western worship of God in the Abrahamic traditions is the worship not only of a literary character, but also of the wrong literary character, the jealous God of Ezra the Redactor rather than the uncanny Yahweh of the J writer. If the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas is also to be regarded as a literary

character, then at least he too, according to Bloom, will be the right literary character, like the Yahweh of David and Solomon.

Like William Blake, like W.B. Yeats, this Jesus is looking for the face he had before the world was made. If such is our quest, then the Gospel of Thomas may well call out to us.

Here endeth the lesson.