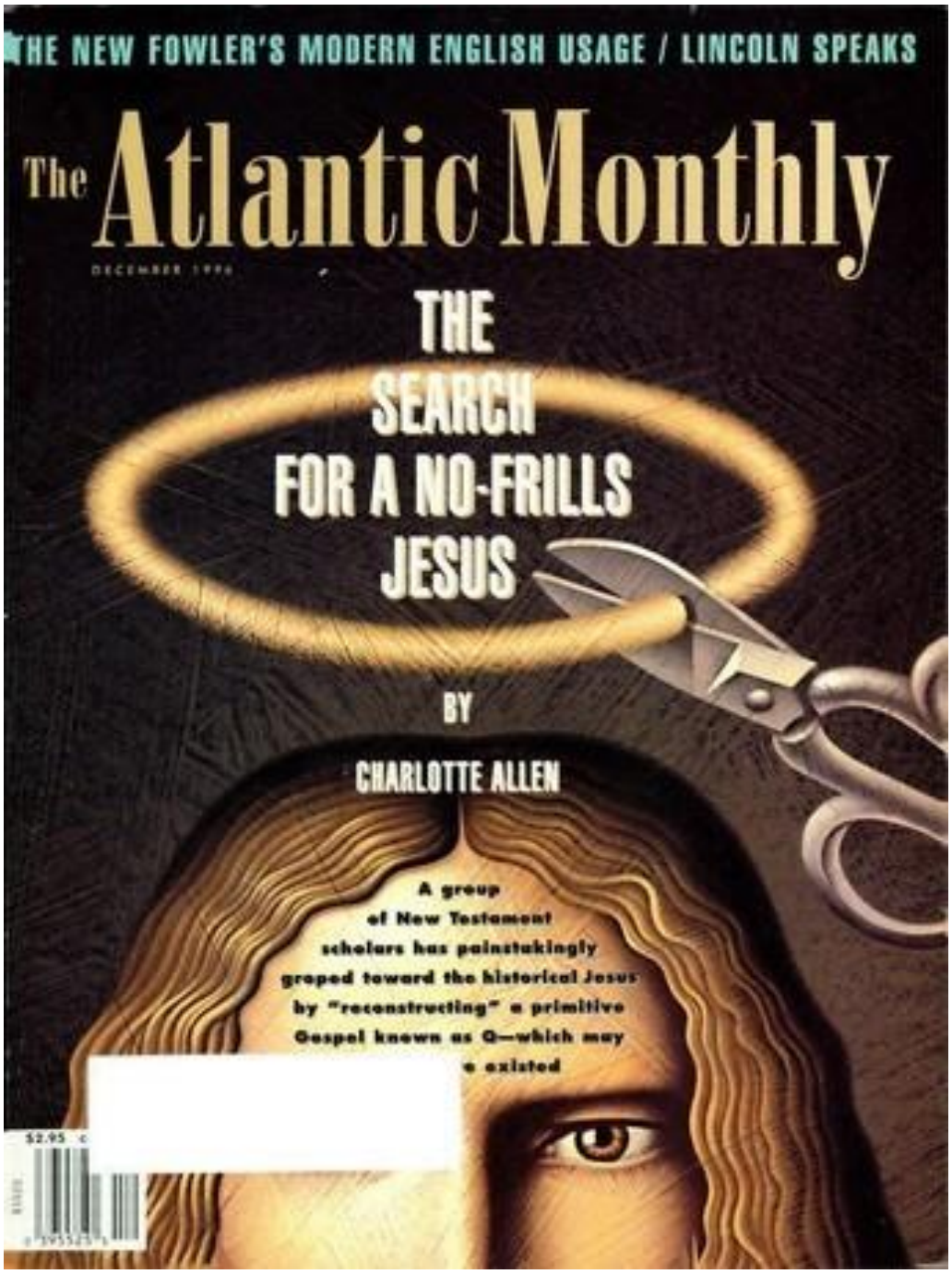

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The Search for a No-Frills Jesus

By Charlotte Allen

DECEMBER 1996 ISSUE

It should bring an end to the myth, the history, the mentality, of the Gospels. But nobody's going to want to read it!" Burton L. Mack, until his recent retirement a professor of New Testament at the School of Theology at

Claremont, in southern California, and the author of a best-selling book about the origins of Christianity, was drumming his palms on a table in his living room not long ago and talking about the publication of a scholarly document that he believes radically undercuts Christianity's claim to be the religion of Jesus of Nazareth. Mack, although he taught future ministers, would not be displeased. He blames Christianity for contributing to centuries of U.S. wrongdoing, from wars against Native Americans to interventionism abroad. "They'll have to read it!" he declaimed.

The document he was discussing is a reconstructed Greek text (with an immense scholarly apparatus) of "Q," as biblical scholars have named a hypothetical first-century work composed mostly of sayings of Jesus. The first installment was published last spring by the Belgian firm Peeters under the series title *Documenta Q*. Many scholars believe that Q served as a literary source ("Q" is short for *Quelle*, the German word for "source") for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which contain numerous parallel passages. Other scholars believe it never existed -- there are no manuscripts of Q or references to it in ancient literature. Contained in Q, or at least in the parallel passages of Matthew and Luke for which Q is the hypothetical

source, are many of the teachings of Jesus that Christians placed near the heart of their faith: the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, the Golden Rule, and the famous admonition "You cannot serve God and Mammon." It would therefore seem at first glance as though Q were a thoroughly Christian text, not the threat to Christianity that Mack describes. Believing that something like Q might have existed does not in itself entail a rejection of Christianity. Indeed, many scholars who are Christian believers endorse the Q hypothesis.

However, according to a largely North American cadre of biblical scholars that includes Mack, who in 1993 published a book called containing his own Q rendition, and James M. Robinson, the founder of the International Q Project and a

colleague of Mack's at Claremont, the teachings of Jesus in Q hold the key to an understanding of Jesus that is fundamentally *non*-Christian. According to these scholars, the authors of Q did not view Jesus as "the Christ" (that is, as "the anointed one," the promised Messiah), or as the redeemer who had atoned for their sins by his crucifixion, or as the son of God who rose from the dead. Instead, they say, Q's authors esteemed Jesus as simply a roving sage who preached a life of possessionless wandering and full acceptance of one's fellow human beings, no matter how disreputable or marginal. In that respect, they say, he was a Jesus for the America of the third millennium, a Jesus with little supernatural baggage but much respect for cultural diversity.

RECOMMENDED READING

Why Your Leisure Time Is in Danger

KRZYSZTOF PELC

What It's Like to Visit an Existential Therapist

FAITH HILL

The Small Island Where 500 People Speak Nine Different Languages

MICHAEL ERARD

The roughly 235 parallel verses in Luke and Matthew that scholars have identified as Q material (their techniques and their reasoning will be discussed in greater detail below) do not include the Gospel narratives of Jesus' passion and resurrection, which seem to have come from other sources, written or oral. Therefore Q partisans

contend that the authors of Q knew nothing about the way Jesus died or about the stories of an empty tomb -- or if they knew, they did not care. Hence there was no atonement doctrine in Q theology. And because belief in Jesus' resurrection is the core belief of Christianity (even very liberal Christians profess faith in the Easter event, if only as a metaphor for renewal), the people who wrote Q must have been adherents of Jesus' in Palestine who were not "Christians" -- unless, as Robinson and others observe, one stretches the word to include anyone who admires Jesus. Scholars used to refer to members of the Q community as "Jewish Christians," a term that can sometimes lead to confusion. The preferred designation nowadays for the group of which they were a part is the "Jesus movement." It took decades, Q partisans believe, before the movement was subsumed into a "cult of Christ," largely gentile and centered on the cross and the resurrection -- a cult that became known as Christianity.

ROBINSON and Mack are hardly the first to try to discern a non-Christian Jesus hidden inside the Christian Gospels. Ever since the Enlightenment, intellectuals and liberal clergymen have been on a quest for a "historical Jesus," an inspirational but purely human figure who might have intended something different from the dogmatic -- and in the view of many, oppressive -- faith that grew up in his name. In the nineteenth century liberal scholars looked to the Gospel of Mark for their clues to the historical Jesus. Mark is the shortest of the four canonical Gospels. It contains few references to Jesus' divine status and none to the virgin birth. In its earliest version it apparently mentioned none of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, merely relating a brief story of the empty tomb. Mark is essentially a collection of reports of events: accounts of Jesus' early ministry and of many of his miracles and parables, and a passion narrative. The various authors of the famous nineteenth-century "liberal lives" of Jesus tended to follow Mark's outline, but eliminated (or rationalized) the miracles in order to present Jesus as a preacher of moral and social progress who met a tragic end at the hands of people who did not understand him.

Nowadays, though, Mark is out (the passion story is too bloody for late-twentieth-century sensibilities, and it also raises issues of anti-Semitism), and Q is in. Not only does Q contain no crucifixion account; with its emphasis on Jesus' sayings, it presents a purer distillation of Jesus' moral and social teachings than does Mark's Gospel. Mark does call Jesus a "teacher" but reports few of his precepts.

Furthermore, those who claim to have found the real Jesus in Q believe that they have an important edge on their nineteenth-century counterparts. Having carefully broken down the hypothetical Q text -- that is, again, the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke -- into layers reflecting the stages of its writing and rewriting over several decades during the first century A.D., some scholars think they can reconstruct not only the document in its earliest form but also the community that produced it: a cadre of itinerant Galilean ascetics ("wandering charismatics" or "wandering radicals," in the words of some Q scholars) who actually heard Jesus speak some of the words in Q and who took seriously his command that they not worship Mammon. Because of their interest in this community, a favorite text among Q scholars is the so-called "mission" speech, in which Jesus instructed his disciples not to take food, knapsacks, money, or extra clothes with them on the road but to depend solely on the hospitality of strangers. Why is the Q community deemed to have been Galilean? Because Jesus did most of his preaching in Galilee, and Q mentions certain towns he visited near the Sea of Galilee: Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida. Their residents most likely remembered his sayings and tried to live by them. What's more, Jerusalem, where the memory of Jesus' crucifixion would have been too potent to ignore, is some distance south of Galilee -- hence the lack of a

passion narrative in Q.

"The collection of sayings of Jesus would precede accounts of his passion in terms of age," says Jon Asgeirsson, the associate director of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, a Claremont Graduate School-affiliated research center headed by Robinson that is the headquarters of the International Q Project. Asgeirsson and other scholars involved in the project surmise that Jesus' followers started collecting his sayings even before he died, giving them an authenticity and immediacy that the Gospels' passion stories lack.

Also, he says, the apparently primitive state of the Q text -- mostly sayings of Jesus without a heavy emphasis on narrative -- means that its composition in all likelihood preceded that of the four canonical Gospels, all of which take the form of quasi-biographical narratives, and which most scholars believe were written between A.D. 65 and 100. "A narrative implies some sort of elaboration, which would be later," Asgeirsson says. Some scholars believe that the oldest parts of Q may date from as early as the year 50, twenty years after Jesus' death, putting them among the earliest Christian (or Jesus-movement) writings in existence.

By assigning an early composition date to Q, placing the Q community in Galilee, and imputing to its members some firsthand knowledge of what Jesus said, scholars have built into their reconstructed text an apparent window of authenticity that permits a glimpse of who in their view the real Jesus was. Other depictions of Jesus from the decades after his death -- Jesus the resurrected redeemer, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the lord of the apocalyptic future -- might represent equally valid perceptions of the way the real Jesus conducted himself, but in the eyes of its advocates only the Q text records a sustained living voice. If one accepts this logic and follows it through, one is forced to conclude that this non-Christian Jesus -- the Galilee-based wise man who displayed no interest in the end of the world, resurrection, or redemption -- is about as "historical" a Jesus as modern scholars are likely to retrieve. It is no wonder that Mack believes that the publication of the reconstructed Q text could undermine Christianity as strictly defined.

"You still hear that: *only a hypothesis*," says Mack, a bearded, muscular sixty-five-year-old whose flamboyance and occasional ferocity have helped to bring his views attention. Mack is famous as an advocate of the theory that Jesus was a roving "Cynic-like sage," more of a secular philosopher than a religious figure. (The Cynics were adherents of an authority-questioning philosophical movement that began in Athens nearly four centuries before Jesus.) Mack gained particular notice at an academic conference one year by propounding -- humorously, he says -- what came to be known as the "car accident" explanation for Jesus' death: he suggested that the crucifixion might have been sheer happenstance. Indeed, not a few of the eyebrow-raising ideas about Jesus that appear in the press are likely to have some association with Mack. In (1988), Mack argued that the Gospel of Mark was responsible for contributing to the American mindset that led to the Vietnam War and to Ronald Reagan's defense policy. *The Lost Gospel*, which has sold 39,000 copies, repeated that theme. Mack's new book, (1995), blames the Bible for providing justifications for Waco-style apocalyptic violence and the selfish exploitation of natural resources.

During my visit to his home Mack joked about the reconstructed Q document. "This is going to complicate things for them! There will be a *text*! It's going to have a Library of Congress number!"

THEM" refers to the nonbelievers in Q: fundamentalist Christians; biblical scholars whose theories of Gospel composition do not include Q; and scholars who are Q-neutral -- who believe that Q makes sense as a possible explanation for similarities of wording and subject matter in Matthew and Luke but are unwilling to venture a guess as to what Q's text or texts originally looked like, let alone to try to reconstruct it or them. The battle over Q is particularly intense because, of course, it is not merely scholarly but also theological and political.

In some respects the International Q Project, which operates under the auspices of the highly regarded Society of Biblical Literature, resembles the flashy Jesus Seminar, whose headquarters are also in California, and whose member scholars assemble and vote -- usually in the negative -- on whether Jesus said or did specific things ascribed to him in the canonical Gospels. Mack and James M. Robinson were both early members of the Jesus Seminar and are friends of its founder, Robert Funk. The Q Project and the Jesus Seminar both draw on the liberal wing of the New Testament academy. Both groups poll their members to determine whether material is authentic. However, unlike the Jesus Seminar, whose ever-changing roster of participants (Mack has dropped out, and Robinson rarely attends) vote as if they were at a town meeting, the thirty-five-member Q Project has put in fifteen years of painstaking work, assembling the requisite passages from Matthew and Luke, breaking them down into "variation units" in order to assess the tiniest differences of wording and order, and amassing an enormous computer database of 150 years' worth of scholarly opinion as to whether particular variations represent genuine Q material or creative rewriting by either or both evangelists. The project is in fact international, but at least half its members are affiliated with universities on this continent, and many of them were students of Robinson's at one time or another. Only three years ago did Robinson and his project co-editor, John S. Kloppenborg, an associate professor at St. Michael's College, in Toronto, bring in Paul Hoffmann, of the University of Bamberg, in Germany, as a third editor for *Documenta Q*, lending the leadership of the reconstruction project European representation.

Whereas Mack, who has long been heavily involved in Q research but is not a member of the official Q Project, is truculent and colorful, Robinson, seventy-two, is a formal, mildly rumpled scholar of the old school who specializes in large-scale text-assembly projects. His previous venture -- his greatest achievement, in fact -- was a triumph of both scholarship and diplomacy: under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, he persuaded the Egyptian government during the 1970s to break a monopoly held by French and German scholars and permit the facsimile publication of a trove of fourth-century Coptic-language manuscripts discovered at Nag Hammadi, near the Nile River, in 1945. The eventual result was an English translation of the Nag Hammadi texts, overseen by Robinson, which to this day remains the only complete translation of those ancient religious manuscripts.

At the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, located in a handsome whitewashed brick building on the Claremont campus, Jon Asgeirsson shows off printouts from the Q Project's vast database, including a breakdown of the opening verse of the Lord's Prayer into six heavily annotated variation units, and a ninety-one-page single-spaced analysis of a verse from Matthew that the team ultimately decided was not Q. The reconstructed text as a whole follows the sequential order in which Q material appears in Luke (who is thought to have tampered less with Q's structure), although the wording of the reconstructed passages is derived about 50 percent

from Luke and 50 percent from Matthew. Both evangelists read like stripped-down versions of themselves in the Q reconstruction, with most Christian overlay deleted. The Peeters publication of those thousands of pages of material began last spring with the Lord's Prayer reconstruction. A volume on the temptation of Jesus was scheduled for this fall. Further volumes will appear at the rate of four a year for the next fifteen years or so, with each roughly 300-page volume taking up perhaps a hundred words of Q. In addition, the project expects to issue in 1998 a one-volume translation of the reconstructed Q, designed for the public, and a one-volume critical edition of the Greek text, for scholars.

The detailed reconstruction work is impressive, but nagging questions remain for any observer. Is it truly possible to turn a hypothetical document into a real document? Q partisans have taken a working hypothesis and given it a life and shape of its own, going so far as to speculate about what the original manuscript looked like, even though other scholars believe that Q may have consisted solely of oral tradition. The Q Project has assumed that an actual first-century papyrus scroll existed. That provenance firmly in place, the Q "manuscript" now has such palpable reality in the minds of its proponents that Mack in *The Lost Gospel* refers to it matter-of-factly as a "document." Q has grown over time from 200 or so parallel passages in Matthew and Luke to about 235, as scholars have assigned ever more material to it. Robinson, Mack, and others have decided to call the enhanced Q a full-fledged Gospel. Gospels are, among other things, vehicles for their authors'

theology, so the next step has been to work out the theology Q embodies -- a theology distinct, in the view of Q scholars, from either Matthew's or Luke's. By discerning layers of textual composition in Q -- again, just as if it were an actual document rewritten over time -- advocates have worked out the stages in which that theology developed. Finally has come a reconstruction of the community that subscribed to the Q theology and wrote and read the Q Gospel: those shadowy Galileans, unrecorded elsewhere in ancient texts, who wandered from town to town carrying no food or money. As can be seen, this entire edifice -- building from hypothesis to document to Gospel to theology to community -- is either a marvel of perceptive scholarship or a showy sandcastle.

To understand how this edifice came to exist entails an understanding of the puzzles behind the similarities in Matthew and Luke, puzzles that have perplexed scholars and theologians since ancient times, and also an understanding of the recent history of biblical scholarship itself.

The Q hypothesis arose from an attempt to solve what biblical scholars call the Synoptic Problem. Anyone who has ever studied the four canonical Gospels is aware that three of them -- Matthew, Mark, and Luke -- have a good deal of substantive material and even exact wording in common. (The fourth Gospel, John, although it

contains a few parallels with the other three, is largely idiosyncratic in its subject matter and its presentation of Jesus.) For that reason Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels ("synoptic" derives from a Greek verb meaning "to see together"). About 90 percent of Mark's subject matter is also in Matthew, and more than 50 percent of Mark's subject matter is in Luke. Matthew and Luke are both a good deal longer than Mark, however: they each contain around 1,100 verses, whereas Mark contains 661. Furthermore, both Matthew and Luke frequently follow Mark's order when presenting Mark's material, though they seldom put the other material they have in common into the same place in Mark's framework. That material appears in scattered chunks in Luke, whereas in Matthew it is organized rhetorically around a theme, such as the Sermon on the Mount.

Finally, studying the Greek texts of the three Synoptics side by side suggests that the relationship among them may be *literary*, a matter of their authors' having read one another's work rather than having drawn on the same eyewitness accounts or a common oral tradition about Jesus. In many cases the three evangelists used the exact same Greek word, right down to the verb form, in a narration of the same event. In a few cases entire sentences are almost identical among the three. The matter shared by all three Synoptics is known in New Testament circles as the triple tradition. The matter shared by only Matthew and Luke -- amounting to about one fifth of the verses in each evangelist's Gospel -- is known as the double tradition.

How to explain those traditions? In a treatise written around 400 A.D. the Church father Augustine seems to have concluded that Matthew wrote his Gospel first (Matthew was the favorite evangelist of early Christians), followed by Mark, who wrote a condensation of Matthew, and then by Luke, who used both Matthew and Mark. An eighteenth-century scholar, Johann J. Griesbach, taking issue with Augustine, thought that Luke came second, and *then* Mark, who sometimes followed Matthew's text, sometimes Luke's (Matthew often disagrees with Mark on triple-tradition details where Luke agrees, and vice versa). The Griesbach hypothesis continues to have adherents to this day, including William R. Farmer, an emeritus New Testament professor at Southern Methodist University.

In the early nineteenth century several German New Testament scholars -- most notably Christian Hermann Weisse, of the University of Leipzig -- proposed a different theory: that Mark wrote first ("Marcan priority"), and that Matthew and Luke, each working independently and adding material of his own, used both Mark and some other written source, probably a collection of Jesus' sayings. This is known as the two-document hypothesis. In 1890 the hypothetical sayings source acquired the name Q. In its general outlines the two-document hypothesis has become mainstream teaching in New Testament circles, accepted by the overwhelming majority of scholars in Europe and America today. So commonplace is the basic Q theory that in a 1990 essay on the Gospels, John Updike simply asserted "Matthew = Mark + Q," as though the question of Synoptic authorship were settled and could

be reduced to a quasi-mathematical formula.

The two-document hypothesis accounts nicely for the similarities among Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and for the similarities and striking *dis*similarities between Matthew and Luke (for instance, the two Gospels feature different and possibly contradictory accounts of Jesus' birth, Luke focusing on the manger and Matthew on the Magi). The inconsistencies can be attributed to the likelihood that neither Matthew nor Luke knew the other's work, but each knew the same two sources, Mark and Q. However, the hypothesis is not without problems, which have led to its rejection by a significant minority of scholars. The primary problem is that although Matthew and Luke often agree with Mark but not with each other on details of the triple tradition, they also often disagree with Mark while agreeing with each other. How can this be, if their authors were working without knowledge of each other's work? For example, Matthew and Luke will sometimes change one of Mark's colorful, if rough-and-ready, Greek words to a more polished Greek synonym -- the same synonym in both. Or both will omit one of Mark's vivid details, such as the fact that "four" men lowered a paralytic through a hole in the roof for Jesus to heal. These "minor agreements" between Matthew and Luke against Mark are numerous but picayune, and most two-document defenders attribute them either to coincidence or to efforts by the scribes who recopied the Gospels to make their language match. However, in half a dozen passages Matthew and Luke have taken a complete story from Mark -- Jesus' baptism, for example, or

his temptation by the Devil, or the parable of the mustard seed -- and significantly reworked it or expanded it in almost exactly the same way. Indeed, the favorite "Q" passage of Q scholars -- Jesus' "mission" instructions to his disciples not to carry food or money on their travels -- is not, strictly speaking, from Q at all but from a section of Mark that Matthew and Luke rewrote in parallel ways. These "major agreements" between Matthew and Luke against Mark in triple-tradition material have come to be known as Mark-Q overlaps. They are very difficult to explain without hypothesizing that either Matthew or Luke had access to the other's Gospel -- which would obviate any need for Q in the first place.

Defenders of the hypothesis that there existed something on the order of Q have offered theories to explain the overlaps: that Mark, too, read Q (this is Mack's view), or that Mark and Q drew on a common oral tradition (Kloppenborg and others). Any textbook introduction to the Synoptic Gospels is likely to contain elaborate diagrams that depict still other explanations for the overlaps: circuitous text routes from Q to "intermediate Matthew" to "proto-Luke," and so forth.

Not surprisingly, some scholars have decided to dissent from the Q hypothesis and look for a simpler explanation for Synoptic similarity. "I believe that Luke and Matthew copied Mark and that Luke also copied Matthew," says E. P. Sanders, a professor of religion at Duke University, the author of the recent book *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, and a leading Q nonbeliever. Sanders says that his theory of Gospel

composition explains the similarities far more simply than any of the two-document theories: "I think it accounts in the most direct way for the majority of the parallel material in Matthew and Luke."

In *On the Independence of Matthew and Mark* (1978), John Rist, a classics professor at the University of Toronto, offered yet another possible solution to the Synoptic Problem: Matthew and Mark wrote their Gospels more or less at the same time, without knowledge of each other's work, drawing on the same stream of oral tradition about Jesus. Rist theorized that Luke, writing later, might have used Matthew and Mark. Furthermore, Rist reminded his readers that the very assumption of Marcan priority on which Q hangs is tainted by the ideological predilections of the nineteenth-century searchers for a non-Christian Jesus.

Another researcher, Eta Linnemann, who once studied with the formidable German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann but later rejected his ideas, argued in *Bible Review* last year that all three Synoptic writers compiled their Gospels independently, from different eyewitness accounts of Jesus' ministry. Linnemann's article was marred by tendentiousness (she was debating with Stephen J. Patterson, a Q Project member and a former student of Robinson's who teaches at Eden Theological Seminary, in St. Louis), but she did -- as Rist had earlier -- make the solidly buttressed point that Synoptic literary interdependence, in contrast to subject-matter overlap, may be more apparent than real. Linnemann undertook a

word count and discovered that only about 42 percent of the words in Matthew's and Luke's putative Q passages are in fact identical. Most of the identical words are in statements that purport to quote Jesus directly, and those statements generally do not vary much from one Synoptic Gospel to another, Linnemann wrote. In a full quarter of the parallel passages, she found, less than 25 percent of the words are identical, and in only 33 percent of the parallel passages do identical words constitute 50 percent or more of the text. Those tend to be short passages, easily memorizable in an oral culture.

Nonetheless, all the alternatives to Q have their own problems. For example, none offers any persuasive explanation for why Matthew, if he was working independently, followed Mark's order, or for why Mark, if he used Matthew, would have left out the Sermon on the Mount. "The only way to avoid Q is to argue that Luke uses Matthew," John Kloppenborg, Robinson's project co-editor, says. "You have to weigh the logical possibility of that against its historical or literary plausibility. You have to account for the shape of 'Q material' in Luke, given the presupposition that he uses Matthew. Matthew's a systematizer. Look at his three-chapter Sermon on the Mount. It's well organized rhetorically and literarily. The same elements are in Luke, but they're scattered all over the place. Why would Luke do that? And why is Matthew's infancy story ignored by Luke? The Magi from the East -- why does he leave them out? The answer is that they've never seen each

other."

Given that no one's proposed solution to the Synoptic Problem seems entirely satisfactory, the best way to regard the problem may be simply as that: a problem, probably unamenable to ultimate solution until someone uncovers a text. The hypothesis that a collection of Jesus' sayings was patched together by those who revered him is about as helpful as any in understanding the Synoptics' composition, so it is not surprising that most biblical scholars accept it. Luke himself hints at the existence of something like Q, in the beginning of his Gospel: "Many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word."

Yet to a number of biblical scholars, as we have seen, Q is more than a possibly lost source whose fragments show up in Matthew and Luke. To them, it is a complete, separate, and even sectarian Gospel in its own right. Where their thinking comes from is another tale of twentieth-century New Testament scholarship.

IN 1934 a professor at the University of Tübingen named Walter Bauer published a book,, that would eventually provoke a revolution in the way many Church historians viewed the rise and spread of the Christian faith. Before Bauer most New Testament academics, who tended to be German Lutherans, believed that there had once been a "primitive Christianity," uniform of faith, widespread throughout the ancient world, and unspoiled by such Roman Catholic frippery as Popes and veneration of the Virgin Mary. Heresies came later, according to this classic thinking. Bauer argued the contrary: that this "primitive Christianity" had never existed, and that from the very beginning Christianity had exhibited an extraordinary theological diversity that amounted to bickering sectarianism. As for the heresies, Bauer contended that they were simply geographic variants of the faith, variants dating back to its earliest days. In Egypt, Bauer maintained, Gnosticism, regarded as a heresy elsewhere, was the only variety of Christianity available, and Gnostic Christians in Egypt considered themselves to be the true Christians, with their "orthodox" enemies being heretics. Bauer also rejected the idea of a New Testament canon that reflected mainstream Christianity; any book written by any early Christian was as important for understanding Christian origins as any other, he maintained. Tübingen had a reputation for outré scholarship. Bauer drew criticism for his overbroad assumptions, and his book fell into near oblivion amid the academic and moral chaos occasioned by Hitler's rise and the ensuing world war. In 1963 *Orthodoxy and Heresy* was republished in West Germany, to scholarly fanfare, and an English translation emerged from an American publisher, Fortress, in 1971. Despite Bauer's shortcomings on certain issues (most scholars now believe that he was wrong about the Gnostics in Egypt), there was general agreement that

he had made an important point about the variety of expressions of Christianity during the early days, when no formal creeds and little centralized authority obtained. Meanwhile, his book had caught the attention of the enormously influential Rudolf Bultmann.

Bultmann, who taught New Testament theology at the University of Marburg, was one of the first to apply to the New Testament a kind of biblical scholarship known as form criticism. He believed that little could be known of the historical Jesus beyond the fact of his crucifixion (which Bultmann called "*dass*," for "that"). The Gospel stories were mostly mythological material, each dealing with a specific theological or practical problem (a "*Sitz im Leben*," as Bultmann called it, or "life situation") facing the particular Christian community that composed the myth. Every story in the Gospels had a "form," he believed, a distinct literary format related to its *Sitz im Leben*, and every New Testament book -- along with its sources -- had a *Gattung*, a distinct genre that served a theological purpose for its community. Bultmann believed that the stories in the Gospels had grown like pearls, from simple core aphorisms (perhaps reflecting Jesus' actual words) into longer, contextualized discourses and narratives. He put several generations of graduate students to work doing textual archaeology: identifying the form of each Gospel unit and peeling off what they considered to be later layers of elaboration, in the hope of hitting a primal stratum that reflected the community's earliest

theology. Bultmann admitted that there was something circular about the layering approach -- using a text to reconstruct the community that wrote it, and then using the reconstructed community's "needs" and "history" to determine what parts of the text were oldest -- but he and his students continued nonetheless.

Bauer's theories about early Christian diversity dovetailed with Bultmann's belief that the various Christian communities had developed their theologies -- and their Gospels -- in ways that were sometimes fundamentally antagonistic to one another. Later on, during the 1950s and 1960s, many of Bultmann's former students began to move beyond their *Doktorvater*'s form criticism to a newer technique, called redaction criticism, which emphasized the evangelists' editorial roles in stringing together the smaller units that made up the Gospels. Many Bultmannians also came to believe, despite their master, that it was possible to derive an understanding of who the historical Jesus was -- not just confirmation of a few tantalizing quotations -- from the bottom, aphoristic layer of some of the Gospel stories.

Some of those former Bultmann students (and students of former students) were

ed with Bultmann at Marburg
tudied with Bultmann's disciple
en. Moreover, the proprietors of American divinity schools had long admired the sophisticated "higher criticism" of the Bible which was emanating from Germany. In the fifties and sixties several U.S.

universities -- Harvard, Chicago, and Vanderbilt among them -- sought out German theological faculty members. Harvard acquired Helmut Koester, a student of Bultmann's who had been influenced by Bauer and who passed along Bauer's theories of Christian diversity to his own students. Koester and Robinson had become friends, and in 1971 they published *Trajectories Through Early Christianity*. It was, in essence, Walter Bauer for Americans. In a series of essays that expanded on Bauer's themes, Koester and Robinson argued that any early Christian text from any century could be used to plot a trajectory, forward or backward, of the thinking of Christian groups. It was thus possible, they maintained, to take two different but thematically related texts from different periods and, using Bultmann's layering theories, trace the history and evolution of the single Christian community presumably responsible for both texts. Underlying their theories was the assumption, certaijly debatable, that each early Christian community read only a single text at any given time.

Koester and Robinson inspired a generation of trajectorists among their students and admirers. The most famous of those influenced by trajectory theory was Elaine Pagels, who wrote her doctoral dissertation for Koester at Harvard. In her best-selling book *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979), Pagels contended that early Gnosticism, far from being a heresy, was simply a Christian variant that happened to be out of favor with the more politically powerful orthodox Christians. Raymond E. Brown, of

Union Theological Seminary, applied trajectory theory to John's Gospel and three New Testament letters attributed to John, sketching out a separatist theology and a hundred-year history for John's Church in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (1979).

In one essay in *Trajectories*, Robinson had focused on Q. Some of Bultmann's former students in Germany were also writing about Q. But Robinson and Koester took the lead, plotting a complete trajectory for the presumably lost text. Robinson described the *Gattung* of Q as a collection of "sayings of the wise," a kind of literature well known in the ancient world. Koester took Robinson one step further and designated Q a "wisdom gospel" with its own "wisdom theology" -- designations that Robinson came to adopt as well. To bolster the contention that the earliest Christians would have called Q a Gospel, Robinson points out that Q itself refers to proclaiming the "gospel" or the "good news." Furthermore, one of the fourth-century Coptic manuscripts from Nag Hammadi calls itself the Gospel of Thomas. It is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, many of which are also in Q (or at least in Matthew and Luke). The majority of scholars date the Greek original of Thomas as mid second century, but Robinson, Koester, and their disciples, using trajectory theory, have moved at least some of the oldest layers of Thomas back to the late first century, bringing it within striking distance of Q. Using Thomas to prove the existence and Gospel status of Q, and Q to prove the early date of Thomas, is more of that circular reasoning that dogs Bultmannian and post-Bultmannian speculation.

Furthermore, Robinson's designation of Q's genre as a collection of wisdom sayings was a stretch: although there are many -- mostly -- sayings of Jesus in Q, there are also several passages of narrative. The story of John the Baptist is in Q, except for his birth and beheading, and so is the story of Jesus' temptation, and even two miracle stories -- the healing of the Roman centurion's slave and the exorcism of a mute demoniac.

Nonetheless, the wisdom-sayings genre that Robinson awarded to Q stuck, inspiring a book by Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (1987). In that book Kloppenborg contended that because Q partook of a particular genre, it was "genre-bound" with respect to meaning:it *had* to be *only* a collection of wisdom sayings. Anything in Q that did not reflect a wisdom orientation was therefore probably an addition to the original text by later editors. Kloppenborg broke down the document into three layers, reflecting Q's presumed growth over the life of the Q community: a bedrock "sapiential" stratum of Jesus' teachings; a "polemic" stratum with apocalyptic overtones, reflecting the community's increasing sense of besiegement by its orthodox competitors; and a narrative top stratum, consisting of the temptation story -- which reflected the community's imminent absorption by the orthodox, who preferred Gospels that told stories. In 1988 Kloppenborg published a synopsis of Q materials, *Q Parallels*. The earliest Q layer, in Kloppenborg's opinion (and in Robinson's and Koester's), reflected a theological view of Jesus as a teacher of God's wisdom but not primarily an apocalyptic figure, much less the divinely sent one who appears in Matthew and Luke. "Q wasn't Christian, but Luke was Christian," Robinson explains.

KLOPPENBORG'S three-layer analysis became holy writ for Q scholars and is the theoretical basis for both the Q Project and Burton Mack's Q book. There are a few dissenters in the Q ranks, among them Arland D. Jacobson, of the Charis Ecumenical Center, in Moorhead, Minnesota, a former graduate student of Robinson's, who argues in *The First Gospel: An Introduction to Q* (1992) that although it is definitely non-Christian at its core, Q presents Jesus as a Jewish prophet as much as anything else. One problem with the wisdom-teacher theory is that it makes Jesus an oddity in purely historical terms. There were no other known Jewish wisdom teachers in early-first-century Palestine, although there were plenty of prophets.

That is where the notion of Jesus as Cynic sage comes in -- to give Jesus and the Q community a recognizable place in ancient history. One of the first to bring on the Cynics was Gerd Theissen, a New Testament professor at the University of Heidelberg, who employs sociological concepts to explain the spread of Christianity. Theissen is the one who came up with the term "wandering radicals" to describe the early Jesus movement, using a sociological model that presupposes that religions begin as free-form associations around autonomous charismatics and then settle into more orderly and authoritarian structures.

The Cynics seemed tailor-made for Theissen: like the Q community, they were wandering radicals who begged for their bread and flicked pithy aphorisms at anyone who gave them a handout or tried to strike up a conversation. Their founder was Diogenes -- he who carried his lamp in broad daylight in search of an honest man. According to legend, Diogenes slept in a tub and once told Alexander the Great to quit blocking his sunshine. Diogenes' disciples reveled in flouting convention. The one known female Cynic, Hipparchia, reportedly consummated her marriage to Diogenes' protégé Crates in full public view outdoors. Like their epigones in the Woodstock Nation, many Cynics undoubtedly gave up their mode of life after a few years. The movement, never widespread, waned -- but in the first century A.D. it enjoyed a revival in the Roman Empire, and numerous beggar-philosophers roamed the Hellenistic world with their distinctive walking sticks and knapsacks. One on-again, off-again Cynical site was Gadara, a Greek city east of the Jordan River, near the Sea of Galilee. Indeed, Galilee itself, although part of the ancient kingdom of Israel, had been conquered and reconquered by Hellenistic warlords so many times that its culture showed strong Greek inroads; many of its Jewish inhabitants were probably bilingual, providing some foundation for communication between Cynics and followers of Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus' famous "mission" speech contains instructive parallels with the Cynics' credo.

Having read Theissen, some Q scholars made the Cynics the warp of the fabric of their reconstructed Q community in Galilee. Leif E. Vaage, who was a graduate student of Robinson's at Claremont in the mid-1980s and now teaches at the Toronto School of Theology, published an expansion of his doctoral dissertation, *Galilean Upstarts: Jesus' First Followers According to Q* (1994), which contends that the Q community actually lived like Cynics -- Jesus possibly having picked up their philosophy on trips to Gadara. In this view, all the aphorisms of Jesus that we associate with Christian selflessness -- "Turn the other cheek," "Love your enemies," and so forth -- were actually clever survival strategies for unpopular Cynics in strange places. Jesus' first disciples were proto-beatniks encamped along the Sea of Galilee, who wrote down his teachings during spare moments on their travels. "They might have done their work in the town squares -- that was the equivalent of coffeehouses back then," says Vaage, who is remembered in some circles for having once called Jesus "a party animal" (the context, though, was a serious, scholarly one).

Others to take an interest in the Cynics include John Dominic Crossan, a co-chairman of the Jesus Seminar, an emeritus professor of biblical studies at DePaul University, and the best-selling author among Q partisans (his three historical-Jesus

books have sold nearly 200,000 copies), and, of course, Mack, who became friendly with Vaage at Claremont. Mack's *The Lost Gospel* contains a translation of Q into what he calls "demythologized" language, free of traditional biblical overtones, and even includes some small additions of his own to the text. The book features enthusiastic prose (in a feat of metaphor Galilee is described as "a kind of beachhead where the surge of political crosscurrents constantly kept the people on their toes"). His picture of first-century Galilee presents a multi-ethnic population that did not overall feel much loyalty to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish religion and culture. Mack's Jesus was a countercultural guru who encouraged his Galilean followers to "experiment with novel social notions and life-styles," to question "taboos on intercourse with people of different ethnic roots," and to "free themselves from traditional social constraints and think of themselves as belonging to a larger human family." Kloppenborg wrote glowingly about *The Lost Gospel* for its book jacket. Robinson, who does not subscribe to the Cynic theory, contended in a review that Mack had gone a bit over the top. He was especially critical of the tilt of Mack's translation, which, for example, renders Jesus' command to his disciples to "Heal the sick" (the Greek verb is "*therapeuete*") as "Pay attention to the sick" -- more in keeping with a Cynical image.

None of the criticism fazes Mack. In the course of a recent interview he revealed his next project: putting together a scholarly consortium that would "redescribe"

Christian origins in some way other than through the Gospel narratives and their "crucifixion drama," as he calls it. Because Q contains no passion narrative, Mack believes that no one really knows how Jesus died and that the Gospel stories of his passion, like most of the other Gospel stories, are pure fiction. That would explode even Bultmann's *dass*. "It's over," Mack said. "We've had enough apocalypses. We've had enough martyrs. Christianity has had a two-thousand-year run, and it's over."

Perhaps so -- if you believe that Mack's countercultural theories, Kloppenborg's layer-peeling, Theissen's wandering-radicals sociology, and Robinson's exhaustively labored-over Q-reconstruction project add up to a genuine leap in our understanding of where Christianity came from. Many scholars do not. "It's all faux history," says Luke Timothy Johnson, a New Testament professor at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, and the author of *The Real Jesus* (1996). "They put the Q community in Galilee because we know so little about Christianity in Galilee." "It's not sociological; it's simply ideological," says Richard Horsley, of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, a former student of Koester's who remains friendly with many Q scholars, including Mack, despite a wide divergence from their beliefs. Horsley's latest book, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (1995), examines the area's society and culture during the first century. "My book pulls the rug out from under the Cynic sage," Horsley contends. "There's no such thing as a peasant sage, period, in Palestinian Judaism of that time. The sapiential figure -- that's our modern typology, something we've made up. Q is prophetic -- it's traditional Bible prophecy. It's a text, because someone wrote it down, but basically it was functioning in a dynamic way in the oral tradition. What we know as Q is a freeze-frame that Matthew and Luke picked up around the same time. This whole assumption about Jesus -- that in the beginning were aphorisms, something Thomas-like, and that they grew into narrative discourses -- fiddlesticks! I think there was a script in the culture already, although we don't have a lot of evidence, and Jesus knew it and his followers knew it, and something happened, and Jesus played out the role the script called for."

"There's this idea that we can always be sure where something was written, or what the steps in the tradition were, or even that there was one Q community," says John Meier, a New Testament professor and historical-Jesus researcher at the Catholic University of America. "There *was* probably a ragtag collection of sayings of Jesus that floated from community to community, and Luke usually has the more original version of the sayings. That's about all we can know. A good number of European scholars are aghast at all of this Q reconstruction."

Attribute the Q phenomenon, if you will, to American enthusiasm, or to American entrepreneurship, or to the American university system, which tolerates more speculative scholarship than the European academy. But there is another factor at work: an understandable lack of willingness to accept that there are limits to what historical research can provide by way of hard information about Jesus and his earliest followers. The only known first-century texts dealing with first-century Christianity are specifically Christian documents, such as the books of the New Testament, and the works of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who wrote at century's end and mentioned Jesus and Christians only twice. So scholars read those books over and over and try to find something new there, or try to bring another discipline -- literary criticism or sociology or anthropology -- to bear on what they read, or hope that archaeologists will dig up new stones and new texts to explore. Given the scholarly urge to break new ground -- especially in America, where there are so many universities -- it is not surprising that an entire industry has grown from

the Q scholars' hypothesis.

"There's this big black spot in early Christianity," James Robinson told me, sitting in the library at his institute, where tall volumes of Nag Hammadi facsimiles line the shelves. "There must be something there, so we're projecting back from the texts we have, trying and trying to get some kind of understanding of what it was."

Robinson continued: "I think that Jesus was an important person, one of the most important people who ever lived. In modern times many enlightened types have become skeptical, and we look down on the uneducated types who believe. It's sort of a pity that all that most of us know about Jesus is from the creeds, which we can't believe in. This focus on the sayings is a way to make Jesus comprehensible in this age. Jesus was giving people the kingdom -- a kind of selfless society where everybody is supposed to have a trusting attitude toward one another."

Robinson's words sum up why the Q Project, for all the improbability it may present to those who are not Q partisans, is a worthwhile venture, no matter how history judges its central premise. For one thing, Kloppenborg's *Q Parallels* and the *Documenta Q* volumes are important scholarly achievements in their own right. As for the sayings of Jesus that scholars have isolated, they may remind readers of something valuable.

When many educated Europeans and Americans lost their religious faith, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they began subscribing to the notion, still current, that the main purpose of religion is its social utility as an enforcer of morality among the poor, inspiring them (for example) to quit drinking and pull up their socks. The Gospels -- or Q, if you will -- have something different to say. At their core is a more radical commandment, which requires one to make a gift of everything, of one's very self. It is a commandment that only a few have followed -- Russian holy men, Saint Francis of Assisi, Dorothy Day -- but one that remains compelling nonetheless. So it may be worthwhile that scholars in Claremont and elsewhere have pulled out the texts to serve as a distilled reminder.

However, those saints and mystics did not need a reconstructed Book of Q or a consortium of scholars in order to find the words of Jesus that directed them to give their possessions to the poor and to abandon all concern for their own fortunes. They found those words in the place where they have always called attention to themselves -- in their Bibles.

Illustrations by Adam Niklewicz

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