

The Q Source in Contemporary Scholarship

Many New Testament scholars believe that both Matthew and Luke made use of a source in the composition of their Gospels that has been lost to us. For reasons unknown, this lost source has come to be called “Q” (one possible explanation for the name: “Q” is short for *Quelle*, the German word for “source”).

Written or Oral?

Some scholars have regarded Q as no more than a common body of oral tradition, but the majority of scholars now believe that it was a written document. Evidence for this includes the internal theological consistency expressed throughout the Q passages and the strength of the verbal agreements between these passages as they are reported in Matthew and in Luke, an agreement that frequently extends even to the order in which the passages occur.

Language

Scholars have long thought that Q was originally written in Aramaic and then rendered, independently, by both Matthew and Luke into Greek. Current opinion, however, is shifting toward the belief that Q was composed in Greek and came to both evangelists in that form. This matter is still debated.

Authorship

The church historian Eusebius (260–339) claimed to have a statement from someone named Papias, who said, around 135, “Matthew [i.e., the disciple of Jesus] compiled the sayings in the Hebrew [or Aramaic] language and each one interpreted them as he was able.” Eusebius took this as a reference to the book that we call the “Gospel of Matthew,” but New Testament scholars no longer believe that Matthew the disciple of Jesus wrote that book. Some scholars, however, think that Papias might have been referring to Q, and, therefore, that Q may have been compiled by Matthew the disciple of Jesus. This remains speculative.

Content

Q consists almost entirely of “sayings.” In this regard, it resembles the form of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. The few narrative portions include the story of Jesus’s temptation (Luke 4:1–13; Matt. 4:1–11) and the healing of the centurion’s servant (Luke 7:1–10; Matt. 8:5–13), but even here the emphasis is on the sayings of Jesus preserved in the narrative. There are no stories about Jesus’s birth or baptism, and, remarkably, there is no passion narrative. It is generally thought that the original order of the sayings is better preserved in Luke than in Matthew.

Types of Sayings

Richard Edwards finds three types of sayings interwoven in the Q material:

Wisdom sayings are aphorisms that provide insight into how things really are or perhaps offer recommendations for life based on these observations:

- “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21; Luke 12:34).
- “Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:31; Luke 12:7).

Prophetic sayings are announcements that proclaim the judgment of God or perhaps call for a particular response in light of that judgment:

- “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9).
- “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39; Luke 17:33).

Eschatological sayings reflect the view that the future is of primary importance and that the end of the age is rapidly approaching:

- “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Matt. 24:44; Luke 12:40).
- “As it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man” (Matt. 24:37; Luke 17:26).

These types of sayings overlap (e.g., wisdom sayings may also be eschatological), but the categories do identify the streams of tradition important for an understanding of Q.

Recensions

John Kloppenborg and other scholars have suggested that Q might have gone through two or three editions before assuming the form to which Matthew and Luke had access. According to this theory, the wisdom sayings were part of the original version of Q but the eschatological sayings were not. This theory, again, is regarded as highly speculative.

Theology

The Locus of Salvation Is the Parousia, Not the Cross

In Q, the death of Jesus is perceived only as a martyrdom, not as an atonement or sacrifice for sin. In fact, there is no mention of the cross, only allusions that imply that Jesus suffers the fate of the prophets (and of John the Baptist). Jesus saves people not by dying for them but rather by inaugurating God's kingdom and granting fellowship in this kingdom to those who are faithful. This will occur shortly, at the final judgment, over which Jesus will preside as the glorified Son of Man.

Discipleship Takes the Form of Itinerant Radicalism

True discipleship, according to the Q sayings, consists of being like Jesus (cf. Luke 6:40). This means, among other things, that disciples

are expected to forgo domicile, family, and possessions. Just as the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58), so his disciples are called to leave their homes and families, renounce all worldly security, and devote their lives entirely to the kingdom of God.

Community

Some scholars speak loosely of a “Q community,” by which they mean early followers of Jesus who used this document as their primary Christian text. Such people might be characterized as believing that they live at the very end of time, guided by the words of Jesus and totally dependent on God for sustenance. They view their mission as a continuation of the ministry of Jesus on earth. They have collected the sayings of their coming judge to serve as a guide for living in the last days. In addition to collecting and repeating these sayings, they continue to proclaim the dawn of God’s kingdom through inspired prophets who speak in Jesus’s name.

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