New Testament Studies:
The Sayings of Jesus

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Abstract
The sayings of Jesus of Nazareth, found mainly in the New Testament’s Sermon on the Mount, have inspired countless millions to live a higher life, to turn toward peace and away from violence. For a little less than two hundred years, these sayings have fascinated scholars because they rightly discerned in them possible answers to the riddles of the historical Jesus and his early Galilean followers. Scholars believe these sayings were a separate book (or codex) used by Jesus’ followers for inspiration as the movement thrived after Jesus’ passing. Yet, these original sayings, consisting of about seventeen hundred words (known as Q 1), were lost. They endured because the writers of Matthew and Luke’s gospels incorporated nearly all of them into their narratives. How did Jesus of Nazareth, who gave the world these sayings, see himself? Why did his sayings resonate among the people of Galilee in the first-century CE? These questions, of course, will never fully be answered, yet recent studies have brought us closer than ever before to Jesus of Nazareth and his time. This revolution in perspective, of course, has come from the sustained labor of scholars in many fields over many years, in today’s more open intellectual environment and its weaker connection to Christian orthodoxy. But they also have come from taking a fresh look at what had been there all along: the sayings themselves. No one thought to ask the important questions about them (or dared to). I will discuss a little of these studies below.

Key Words
Two-Document Hypothesis, the Document Hypothesis, Cynic Philosophers, the Greco-Roman era, the New Testament, the Gospels

1. Introduction

It is relatively easy for most in the West to see the religions of other cultures, of Hinduism and Buddhism for instance, as myths or stories that reflect certain human and spiritual truths. It has been much more difficult for the West to turn a critical eye on Christianity. Western religion was different, most felt, based as it was on a moment of divine entry into history. The New Testament, therefore, had not engaged scholars the way the works of Homer and Plato had. After all, Christianity’s supernatural beginning was explained in the New Testament itself. Further, many were

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reluctant to examine the Christianity critically, given the fierce and uncompromising orthodoxy surrounding it. Only in the last one hundred years or so did scholars begin to apply the same critical analysis of the New Testament as they have to other ancient texts. How the sayings of Jesus were discovered is extraordinary. They had been part of Christianity all along, embedded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Separating the sayings from the gospel narrative contexts, and viewing them as an independent text, gives a revolutionary perspective of Jesus and his movement in Galilee. For my overview, I draw from three main sources: John Kloppenberg and Burton Mack for the three layers of the sayings of Jesus and life in Galilee during the first century and F. E. Peters for oral traditions in ancient times.

2. The search for gospel truth

New Testament scholarship was born out of the great movements in Western civilization: the Protestant Reformation (sixteenth century) and the Enlightenment (eighteenth century). The Reformation gave the impetus to discover “original” Christianity, in part to justify the Protestant breakaway from the Roman Catholic Church (1517). The Enlightenment gave some of the critical-thinking skills necessary to embark on this mission. This led in unforeseen directions. In the eighteenth century, German scholars revolutionized how the West looks at its own sacred narratives when they unraveled the various writers of the Torah, or first five books of Moses (four different writers or groups of writers over six hundred years had composed it). The Document Hypothesis, championed by Julius Wellhausen (1878), led to a closer critical examination of the New Testament, too. Scholars began to ask how the gospels, the stories of Jesus’ life and work, were created. If this were uncovered, it could very well lead to the historical Jesus. Did the four gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) use other texts to write their narrative accounts? If so, what were they, where did they come from, when were they written, and who wrote them?

As scholars in the nineteenth century began poring over the gospels, they wanted to know which gospel was written first (Christian tradition had decided it was Matthew, hence its place at the beginning of the New Testament). The synoptic gospels (synopsis meaning “view together”), of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are very similar in their story lines, as if two of the three were following the basic plot of the first writer. Who was following whom? Despite the bias in favor of Matthew, and with great patience, scholars concluded that Mark was first—it was simpler and sparser; this in itself said much. Moreover, as Karl Lachmann (1835) observed, Matthew and Luke agreed when they followed Mark, but differed when they did not (Matthew and Luke did not seem to know of each other). Matthew and Luke seemed to have used a separate collection of sayings—the same translation in fact from Aramaic into Greek. Christian Weiss (1838) was first to offer a solution to these observations when he theorized that Matthew and Luke had used two documents, the Gospel of Mark and a separate collection of Jesus’ sayings. Others built on Weiss’s work. Johanness Weiss (1890) called these sayings “Q” (Quelle is “source” in German). Heinrich Julius Holtzmann (1909) worked out the details of the theory that became known as the Two Document Hypothesis. This hypothesis seemed to solve the riddle of the synoptic gospels, their similarities and differences, and critical scholarship follows the theory that answers the questions. Few at the time, however, considered the hypothesis’ importance: Q was also the key to Jesus the person and his first followers.
Scholars in the late nineteenth century had been hung up on the idea that the gospels were biographies, and special attention was given to Mark’s gospel, which they felt was closest to the historical Jesus. It would take more time, too, for the Two Document Hypothesis to be accepted. Some felt the historical Jesus could emerge if aspects from more than one gospel were considered for a better overview. Albert Schweitzer, as just one example, wrote in The Quest for the Historical Jesus (1906) that the Gospel of Mark alone was inadequate. Mark’s Jesus had expected the Kingdom of God to come with the next harvest (1906:358). As a fiery, driven person, Jesus was unsure of his mission and identity. When the Kingdom did not come, Jesus decided to die, marching to Jerusalem with a death wish. The Gospel of Matthew complemented Mark’s gospel, since it gave direction to Christianity’s movement in history (1906:360). Mark and Matthew together, according to Schweitzer, could offer a glimpse of the historical Jesus.

Schweitzer and others in the search of the historical Jesus were influenced by German biblical scholarship, which has tended to see the Christian religion through the prism of Georg Wilhelm Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind (1807), of progress in history. For them, Christianity as a development culminated in the perfection of rational German (or European) Protestantism. Jesus was part of this dialectic, as the antithesis (Christ) challenging the thesis (Judaism) to propel progress or synthesis (Protestant Christianity).

Later, Karl Ludwig Schmidt, in The Framework of the Story of Jesus (1919), shocked the world of biblical scholars by claiming that the Gospel of Mark (and by inference all gospels) could not be considered a biography at all, but a collection of different pieces of earlier writing that Mark framed for his own purposes. Schmidt was so persuasive that his thesis did more than wound: It was the death knell for finding the historical Jesus in the gospels. Yet this encouraged scholars to look elsewhere for Christian origins, in “form criticism,” the examining of pre-gospel material: bits of the kerygma (or proclamation), miracle stories, and pronouncement stories (see Appendix 4). Since Q as a separate work was only a theory, few thought to look more closely at it. One early exception was Adolf von Harnack’s short book, The Sayings of Jesus (translated into English in 1908), where the sayings for the first time were presented outside the gospels. Yet, Harnack believed the sayings of Q were simply a random collection, not a complete work (Kloppenborg et al., 1990:17). Scholars would later show this to have been mistaken.

As the search for the historical Jesus and original Christianity continued (with the gospels out of the picture), scholars by mid-century had become disconcerted with what they were finding. New archeological discoveries and research in other fields called for numerous revisions. Christianity had been seen as unique, but looking at it objectively scholars could see it was derived from two cultural sources: 1) the Greek mystery cults honoring a divine figure or hero—who has died and is resurrected—with sacred meals and rituals. Saint Paul, founder of Christ communities in Asia Minor and writer of at least seven New Testament letters, is the expositor extraordinaire of this, in the way he combined Hebrew scripture with Greek mythic orientations: 2) Jewish apocalyptic teachings (end time predictions) of which the Book of Revelation, last book of the New Testament, is one example of the end-time fervor originating in Palestine between the first-century BCE and the first-century CE. Was this the origin of Christianity, then, Greek mystical orientations grafted together with Hebrew apocalypses and
sacred scriptures? Groundbreaking archeological discoveries would also tip the balance even further away from accepted mainstream views.

In 1945, an ancient collection of scrolls was found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt (the Nag Hammadi library—with the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran, Israel from 1946-56—were the two most spectacular discoveries for biblical scholars). The scrolls had been repressed as either unorthodox or as heresy; some were dated to the first-century. Among them was the Gospel of Thomas, mentioned by Origen (184-253), Jerome (347-420), and other early Church Fathers. It was in Coptic, a translation from the Greek original. For the first time scholars had a complete gospel of Jesus’ “sayings,” just as Weisse (1838) had theorized. It contained almost no biographical details of Jesus. Dated to the last quarter of the first-century, Thomas consisted of about one-third of the Q sayings, sixty-percent of those from the earliest sections (Q 1). This could only mean that the group Thomas represented had once been a part of the original Galilean community. Thomas presented a startling different vision from the Christ communities of the Eastern Mediterranean, the forerunners of today’s normative Christianity. Described as “proto-gnostic,” meaning its focus is on inner enlightenment, the Jesus of Thomas is neither crucified nor resurrected; he does not stand in opposition to Jewish religious authorities; he was non-apocalyptic, meaning he did not come to tell about end times; nor did he come to fulfill the Law of Moses. Jesus instead came offered an inner awakening to one’s true nature (Kloppenborg et al., 1990:96):

(49) Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are alone and chosen, for you will find the kingdom. For you have come from it, and you will return there again. (50) Jesus said, “If they say to you, ‘Where have you come from?’, say to them, ‘We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, establish [itself], and appeared in their image.’ If they say to you, ‘Is it you?’, say, ‘We are its children, and we are the chosen of the living Father.’ If they ask you, ‘what is the evidence of your Father in you?’, say to them, ‘It is motion and rest.’"

After the astounding Nag Hammadi discovery renewed interest in Q soared everywhere, except, unfortunately, among biblical scholars, who would continue to focus on “form criticism,” as scholarly inertia and rigidity set it.

In the nineteen-sixties, as Biblical Studies moved from Protestant denominational schools to the literature departments in American and Canadian universities, the focus turned to the development and connection of ideas and metaphors, the writer’s intentions, and the historical context of the New Testament (Mack 1994:24-26). This helped to foster a more open climate for taking a fresh look at all New Testament scholarship. Studies on the sayings of Q in the nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties began to highlight the experimental, nonconformist lifestyle Q encouraged (to sell one’s possessions, to give to everyone who asks, to give your shirt when someone asks for your coat, to not worry about food and clothing). These studies, however, tended to view the writing of Q through the prism of the New Testament’s Acts of the Apostles (the fifth book of the New Testament), the orthodox account of supernatural origins.

Social changes in nineteen-sixties also shaped the direction of New Testament studies toward what became known as the “Social-Historical Context” (Kloppenborg 2000:410-416). With the civil rights movement in the American South, student
protests around the world against America’s involvement in Vietnam, the women’s rights and minority rights movements, scholars took a deeper interest in the “social context” of this movement in Galilee. Why had Jesus’ sayings spread so rapidly? Was it because they offered a psychological center for a displaced people? Empires had controlled Galilee for about seven hundred years before Jesus of Nazareth: the Assyrian Empire (714-605 BCE); the Babylonian Empire (605-538 BCE); the Persian Empire (538-323 BCE); the Greek Empire (320-198 BCE); and the Roman Empire (from 63 BCE). Galileans were even ambivalent about the Hasmonean (Judean) Dynasty (142-63 BCE), which ruled Galilee under the banner of restoring the Davidic Kingdom. For ages Galileans had been second-class citizens in their own homeland. Yet they survived, even flourished, mainly from their insouciance regarding all political domination and their resilience in keeping a sense of humor about it all. Had Jesus of Nazareth tapped into this Galilean survival mind-set to offer new direction?

In the nineteen-eighties a few also began to ask more disconcerting questions. Was the community of Q Christian at all, according to modern definitions of Christianity? Leif Vaage (1987), in Q: The Ethos and Ethic of an Itinerant Intelligence, suggested the behavior the sayings encouraged, if taken on their own, was similar to the Cynic philosophers.

Cynics had been the gadflies in the Mediterranean world for hundreds of years. Itinerants, who lived as beggars, they pointed out society’s hypocrisies, often to large crowds in pithy witticisms. As early editorialists, political critics, and freedom of speech pioneers they were esteemed for their counter-cultural lifestyle, for they practiced what they preached: They had few possessions and no permanent place to live. The Cynic message was also positive: Everyone already has the capacity for a fulfilling life outside society’s double standards. These “philosophers” were part of the intellectual class during the Greco-Roman era, their vagabond lifestyle seen as an honorable alternative to a life of social conformity. After all, people gave liberally to support them. Were the Cynics, who turned social values upside down to proclaim a spiritual autonomy, the starting point for Jesus of Nazareth’s teachings? If indeed the movement Jesus founded in Galilee was originally modeled on a Hellenistic Cynic school of philosophy, it did have some very important differences, which I will discuss below.

3. The sayings of Q

In 1988, at the Q Seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature, John S. Kloppenborg identified three separate layers of Q, added at different times in the life of the community, from 30 to 80 CE. Q 1, the earliest, contained the wisdom teachings and radical lifestyle exhortations. Q 2, added some decades later, changed the earlier tenor. Jesus became an apocalyptic prophet sent by God, in the center of Israel’s epic. Q 3, the shortest section, written after the Roman-Jewish war (66-73 CE), suggests Jesus is a divine being. Together, the three parts of Q consist of about forty-six hundred words. I will say more about each of the Q sections below. Is Q 1 the closest we come to the historical Jesus? Yes, it comes directly from the movement Jesus of Nazareth began in Galilee, from the people who knew him. The earliest sections were written within a couple of decades of Jesus’ death, in Aramaic, Jesus’ language, perhaps used for formal readings at gatherings in people’s homes. What do these sayings tell us about Jesus and his teachings? The “message” from these sayings, in fact, has little to do with normative Christianity today, except to the ex-
tent that people actually follow the instructions, very rare indeed. More surprising is what they do not say. As the Gospel of Thomas, these sayings do not mention an atoning death or resurrection in Jerusalem; no prophecies, no claims of a messianic mission; nothing of Jesus speaking God’s very words, reforming Judaism, making the Law of Moses void or fulfilling it; the community had no need of a wine and bread sacrament, baptism as a symbol of a new life, of miracles, visiting angels or demon exorcisms whatsoever; no disciple is mentioned by name (evidence the movement was egalitarian). In fact, the sayings contain nothing that could be termed “supernatural” or “religious,” except for how to pray (the traditional Lord’s Prayer is part of Q 1). It is obvious these early followers shied away from the supernatural and did not see themselves as forming a new religion. For them, the teachings of Jesus were enough of an ethical center for their community.

a) Q 1

Q 1, consisting of around seventeen hundred words (see Appendix 1), is among the earliest material from what eventually became the Christian religion. Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians—1 Thessalonians (c. 50 CE)—may have been written a couple of years before the sayings were written down. The sayings of Jesus are precious, indeed; the institutional church from the fourth-century had little interest in keeping it alive as a separate piece of writing. The fact it was incorporated by two of the synoptic gospels writers, however, ensured it would endure, contextualized though it is. Q 1 represents about the first twenty years of the community of Q. Scholars believe the earliest section is the one that remains most famous today: the Sermon on the Mount. Q 1 tells us that Jesus was not a divine figure for the early movement. The movement saw itself as a school, with Jesus as their founder-teacher. During these early decades, as the movement grew, it created rules for proper conduct in spreading the news of the Kingdom of God (Mack 1995:50):

Love your enemies.
If struck on one cheek, offer the other.
Give to everyone who begs.
Judge not and you won’t be judged.
Sell your possessions.
First remove the stick from your own eye.
Say, “The Kingdom of God has come near to you.”
Don’t worry about your living.
Turn away from all family ties.
Make sure of God’s rule over you.

Q 1 must have been part of the community rules from Jesus’ lifetime; they centered on four obligations: 1) voluntary poverty; 2) selfless lifestyle; 3) severance from family; 4) complete loyalty. A network had arisen, as we see from the text, with fellow devotees recognizing each other through a greeting of peace and by their sparse clothing and lack of belongings (they were instructed to carry no money, bag, sandals, or staff). Cynics, I should point out, were recognized by their sandals and staff. Jesus’ message of a higher way to live had indeed caught on, with members going out in twos, as lambs among wolves, spreading this good news.

If the community of Q was more of a social than a religious movement, was it made up of Galilean Jews at all? Yes, it no doubt was. The sayings are monotheistic, with God as father. Though nothing is mentioned of Israel’s epic—except for the lilies being better clothed than Solomon had been—its approach to culture reflects a Jewish orientation: that individual well-being comes from a rightly ordered society. Since society is not rightly ordered, drastic action is called
for. The sayings bristle with insight, showing both a sympathetic sense of humanity in its daily challenges, along with a call to live more fully in the present circumstances. The community of Q did not need anything supernatural, the sayings were the great miracle.

The Kingdom of God Jesus spoke of, though suggestive and poetic, was not imaginary or unreachable; it was the social solution for the here and now, a real alternative to suffering under foreign oppressors—it is a mustard seed (something usually unwanted in a garden) that flourishes or a small bit of yeast that transforms a great amount of dough:

(Q 1:20) He said, “What is the kingdom of God like? To what should I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard which a man took and sowed in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” He also said, “The kingdom of God is like yeast which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it leavened the whole mass.”

The goal was both for individual and communal transformation through the small acts of selflessness done with complete devotion:

(Q 1:4) “I am telling you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer your other cheek as well. If anyone grabs your coat, let him have your shirt as well. Give to anyone who asks, and if someone takes away your belongings, do not ask to have them back.

The early community of Q had no immediate goal to change the larger society. Transformation must first come to the followers individually; then a new community will form. A central teaching is: “Don’t be afraid of those who can kill the body, but can’t kill the soul (Q 1:15).” The message is for saving the soul in the here and now, making it come alive with new possibilities. What wonderful things can happen by letting go, by taking no thought for your life? “Offering the other cheek” frees you, right now. Though this is the ultimate gesture of submission, is this not also a prescription for social revolution, once everyone begins to offer the other cheek?

Will the Kingdom of God come when the majority of people follow this? The Kingdom is already here, everywhere, seen in the way God cares for nature. When people respond to cruelty with goodwill, blessings, and prayers, they open the floodgates for the Kingdom to pour in and the veil of blindness preventing them from seeing the Kingdom is lifted. The sayings, to be sure, side with the poor, cursed, mistreated, those slapped on the cheek. This is why the Kingdom begins with the poor of the earth. Only the poor already have one foot in this present Kingdom, living as they do on the edge of survival. With the poor leading the way, this Kingdom will grow and grow and grow, knowing no bounds; it will even leaven the whole world.

Though Q takes social hypocrisy and double-standards much more seriously than the Greek Cynics they patterned themselves after, the sayings are also playful, with a light-hearted and ironic ring: “Let the dead bury their dead,” “Which of you can add a single day to his life by worrying?” “Aren’t you worth more than the birds?” Here is perhaps the closest we come to ancient Jewish Galilean wit, the use of clear-sighted, earthy statements to teach the folly of empty social attachments or conventions. Following through is what matters most: “Whoever
does not accept his cross [bear up under condemnation] and so become my follower, cannot be one of my students.” All of this is for community building. The Cynic philosophers, by contrast, traveled as solitary individuals, spotlighting society’s absurdities in town squares, often to roaring crowds; they had no goal to recruit followers.

What does Q 1 say about Jesus the person? Scholars tend to avoid answering this question. All we can really know of Jesus, they say, is what the movement thought of him. But this indeed says a great deal. The genius of Jesus of Nazareth was in combining the lifestyles and philosophies of two cultures, Greek and Hebrew, to create an alternate social vision. The combination would have attracted followers from both cultures. Jesus was more the poet than the architect of a comprehensive blueprint for creating the Kingdom of God—the reason scholars see at least six distinct variations in the early Jesus movements, each struggling to interpret the words of their founder (Mack 1989:43-73). The mission of architect, I should add, belonged to another Jewish genius: Saint Paul. Taken on their own, the sayings show Jesus as one of the great geniuses of the Greco-Roman period. Jesus, however, turns away from the rugged individualism of the Cynics; his vision is for a new community, one that lived in harmony with God, attended to by God the father and by nature. Q’s radical invitation was for everyone to become fellow citizens of the Kingdom of God, first by becoming poor, giving up false pretenses as you give up your possessions, in order to find your life. Where would this lead? Of course, it led to conflict, as Q 2 clearly shows.

b) Q 2

Q 2 is longer than Q 1, at about twenty-four hundred words (see Appendix 2). Carefully added to Q 1 to make it appear as a single work, Q 2 radically changes the image of Jesus. It was written before 70 CE, amid the social chaos just before or during the early part of the Roman-Jewish war. Scholars believe the second section was also written in Aramaic. Once an itinerate founder-teacher offering a dynamic alternative lifestyle, Jesus has now become a prophet, standing squarely in the tradition of Israel’s great prophets. The movement, we find, is also at the center of Israel’s epic, connected with its great founder. Q 2 does not bring a message to become fully alive in a new kingdom already present—as a mustard seed or as yeast—nor does it contain the sharp and unnerving folk wisdom of Q 1. Q 2 is a both a fighting back against criticism and a justification for the group’s existence; it offers scant comfort to its own community, now only for the stouthearted.

The community, judging from the drastic change of tone, must have faced manifold traumas in its mission: Civic leaders were calling it to account, even taking it court for breaking up families and impoverishing individuals. Religious Jews were accusing it of being too Greek, even amoral (this deeply wounded some followers). Members were leaving, finding the demands too high. While Q 1 is addressed only to community members, Q 2 speaks also to outsiders, firmly firing back at its critics. Wrath and condemnation are spewed out on cities that rejected the group, as well as toward religious figures in general (QS 22; QS 34):

Woe for you, Khorazin! Woe for you, Bethsaida! If the forceful deeds performed among you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have changed their ways long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. In the judgment Tyre and Sidon will have a lighter pun-
ishment than you. And you, Kafer Nahum (Capernaum), do you think you will be praised to high heaven? You will go to hell.

Shame on you Pharisees! For you love the front seats in the assemblies and greetings in the marketplaces. Shame on you! For you are like graves, outwardly beautiful, but full of pollution inside.

The mention of this area around Khorazin and Bethsaida, leads some scholars to believe the center of the first Jesus movement was in Kafer Nahum, on the northwestern coast of the Sea of Galilee (Kloppenborg 2000:203).

The Pharisees play a special role in Q 2, as sounding boards of that day’s Judaism. A reform movement of ordinary people (mostly Judean men), the Pharisees may have had some semi-official responsibility to collect taxes for the Jerusalem Temple in the larger cities of Galilee, in Sepphoris and Tiberias (each city with about twenty-four thousand people at the time. Kloppenborg 2000:426). It was a label loosely used. Those who simply practiced the Judaism of that day could earn the designation “Pharisee,” meaning “one who is set apart” in Hebrew. While the Q community, beginning with Jesus, had downplayed traditional Jewish practices to keep its door open to everyone, the Pharisees held high standards for Jewish piety in every day life: distinctive clothing, frequent washing, giving to those in need, refraining from work on the Sabbath with observance at home, fasting, keeping dietary laws, eating only with fellow Jews, daily prayers. The Pharisees, too, were controversial, since they tended to undermine centralized worship at the Jerusalem Temple. Yet they seem to have earned the esteem of towns-people in Galilee by 60 CE. Certainly, the people of Q took them seriously. It was only after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, with the displacement of its priesthood, that the Pharisees began to fill the void left in religious life. All the gospel writers from 75 CE retrospectively connected the Pharisees with the Jerusalem priesthood. All but the writer of Mark’s gospel treated them as villains in their narratives.

With Q 2 we see a community adopting new images and narratives for their founder, with Jesus now as both a healer and a judge. But how could this community combine two contradictory images: the sagacious founder-teacher with a prophet in Israel’s epic? Usually the wise-connected with healing—are not prophets, since prophets bring wrath and judgment. The community answered this with the introduction of John. No one knows who this John is. Flavius Josephus (37-100), Galilean historian of these times, mentions some prophet-type figures of the 60s predicting doom. John may have been one of these. All gospel writers incorporate this John of Q 2 into their narratives. But the John of Q 2 does not baptize—John the Baptist was Mark’s innovation, written perhaps ten years later. Q 2’s John connects Jesus with the one prophet in Israel’s history who was also a healer, the prophet Isaiah (Kloppenborg 2000:381, 397). Jesus, then, is bringing the restoration Isaiah spoke of in Isaiah 35:5 (QS 16):

John heard about this (the healing of the centurion’s son) and sent his disciples to ask, “Are you the one to come, or should we look for another?” Jesus said, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed [healed and therefore made ‘clean’], the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are given news.
The Holy Spirit is mentioned for the first time in Q 2; demons are now exorcised, with people healed—yet the tone is far from healing. Even with the elaboration of Jesus’ healing and restorative mission, Q 2 represents a sad descent in the life of this community with Jesus as prophet. Most disheartening are its changes in tone regarding the Kingdom of God and its own members. When movements are unable to realize their goals, they become apocalyptic (futuristic), whether they are secular or religious; realization of the vision is postponed and the present is filled with harsh dogmas, demanding ever higher thresholds for behavior in order to realize future goals. In Q 2, commitment to the community is now the benchmark for one’s commitment to Jesus. Dark pronouncements are made toward followers: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and the one who does not gather with me scatters” (QS 29). The expression, “son of man,” used self-referentially by Jesus in Q 1, is an Aramaic idiomatic expression for “human.” Now “the son of man” is a menacing, vindictive figure, like in Daniel 7:13-14, able and willing to cast a verdict at the Final Judgment. Now Jesus has a pre-existence, with a destiny to judge all humankind. Q 2 offers no space for dialogue or accommodation, but deflects criticism by raising the bar even higher for its embattled followers (QS 43; QS 37):

Every one who admits in public that they know me, the son of man will acknowledge before the angels of God [heavenly court]. But the one who disowns me in public, the son of man will disown before the angels of God.

Some encouragement is given to its beleaguered followers, for no doubt they are in need of it (QS 25):

How fortunate are the eyes that see what you see! For I’m telling you that many prophets and kings longed to see what you see and did not see it, and to hear what you hear and did not hear it.

All gospel writers incorporated Q 2’s harsh and uncompromising tone. For the writer of Mark’s gospel, the New Testament’s third Jewish genius, Q 2 fit perfectly with his community’s own experience of suffering bitter disappointment in its mission, the great trauma of the Roman/Jewish War, and the sense of abandonment left in its wake. Mark, probably composing in southern Syria around 75 CE, showed this trauma as Jesus’ essential characteristic: the suffering and rejected prophet, the noble martyr, abandoned even by God. Mark did not use very much of Q 1 and had a different translation of Q from the writers of Matthew and Luke’s gospels (or Mark may have translated directly from the Aramaic original). There is no resurrection in Mark’s original version (this was added later). Jesus’ tomb is empty and his gospel ends with the women running away from it because “they were so afraid.”

c) Q 3

Q 3 was added after the Roman-Jewish war (Kloppenborg 2000:213-214). Jerusalem now lay in
ruins; Jews scattered, with those remaining in Palestine traumatized. The Temple, the central civil and religious institution—center of Jewish life for one thousand years—had been destroyed. Somehow the movement endured; it knew of other movements as well, ones that saw Jesus as more of a divine figure. Made up of about four hundred words, the earlier harsh tone is softened, perhaps as the need for accommodation set in. Members may have been embarrassed over the earlier harshness (Q 1 had instructed everyone not to judge, lest they be judged, but Q 2 does nothing but pour out judgment and condemnation). Q 3 was carefully placed here and there throughout the manuscript in this second grafting of the original seven clusters of sayings.

As with the two previous sections of Q, all gospel authors used Q 3, made up mainly of Jesus’ temptation by Satan—Mark’s gospel opens with John (Q 2), followed by Satan’s temptation of Jesus (Q 3). We also find the first, rather oblique, reference to Jesus’ divinity. Jesus has become the Son, with all-authority, who alone knows the Father and who alone is able to impart knowledge of him (QS 24):

Authority over all the world has been given to me by my father. No one recognizes the son except the father; and no one knows who the father is except the son and one to whom the son chooses to reveal him.

In Q 1, Jesus had said all the poor could enter the Kingdom of God, with all potentially God’s children (sons and daughters), since all are potentially poor after they forsake their possessions. Now, Jesus alone is a Son; he alone knows the father and imparts this knowledge to his chosen ones. More telling, Q 3 contains Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem, reflecting the pathos of all who lived through its destruction (QS 49):

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem.... Look, your house is left desolate. Now, I tell you, you will not see me until you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

A final addition is directed to the community, a promised reward for those who endure, placed at the very end of the text (QS 62):

And you who have followed me will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

4. Determining the three layers of Q

The divisions of Q 1, Q 2, and Q 3 are the result of painstaking analyses of scholars over the years. Disagreements remain, but most tend to accept the general divisions I have outlined. Remember, scholars had the double chore of first extracting the Q material from the synoptic gospels before they could reconstruct Q as it appeared at each of the three stages. It was a monumental task. Generally, there are three ways to determine whether a manuscript is a patchwork (Kloppenborg 2000:114-128):

1) Tone—Q 1 has certain characteristics that make it distinctive. The tone is innovative, risky, free-spirited, and even humorous; none of the sayings condemns anyone. Q 2 is harsher. Here we find curses on the children of Abraham (perhaps revealing the group’s bitter rejection by neighboring Jews), calling judgment down on the cities that rejected Jesus’ followers. The Pharisees are mentioned for the first time, with a prophetic person, John, and the Final Judgment. With Q 2’s wrath and curses, Jesus now has a spe-
cial divine mission. Q 3 is more accommodat-
ing and scholars agree it was added after the
Roman-Jewish war. The distinctive tone of
each tells a great deal about the times and
the attitudes the group held toward those
times, over the community’s life of about fifty
years.

2) Seams—when pieces of information are
added later to a text, certain words or ex-
pressions are also added to smooth the con-
nection, such simple expressions such as “he
said” or “furthermore.” As Matthew and
Luke incorporated Q, they required “seams”
to introduce it. Since each took Q in large
blocks, the Q material also differs from each
gospel writer’s own style. While much of this
may seem subjective, scholars have high
standards for detail, findings are tested again
and again, corroborated among many groups
—conclusions must be replicated independ-
ently, using the same standards.

3) Language—idiomatic expressions change
over time. This is more evident over a longer
period of time, say, one hundred years. Still, a
great deal of the vocabulary in fashion dur-
ing the nineteen-sixties is no longer used. If
someone were to leap from the nineteen-
sixties to our time, he or she would not un-
derstand our idioms, especially those related
to technology. Granted, first-century Pale-
tine did not change as much as it has with to-
day’s technological revolution, yet some
changes had occurred, especially with cer-
tain key expressions, in the thirty years or so
between Q 1 and Q 3. One example men-
tioned above is the change in meaning of “son
of man,” from human being (Q 1) to a judge of
humankind (Q 2).

Most importantly, Q 1 stands on its own as a co-
herent piece of literature, in seven clusters, each
cluster expounding a single idea, with its own in-
ternal logic, in the Greek fashion. By contrast,
without Q 1 (see Appendix 1), Q 2 and Q 3 have
no context.

5. Attribution and oral traditions in an-
cient times

When people today hear that words were
added to Jesus’ own words long after he died,
they wince. How could someone dare write in the
name of another? But considering the material of
the first-century CE through today’s copyright
laws prevents us from understanding Christian
origins (indeed philosophical schools of the Greco-
Roman period). Writing in the name of another,
especially of a founder-teacher, was a common
practice in ancient times, part of a school imagi-
natively adapting to changing times. As the Q
community faced some of the most challenging
times in human history, they asked themselves:
“If Jesus were alive, what would he say?” Deeper
conflict with Rome had arisen, with the region
preparing for war. Rejected and scorned both for
their extreme anti-materialism and for minimiz-
ing family relationships, how should they re-
spond, since Jesus had addressed none of these
challenges?

Movements today continue this on some level.
If Greenpeace members are asked who their
leader or founder is, they may reply it is Gandhi
or Martin Luther King, Jr., neither of whom ever
protested against nuclear waste dumping in Ne-
veda, logging in the American northwest, oil drill-
ing in the Amazon or North Pole, or whaling in
the South Pacific. They are applying Gandhi or
Martin Luther King, Jr.’s non-violent approach to
new and evolving situations. With a stretch of the imagination, we can see the connection between adopting a new approach to challenges from a distant founder or inspirational person. Furthermore, attribution in ancient times was also a way to “classify” certain sayings or stories that had been handed down, associating them with certain schools of thought (Mark 1993:194). I should add that scholars see Q 1 as the authentic words of Jesus, while they see Q 2 and Q 3 as inauthentic. This does not mean the community saw the Q 2 and Q 3 sayings as any less important than the Q 1 sayings. For the community, Q 2 and Q 3 created necessary applications for the challenges they were facing. Since the community did not see Jesus’ words as the very words of God, they felt it necessary to adumbrate them, for community survival.

Another challenge for us today is to understand life in an oral culture. Galilee during Jesus’ time had elements of both an oral and literate tradition, but its levels of literacy are difficult to determine. It may have been between ten and fifteen percent (Kloppenborg 2000:166), the literate mostly from the upper classes. But the degrees of literacy also varied, from those who could just sign their names to those who could compose fluently. Further, a piece of writing in ancient times was more like a musical composition. It was to be performed by a trained professional, as Kenneth Quinn (quoted in Kloppenborg 2000:168) wrote:

[T]he written text played very much the same role which the printed score of a musical composition plays today. It recorded the final text as passed for publication by the author. But you acquired a copy with the intention of having it performed for you by a professional reader or as a record of a performance which you had heard by the author. It was not in itself a substitute for performance (1982:90).

Jesus had conducted himself as any other teacher in an oral culture. He traveled by foot, attracted followers, and made pronouncements that were easy to remember—proverbs, parables, short lessons regarding daily life: people working, cooking, farming, celebrating, traveling, going to the market. In societies mixed with oral and literate traditions, where basic writing materials—papyrus and parchment—were expensive and rare, memorable statements were passed on orally in ways that were easy to remember. Only after Jesus passed from the scene did his followers pool their collective memory to write down what they felt was most important. What we have in Q 1, therefore, is the work of a scribe who finally wrote these important sayings down (Peters 2007:85-86). Again, these first followers remembered Jesus as a founder of a school of philosophy (“philosophy” meaning a new way to live). Later, as the group faced other challenges, their vision of Jesus shifted as well. Older members may have remembered other things Jesus had said, now thirty to forty years earlier. It is more likely the group added to the first collection of sayings to articulate new meaning as it faced fresh challenges.

Again, the question we are left with: How could Jesus’ followers accept such vastly contrasting views of their founder, from Q 1 to Q 2? The outcome we read in Q 2 is perhaps the result of decades of debate and compromise among group members. The change of tone must have been gradual, as their image of Jesus shifted (Mack 1993:149-152). This shift caused deep divisions. Some, like those associated with the Gospel of Thomas, angrily left; they had no interest in placing Jesus in Israel’s epic, as a prophet, and did
not see Jesus as bringing a sword. Jesus for the Thomas group had brought a spiritual awakening.

How the group “saw” Jesus and what Jesus meant in their present circumstances was most important for determining what sayings the group could add. If they remembered Jesus as a wise, unconventional, dynamic teacher, then sayings in harmony with that image might be added. If during a time of crisis the image of Jesus became more judgmental and argumentative—as certainly happened—sayings that fit this image might be added (all additions, I should add, were done with great care). Abraham Lincoln’s image changes constantly, indeed with each generation. As a founder of modern America, both conservatives and liberals in America claim Lincoln as their own, to apply certain of his statements to support their political philosophies. In reality, Lincoln was neither conservative nor liberal by today’s definitions. Images of important historical figures change. Sometimes the change is based on new facts about the person; often, though, a change in image is from a group’s (or country’s) own particular needs. Q was adapting Jesus’ image for their crises in a somewhat similar fashion (Mack 1989:59-60).

With the movement that created the complete work of Q, however, the personality of Jesus and the facts surrounding his life were not as important as his ethical teachings and his lifestyle injunctions. I should also stress that the movement was not communicating with Jesus in some mystical way to determine the changes. There were no séance-like experiences, no visions received in dreams or otherwise from Jesus, and, indeed, no otherworldly experiences at all. The community was following normal precedents in the Greco-Roman era for philosophical schools. The original community of Q was mainstream in this respect, according to the standards of the time. Above all, they were rational, though idealistic to be sure, in their attempts to live a higher life.

6. Social psychology and group myths

Considering the community of Q, as all movements, religious or otherwise, is ultimately a study in group dynamics, the urge to see oneself as important in the sweep of time, paving the way to new historic heights, in God’s very plan for salvation. Members also require a high sense of purpose to press on against odds—a justification for the things they have endured, that none of it is in vain. As Nietzsche said: “He (or she) who has a ‘why’ to live can bear almost any ‘how.’” It is a deeply human need to feel connected to something greater than oneself. After all, we are all “tribal” at heart (Freud 1921:67-141). Religious groups today show this tendency. All may indeed serve an eternal purpose as they claim, whether it is today’s Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or any other religious fellowship. It is also human to believe only one’s own group is the keeper of the covenant, the true community of faith, the only group favored by God.

The community of Q shows this tendency too, not so much in its dynamic and openhearted beginning but after the initial enthusiasm faded and the harsh reality of living life against the grain set in. Q 2 completely revised Q 1, for it placed the early wisdom teachings and invitations for a new way of life in the context of Jesus as apocalyptic prophet. “Apocalyptic” means to predict an ending, to reveal ultimate destiny. The community later required this of their founder, a prophet in Israel’s epic, with some transcendental qualities to participate in the Final Judgment at the end of time. They wanted their movement to be seen as “Jewish” in the center of Israel’s epic, not as another “Greek” school. In Q 3, the community
had made the leap, some fifty years after Jesus faded from the scene, of affirming Jesus’ divinity. This was tentative, however, not at all a direct declaration. All of this we associate with group-egoism, for the group to appear in a certain light to the public.

Q also shows a people with a fragile identity, for their sense of belonging came more from group association—with teachers, schools, movements—than with a larger sense of the Jewish people as a nation, a nation that was disintegrating around them by 60 CE (and, as mentioned above, Galilean Jews maintained a more independent stance as part of their culture). It is also a study of the myth-making imagination, of placing one’s group at the heart of an eternal moment in which they were the center. Some may ask: Was not the Q community part of human destiny, in view of the extraordinary triumph of Christianity? Yes, but they wanted the Kingdom of God as they had envisioned it: a universal transformation to a higher way to live, a world without political domination by anyone.

What happened to the original sayings? If they are indeed the very words of the Second Person of the Trinity, written in Aramaic—Jesus’ own language—how could the early church have been so careless with them? There are perhaps two main possibilities. The first is that for Christians from the second-century, the life of Jesus—his birth, death, resurrection—became more important than what he had spoken (the opposite of how the Q community saw Jesus). And since the gospels had incorporated the sayings (the Gospel of Luke has almost all of them, close to the original order); a separate book was no longer necessary. They were then lost to history, perhaps from disuse. The second is more sobering: Q was destroyed. As the Gospel of Thomas, the sayings contradicted the myths already in place by the late second-century, both of Jesus’ identity and church origins, from Acts of the Apostles. The early church needed the sayings to remain only in the gospels, as Jesus’ divine utterances, since the sayings standing alone told too much about the real Jesus and the real origins. Hence, the great irony: The very words accepted by Christians as from God, the incarnate Son, written down by those who knew him, were discarded for the good of Christianity.

7. Conclusion

The breakthroughs in understanding the origins of Christianity I discussed above have only come about since the early nineteen-nineties. The more open intellectual climate, the fantastic archeological discoveries at Nag Hammadi and Qumran, greater communication among scholars world-wide—as well as excavations in Galilee and elsewhere in Palestine—have given a multi-dimensional portrait of Jesus’ time and culture. All this has given some clues about why the message resonated among Galilean Jews and spread so rapidly in that fertile climate, since those were oppressive times indeed for the indigenous peoples of Palestine. We come away with a sense of the tremendous devotion and energy—intellectual and spiritual—that the West has invested over the millennium in what it considers sacred—its founder and his teachings. The sayings of Jesus of Nazareth are one of the great moral and spiritual achievements in history, deeply woven into the fabric of Western Civilization.
References

Appendix 1
The Original Book of Q 1

(1) (These are the teachings of Jesus.)
(2) (Seeing the crowds, he said to his disciples.)
(3) "How fortunate are the poor: they have God’s kingdom.
    How fortunate the hungry: they will be fed.
    How fortunate are those who are crying: they will laugh.’’
(4) "I am telling you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.
    If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer your other cheek as well. If anyone grabs your coat, let him have your shirt as well.
    Give to anyone who asks, and if someone takes away your belongings, do not ask to have them back.
    As you want people to treat you, do the same to them.
    If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even wrongdoers lend to their kind because they expect to be repaid.
    Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend without expecting anything in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of God.
    For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good; he sends rain on the just and on the unjust.’’
(5) "Be merciful even as your Father is merciful.
    Don’t judge and you won’t be judged.
    For the standard you use [for judging] will be the standard used against you.’’
(6) "Can the blind lead the blind? Won’t they both fall into a pit?
    A student is not better than his teacher. It is enough for a student to be like his teacher.”
(7) "How can you look for the splinter in your brother’s eye and not notice the stick in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the splinter in your eye, when you do not see the stick in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the stick from your own eye, and then you can see to remove the splinter that is in your brother’s eye.”
(8) "A good tree does not bear rotten fruit: a rotten tree
does not bear good fruit. Are figs gathered from thorns, or grapes from thistles? Every tree is known by its fruit.
The good man produces good things from his store of goods and treasures; and the evil man evil things.
For the mouth speaks from a full heart.”
(9) “Why do you call me, ‘Master, master,’ and not do what I say?
Everyone who hears my words and does them is like a man who built a house on rock. The rain fell,
a torrent broke against the house, and it did not fall, for it had a rock foundation.
But everyone who hears my words and does not do them is like a man who built a house on sand.
The rain came, the torrent broke against it, and it collapsed. The ruin of that house was great.”
(10) “When someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go,” Jesus answered, “Foxes have dens,
and birds of the sky have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.”
When another said, “Let me first go and bury my father,” Jesus said, “Leave the dead to bury their dead.”
(11) Yet another said, “I will follow you, sir, but first let me say goodbye to my family.” Jesus said to him,
“No one who puts his hand to the plow and then looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”
(12) He said, “The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few; beg therefore the master of the harvest to
send out workers into his harvest.
Go. Look, I send you out as lambs among wolves.
Do not carry money, or bag, or sandals, or staff;
and do not greet anyone on the road.
Whatever house you enter, say, ‘Peace be to this house!’ And if a child of peace is there, your greeting
will be received [literally, “your peace will rest upon him”]. But if not, let your peace return to you.
And stay in the same house, eating and drinking
whatever they provide, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not go from house to house.
And if you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. Pay attention to the sick
and say to them, ‘God’s kingdom has come near to you.’
But if you enter a town and they do not receive you, as you leave, shake the dust from your feet and say, ‘Nevertheless, be sure of this, the realm of God has come to you.”
(13) “When you pray, say, ‘father, may your name be holy.
May your rule take place.
Give us each day our daily bread.
Pardon our debts, for we ourselves pardon everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to trial [into a trying situation].’ ”
(14) “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.
For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks the door will be opened.
What father of yours, if his son asks for a loaf of bread, will give him a stone, or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?
Therefore, if you, although you are not good, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the father above give good things to those who ask him”
(15) “Nothing is hidden that will not be made known, or secret that will not come to light.
What I tell you in the dark, speak in the light. And what you hear as a whisper, proclaim on the house-tops.”
Don’t be afraid of those who can kill the body, but can’t kill the soul.
Can’t you buy five sparrows for two cents? Not one of them will fall to the ground without God knowing about it. Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.”
(16) Someone from the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Sir, who make me your judge or lawyer?”
(17) He told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced in abundance, and he thought to
himself, ‘What should I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this. I will
pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods stored up for many years. Take it easy. Eat, drink, and be merry. But God said to him, ‘Foolish man! This very night you will have to give back your soul, and the things you produced, whose will they be?’ This is what happens to the one who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich in the sight of God.”

(18) “I am telling you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. Isn’t life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Think of the ravens. They do not plant, harvest, or store grain in barns, and God feeds them.

Aren’t you worth more than the birds? Which one of you can add a single day to your life by worrying?

And why do you worry about clothing? Think of the way lilies grow. They do not work or spin.

But even Solomon in all his splendor was not as magnificent. If God puts beautiful clothes on the grass that is in the field today and tomorrow is thrown into a furnace, won’t he put clothes on you, faint hearts?

So don’t worry, thinking, ‘What will we eat,’ or ‘What will we drink,’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For everybody in the whole world does that, and your father knows that you need these things.

Instead, make sure of his rule over you, and all these things will be yours as well.”

(19) “Sell your possessions and give to charity [alms]. Store up treasure for yourselves in a heavenly account, where moths and rust do not consume, and where thieves cannot break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there you heart will also be.”

(20) He said, “What is the kingdom of God like? To what should I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard which a man took and sowed in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”

He also said, “The kingdom of God is like yeast which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it leavened the whole mass.”

(21) “Everyone who glorifies himself will be humiliated, and the one who humbles himself will be praised.”

(22) “Whoever does not hate his father and mother will not be able to learn from me. Whoever does not hate his son and daughter cannot belong to my school.

Whoever does not accept his cross [bear up under condemnation] and so become my follower, cannot be one of my students.

Whoever tries to protect his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life on account of me will preserve it.”

(23) “Salt is good: but if salt loses its taste, how can it be restored? It is not good for either the land or the manure pile. People just throw it out.”
**Appendix 2:** The Contexts of Q, from the Gospel of Luke (Mack 1995:312)

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<td>QS 1</td>
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<td>3:1-6</td>
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<td>QS 2</td>
<td>3:7-9</td>
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<td>12:3-35</td>
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<td>QS 3</td>
<td>4:1-17</td>
<td>QS 4</td>
<td>11:39-52</td>
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<td>QS 4</td>
<td>4:1-13</td>
<td>QS 5</td>
<td>12:2-3</td>
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<td>QS 5</td>
<td>6:20</td>
<td>QS 6</td>
<td>12:4-7</td>
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<td>QS 6</td>
<td>6:20-23</td>
<td>QS 7</td>
<td>12:8-12</td>
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<td>QS 7</td>
<td>6:27-35</td>
<td>QS 8</td>
<td>12:13-21</td>
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<td>QS 8</td>
<td>6:36-38</td>
<td>QS 9</td>
<td>12:22-31</td>
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<td>QS 9</td>
<td>6:39-40</td>
<td>QS 10</td>
<td>12:33-34</td>
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<td>QS 11</td>
<td>7:1-10</td>
<td>QS 12</td>
<td>12:42-46</td>
</tr>
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<td>QS 12</td>
<td>7:18-23</td>
<td>QS 13</td>
<td>12:49-53</td>
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<td>QS 13</td>
<td>7:24-28</td>
<td>QS 14</td>
<td>12:54-56</td>
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<td>QS 14</td>
<td>7:31-35</td>
<td>QS 15</td>
<td>12:57-59</td>
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<td>QS 15</td>
<td>9:57-62</td>
<td>QS 16</td>
<td>13:18-21</td>
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<td>QS 16</td>
<td>10:1-11</td>
<td>QS 17</td>
<td>13:24-27</td>
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<td>QS 17</td>
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<td>QS 18</td>
<td>13:28-30</td>
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<td>QS 20</td>
<td>14:11-18:14</td>
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<td>10:21-22</td>
<td>QS 21</td>
<td>14:16-24</td>
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<td>QS 22</td>
<td>11:1-4</td>
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<td>14:34-35</td>
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<td>QS 23</td>
<td>11:9-13</td>
<td>QS 24</td>
<td>15:4-10</td>
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<td>QS 24</td>
<td>11:14-23</td>
<td>QS 25</td>
<td>16:13</td>
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<td>QS 25</td>
<td>11:23</td>
<td>QS 26</td>
<td>16:16-18</td>
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<td>QS 26</td>
<td>11:24-26</td>
<td>QS 27</td>
<td>17:1-2</td>
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<td>11:27-28</td>
<td>QS 28</td>
<td>17:3-4</td>
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<td>QS 28</td>
<td>11:27-28</td>
<td>QS 29</td>
<td>17:6</td>
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<td>QS 30</td>
<td>17:23-37</td>
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<td>QS 30</td>
<td>11:27-28</td>
<td>QS 31</td>
<td>19:11-27</td>
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Appendix 3: Outline of Contents of Q

Burton Mack (Mack 1995: 313) shows how Q 2 shapes and changes Q 1. This outline also shows the contrasts of the Q 1 sayings, with the Q 2 judgments toward the outside world, and what it meant for the Q community to have this new image and the new responsibilities.

Q 1: The original instructions to the community
Q 2 a: The judgments toward the present generation
Q 2 b: The teachings to the community, in context of these judgments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q 1</th>
<th>Q 2 a</th>
<th>Q 2 b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>John’s Preaching</td>
<td>(QS 1–2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus’ Teaching</td>
<td>What John and Jesus thought</td>
<td>(QS 3–5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructions for the Movement</td>
<td>Pronouncements Against Towns</td>
<td>(QS 7–14)</td>
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<td>Congratulations to Persons</td>
<td>(QS 15–18)</td>
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<td>Confidence in the Father’s Care</td>
<td>Controversies with This Generation</td>
<td>(QS 19–20)</td>
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<td>Caution on Taking Sides</td>
<td>(QS 21–22)</td>
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<td>Judgment on This Generation</td>
<td>(QS 23, 25)</td>
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<td>True Enlightenment</td>
<td>(QS 26–27)</td>
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<td>On Anxiety and Speaking Out</td>
<td>Pronouncements Against Pharisees</td>
<td>(QS 28)</td>
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<td>On Public Confessions</td>
<td>(QS 29–30)</td>
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<td>On Personal Goods</td>
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<td>(QS 31)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Coming Judgment</td>
<td>(QS 32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parables of the Kingdom</td>
<td></td>
<td>(QS 33)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Two Ways</td>
<td>(QS 34)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The True Followers of Jesus</td>
<td></td>
<td>(QS 35–36)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Rules</td>
<td>(QS 37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Final Judgment</td>
<td>(QS 38–40)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Greece/Asia</td>
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