

# More About Q and the Gospel of Thomas

An accidental discovery in Egypt seems to confirm the existence of the 'lost' gospel of Q.

by Marilyn Mellowes

Q is the designation for a gospel that no longer exists, but many think must have existed at one time. In fact, even though no copy of this gospel has survived independently, some nineteenth-century scholars found fragments of such an early Christian composition embedded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

By putting these two gospels beside that of Mark, scholars realized that when Matthew and Luke are telling the story about Jesus, for the most part they both follow the order and often even the wording of Mark. But, into this common narrative outline, Matthew and Luke each insert extra sayings and teachings of Jesus. And although Matthew and Luke do not put these sayings in the same order, nevertheless they each repeat many of the same sayings, sometimes word for word.

Since for other reasons it seems unlikely that either Matthew or Luke could have copied from the other, how can this sort of agreement be explained? The answer appears to be that Matthew and Luke each had two sources in common: the Gospel of Mark and another gospel, now lost, a collection of sayings known only as Q.

Q stands for "Quelle," the German word for source. Although no actual copy of Q has ever been found, many scholars are convinced that such a document once circulated in early Christian communities. Since it was difficult to get excited about something that did not exist, Q remained a hypothesis that lingered on the edges of scholarly research. But in 1945, a chance discovery in Egypt provided surprisingly new evidence that rekindled interest in the possible existence of Q.

Two brothers were looking for fertilizer at the base of cliffs in the Egyptian region of Nag Hammadi, where the Nile bends on its way from Chenoboskeia to Pabau. As they searched, the brother called Mohammad Ali hit a hard object, concealed under the ground. It proved to be a huge earthen jar, closed with a shallow red dish. At first Mohammad Ali was afraid to open the jar, lest a jinn might be closed up inside it. But finally he summoned the courage to break it, hoping that it might contain gold. Out tumbled, not gold, but twelve books bound in gazelle leather.

These books would prove one of the most important archaeological finds of the twentieth century. And one of the reasons for their importance is the valuable evidence they provide for the existence of the sayings collection known as Q.

These manuscripts, now known as the Nag Hammadi Library, contained a complete manuscript of the Gospel of Thomas. A fragment of this gospel, written in Greek, had been found earlier at Oxyrynchos in Egypt. But it was only a fragment. The text found at Nag Hammadi, although complete, was written in Coptic, which was the form of the Egyptian language in use during later Roman imperial times.

On the basis of this text, however, scholars were able to reconstruct the Gospel of Thomas in Greek, the original language of its composition. By this means, they were able to compare its contents with those of writings found in the New Testament.

The Gospel of Thomas is very different from the gospels that have become part of the New Testament. It contains no narrative material, nor is there any story of the birth, the life, or the death of Jesus. It consists only of sayings, 114 in all, each preceded by the phrase, "And Jesus said." The

collected sayings of the Gospel of Thomas are designated by its author as "the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke."

Some of the sayings from the Gospel of Thomas are very much like those found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, for example: "Jesus said, 'Come to me, for my yoke is easy and my mastery is gentle, and you will find repose.'" (#90) But others are puzzling: "Jesus said, 'Become passers by.'" (#42).

According to this author, salvation is achieved in the recognition of one's origin (the light) and one's destiny (the repose). And in order to return to his or her origin, the disciple must separate from the world by "stripping off" the garment of flesh and "passing by" corruptible human existence.

For New Testament scholars, one of the most interesting things about this gospel is that its author (who calls himself Didymos Judas Thomas) appears to have used sayings from the same collection used by Matthew and Luke. But for this author and his community, the meaning of these sayings was clearly very different. The Gospel of Thomas, therefore, provided exciting new evidence for the existence of an earlier collection of sayings used by a variety of Christian communities.

In 1989, a team of researchers led by James M. Robinson of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity in Claremont, CA, began a most unlikely task: the "reconstruction" of the Gospel of Q. Robinson and his team are accomplishing this by a highly detailed literary analysis of Matthew, Luke, and Thomas. Their painstaking work goes "verse by verse, word by word, case ending by case ending." After nearly ten years of work, the results of their efforts are soon to be published as the Critical Edition of Q.

The "recovery" of the Q gospel has stimulated a debate about the nature early Christian communities, and by extension, the origins of Christianity itself. One scholar, Burton Mack, has advanced a radical thesis: that at least some Christian communities did not see Jesus as a Messiah; they saw him as a teacher of wisdom, a man who tried to teach others how to live. For them, Jesus was not divine, but fully human. These first followers of Jesus differed from other Christians whose ritual and practice was centered on the death and the resurrection of Jesus. They did not emerge as the "winners" of history; perhaps because the maintaining the faith required the existence of a story that included not only the life of Jesus but also his Passion.