

Thoughts on Reading:

The Lost Gospel, The Book of Q & Christian Origins

Burton L. Mack (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993)

This book looks at the sayings of Jesus found in both Mark and Luke's gospels and suggests that the "sayings" material on which these sayings were based existed as a collection that grew over time. Mack suggests there are three layers. One is from the actual teachings of Jesus, who sounded like a Greek Cynic in many respects. The second layer expands those sayings to fit the needs of a community that is being defined and formed. The third layer begins to weave the myths that later grew into the Christianity we know, especially from Mark's and Luke's gospels in the New Testament.

I found the descriptions of Galilee very interesting. It was a place where Greek influences were at least as strong as, if not stronger than, Jewish influences. Hence the formative layer of sayings being comparable to some Greek sage's sayings (especially those of the Cynic variety of opinion, which has naught to do with the modern use of the word cynic). The middle layer adds in detail that befits a growing community, and the last layer adds in what would have been expected by the Jews: prophecy and end-of-time materials as well as a reference to the "son-of-man" (which literally means 'child of humans') from Daniel's apocalyptic vision of a man coming from heaven at the end of time.

Clearly, Mack believes only the first layer of sayings is attributable to Jesus. The myth-spinning came after his death.

I found the descriptions of life at this time, in transition from millennia as temple-centered nation states into small kingdoms run by people who were typically not nice, an interesting backdrop to the original layer of Jesus' sayings. The Cynics, as well as Jesus, were teaching people to think for themselves and take control of their own lives since the state was no longer the overseer and benevolent dictator. Now avaricious and violent kings and their appointees were in charge. You are on your own, so here is how to live so as to please God and be part of God's kingdom (it now resides in you rather than in the temple-centered state). A community of persons who were independent and took care of each other was the good news of the earliest layer of the book of the sayings of Jesus, labeled Q by scholars.

I found the book fascinating in some respects, particularly in filling in the details about how daily life was experienced and the great social upheavals and changes that were being experienced. I found the book rather boring in some places where the discussion of a given topic went on too long.

I found the primary arguments about the structure of Q to be a bit of a stretch, at some points. I read the explanations and understand there is evidence of "seaming" I may have missed. The change of tone between Q1 and Q2 I could see, especially after reading the explanations. Well, except in some cases there did not seem to me to be so much of a change in content or tone or world view to represent an addition after Jesus' death.

The change of tone between Q2 and Q3 was a lot more clear in the explanation offered than in the text of Q itself, to me.

But all in all I have to give Mack his due. What he says fits with what others whom I have read have said, and adds in clarifications that make it seem sensible. Mack is adamant that the ordering of books of the New testament, and the rearrangement of the books of the Old Testament to end in Malachi, are a well-designed attempt to create a flow and harmony that never was. He is also adamant that the gospels tell a story that never was, using Q as a source to cement together ideas from other traditions of religious and philosophical thought until a new religion was born.

Mack says there are at least five different early Jesus movements, each producing literary traditions, and that two (the Jewish-Christian and Gnostic) were melded into one by the time of the evolution of the New Testament. The glue that binds the two are the sayings of Q. Mack suggests that Paul's writings were used to inspire Mark, which in turn inspired Matthew (from a Jewish-Christian perspective) and Luke-Acts (representing the more centrist, multi-cultural perspective). John added a Gnostic touch. The whole idea of *kerygma* was Paul's vision, leading quite naturally to the incorporation of this idea of the sacrifice of God's Son into the gospels, an idea very foreign to Q1 and Q2, even though they partook of the "son of man" wording of, and thus already allowed the idea of, a fulfillment of Malachi.

An important point in this book is the idea that the Christian religion was born by taking existing religious thought and philosophy and wrapping it around a person to create a super-human being who became the fulfillment of all. I am embarrassed to admit that almost every page in this book is

dog-eared, so the dog-ears, which are usually my reminders to cite something from that page, are quite useless.

I did make a double dog-ear on page 257, however, because on that page Mack concludes that what the early Christians did was the same thing done in all times and places: mythmaking to make sense of daily experience and what was known. He suggests the Q communities did this, so did the Jewish-Christians, so did the Pauline churches, the state-church that came after, the Reformers, and it continues to this day.

I might add to his list my former religion, Mormon, which apparently, now it seems, took from the Bible and history and concocted a new set of myths that "redefined" "Christianity" and resulted in a "rethinking that changed the picture, not only of the Christ, but also of the church and its world. It has not been different for any other people." Indeed.

Does Mack offer any solace to Christians whose beliefs he has just shattered? No, instead he points to the opportunity to address the abuse of ecclesiastical power and the unique standing of the Christian myth which it has been taboo to question heretofore. He suggests this opens cross-religious dialogue much wider than heretofore. He suggests it opens the door of experience for Christians who have been sheltering themselves by interpreting their world from a rather limited point of view.

He also acknowledges that scholarship usually does not make a dent in religious feeling and fervor among the masses of a religion's believers. In other words, churches did not come unglued after this book was released, but we all know that the laity in the Catholic church has been bold in calling sex-offenders among their clergy to account, something not seen

before. Surely this book has naught to do with that except as another weight on the scales that says it is OK to question religious authority.

I wish I had read this book last year when I was probing Christian origins. What does this book give me in terms of my current quest? It contributes more insight than I had, heretofore, in the universal tendencies of people, especially people in situations of social upheavals, to create myths that answer their needs. Given that understanding, I can have more sympathy for the organizations that have grown from, and continue to engage in, such mythmaking. It is human nature at work. And human nature at its deepest core is divine nature. There, now I am engaging in mythmaking to help me cope! And I am coping, obviously, thank you for asking.