

RBL 07/31/2000

Meadors, Edward P.
Jesus the Messianic Herald of Salvation

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/72

Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1995. Pp. xii + 387, Paperback, DM 118,00, ISBN
3161462513.

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The past fifteen years have seen a most remarkable renaissance in interest in the Q hypothesis, not only in American scholarship, where James M. Robinson's SBL Q Seminar has now made it impossible to dismiss Q as a "mere hypothesis," but among European and Asian scholars as well. Most of this work, undertaken by persons trained in the classical disciplines of form and redaction criticism, presupposes that the texts of earliest Christianity are first and foremost witnesses to the theological activity of the authors who produced them, and by extension, the communities within which they were produced. Thus, Q research, as with other areas of Gospels research, has been busy pressing forward on the question of the community behind Q and its distinctive understanding of the significance of Jesus. The state of the question may be summarized roughly as follows: Q represents a branch of early Christianity that is distinct in its views over against Markan Christianity, Pauline Christianity, Johannine Christianity, etc. One may rightly detect in this approach the influence of Walter Bauer's hypothesis that earliest Christianity was diverse and that "orthodoxy" emerged only gradually, and after much time had passed. What began as a hypothesis based on differences in Q's content (G. Bornkamm, H. E. Tödt), and pressed forward on the basis of its distinctive genre, *λογοι σοφου* (J. Robinson, H. Koester), has now proceeded on the basis of literary and redactional analyses of Q itself (D. Lührmann, A. Jacobson, J. Kloppenborg). Kloppenborg's description of Q's history has become the working hypothesis for many: Q began as a collection of wisdom speeches, such as one finds still in Luke's Sermon on the Plain or the speech On Cares. In this first edition of Q, Jesus appears as Sophia's prophet, offering words of saving wisdom. At a later point in its history, however, Q was edited to produce a second edition, in which sayings of prophetic and apocalyptic judgment assume a prominent role. In this later edition of Q, the wisdom orientation of the earlier sayings collection gives way to an apocalyptic theology in which Jesus appears now as the Son of Man seen in Daniel and *I Enoch*. Thus, in this second edition, Q took

significant steps toward Paul and Mark, who understood Jesus within an apocalyptic, rather than wisdom framework.

In his book, *Jesus the Messianic Herald of Salvation* (originally a 1993 Ph.D. dissertation at Aberdeen), Edward Meadors seeks to call into question all of this line of thinking, together with its many and varied derivative hypotheses. In short, he comes from another world altogether. He does not share the form-critical assumption that the Gospels (and Q) are first and foremost witnesses to the theology of early Christianity. Rather, he assumes that they are accurate reports of what Jesus actually said and did. This means that, to the extent that they report accurately what he said and did, they will not disagree in any substantive way. Therefore, Q does not represent a version of Christianity that is distinctive over against Mark, but, as the written report of "the apostle Matthew, a former tax-collector and eyewitness to Jesus' ministry" (p. 329), it is in fundamental agreement with the Gospel of Mark, the recorded statements of Peter, another eyewitness (p. 326). Meadors summarizes:

If we take the historical Jesus seriously and agree to the overwhelming probability that Jesus' followers, and the disciples in particular, held in their memories specific things that Jesus said and did, the historical judgment may be secure that Mark and Q represent basically conservative redactions of orthodox or mainstream tradition (p. 326).

Therefore, Q does not represent a different understanding of Jesus from that which we find in Mark. Both texts have the same understanding of Jesus, because, ultimately, both texts preserve something of Jesus' own understanding of himself. Rather than seeing in Mark and Q evidence for Bauer's hypothesis of diversity in earliest Christianity, Meadors sees in them a univocal witness to an orthodoxy that derives from Jesus himself.

This book is a study in what can happen when participants in a discussion come with such radically different presuppositions. In each chapter Meadors gamely takes on wave after wave of recent Q research, and yet his arguments never really seem to connect. Meadors passes his opponents as though he were operating in a parallel universe. Not that no blows are struck. In chapter 3 Meadors raises some valid questions about the extent to which one may speak of a full-blown wisdom Christology in Q. And chapter 4 will necessitate some response from those who have used form-critical observations to identify words of early Christian prophets in Q. But on the whole, Meadors' arguments fall quickly into a repeating pattern. Evidence that might be taken in the more form-critically oriented Q discussion as indicative of some theological position developing within the Q community is invariably dismissed by Meadors on the grounds that it comes from Jesus, not the Q community, which simply preserves the authentic Jesus material. Diverse traditions that others have taken as indicative of successive layers in Q's theological history are seen by Meadors as ideas that Jesus himself could have integrated in his own messianic self-consciousness. In chapter 5, for example, Meadors argues that

with Daniel as background, Jesus could have integrated wisdom theology, his identity as the Son of Man, and the idea of the kingdom of God into his own messianic self-understanding. In chapter 6 Meadors reduces the well-known debate over the various kinds of Son of Man sayings (generic, titular but future, and titular but present) to the simple solution that Jesus could have said them all, sometimes generically (but hinting at a titular meaning) and sometimes speaking outright of himself as the Son of Man, beginning something now (present sayings) that would be finished later (future sayings).

Ultimately Meadors offers an alternative understanding of the Q material, but in order to accept it, one must first accept his working assumption that the Gospels and their sources are historically accurate reports of what Jesus said and did. For those who do not share this assumption, Meadors offers no real alternative to the current Q discussion, for he fails to engage this discussion seriously on its own terms. The idea that Q represents a distinctive form of early Christianity was based originally on observations about its distinctive content, especially its lack of a passion narrative. Many have argued that the absence of any explicit interest in the cross and resurrection in Q indicates that here is a form of early Christianity that is not "kerygmatic," in the classical sense of that term. Meadors's two-page answer to this hypothesis is especially weak. He writes, incredibly, "Q's failure to interpret explicitly the cross is quite characteristic of the synoptic gospels as a whole" (p. 296). Meadors can utter such a statement because he has mistakenly assumed that to speak at all of Jesus' death is to speak of the atonement. He asks, "When Matthew, Mark, and Luke only seldomly present direct references to the atoning benefits of Jesus' death, should we find it remarkable that Q is silent on the same issue?" (p. 296). There are many today who would agree with Meadors that atonement theology is indeed scarcely represented in these early traditions. But that in no way diminishes the fact that Q has no passion narrative, while Mark is nothing but "a passion narrative with an extended introduction." Mark is very interested in Jesus' death, Q is not. Today this point has become more than an argument from silence. Study of the genre of Q, a wisdom collection, suggests another locus for the saving power of Jesus in such texts like Q and the Gospel of Thomas, viz. his words. In such a theological atmosphere, Jesus' death would have had tragic significance, but it would not have been the focal point of theological reflection. Meadors does not engage this point. Nor does he engage recent redaction-critical and literary analysis, which has isolated a collection of wisdom speeches at the core of Q (esp. Kloppenborg). Meadors dismisses all such hypotheses on the grounds that the disparate theological traditions in Q are really quite compatible, and so do not necessitate successive stages in Q's development. Moreover, they all come ultimately from Jesus, and so, being of the same age, could not mark out points on a time line of Q's gradual development. But this misses the point entirely, for Kloppenborg's thesis is not built on tradition-historical analysis, but a detailed *literary* analysis of Q. He consistently demurs from any judgment about a saying's age or provenance, limiting himself to the question of when certain traditions found their way into Q. Meadors seems to have misunderstood the real foundation for Kloppenborg's work.

While disappointing in many respects, Meadors's very ambitious study raises some challenging issues for NT scholarship in North America. It has by now become a familiar sight for American students with conservative evangelical backgrounds to avoid the more liberal Religious Studies programs on this side of the Atlantic and pursue their graduate studies in European universities, such as, in this case, Aberdeen, where the very critical continental scholarship of the last generation, so influential now in North America, never really made many inroads. Such institutions, of course, practice a scholarly tradition at the highest possible level. But its assumptions are different. Meadors's erudition in this book is beyond question. And a perusal of his notes and bibliography would suggest that his work will engage thoroughly the current discussion of Q. But because his basic assumptions are so different, his arguments do not really engage those of his opponents. This means, of course, that books such as this one are really a prelude to another, more basic discussion about the very foundations of biblical scholarship, which we will surely need to have if we are ever to have a common discussion of issues like Q. (9/96)