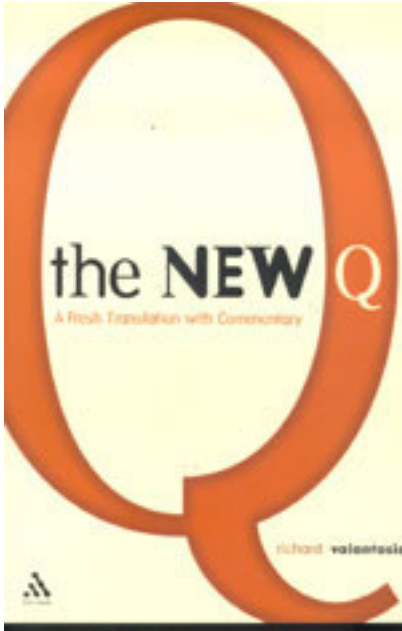


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Valantasis, Richard

The New Q: A Fresh Translation with Commentary

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This is not your average scholarly book on Q. It contains no references to secondary literature, indeed no notes at all. There is not a word about such “common-type” questions in Q research as that of the existence or the extent of Q. Not a word either about a Q community that hides behind the document, nor about the place Q takes in the earliest development of Christian theology. There is not even a hint about its date of composition and nothing about Q stratigraphy or any other solution that has been offered with regard to the composition history of Q. On these and similar issues, one will find only the bare minimum: Q is “what Matthew and Luke have in common that does not come from Mark” and the conviction that Matthew and Luke used, if not the same text, at least “a very similar collection of sayings” (11).

Instead, Richard Valantasis offers a commentary of Q, based on a “fresh” translation that is regulated by a double purpose: to examine “how collections of sayings serve an ascetical function” and to develop “a mode of reading Jesus’ sayings ... that instructs twenty-first-century readers ... to come to their own understanding of the meaning of Jesus’ words” (12). With the first purpose, Valantasis harks back to a field of research he has explored at length in studying (Christian) ascetic texts and asceticism in antiquity and what this

phenomenon intends to bring forward. It can be summarily described as creating an identity that runs counter to dominant culture, a subversive alternative. The second purpose is said to be a most difficult goal to reach, since we are living in totally different contexts than the one in which Q was written, but it is then paraphrased and, I am afraid, thereby also somewhat redefined, as keeping an open eye for the multitude of readings and meanings to which a text can open up one's mind (12–13). Those who are acquainted with the often highly technical character of much of recent Q research and literature may find these thoughts somewhat naïve. Is it not all too easy to say that Q opens a door to the voice of Jesus? Valantasis himself no doubt is aware of this, as when he writes, almost in passing, “the sayings do not provide history as we know it, nor even biography as we know it,” or acknowledges that the collection may also contain “a saying *likely* to have been spoken by Jesus” (2, emphasis added), but such cautionary remarks threaten to get lost in the more direct way of speaking that is used elsewhere in defining Q as a collection of words of Jesus.

Valantasis takes as his basis the reconstruction of Q as it is found in *The Sayings Gospel of Q in Greek and English* (2002; henceforth SGQ), but he offers his own translation that differs quite often from that of SGQ. He divides the text of Q into eighty-eight sayings. A few verses that were put in brackets in SGQ (3:20, 21b–22) are left out, and so are two passages that proved almost impossible to reconstruct (3:2b–3a; 4:16). In a couple of instances Valantasis gives a more complete (and different) text than what is found in SGQ. Compare 7:29–30:

SGQ: «For John came to you», ... the tax collectors and ... «responded positively», but «the religious authorities rejected» him.

Valantasis: For John came into your presence, and the [sinners and] tax collectors received him, but [the mobs did not] (see also the translation at Q 11:21–22 and 14:16–18, 19–20, 21, 23).

It is also worth taking a closer look at the translation itself, which at times sounds more “modern” but elsewhere more “biblical” than that of SGQ. Thus, the “crowds” and the “snakes’ litter” of Q 3:7 SGQ have become “mobs” and “snakes’ kids,” but “the impending rage” is rendered as “the coming wrath” (cf. RSV). Note also SGQ’s “bear fruit ... produce children ... not bearing healthy fruit” and Valantasis’s “produce fruit ... raise up offspring ... not produce good fruit,” which for the middle term yields a more literal translation. Valantasis’s “whose sandals I am not competent to carry” (3:16) is more correct for the final verb but hardly better in rendering “being worthy” than SGQ’s “whose sandals I am not fit to take off.” On the other hand, Valantasis somewhat overemphasizes the composite verbs of 3:17 (“he will thoroughly cleanse” and “he will

completely burn”). And the reader who is familiar with the Greek will look in vain for an explanation why *pneuma* in 3:16b is translated as “(holy) wind,” for in the commentary it is merely paraphrased as “baptize with holy wind (or holy spirit) and fire” (47).

Turning to the commentary itself, one will discover on more than one occasion a quite original and helpful interpretation, although at times it may appear Valantasis had to stretch the text to have it say what he thinks it means. To give one example, the light saying in Q 11:33 is tackled from its ending and would refer to the task of illuminating, through intellectual or other modes of enlightenment, “the household of God” (lit., “everyone in the house”). No problem so far. But then Valantasis goes on, “But light does not shine only on elect people” (139), and proposes to interpret the saying as a warning to those in the community who would be hesitant to expose the Christian message to outsiders. Matthew clearly took the saying to have this “open” meaning by putting it after 5:13–14. But the text of Q was less pronounced, or at least more ambiguous about the audience it has in view. And Luke may have been closer to Q when adding the phrase about those who take the trouble of entering the house (also at 8:16). On the other hand, Valantasis’s comment on the temptation narrative offers a good illustration of his concern to discover an “ascetical” perspective and also to give a sense to this “mythological” story that goes beyond the commonly voiced conclusion that it is a somewhat singular way of introducing a christological reflection on the person and character of Jesus. Valantasis reads the text as a combination of how to counter objections and successfully to withstand temptations. The text is as much about form as about content. It “demonstrates how to use scriptural knowledge in discussion as well as the practice of talking back to temptation” (52). No wonder that later on this passage has become the primary model for describing the monk’s struggle with the (his) demon(s) in ascetic and monastic literature. It is this kind of observations that make Valantasis’s book worth reading also for those who think all was said and done about Q.