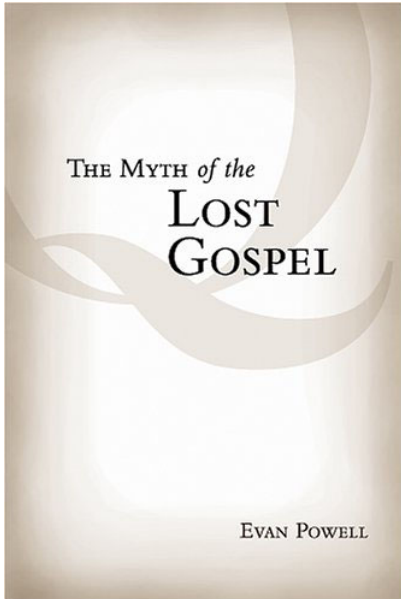


RBL 01/2007



Powell, Evan

The Myth of the Lost Gospel

Las Vegas: Symposium Press, 2006. Pp. 176. Paper.
\$16.00. ISBN 0977048608.

Jim West

Quartz Hill School of Theology
Petros, Tennessee

The hypothetical Gospel source Q (not to be confused with Q from the *James Bond* series or Q from the long running *Star Trek* franchise), well known to scholars of the New Testament, Jesus “questers,” and students of the Synoptic Gospels in particular, underlies the similarities between Matthew and Luke when those Gospels differ from Mark. Since its arrival on the scholarly horizon in 1838, this theory has been embattled, discarded, praised, ignored, reviled, adhered to, and rejected. No other theory, it seems, has provoked the slaughter of so many trees (for the production of paper) and the spilling of so much ink. It is the hypothesis that is neither settled, rebutted, nor completely convincing. Luminaries such as Mark Goodacre have rejected it, and luminaries of equal prominence, such as John Kloppenborg, have not only adopted it but produced a massive critical commentary based on the textual and historical reconstruction of this hypothetical text.

It is no surprise, then, that another hat has been tossed into the ring concerning the “election” of this hypothesis. Evan Powell’s volume cannot be described as exhaustive or extensive, to be sure, and it may be a small “hat,” but it is an interesting, if not convincing, entry into the “to Q or not to Q” race.

Published in 2006 by Symposium Press of Las Vegas, Powell's book consists of seven chapters: (1) "Hidden Synoptic Patterns" (23–44); (2) "Matthew, the Revisionist" (45–68); (3) "The Man Who Buried Jesus" (69–84); (4) "Did Matthew Know Luke?" (85–106); (5) "The Eccentric Evangelist" (107–20); (6) "The Case for the Existence of Q" (121–40); and (7) "The Historical Jesus" (141–64). Naturally, there are the requisite acknowledgements (7–8), introduction (9–22), appendix (165–72), and bibliography (173–74).

In the introduction Powell tells his readers what he will do in the manuscript that follows: "This book will argue that the failure to bring the historical Jesus into focus is not due to an insufficiency of surviving evidence. Rather, it is that key elements of the historical record have been misinterpreted. In this regard, no greater error has been made than to presume that many of the sayings recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were drawn from a lost **Sayings Gospel 'Q'**" (10, emphasis original). He continues a little further down the page: "As long as the Q theory is presumed to be a reliable centerpiece of historical Jesus studies, the pieces of the puzzle will never fit into an integrated whole."

On the following pages of the introduction, Powell describes the Synoptic Problem as well as the usual solutions proffered in explanation of that problem. I am, quite frankly, not certain why such an explanation is necessary. Powell seems to be directing his monograph at New Testament scholars and not general readers, so it really makes no sense to spend so much time telling them about things they must surely already know. In any event, Powell offers his own solution, when he notes that "Matthew was the last of the Synoptics to be composed, and that Matthew relied on Luke as a source" (18). Indeed, in chapters 1–5 Powell does his best to support that conviction.

When Powell finally draws conclusions to his exegesis, the results are quite intriguing. For instance, toward the end of chapter 6 he writes"

The Q era in New Testament scholarship began in 1838. But from the outset, Weisse's speculation concerning a lost sayings source lacked an adequate logical foundation. Matthean posteriority, though long ignored, will in time be recognized as a more comprehensive theory that surpasses the 2 DH in its ability to resolve the data. It is as elegant in its simplicity as it is thorough in its resolving power. Thus, an appeal to the logic of Ockham's Razor will ultimately favor Matthean posteriority as the true solution to the Synoptic Problem. (140)

Supposing himself correct, Powell in chapter 7 suggests some consequences for our understanding of the Historical Jesus. He notes, "Mark, Luke and Matthew ... are snapshots in time in the latter third of the first century that reveal trajectories of evolving kerygma as the Pauline Jesus movement struggled to survive in a Roman world, and as a

new world religion took its institutional form” (160). Fair enough. Indeed, perhaps even correct. But where Powell takes us next seems to me to be unfounded. He remarks, “Once we interpret the Synoptic Gospels through the lens of Matthean posteriority, a coherent image of Jesus comes into focus: Jesus was indeed leading a rebellion against what he perceived to be an oppressive, unholy foreign regime that had no right to occupy Israel and subjugate the Jews” (161). And, “Surely he stood against the Roman occupation of Judea, but he also stood against what he perceived to be a grossly inequitable distribution of wealth in society” (ibid.). And finally, “Jesus preached an anti-establishment message that gained him an enthusiastic following among the poor” (ibid.). In other words, Jesus was an egalitarian communist who, as champion for the poor, exercised his ministry against Roman imperialism and Jewish wealth.

The weakness, in my estimation, of Powell’s thesis is precisely its conclusion. The Jesus he “finds” is the Jesus he is looking for. He has gazed into the deep well of the historical Jesus and seen his own egalitarian, antioppression, antiwealth persona exemplified in the Jewish peasant named Jesus from Nazareth. To find such a Jesus it is essential, then, to attempt to demonstrate that the very sort of Jesus who walked and spoke in dusty Galilee is the Matthean version. Having dismissed “Q” (because it does not fit his schema), he finds it absolutely necessary to rearrange the order of Gospel production so that the Jewish reformer is usurped by the Pauline accommodator to Roman society.

The central problem of this thesis is that one nagging question seems unasked and unanswered: If Matthew’s Jesus was so subversive to the growing movement to appease Rome by the church, then why was the Gospel preserved alongside Mark and Luke, Gospels that, according to Powell, show exactly that sort of pro-Rome accommodationism. Many Gospels were read and then summarily dismissed by the growing church. Why retain one so out of sync with the church’s desire to fit in to Roman culture? Did the early church fail to see something that Powell, nearly two thousand years later, sees so clearly?

Although this reviewer is unconvinced by Powell’s line of thinking, others may very well find the book instructive and convincing. Do read it. Whether you agree or disagree, you will enjoy the experience.