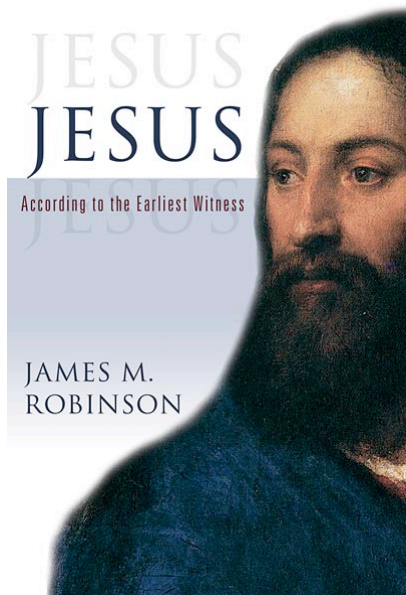


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Robinson, James M.

Jesus: According to the Earliest Witness

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The hallmark work of James M. Robinson on the Sayings Gospel Q, and also on the Nag Hammadi codices, spans more than three decades. Director of the International Q Project at the Institute of Antiquity and Christianity and Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Claremont Graduate University, Robinson is arguably the most significant scholarly contributor to the investigation of Q in the twentieth century. *Jesus: According to the Earliest Witness*—the latest in a number of his books on the importance of Q for the reconstruction of the historical Jesus—brings together a fruitful collection of essays on the figure of Jesus as portrayed in the Sayings Source embedded in Matthew and Luke, generally referred to as Q (from the German *Quelle* = “source”), including Robinson’s presidential address delivered at the SBL convention in 1981 (which I heard with much appreciation): “Jesus from Easter to Valentinus (or to the Apostles’ Creed)” (27–63).

Professor Robinson concludes his book on Jesus with a poignant “Theological Autobiography” (203–34), not that of Jesus but of Robinson himself. One wonders how such a substantial autobiographical statement bears on the reconstruction of Jesus of Galilee “according to the earliest witness.” Upon further reflection, though, by opening himself up to his readers thus, Robinson avers implicitly that his scholarly reconstructive effort using Q comes all the while out of his twentieth century life influenced by German

theological education and reflection. I read the autobiographical chapter as Robinson's way of conducting a necessary heuristic operation, which Bernard Lonergan calls "self-appropriation." That Professor Robinson shared the operation with his readers is to his credit.

While the title of the book leads one to believe that the book will focus on a close examination of the person and mission of Jesus *using the results* of Q research, it soon becomes evident that a number of the essays deal with the difficult task of determining the text of the hypothetical literary source from which Matthew and Luke independently gleaned the sayings attributed to Jesus of Galilee. For example, chapter 1 compares and contrasts the narrative Gospels of the New Testament with the Sayings Gospel Q and further deals with the redaction of Q after the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. In this latter, Robinson builds on the work of Dieter Lührmann's 1968 work, *Die Redaktion der Logienquelle* (10). Accordingly, the post-70 redactor of Q (whose redaction can be traced in both Matthew and Luke) imposed on the older body of sayings of Jesus "the deuteronomic view of Israelite history" (10). Moreover, the title of chapter 1 pinpoints the important correlation between "The Critical Edition of Q and the Study of Jesus."

The critical edition cuts away elements of the sayings that reflect a later situation in the life of the Q community in Galilee. The aim of Robinson's analysis is to locate "archaic collections in Q" (18) that reflect more nearly the historical voice of Jesus in Galilee in the late twenties C.E. It is from these critically ascertained "archaic collections" of sayings that Robinson paints his picture of Jesus as one who lives by the reign of God (or "kingdom of God") and invites others in his Galilean society to do likewise. Lilies grow in the field by the reign of God without striving to do so (Q 12:27 = Matt 6:28). Ravens likewise find their food by the same rule (Q 12:24 = Luke 12.24). Robinson considers this total abandonment of human striving, as illustrated in the lilies and ravens sayings, to epitomize the experience and teaching of Jesus as represented in the older version of Q sayings.

The critically acclaimed Mission Instructions in Q 10:2–16 bear out the point. The disciples, following Jesus himself, were to set out "without any human security. [Jesus] had no backpack for provisions, no money at all—penniless—, no sandals, no stick—helpless and defenceless (Q 10.4).... One prays to God to reign, and thus to provide bread (Q 11.2b-3)" (23). The mission instructions were updated, to be sure, in keeping with the changing situations in the life-experiences of the developing churches, as reflected in all three Synoptic Gospels.

Another example of Robinson's emphasis on critical method comes through in his chapter 2, "Jesus from Easter to Valentinus (or to the Apostles' Creed)." In that chapter Robinson

delineates the two trajectories, both of which lay claim to a high Christology but neither one taking seriously the word and work of the historical Jesus of Galilee. The Apostles' Creed trajectory, for example, cites something about Jesus, what was done to him (conceived in a womb, crucified, and buried), but not what he said and did in his ministry among his fellow Galileans. Thus the trajectories illustrate how the historical Jesus became more and more shrouded in mystery and spiritual experience as the church moved into the Gentile world. Paul, the most ardent early promoter of Jesus crucified and raised, had not met the historical Jesus, nor was he interested in knowing "Jesus according to the flesh" (2 Cor 5:16). This overt distancing of Paul's Christ-kerygma from the sayings of Jesus has made the effort of recapturing the historical vision of Jesus that much more difficult. One would think that Paul's genuine letters from the 50s C.E., the earliest extant literature of the New Testament, would be a principal source of information about Jesus. Instead, they are laden with Paul's "Christ-experience," with an emphasis on crucifixion-resurrection. The kingdom of God in Paul, like the general resurrection, is reserved for the future (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:50).

In the middle chapters of his book Robinson brings into sharp focus the theology of Jesus represented in the Q sayings. Accordingly, Jesus spoke about "the kingdom of God" above all and conducted his life and ministry as one compelled by that metaphor. God's reign in heaven was one for which people should pray to have happen on earth here and now, as the Lord's Prayer in Q makes clear (Q 11:2b-4). But Jesus' understanding of the reign of God on earth had some radical implications. It recognized that God gives showers and sun to the bad as well as the good, so also anyone who lives under the reign of God loves the enemy along with the friend (Q 6:27-28, 35).

The shortest chapter in Robinson's book (141-43) is perhaps the most telling in putting a finger on the impact Jesus had on the Q people of Galilee, on the one hand, and implicitly on Jesus-people of present-day society, on the other. Here is a sampling of Robinson's reconstituting of the words and deeds of Jesus "according to the earliest witness": "We need to face up to an undomesticated Jesus..., a profound person who proposed a solution to the human dilemma"; "we are the tool of evil that ruins the other person, as we look out for number one"; "put in language derived from his sayings: I am hungry because you hoard food. You are cold because I hoard clothing"; "the sharing of food and clothing, the canceling of debts, the non-retaliation against enemies, were not seen as human virtues, but rather as God acting through those who trust him."

Robinson commends Matthew as the Gospel largely responsible for the preservation and transmission of the Galilean tradition about Jesus enshrined in Q. Of course, Matthew had an agenda quite different from that of the Q people, which led in turn to a recasting of

the Q sayings in keeping with Matthew's later issues and concerns. Hence the need for a critical edition of Q in the current quest for the historical Jesus.

Robinson has captured "The Image of Jesus in Q" (161–78) clearly and provocatively, using the best critical skill at his disposal. The collection of essays in this volume deserve close attention by those involved in recovering "Jesus of Nazara" (10) from behind the several theological veils of church history and dogma that have, unwittingly perhaps, kept his historical life a secret.

Anyone interested in reading the Sayings Gospel Q in English will find it, along with an introduction, in an appendix on pages 235–53.