CHAPTER TEN

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE JESUS MOVEMENT: WHAT DOES Q TELL US?

Risto Uro

One of the most significant results of the renewed interest in the Sayings Gospel Q during the last 30 years has been a change in the view of Q from a vague and hypothetical collection of Jesus’ sayings to a more precise description of a writing in its own right. This change is signalled in the tendency to use the designation “gospel” instead of “source”, shifting the emphasis from the perspective of the canonical gospels to the lost gospel known to us through Matthew and Luke. Intensive analyses of the Q material have been able to reveal a coherent writing with distinctive textual and symbolic worlds.1 All this has an indisputable pertinence to our understanding of the earliest Christian movements and Christian origins.

The train of the New Testament scholarship moves slowly, however, and it may be that we have not yet fully realized the significance of this newly discovered gospel we are reconstructing. A balanced view of Christian origins which takes into account the results achieved in Q research does not emerge in one or two decades. We are in the process of constructing a new picture piece by piece, reviewing old views in the light of the information gained by the textual analyses of the Q material. This paper will focus on

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1 The underlying theoretical framework and terminology of this paper are indebted to the Three World Model developed by K. Syreeni (for a convenient description, see K. Syreeni & M. Myllykoski, “Text, Ideology, and Concrete Reality in the Gospels: A Three World Model for Hermeneutical Exegesis” forthcoming in ANRW II.26,4). Syreeni’s model provides a heuristic tool for exegetical analysis by making a distinction between the “text-world”, “symbolic world” and “concrete world” of the gospels (or any other text under hermeneutic scrutiny). The influence of the model on the present paper can be seen in the attempt to make distinctions between the literary phenomena (e.g., the function of John in the “narrative” of Q), the symbolic world (the symbolizing and mythmaking process attached to John and Jesus in the text), and the concrete social and historical situations (the movements around John and Jesus).
one such piece of construction, John the Baptist, and particularly
his preaching as reported in Q 3. The Baptist undoubtedly is a
figure of importance both in Q and in the history of the earliest
Christianity. Therefore any progress achieved in understanding the
message and function of John the Baptist in Q will inevitably have
its effects on the reconstruction of the nascent movements around
John and Jesus, and ultimately on the history of these figures
themselves. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the
importance of the Q research to such crucial issues by making
John’s preaching the focal point. As I hope to able to demonstrate,
in spite of the vast number of treatises on the Baptist, this particular
question has not been duly raised in research.

1. The Consensus

The great majority of scholars take it for granted that the sayings
preserved at the beginning of Q (3:7-9, 16-17) are essentially
Baptist provenance, although a slight Christian modification of
John’s preaching of the Coming One is usually suggested. The
characterization by C. H. H. Scobie still represents a consensus
among scholars:

There can be little doubt that the keynote of John’s teaching and
preaching was the proclamation of the imminent approach of the end
of days and of the judgement. This is evident from John’s sayings pre-
served in Q, with their vivid pictures of the vipers fleeing the wrath to
come, the tree about to be cut down, and the separating of the wheat
from the chaff.2

Q’s description of John as a fiery preacher of the apocalyptic
judgment and as a prophetic figure in his own right (cf. Q 7:30-
35) seems indeed more primitive and original than the portrayal of
Mark, who presents the Baptist as the less independent forerunner

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2 C. H. H. Scobie, John the Baptist. (London: 1964) 60. R. Bultmann (The
Harper, 1968] 117 and 247) regards the Baptist preaching in Q 3: 7-9 as a
Christian formulation, but even he thinks that the kernel of Q 3:16-17 goes
back to the proclamation of the historical John. A recent massive study on John
the Baptist by J. Ernst (Johannes der Täufer. Interpretation - Geschichte -
Wirkungsgeschichte [Berlin / New York: 1989]) simply concludes that “die Lo-
gienquelle hat die ursprüngliche Täuferpredigt ohne wesentliche Änderungen
tradiert...” (p. 55). Similar optimism pervades another recent book on John, R.
L. Webb, John the Baptist and the Prophet. A Socio-historical Study (JSNT