CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DIVIDED FAMILIES AND CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

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“The hostility of Christianity to the family dates back 2,000 years”, writes Ferdinand Mount in his popularisation of modern research on the family entitled *The Subversive Family* (p. 6). “Hostility” may be a bit sensational, but it is not hard to document *de facto* opposition to the family from the very beginning. Gerd Theissen called attention to the a-familial ethos of the Jesus movement.¹ Some of the sayings of Jesus which are most offensive to modern ears are his anti-family sayings. For example, “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother...and brothers and sisters...he cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:26). These sayings are found in all the gospels except the Fourth, including Mark, Thomas and Q. Whether they are deliberately anti-family or only anti-family in their effect, they will herein be called “anti-family” sayings. This paper, then, will focus on these sayings in Q, and on a series of questions related to these sayings, questions which will lead us to consider their social context and some aspects of the larger question of Christian origins.

*The Texts*

*Q 9:59-60a*

The most obviously anti-family sayings in Q are Q 9:59-60a and 14:26. In the first, Jesus says to a prospective disciple, “Follow me.” The disciple says, “Master, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus replies, “Let the dead bury their dead.” This saying is shocking both because of the sacredness of the duty of burying one’s father which is here contravened, and because of the presumed precipitous nature of the call.

Burial apparently took place as quickly as possible (cf. Acts 5:6, 7-10; 8:2). "Leaving a corpse unburied through the night, for any reason, was considered to be sinfully disrespectful." One would therefore presume that the death had just happened. Among the various tasks a son was expected to perform was that of obligatory grief and mourning and the rending of garments. But the call of Jesus would require the son to trample on all of these family pieties, including the most solemn one of all, the duty of burying one's father. Since the burial would take place quickly, it is hardly a matter of a significant delay, though the period of mourning would have extended the delay much longer. Jesus' call is, in any context but especially that of first-century Palestine, utterly insensitive. It is an insult to the most inviolate of all bonds, those of the family.

Many interpretations of this saying have been proposed. We cannot review them all here. Recently, Byron McCane has proposed that secondary burial of the dead lies behind this saying. It was, he claims, common practice in first-century Palestine to "bury" a person (that is, place the body in a niche in the wall of a burial cave) for a period of about one year during which the flesh would decompose; then the bones would be reburied in an ossuary or other repository where the bones of other members of the family had also been placed. This, it is claimed, is what is meant when the Bible speaks of someone as being "gathered to his people" (Gen 25:8 and elsewhere). Secondary burial was not, apparently, limited to elites but was employed generally. McCane thinks that "let the dead bury their dead" really means: let the dead whose bones are in an ossuary rebury the bones of the dead father. In the


3 Ibid.


5 "Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead", HThR 83 (1990) 31-43.


7 E. Meyers, "Secondary Burials" 18; Hachlili, "Burials" 793.