



the empty bell

The Logia of Yeshua

Guy Davenport and Benjamin Urrutia, translators

A Book Review by Robert A. Jonas, Ed.D., ©1996
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Western Christianity is currently undergoing the third quest for the real, historical Jesus. The first quest began in the early 19th century and concluded with the publication of Dr. Albert Schweitzer's The Quest of the Historical Jesus, (1906). Schweitzer argued that we have no substantial proof for Jesus's divinity or for the literal truth of the Gospel stories. Energy for this quest waned until a reputed collection of Jesus's sayings, called *the Gospel of Thomas*, was discovered in Nag Hammadi, Upper Egypt in 1945. Soon, a second quest was underway, and by 1960, most scholars agreed that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke had been composed about 50 years after the death of Jesus. The authors were probably not Jesus's disciples. As their source for the Gospel stories, the authors had used scraps of oral tradition, the manuscript we now call the Gospel of Mark, and a third, hypothetical source of Jesus sayings called "Q." This theory is generally accepted today, even though "Q" has never been found. The fourth Gospel, John, was now thought to have been written last, toward the end of the first century, the author being not Jesus's disciple John, but an inspired member of a "Johannine" community.

Today we are in the midst of the third quest. It began in 1985 when a group of Protestant scholars began meeting as "The Jesus Seminar" to see if they could agree on the authenticity of NT (New Testament) texts, including "Q," Thomas, and other fragments from Greek, Coptic/Gnostic and Jewish sources. These scholars still meet, voting by casting beads of different colors for the probability that a particular saying or story is authentically by or about the historical Jesus. They assume that the Gospel of John, and the letters of John, Paul and other apostles (the epistles) contain virtually no material that can be directly traced to Jesus.

The Logia of Yeshua: The Sayings of Jesus, translated by Guy Davenport and Benjamin Urrutia, presents 105 "sayings" (Greek: *Logia*) as representing the heart of Jesus' teaching. Davenport and Urrutia, like so many scholars before them, accept the view that the Gospel narratives were added to "Q," and that they therefore obscure the "real" Jesus. Perhaps sensing that over-familiarity with the Gospel stories may cause them to lose their capacity to awaken, shock and even heal a listener, the authors want to bring Jesus to life in new, surprising ways. Even the name "Jesus", can become meaningless through repetition, so they prefer to use the Hebrew name "Yeshua." Their fresh approach is welcome.

The Logia of Yeshua presents a stripped-down version of Jesus and his ministry. He is not an exalted "Son of God" so much as a street preacher in the Greek tradition of wandering sages. He is an occasionally sharp-tongued, and yet compassionate gadfly, who utters timeless truths about the danger of greed ("What good is it to lose one's life in acquiring the world?"); the temptation of selfishness ("Who would save his life will lose it, who loses his life will save it"); the value of spontaneous action, and the danger of self-righteousness ("Do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing"); the paradoxical coincidence of worldly and spiritual knowledge ("Be as watchful as snakes and innocent as

doves”); the spiritual wisdom that overturns worldly expectations (“The last will be first, and the first will be last”; and, “You that are destitute, rejoice. . . you that are hungry: you shall feast. You that weep: you shall laugh with joy.”); the inevitability of truth (“There is nothing hidden that will not be revealed”); the value of forgiveness (“Leave your offering and go and be reconciled with your brother”); the importance of non-judgmental awareness (“When you have cleared the plank from your own eye, then you can see to clear your friend’s”); the homelessness of the spiritual seeker (“Foxes have dens, and birds have nests, but the son of man has no place to rest his head”); and the supreme value of love and compassion (“Meet meanness with generosity, evil with good,” and, “Love your enemy. . . Your father is compassionate to all, as you should be”). Davenport and Urrutia must be applauded for their desire to awaken the reader by offering these new, bare translations of Jesus’s sayings.

The Logia of Yeshua does not include many of the biblical stories that are familiar to us: the story of Jesus’s birth, with the shepherds, wise men, and the angelic choirs; Jesus’s baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended like a dove; the healing of the hemorrhaging woman and the paralytic man; the touching stories of Martha and Mary; the raising of Lazarus; the death on the cross, and the mysterious Resurrection appearances. Sometimes, we know these stories too well. They can become mindless truisms, having lost their bite, and their affective connection to our real lives. When Jesus’s sayings stand alone, we may be more likely to hear the immediate relevance of their ancient wisdom. Gathering Jesus’s sayings in one place, as The Logia of Yeshua does, draws the reader into a reflective frame of mind. Each saying can be mulled upon separately for its ageless meaning. In this way, some of the sayings become koans: “What would a person give in return for life?”

On the other hand, readers of The Logia of Yeshua need to be aware of two disadvantages when the Gospel narratives and all the epistles are excluded. First, these rejected NT texts may well contain sayings, hymns and stories that originate with Jesus or his immediate followers. After all, Paul wrote his letters only twenty years after Jesus’s death. By the same token, certain supposedly “authentic” sayings of Jesus may have never passed his lips. In Jesus’s time, there were no court reporters, journalists or audio-cassette tape recorders. He lived in an oral culture where truths were passed on within communities and between generations, from one person to another, often in small gatherings of like-minded people. Scholars can only say which sayings are likely to have been spoken by him.

And second, the rejected portions of the NT may carry passages which, although they are neither the actual words of Jesus, nor literal, historical fact, are nonetheless spiritually true. We may reject as preposterous the Gospel story in which Peter walks on water, is seized by self-consciousness and fear, plunges down, and is rescued a moment later by the hand of Jesus; we may reject as fairy tale Mary Magdalene’s very existence, or the poignant moment when, in her grieving, she mistakes her beloved teacher for a gardener;

we may reject as utterly fantastic the stories about a Holy Spirit who descends like a dove, transforms people's bodies and consciousnesses, or lovingly accompanies them and speaks through them. But haven't we then lost a window into Mystery? Haven't we then discarded some of the archetypal figures, relationships, and parables that can speak to us and within us, and so transform our awareness of ourselves and of the divine?

Likewise, when St. Paul's epistles are dismissed, the depth of his mystical insight vanishes, too. Thus, we lose his "Now not I, but Christ in me" (Galatians 2:20); "the Spirit of God dwells in you" (Romans 8:9); and his astonishing and heart-stirring parables about the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12ff) and the nature of love (1 Corinthians 13). Indeed, some of Paul's writing is culture-bound, but in other cases, his wisdom, arising out of what Christians call "the Holy Spirit," or "the Risen Christ," has inspired centuries of personal healing, community-building, and political resistance. What would the NT be without Paul's brilliant description and naming of a transformed spiritual consciousness?

John's Gospel is named as "inauthentic." And yet, it may well be that the authors of John's Gospel lived, told stories, celebrated liturgies and wrote accounts of Jesus that Jesus himself would have welcomed. John's is the most mystical of all the Gospels. Christian mystics throughout the ages have been nourished by John's detailed descriptions of spiritual consciousness. Even if Jesus never really said the words that are ascribed to him in John, is it not possible that these words are nonetheless true--true in the sense that they are inspired from the same center of awareness and Presence that lived in Jesus? Christians call that center the Holy Spirit. It is the dynamic center of identity that formed the core of the early Christian communities. Is it not possible that when we hear that voice, even in contemporary spiritual communities, we are sometimes hearing the voice of Jesus?

Many chroniclers of Jesus's sayings, including Davenport and Urritia, are doing us a service if they are asking Christians to detach from the literal level of the Gospel narratives. But they often don't seem to understand that there are more choices about how to respond to ancient texts than simply labeling them as either "fact" or "fairy tale." In medieval Christian theology, Gospel narratives were read on different levels, depending on the maturity of the spiritual sojourner. Stories could be read literally, analogically, anagogically, symbolically, mythically, and mystically. Any one story could be read on all levels successively or simultaneously. For Christians who are interested in knowing God (not simply knowing about God), stories often provide an easier entry-point into the spiritual dimension than short, and necessarily abstract aphorisms like the *Logia*. Sometimes, an imaginative, prayerful participation in the action and characters of the Gospel stories opens the heart and mind to deeper levels of the Holy. Sometimes, our identification with the characters, and the relationships--such as Jesus's friendship with Mary Magdalene--enlarges our identity and our contact with the Holy.

Davenport and Urrutia display an astonishing anti-Christian bias when they write in their Introduction that the Gospels are merely “the graves of the *Logia*.” They imply that the sayings in The Logia of Yeshua are somehow spiritually deeper than their narrative context. They write that these sayings can be read somewhat like Zen koans. This is true. But it is also true that for almost 2,000 years, many contemplative Christians have pondered the Gospel narratives as koans too. In fact, most Christian monks and nuns still practice an ancient form of prayer called *Lectio Divina*, in which one reads a Gospel story or psalm several times over and then lets the intellect become quiet, allowing the story to sink ever more deeply into the soul. Extracting “Q” from the Gospels may be a refreshing experiment, but it does not necessarily mean that readers will gain deeper levels of wisdom.

Read the *Logia* and ponder their immutable truths, but also read the Gospel narratives for the treasures that lie waiting to be found.

