

JESUS AND FAMILY—A TEST CASE*

John W. Pryor

In the world of New Testament scholarship no area of research has produced such provocative and exciting insights in the last twenty years as those which relate to historical Jesus studies. And while the original quest for the historical Jesus of the 19th and early 20th centuries was fairly much an all German affair,¹ it would be true to say that the so-called “third phase” of the quest² has been a much more international exercise, though in recent years North American scholars, particularly those associated with the Jesus Seminar, appear to have grabbed the limelight.³

The most significant aspect of the modern quest is the realization that Jesus and his mission must be understood in terms of the religious, social and political world of first century Palestine.⁴ If we may say that it was the excesses of S. G. F. Brandon in the 1960s which began this recent stage of the quest,⁵ we may also say that it is the more nuanced studies of scholars such as Horsley, Vermes, Theissen, Borg, Meier, and Crossan which are setting the standards of research.

This paper is primarily designed to be a preliminary discussion of the attitude of Jesus to family and family relationships. At the same time, I would like this exploration to assist in addressing the three major claims in contemporary Jesus studies. Those three claims are:

*A paper delivered at the annual conference of the Society for the Study of Early Christianity, Macquarie University, May 1995. The title of the conference was *Jesus and History*.

¹See A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A & C Black, 1910). This remains the best survey of the early quest.

²See N. T. Wright and S. C. Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986* (Oxford: OUP, 1988) 379-403

³See the fruits of their labours in R. W. Funk, R. W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993)

⁴I recognize that even these terms set up a false framework which reflects more a contemporary division between religious, societal, and political concerns than the integrated world of Jesus' day.

⁵See, for example, S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1967).

1. Jesus' mission should not be understood in narrowly religious terms (the conversion of individuals and their future "salvation") but in corporate and societal ones. Put briefly, Jesus had a vision of a new society in Israel, he was a social revolutionary with a very this-worldly vision. Marcus Borg, for example, in his important study entitled *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus*⁶ presents Jesus in fundamental conflict with the Pharisaic world view. In the place of an outlook whose core values were holiness and purity, Jesus had a vision of a society whose fundamental philosophy was "be compassionate as God is compassionate". For him, the Kingdom of God would be a nation restructured to embrace the poor and the outcasts, to forgive the wayward, and to overthrow the societal hierarchical structures based on entrenched religious dogmatism and culturally sanctioned norms.⁷ John Dominic Crossan, co-chair of the Jesus Seminar, likewise sees Jesus as a revolutionary social prophet in his significant work *The Historical Jesus, the life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*,⁸ For him, too, the overthrow of the dominant power structures and patterns is the true agenda of Jesus. To this end, Jesus practised non-discriminating table fellowship, which Crossan calls open commensality; he was a rural Jewish Cynic who by his words and deeds challenged the conventions of his time. In the words of Borg, who summarizes Crossan, "To eat with others without regard for social boundaries ... subverted the deepest boundaries society draws: between honour and shame, patron and client, female and male, slave and free, rich and poor, pure and impure."⁹

2. The second claim relates to Jesus and the future. Since the time of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, it has been an axiom of New Testament scholarship that Jesus considered himself to be an eschatological prophet. That is, he preached in Israel against the backdrop of an expectation of imminent eschatological judgement. Though the excesses of the theories of Weiss and Schweitzer did not receive a strong following, few were the scholars in the 20th century who did not believe that Jesus looked to an imminent, climactic event which would soon overtake Israel,

⁶M. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1984).

⁷See particularly chaps. 4-7 of Borg's book. A popular version of Borg's understanding of Jesus is presented in his later books: *Jesus, a New Vision* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987); *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994); and his collected articles, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1994).

⁸J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus, the life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991). In his briefer, later, work, *Jesus: a revolutionary biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994) Crossan gives a popular summary of the conclusions drawn in the earlier work.

⁹Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, 35.

and that much of his preaching and teaching needs to be understood against that sense of urgency.¹⁰ Whether Jesus thought of himself as the coming Son of Man might be contested, but that someone would come soon or that something would soon happen was considered by the majority of scholars to be part of the outlook of Jesus. This near consensus has now broken down, to the extent that Borg is able to report that according to his polling of North American scholars up to 75% no longer believe that Jesus expected the imminent end the world in his generation.¹¹ For the Jesus Seminar, this change from an eschatological to a non-eschatological prophet has become so assured that they can make it one of their "Seven Pillars of Scholarly Wisdom", a pre-supposition of their research.¹² What, then, are we to make of the fact that the gospels present John the Baptist as an eschatological prophet, that Qumran had a heightened expectation, as also did the early Christian communities? Does this not make Jesus the odd one out? Yes indeed, and this is his uniqueness, and this is why the early church misunderstood him and turned him into an apocalyptic, eschatological prophet made in its own image. The reality is, however, (so the claim goes) that when Jesus ceased to be a disciple of the Baptist, ceased to baptize and preach repentance in the face of judgment and became, instead, a worker of miracles, he broke with the emphasis of the Baptist and turned to the social reform of Israel.¹³

¹⁰When, in the 1930s, C. H. Dodd presented an alternative "realized eschatology" based on his exegesis of ἤγγικεν in Mark 1:15, it was not long before scholars such as J. Jeremias sought to redress the balance and restore the future dimension to the teaching of Jesus. See his *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1963) and *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1971).

¹¹Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, 15, n. 1. The wording of the poll question is, however, noteworthy and may well have skewed the response. To be an eschatological prophet Jesus need not have expected the end of the world. He simply needs to have believed that a catastrophic divine intervention in Israel was imminent. On the question of the meaning of futurist apocalyptic terminology in Judaism and Jesus, see G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980) chap. 14. Incidentally, the speed with which scholars have abandoned the eschatological Jesus can be seen in the following: when, in 1984, Borg published his revised doctoral thesis, he could write: "Though it remains possible that Jesus did expect the end of the world in some quite literal sense in the near future ... " (*Conflict, Holiness and Politics*, 226-27). In 1986, Borg wrote an article in which he spoke of the collapse of the scholarly consensus, with scholars now evenly divided (see chap. 3 in *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*). By 1993 the Jesus Seminar had proclaimed it as axiomatic that Jesus had a non-eschatological perspective.

¹²Crossan, Hoover, et al., *The Five Gospels*, 4.

¹³See P. W. Hollenbach, "The Conversion of Jesus: from Jesus the Baptizer to Jesus the Healer," *ANRW* II.25.1. (1982) 196-219. In response to this view, see the extensive argument in John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (2 vols; New York, 1991-94) II, chap. 13. See also E. Linnemann, "Hat Jesus Naherwartung erhabt?" in *Jésus aux origines de la christologie* (ed. J. Dupont; BETL 40; Leuven:

3. The third claim is the oft repeated assertion that the focus of Jesus' preaching was not himself, his own person and status, but the kingdom of God. In reality, the basic point of this assertion is, to my knowledge, not contested by modern scholarship of most shades. Once we eliminate the Fourth Gospel, with its "I am" sayings and its explicit claims to divine sonship, as a direct source of Jesus' logia, it is not difficult to present the case that at the heart of Jesus' message was God and not his own person. But such a general consensus hides some deep divisions. For it is one thing to say that in his preaching of the kingdom of God Jesus considered his own status to be unique and pivotal: he is the chosen agent of God such that allegiance to him is the litmus test for participation in God's kingdom. In the words of John P. Meier:

On the one hand, Jesus makes the kingdom of God, not himself, the direct object of his preaching. Yet what he says about the kingdom and what he promises those who enter it by accepting his message make a monumental though implicit claim: with the start of Jesus' ministry, a definitive shift has taken place in the eschatological timetable.¹⁴

But it is quite a different thing to assert that Jesus did not make claims to personal allegiance, not make blessing in the future conditional upon a certain attitude to him. But such is the conclusion of the Jesus Seminar.¹⁵

I will return briefly to these three claims at the end of this paper. Richard Horsley and J. D. Crossan are two contemporary Jesus scholars who have noted the implications of these trends in scholarship for our understanding of Jesus' attitude to family and family relationships, though their judgements were foreshadowed in the work of feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza.¹⁶ Most radical is Crossan who, in a section entitled "Against the Patriarchal Family", devotes three pages to the issue.¹⁷ Jesus' response to the woman who cries out,

Peeters, 1989) 103-10. Linnemann simply claims that John's and the early church's imminent eschatology does not mean that Jesus need have thought likewise. For an attempted rehabilitation of imminent eschatology in the expectation of Jesus, see D. C. Allison, "A Plea for Thoroughgoing Eschatology," *JBL* 113 (1994) 651-68.

¹⁴Meier, *A. Marginal Jew*, II.144. See also chap. 16.

¹⁵For example, see in *The Five Gospels* their reasoning behind the black colouring given to Mark 8:38 par. (n. 80), and to the Q logion in Matt 10:32-33/Luke 12:8-9 (p.173).

¹⁶R. A. Horsley, *Jesus and Spiral of Violence* (San Francisco: Harper ad Row, 1987) 231-45; E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983).

¹⁷Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 299-302. See also *Jesus*, 58-60. A note is in order on that slippery word "patriarchal". Though Crossan and others, especially when they combine it with a word like "chauvinism", wish to conjure negative connotations of male societal dominance, they also use the term (as well as

“Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts which suckled you”, was to say “Blessed, rather, are those who hear the word of God and keep it” (Luke 11:27-28; Thomas 79:1-2). Crossan contends that by his response Jesus destroys patriarchal chauvinism which presumes that a woman’s greatness derives from a famous son. True blessedness is “open to everyone who wants it, without distinction of sex or gender, infertility or maternity”.¹⁸ Even more important is the following saying in the Q tradition:

Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division: for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. (Luke 12:51-53/Matt 10: 34-36)

What Crossan observes here is that the division within the family is between the generations. “Jesus will tear the hierarchical or patriarchal family in two along the axis of domination and subordination.”¹⁹ In Crossan’s eyes, what Jesus is talking about has nothing to do with faith and divisions of loyalty to him within the family, and everything to do with power and the breakdown of the traditional pattern of dominance and subservience. “The family is society in miniature ... ; since it involves power, it invites the abuse of power, and it is at this precise point that Jesus attacks it. His ideal group is, contrary to Mediterranean and indeed most human familial reality, an open one accessible to all under God.”²⁰

What I find most surprising about Crossan’s treatment of the topic is the high degree of selectivity regarding the gospel tradition.²¹ Altogether, he deals with only four pericopes, whereas in reality there are far more sayings which need to be considered before a judgement can be made.²² It is true that one or two sayings may be secondary and therefore of no

“patriarchy”) more objectively to mean a societal structure where hierarchical leadership and control are given to male heads of families. It is in this sense that the term will be used in this paper.

¹⁸Crossan, *Jesus*, 59.

¹⁹Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 300.

²⁰Crossan, *Jesus*, 60.

²¹Similar surprise is expressed by Ben Witherington in *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995) 68: “In order to arrive at this conclusion, Crossan once again must dismiss many sayings in order to cling to a few, and even the remaining few he often reinterprets in unconventional fashion.”

²²In this regard Horsley is more balanced, though his conclusions are only slightly more nuanced than those of Crossan.

help to us in this particular quest; the Markan version of the Nazareth rejection saying is a case in point. It is probable that Mark is responsible for adding "and among his own kin" to the proverbial statement that a prophet has no honour in his own country, a saying known to all the canonical gospels and to the Gospel of Thomas.²³ But as the table in the Appendix indicates, there are almost twenty sayings which in some way or another bear upon Jesus' attitude to the family. These all need to be evaluated in order to gain a comprehensive picture. In this exercise we must set ourselves a more modest goal.

Firstly, it should be noted that there are in the tradition several indicators which run in the opposite direction to the conclusions of Crossan. In Mark 7:9-13 Jesus is engaged in debate with the Pharisees on the Korban oath and what that does to the Mosaic obligation to honour parents. Though considered by Bultmann to be entirely secondary, a tradition created by the evangelist, and though given a black colour code by the Jesus Seminar,²⁴ many others have concluded that in substance the Korban incident derives from Jesus.²⁵ In a saying designed to encourage and reassure the disciples, the Q tradition (Matt 7:9-11/Luke 11: 11-13) speaks of a son's request to a father for bread/fish/egg and of how that request will not be denied, and then concludes that the heavenly father is unlikely to be any less trustworthy. It does not matter that Matthew writes of a man (ἄνθρωπος) and his son, and Luke of a father (πατήρ) and his son. Here is a tradition which has strong claims to being dominical by reason of its rhythmic parallelism and its similarity to other sayings of Jesus on God's providential care (Matt 6:25-33).²⁶ I will not make use of the parable of the two sons found only in Matt 21:28-32. Its authenticity is somewhat uncertain, though I personally am inclined to consider the core parable to show signs of dominical origin.²⁷ Very few, however,

²³Matt 13:57/Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24; John 4:44; *Gos. Thom.* 31. See the major commentaries on Mark 6:4. On the independence of John 4:44, see my "John 4:44 and the Patris of Jesus," *CBQ* 49 (1987) 254-63.

²⁴R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1963) 17-18; Crossan, Hoover, et al., *The Five Gospels*, 67-68.

²⁵H. Hübner, *Das Gesetz in der synoptischen Tradition* (Witten: Luther, 1973) 176-82; R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (2 vols; Freiburg: Herder, 1977) I. 368-76; R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26* (WBC 34A; Waco: Word, 1989) 362; W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew* (2 vols; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T Clark, 1988-91) II.517-19.

²⁶See the justification in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I.685; and note the pink colour rating given to the Matthean version by the Jesus Seminar (Crossan, Hoover, et al., *The Five Gospels*, 155).

²⁷It uses agricultural imagery, so typical of Jesus; it contrasts the righteous and sinners, common in Jesus' teaching; it uses the father-son metaphor of Yahweh and Israel. Fifty-eight percent of the Jesus Seminar agreed with me, but

have ventured to exclude the prodigal son parable from the corpus of authentic Jesus tradition.²⁸

If we bring together all of the above sayings, we find that we have a substantial block of tradition of various genres (Streitgespräch, paraenesis, parable) in which the undergirding attitude of Jesus to the family and to patriarchy is the very opposite of the reading of Crossan. While Jesus does not exactly parade around proclaiming, "I support the traditional family; I support patriarchy", he nonetheless uses them as models in his teaching in such a way, and to such an extent, that would have been impossible for him had he actually believed otherwise about their validity. You cannot seriously believe that if Jesus had as his agenda a commitment to "tear the hierarchical or patriarchal family in two along the axis of domination and subordination",²⁹ he could at the same time have used that very family structure to convey the fundamental core of his teaching: that God is welcoming back and embracing women and men who have wandered from his ways. If Crossan is correct, the prodigal son parable cannot go back to Jesus.

Nor can we stop there. The extent of the reliable Father-Son terminology in the tradition as it applies to God and Jesus has often been exaggerated. Once we eliminate the Fourth Gospel as a transmitter of reliable Jesus tradition,³⁰ we are left with surprisingly little. The heavenly voices proclaiming Jesus' sonship after his baptism and at the transfiguration cannot be relied upon. They are obviously shaped by Old Testament motifs (reflected in Ps 2:7, Isa 42:1, and possibly Genesis 22) and by each other, so that while it may be possible to affirm that at his baptism Jesus (and in the transfiguration, the disciples) experienced something, there are insurmountable problems in taking the words of the divine voice back to the events themselves³¹. The explicitness of the Father-Son terminology in the Great Thanksgiving (Matt 11:27-28 par.), I consider, is a

the black and grey votes dragged it into the grey category. (Crossan, Hoover, et al., *The Five Gospels*, 556-57).

²⁸Though some Jesus Seminar fellows voted black, which led to a pink colour rating in *The Five Gospels*, 356-57.

²⁹Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 30

³⁰This is not to say that there cannot be elements of reliable tradition embedded in John, but the evangelist has so shaped and elaborated on them to conform to his theological enterprise that they cannot normally be recovered.

³¹The bibliography for discussion of these events is extensive. As well as the major commentaries, see J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1975) 67-72, who argues for the likelihood that behind the baptism narrative lies a genuine experience of Jesus conveyed to his disciples; also J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 51-56. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, II.106-8, considers the baptismal voice "mirrors the desire of the first generation Christian church to define Jesus as soon as the primitive Gospel story begins."

reworking of a parabolic saying about a father and a son.³² This still leaves us, however, with a solid core of bedrock evidence: the Abba/Father terminology;³³ the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mark 12);³⁴ and the original parables behind Matt 11:27-28 and John 5:19-20a.³⁵ Clearly Jesus thought of his relationship with Yahweh in terms of a father-son relationship. Now, whatever that imagery may have meant for Jesus by way of Israel symbolism, it clearly also signified for him a call to submission and obedience to the will of God. In the culture of Judaism (and of the ancient world in general) true sonship implied submission and obedience to one's father.³⁶ And such language for the divine human relationship draws its meaning from a patriarchal culture. My contention is that if Jesus adopted father-son terminology to speak of his relationship with God, he could not have had as his agenda the overthrow of the very culture from which the terminology derived. It is no argument to respond: "But that is the very point. Jesus rejects all human father language and allows his disciples to call no man 'father' (Matt 23:9) in order that in the society he creates all are under the one heavenly Father." This is to confuse metaphorical and literal fatherhood, and to fail to recognize that the one draws its meaning from the other. In the context of first century Palestine, to make father-son/child terminology the primary metaphor for the divine-human relationship is to strengthen, not undermine, the social structure from which the metaphor is derived.³⁷

³²See my forthcoming article on sonship in the gospel tradition.

³³The claims of J. Jeremias in "Abba" in his *The Prayers of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1967) 11-65, that Jesus' addressing of God as Abba is unique, may not be secure. See, for example, G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: Pelican, 1973) 210-11. But that Jesus thought of God as his Father, whether "Abba" was used or not, is not disputed. See J. Barr, "Abba isn't 'Daddy'", *JTS* 39/1 (1988) 28-47.

³⁴The Jesus Seminar acknowledges that at least verses 1-8 of Mark 12 go back to Jesus in some form or another. They consider that *Gos. Thom.* 56:1-7 is independent and more original (Crossan, Hoover, et al., *The Five Gospels*, 510-11). This view is supported by others: Jeremias, *Parables*, 70-71; and J. A. Fitzmyer, *Luke* (AB 28, 28A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1981-85) II, 1277-82.

³⁵On John 5:19-20a, see John W. Pryor, *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People* (London: DLT, 1992) 27-28 and n. 61.

³⁶The literature on this is vast, but see especially the contribution of various authors under "Ἰός" in *TDNT*, VIII, 334-97.

³⁷In this I am disagreeing with Schüssler-Fiorenza who most cogently represents the opposing position. The following quote aptly summarizes her point of view: "Insofar as the new 'family' of Jesus has no room for 'fathers', it implicitly rejects their power and status and thus claims that in the messianic community all patriarchal structures should be abolished." (*In Memory of Her*, 147). Nor does Schüssler-Fiorenza regard this as applying only to the messianic community, leaving society as a whole untouched: "It [namely, Matt 23:9] also enjoined the disciples of Jesus from recognizing any father authority in their society, because there is only one father." (*In Memory of Her*, 151)

The contention that Jesus sought the overthrow of the patriarchal family, we conclude, falls before the cumulative evidence of Jesus' continued use (and presumed affirmation of) the patriarchal model in his teaching and in his references to God. Whatever the sayings cited by Crossan meant, they cannot be read to support his case.³⁸

What, then, is the meaning of the sayings of Jesus where the traditional family seems threatened? We have time to look at only one or two passages, and will therefore first revisit the Q logion previously quoted in its Lukan form (Matt 10:34-36/Luke 12:51-53). Matthew has shaped the saying to make it conform more closely to Mic 7:6, which reads: "For the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household." It is important to realize that in Judaism the breakdown of society was looked upon as a sign of the end days of tribulation caused by the increase in sinfulness, and sayings similar to Mic 7:6 are to be found in several inter-testamental texts (*Jub.* 23:16, 19; 1 *Enoch* 56:7; 110:1-2; 2 Bar 70:2-4; 4 Ezra 5:9;6:24). Likewise *m. Sotah* 9:15 reads: "With the footprints of the Messiah [i.e. just before Messiah's arrival] presumption shall increase ... Children shall shame the elders and the elders shall rise up before the children;" and then follows the quoting of Mic 7:6.³⁹ The Lukan form of the Q saying is more likely to be earlier, since its relationship with Mic 7:6 is more tangential.⁴⁰ Does it, however, go back to Jesus or are we looking at a saying which emerged in the social strife in Palestine generated by the earliest Christian communities? The Jesus Seminar exhibited great uncertainty, according it a grey classification for two reasons: firstly, it conflicts with Jesus' recommendation of unqualified love; and secondly, the saying alludes to Mic 7:6⁴¹ There are, however, arguments which

³⁸In this respect Horsley is more nuanced than Crossan, in that he at least acknowledges that "Jesus had a highly positive sense of the family" (*Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 237). He does, however, agree with Crossan that Jesus wished to abolish patriarchy and establish egalitarian communities and relations. He also fails to mention the implications of the passages we have discussed, and equally fails to recognize that providing a new model of patriarchy (in the service sayings [Mark 10:42-45], in divorce sayings, and in the fatherhood of God) is not the same thing as abolishing patriarchy.

³⁹*Sanh.* 97a. Also see R. C. Tannehill, "Matthew 10.34-36/Luke 12.49-53: Not Peace but a Sward," in *The Sword of his Mouth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 140-47.

⁴⁰*pace* Horsley in *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 223-34, who, on the basis of its similarity with Mic 7:6, claims Matthew's version to be more original. In rejecting family breakdown as a common motif of Jewish apocalyptic/eschatological literature, Horsley ignores the fact that this was precisely how the Mishnah later reads Micah.

⁴¹Crossan, Hoover, et al., *The Five Gospels*, 343.

favour a dominical origin: firstly, if Mic 7:6 is father to the child, why is the verbal similarity so loose? One would have expected that the early church would from the start tie the saying more closely to the scriptural text (as Matthew has done). Secondly, Mark knows of a saying similar to that found in Q: “And brother shall deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children shall rise up against parents and have them put to death.” (Mark 13:12/Matt 10:21/Luke 21:16). Whether this is a variant of the Q tradition, or whether it is saying from another occasion (as Matthew and Luke take it to be), need not concern us. Both sayings reflect the same Jewish outlook of family breakdown and distrust as a prelude to the end. By using the criterion of multiple attestation, we have every reason to look upon these sayings as derived from Jesus.

To return to Crossan’s interpretation of the Q logion. Is Jesus commending the breakdown of the patriarchal family? Several considerations make the answer an overwhelming no!

1. The saying with its similar logion in Mark 13:12, is part of a stream of Jewish expectation which foresaw family chaos and betrayal as an indication of the tribulation to come prior to the messianic age of blessing. Far from lauding the disintegration of the patriarchal family, such chaos is looked upon as a tragedy. If Jesus spoke these words without clearly indicating that he considered such an eventuality a “good thing”, his audience could not have interpreted them any other way.

2. As recorded in Luke, the natural reading of the text does not speak about the overthrow of generational and gender domination. If that had been Jesus’ intention he would not have spoken of father divided against son, and mother against daughter, but only of son against father, and daughter against father and mother. As it has come to us, the saying posits the intrusion of a belief system strong enough to disrupt the accepted family order. It leaves open the possibility that it is the father and mother, not the adult children, who have upset the equilibrium. They, not the children, could be the ones who have introduced the foreign element.

3. There is a further saying of Jesus which has not been considered in all of this. Both Mark and Q bear witness to a parabolic saying of Jesus about a divided kingdom or household which cannot stand (Mark 3:25; Matt 12:25/Luke 11:17).⁴² Whatever it referred to in the earliest tradition, it may perhaps support the proposal that Jesus looked upon divided households as something to be regretted, rather than something to be encouraged.

⁴²Not all are fully persuaded that Q had this saying. See, for example, Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, II.337. But theirs is very much a minority. There are enough agreements between Matthew and Luke (against Mark) to conclude a Q source.

Finally, Jesus' words on the true family (Mark 3:31-35/Matt 12:46-50/Luke 8:19-21: *Gos. Thom.* 99). These have been the subject of considerable discussion both in commentaries and articles.⁴³ Several preliminary comments need to be made. Firstly, if, with most scholars, we accept that v. 35 is an independent saying appended to vv. 31-34,⁴⁴ we are still left with the offence of v. 34b. It is impossible to conceive of v. 34b as a floating saying, unattached to the account of Jesus' family inquiring after him. Secondly, the offensiveness of the saying has been severely reduced by Luke who seems to present the family members as models of those who hear the word of God. Certainly, the sharp contrast between literal and metaphorical family is blurred by Luke.⁴⁵

The offensiveness of this saying to Eastern ears should not be minimized. It is inadequate to say, for example, that Jesus means no disrespect to his family but simply grasps the opportunity to make a spiritual point. To the Eastern mind, such a comment of Jesus can mean only one of three things:

- (i) he has callously turned his back on his cultural and family obligations and should be thought of as a reprobate;
- (ii) he is mentally unstable;
- (iii) he is consumed by a passion which in his eyes relativizes all other obligations. Of course, the distinction between (ii) and (iii) can be very fine and one's own judgement may hinge on one's attitude to the passion by which he is consumed.

In support of the third option we should note that if Jesus had already departed from Galilee to Judea in order to respond to the ministry of the Baptist, and if he had remained in Judea as a disciple of John and engaged in ministry there (John 3:22),⁴⁶ he had already turned his back on his family in pursuit of other goals. Clearly, his words preserved in the tradition simply bear witness to his previous actions: he was indeed consumed by a vision which in his eyes relativized all other obligations. In saying this we need to make several comments:

⁴³J. Lambrecht, "The Relatives of Jesus in Mark," *NovT* 16 (1974) 241-58; E. Best, *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel according to Mark* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) 49-63; J. D. Crossan, "Mark and the Relatives of Jesus," *NovT* 15 (1973) 81-113.

⁴⁴See Guelich, *Mark 1-8*:26, 183.

⁴⁵Fitzmyer, *Luke*, I.723; I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) 330-31.

⁴⁶For excellent defences of this proposal, see J. Murphy-O'Connor, "John the Baptist and History: History and Hypotheses," *NTS* 36 (1990) 359-74; and also Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, II, chap. 13, who surprisingly fails to mention Murphy-O'Connor's article. Also to be consulted is M. Goguel, *Au Seuil de L'Évangile: Jean-Baptiste* (Paris: Payot, 1928) 235-77.

(i) Judaism had a history of people who, out of allegiance to Yahweh, abandoned their family obligations. The tradition begins with Deut 33:9, where of Levi it is written, “who said of his father and mother, ‘I regard them not’; he ignored his kin and did not acknowledge his children.” It includes the Essenes who withdrew from family life, and appear to have looked upon the community as an *Ersatz* family.⁴⁷

(ii) Jesus’ words do not need to be seen as an attack on the family *per se*. He is not saying that those who “do the will of God” should abandon their families, nor is he implying that his own literal family should disintegrate to form part of a larger whole. What he is doing is to bear witness to a community of women, children, and men which transcends that most precious of units in Jewish culture, a community which, if need be, takes precedence over the family.

(iii) There is a difference of opinion over the significance of Jesus’ failure to mention “father” in the new community. Some believe that “father” is omitted simply because Jesus’ natural father is absent from the family grouping which has come to collect him.⁴⁸ While this is not impossible, particularly if v. 35 is a later addition to the tradition, I believe that Matt 23:9 and Jesus’ insistence on the Fatherhood of God for those in the new community, make it unlikely that he would speak of other fathers in the extended family he embraces.⁴⁹ But contrary to Schüssler-Fiorenza and Horsley,⁵⁰ the absence of “father” in these verses does not have negative implications for traditional fatherhood in the family social unit.⁵¹ Certainly, in the light of considerations presented earlier, we cannot with Horsley say, “Jesus apparently did not think in terms of human fathers.”⁵² On the contrary, the fact that Jesus fails to mention fathers in the “kingdom family”, far from denigrating the father role elevates it, for the heavenly Father becomes the pattern of all human fatherhood.⁵³

⁴⁷See, for example, IQS 1-9, even though family terminology is not used of the community. Further detailed evidence in support of the point made is to be found in Stephen C. Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (SNTSMS 80; Cambridge: CUP, 1994) chap. 2.

⁴⁸Guelich, *Mark 1–8*:26, 181.

⁴⁹See the majority of commentators.

⁵⁰Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 146-48; Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 237-38.

⁵¹Positively, however, human fatherhood should presumably model itself on the divine fatherhood.

⁵²Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 238.

⁵³*pace* Schüssler-Fiorenza, who writes: “the ‘father’ God of Jesus makes possible the ‘sisterhood of men’ (in the phrase of Mary Daly) by denying any father, and all patriarchy, its right to existence.” (*In Memory of Her*, 151).

Conclusion

Though we have not performed a complete archaeological survey of the evidence, those exploratory digs which we have made enable us to draw the following tentative conclusions:

1. The evidence does not support the claim that as part of his vision for Israel Jesus wished to shatter the patriarchal family.
2. At the same time, the family, with its structure, obligations, and hierarchy, is not sacrosanct, and the inbreaking of the kingdom of God relativizes it in two ways:

(i) For Jesus personally, and for those whom he calls to serve in his itinerant ministry, the call of God takes precedence over family obligations. He himself abandoned his family and recognized a broader community of brothers, sisters and mothers, under the headship of God. And he appears to have expected that others, too, who shared in his ministry, should abandon their family obligations (Mark 1:17/Matt 4:19; Mark 10:28-30/Matt 19:27-29/Luke 18:28-30; Matt 8:21-22/Luke 9:59-62).

(ii) For others in society who gladly hear his message and respond, it opens up a community of relations which is broader than the family (Mark 3:31-35/Matt 12:46-50/Luke 8:19-21), and which has the potential to shatter the family unity (Matt 10:34-36/Luke 12:51-53).

And what of the three trends noted at the beginning of this paper? Of course, nothing definitive can be said as a result of this study, but our conclusions point in the following directions:

1. Not personal salvation but corporate and societal transformation? And yet: while Jesus certainly has a decided Israel-centred focus and vision, it is as individuals that people respond to the message. Nor does Jesus appear to wish to transform what is central to Jewish life, the family.
2. A non-eschatological Jesus? And yet: if the family remains honoured but may be challenged by a more urgent calling; and if the family tensions envisaged allude to impending crisis, do they not support an eschatological Jesus?
3. Not Jesus but the kingdom of God? and yet: if the Korban oath offends when it clashes with God's concern for the family, but allegiance to Jesus may break family solidarity and dispense with family obligations, surely Jesus and allegiance to him are central to the kingdom's proclamation.

APPENDIX

Jesus and Family: Relevant Sayings

Note: The following list of sayings may contain tradition which does not, at least in its present form, go back to Jesus. But each will need to be tested for any thorough study of the issue to be conducted.

A. JESUS' OWN FAMILY

1. Mark 6:4: a prophet without honour among his own kin
2. Matt 12:46-50/Mark 3:31-35/Luke 8:19-21: Jesus' true family
3. John 20:26-27: Jesus and Mary at the crucifixion.

B. JESUS' DISCIPLES

4. Matt 4:19/Mark 1:17: a call with family implications
5. Luke 8:3: married women who accompany Jesus
6. Matt 19:27-29/Mark 10:28-30/Luke 18:28-30: reply to disciples who have left all
7. Matt 10:21/Mark 13:12/Luke 21:16: future family divisions
8. Matt 10:34-36/Luke 12:51-53: family divisions

C. OTHER SAYINGS

9. Matt 5:31-32/Matt 19:9/Mark 10:11-12/Luke 16:18: divorce sayings
10. Matt 8:21/Luke 9:59-62: forget your family obligations
11. Matt 10:37/Luke 14:26-27: allegiance to Jesus before family
12. Matt 15:4-6/Mark 7:10-13: Korban episode
13. Luke 11:27-28: true blessedness
14. Matt 24:37-38/Luke 17:26-27: marrying and giving in marriage continues

D. GOD AS FATHER OF ISRAEL—A SELECTION

15. Matt 7:9-11/Luke 11:11-13: God the father gives to his children
16. Luke 15:11-32: prodigal son parable
17. Matt 21:28-32: parable of the two sons