The Nonviolent Messiah: Jesus, Q, and the Enochic Tradition is an ambitious study in which author Simon J. Joseph seeks to assess the complex Christologies in the Sayings Gospel Q and link them to a wider thesis about the essentially nonviolent character of the historical Jesus. Whereas some have argued that Q presents an unusual portrait of Jesus in comparison to the canonical gospels, Joseph views it as participating in the wider matrix of messianic discourse of Second Temple Judaism. This would have been a very innovative historical Jesus book roughly two decades ago. As it stands, however, the methodology, which acknowledges but does not always employ, the so-called criteria of authenticity, seems dated, and important recent critiques of historical Jesus scholarship are only briefly recognized in the footnotes. Even so, the study does reflect the increasingly popular and very important effort to assess language of violence in Judeo-Christian texts.

Chapter 1 offers a rationale for why it is necessary to pen a new historical Jesus study that relies so heavily on the Sayings Gospel Q. Here Q is treated as “the single more important source for reconstructing the teachings of the historical Jesus…. Q is our earliest source of authentic Jesus tradition … [an] arguably coherent, authoritative, dominical, canonical, and authentic Jesus tradition” (7–8, 10). Previous explorations of Q have failed to
properly understand its messianic ideas, Joseph maintains, and this book hopes to rectify this problem.

Chapter 2 aims to establish that Jesus was essentially nonviolent and that those who have argued otherwise have misinterpreted the evidence. Joseph’s understanding of violence is admittedly narrow: “the intentional use of force in order to hurt, damage, or kill another person or group” (24). Even with such a narrow definition he must deal with some rather forceful sayings attributed to Jesus (e.g., “I have not come to bring peace but a sword”). Many of the references to violence are interpreted as metaphors to signal, for instance, the tensions that commitment to Jesus’s teachings would engender among communities. Against the recent suggestions that Jesus advocated resistance to the Roman Empire, moreover, Joseph finds no evidence that he promoted any sort of “armed military resistance” (34). Nor does he find any support for Jesus the revolutionary/nationalist, a portrait that “almost completely misrepresents the historical Jesus” (37). Finding no solid proof that Jesus encouraged violence and instead uncovering support that he was a proponent of nonviolence, he surmises the following about authentic Jesus traditions: “if Jesus was consistently nonviolent, then violent Jesus traditions would have little to no claim to being authentic” (50). Later we see how this logic informs Joseph’s historical reconstruction: “[n]onviolent sayings and acts cohere; violent sayings, nonviolent sayings, and nonviolent acts do not” (85).

From a theological perspective (evidently a concern throughout these chapters), any study of Jesus’s violence also must grapple with God’s violence in the Hebrew Bible. It is to this task that chapter 3 turns. Joseph surveys that ways that commentators have struggled with explicit acts of divine violence in the Bible: “Was the Jesus who taught ‘love your enemies’ simply mistaken, hypocritical, or deceptive when he grounded this ethic in the unconditionally loving and forgiving character of God? Is the historical Jesus guilty—by association—of divine violence?” (65). Joseph refuses to characterize the issue as a conflict between Jewish Scriptures and later Christian ones (i.e., a supersessionist model); rather, he correctly observes that these tensions exist “within Judaism” (67).

Chapter 4 looks at the way scholars and theologians have rationalized Yahweh’s violence in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus’s apparent peaceful message in the New Testament. He explores the relationship between the kingdom of God (described as essentially nonviolent) and other references that depict Jesus as a fiery apocalyptic preacher. Although some contemporary scholars see these ideas as diametrically opposed, it is clear that both streams of tradition exist in Q. Joseph reconciles this, in part, by explaining that, while Jesus was certainly interested in eschatology, the violent, apocalyptic dimensions were later developments: he was an “eschatological Jesus, not an ‘apocalyptic Jesus’” (88). Jesus’s message, he clarifies further, was a “predictive warning,” not a “vindictive threat”
This is, of course, not a new position. John Dominic Crossan, for example, has long been a proponent of an eschatologically oriented Jesus who was not an advocate of the violent vindication associated with other apocalypticists.) The emphasis on eschatological violence, Joseph argues, is a later accretion that served social and psychological functions for early Jesus groups.

Also involved in his reconciliation is the implicit encouragement for the audience to share his theological perspective. “What I am denying,” he writes, “is that God’s justice or judgment necessarily looks anything like the divine judgment imagined by imperfect human beings experiencing rejection, persecution, and disappointment in the name of God. We have simply confused God’s justice and judgment with (human) violence and vengeance” (79). I find this line of reasoning troubling in such a study. I for one am not content to assume that my interpretations of many of these traditions as violent result from my own human imperfection; I, unfortunately, cannot share Joseph’s theological interpretation. But I digress.

Having argued that the historical Jesus was nonviolent, Joseph turns in chapter 5 to the related issue of divine violence especially as it has been connected to messianic figures. Many reconstructions of Jesus, he argues, have conflated a variety of understandings of messianism, which was a diverse collection of ideas in the ancient world and was constantly in flux: “the Messiah” as a static and coherent concept has been “over-determined” (105). Messianic understandings could emphasize royal-political dimensions, prophetic dimensions, or even priestly dimensions—all having different relations to violence and nonviolence. Joseph concludes that the historical Jesus lacked features of a military messiah and, conversely, preached a message of nonviolence. But this only complicates matters more: his “voluntary death is thus a riddle in relation to his messianic identity, an historical enigma that continues to puzzle: the idea of a nonviolent messiah” (110).

In an effort to make sense of this enigma, chapter 6 surveys Christologies of Q. Although the title “Christ” is absent from Q, Joseph uncovers an implicit Christology centering around divine kingship. In fact, he proposes that the absence of “Christ” is a deliberate strategy by Q’s author(s), for it challenges traditional (i.e., political-military) messianic notions. Q depicts Jesus as one anointed through his baptism, destined to realize his identity as the “the One Who is to Come,” but yet not fulfilling any military roles, that is, “traditional Davidic expectations” (124). To support his interpretation of Q’s messianism, Joseph relies strongly on Qumran texts that seem to share some of the same messianic expectations. The absence of an explicit identification of Jesus as the Messiah in Q is not especially problematic, according to Joseph, for he sees an affinity between this representation of Jesus’s identity and the messianic secret motif in Mark, explored in
chapter 7. Indeed, Q and Mark may be reflecting something authentic about the historical Jesus: that he intentionally disguised his messianic identity because he “did not want to mislead either his own people or the Romans with ideas of a military revolution” (129). Chapters 8 and 9 examine the different streams of tradition that have been appropriated from the Enochic tradition and repurposed for Q’s messianic portrait of Jesus. Q merges an apocalyptic judge figure (based on the Enochic [and thus Daniel’s] “son of man” character) with a new Adamic messiah who embodies divine sonship.

Chapter 10 sets out to construct a coherent exposition of Q’s theology. Joseph is in good company in seeing the “kingdom” as the central motif of Q and trying to decode its symbolic meaning. Here the kingdom is “the presence of God” (199) and “a way of being [that] can be seen, not as a catastrophic event or as a politico-religious empire, but rather as a symbol-metaphor for God’s original intention for human-divine relationship” (203). Q’s Jesus puts forth new laws, often concerning nonviolence, for this way of being, and this nonviolent ethic challenges some other conceptions of the Messiah. But Q is actually creating new messianic horizons, Joseph suggests: Q’s portrait of Jesus connects two streams of messianism: an apocalyptic judge (based on the Enochic “son of man”) and the “transforming Adamic messiah” who is the Son of God (226).

Joseph seems to have a certain endgame (to reveal a nonviolent historical Jesus), and when he encounters evidence or theories that do not serve his goals, he does not always fully engage with them or follow through with their consequences. Consider his evaluation of the famous criteria of authenticity. It seems as though he gives them routine attention early in his study in order to be methodologically conscientious. But in chapter 2 he is found preoccupied with the Lukan pericope of Jesus instructing his disciples to buy swords. Under which criteria is this authentic? What was the point of reviewing the criteria if one’s study still relies on Sondergut that fit the portrait one is trying to construct? Or, when considering the recent advances in historical Jesus scholarship, Joseph relegates a particularly consequential one (Zeba Crook’s significant critique of the reliability of memories) to the footnotes. These sorts of critiques, which call into question the entire methodologies of historical Jesus scholarship, must be seriously engaged, not simply mentioned in passing, if the field is ever to advance.

Moreover, there is a certain disconnect to these chapters mainly because many were self-contained essays either presented or published elsewhere before being collected together in this book. The analyses in each chapter are also oddly disconnected from the historical setting of the texts involved. Most of the scholarship with which Joseph engages is other biblical scholarship, but he attends to few of the important studies on violence in the ancient world that would assist him with the historical interpretation of the passages that he analyzes. The result is that Jesus seems only to have a Jewish context in this study.
Finally, while this book at first glance appears to be one of the most current studies on violence in early Christianity, its focus on the historical Jesus and Q insulates it from having to consider with some of the most challenging material for this enterprise, such as Revelation or even Paul’s use of violent imagery.

When it comes messianism, the study ends up with an odd tension. On one hand, Joseph goes to great lengths to argue that messianism was so complex and diverse in first-century Judaism that we cannot speak of “one” coherent expected messiah, a conclusion to which I am very sympathetic. On the other hand, we find him arguing that Q is trying to subvert “traditional messianic expectations” (114) through its portrayal of Jesus. How is it subversive, though, if its portrait is just another among many understandings of messianism? For something to be recognized as “subversive,” one presumes that a normative definition of messianic would exist that could be subverted.

It becomes clear as the book unfolds that Joseph has theological investigation, not just historical understanding, in view: “Jesus’ position on violence and nonviolence is not merely a literary or historical triviality but directly affects how contemporary Christian theology understands and represents Jesus, God, eschatology, and humanity” (47). The effort to understand Q within the wider context of Second Temple Judaism and the emphasis on the complexity of messianic ideas are greatly appreciated, but some of the other conclusions are not altogether convincing.