The Synoptic Problem, Ancient Media, and the Historical Jesus

A Response

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The editors of *JHJS* have pulled together an ideal set of respondents to *Q in Matthew*: Robert Derrenbacker and Sarah Rollens, fellow alums of the University of Toronto program and representatives of the so-called 'Toronto School' of Q scholarship, Rafael Rodríguez, Synoptic source-critical agnostic and fellow-traveler in the world of ancient media, and Mark Goodacre, genial champion of the Farrar-Goulder hypothesis (*FGH*). I am grateful for the investment of time evident in their responses. While their expressions of appreciation for the work are welcome, naturally what is of most interest are the points they raise in critique. That this is a journal dedicated to historical Jesus research also raises the question of why the editors have seen fit to devote an issue to the Synoptic Problem debate. We will therefore conclude with reflections on the significance of the memory factor in the transmission of the Jesus tradition, as this becomes visible in Synoptic source relations, for historical Jesus enquiry.

Derrenbacker

Derrenbacker, a pathbreaker in media approaches to the Synoptic Problem,¹ is welcoming of the general intent of *Q in Matthew*, but he does balk at its rejection of the need for intermediary media – provisional drafts (ὑπομνήματα); wax tablets; open-leaf notebooks; proto-codices – to account on source-utilization grounds for Matthew’s rearrangement of the Q materials. Those familiar with Derrenbacker’s work will recognize that he is here defending his view that Matthew had Q in the rather primitive medium of a multi-leaved notebook, a proto-codex; this accounts for Matthew’s ability to access Q materials out of

order. In this connection he also questions my rating of Matthew’s scribal practices at the expert literary level, adverting instead to John Kloppenborg’s opinion that the extensive close copying on view in Synoptic parallels indicates scribes of middling literate capability, ‘of relatively modest accomplishment’.² For this reason Derrenbacker doubts that such scribes had the expert memory-based compositional skills Q in Matthew attributes to Matthew.

Derrenbacker’s critique on these points rests on premises that I would question; these include his misconstrual of Q in Matthew’s analysis of the intersection of memory and manuscript in scribal utilization activity. When writing the volume I was concerned that its emphasis upon the instrumental role of memory might give rise to the impression that I was consigning the scroll artifact to a marginal position and that Matthew proceeded wholly by memory. I went to some pains, therefore, to emphasize that the phenomenon is one of memory-manuscript fusion, of brain-artifact interface, and taking care to speak of Matthew’s ‘memory-grounded’, ‘memory-based’, or ‘memory-assisted’ source-utilization.³ For example:

The instrumental role memory played in discovery and arrangement of materials does not render the scroll artifact superfluous or even marginal to the compositional scene. The scroll itself was certainly ill-suited to the compositional enterprise, but one must think here of manuscript and memory in operational fusion. Source utilization was memory-grounded, whatever the interplay of memory and manipulation of a scroll might be in particular cases.⁴

And in another passage: ‘For Matthew, “Q” exists at the nexus of its memorial, artifactual, ethical, and oral-performative actualizations.’⁵

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⁴ Alan Kirk, *Q in Matthew: Ancient Media, Memory, and Early Scribal Transmission of the Jesus Tradition* (LNTS 564; London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2016), p. 145 (emphasis added); see also p. 221.
⁵ Ibid., p. 183. Memory/manuscript fusion is not really so alien a phenomenon. A relevant analogy is individuals who have a thoroughly internalized knowledge of their Bibles; consequently