

Derico, T. M.: Oral Tradition and Synoptic Verbal Agreement. Evaluating the Empirical Evidence for Literary Dependence. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications 2016. x, 367 S. 44,- \$. ISBN 978-1-62032-090-7.

In recent times a number of New Testament scholars have come to the conclusion that copying may not offer the best explanation for the Synoptic Problem. A growing minority believes that the influence of oral tradition has long been underestimated. In his Oxford dissertation, which was supervised by Ron Piper, Chris Rowland, and David Wenham, Travis Derico has joined the group of exegetes who apply an interdisciplinary empirical approach to the Synoptic Problem and explore the possible contributions of the most recent field research on orality and oral tradition.

D.'s starting point which he describes in his first introductory chapter (pp. 1-16) is the observation that it is no longer possible to appeal to typical features of orality which can universally be found in all kinds of oral traditions. Oral traditions do not, for instance, always change in the same way or to the same extent. Oral literature is much more diverse than has often been assumed. As a consequence, New Testament scholars may not simply refer to universal features of oral tradition in order to apply them to the Synoptic Gospels. It is much more helpful to compare the New Testament Synoptic Problem to concrete synoptic texts with an oral origin. The key question D. wants to answer by doing this is: "How much of the verbal agreement we observe among the Synoptics could be accounted for on the supposition that the Synoptic Evangelists referred exclusively to orally transmitted Jesus traditions?" (p. 15).

In chapter 2, D. notes, correctly I believe, that "mainstream scholarly analysis of the Synoptic Gospels proceeds from the axiom that Synoptic verbal agreement is a reliable indicator of Synoptic literary relationships. The truth of this axiom is almost never contested". At the same time, "one searches the archives in vain for any detailed exposition or defense of the claim that Synoptic verbal agreement is a good indicator of Synoptic literary relationships, finding instead only the continual repetition of that claim" (p. 17). An important exception is J. D. Crossan who interpreted the oral Jesus tradition and the Synoptic Problem in light of some inductive data from checked experiences and controlled experiments. On the basis of this kind of empirical evidence, Crossan confirmed the mainstream conclusion that the kind of verbal agreement found among the Synoptic Gospels could not have been produced by orality.

In the following two chapters, D. analyzes the most commonly presented empirical evidence which Gospel scholars use to explain the origin of the verbal agreements between the Synoptic Gospels. This evidence is anecdotal and comes from scholars' personal experiences. Chapter 3 is devoted to anecdotal evidence from shared experience that is familiar both to the scholar and his readers (pp. 38-59). B. H. Streeter, for instance, referred to the transmission of epigrams and maxims in university colleges in Oxford and Cambridge, and J. D. G. Dunn referred to variation in the liturgy of contemporary western communities. D. rightly observes that most scholars from neighboring disciplines who investigate present-day oral traditions do not share the conviction of many New Testament scholars that the relationship among the Synoptic Gospels can be assessed on the basis of such experiences or other kinds of intuitions regarding the capacity or limitations of oral tradition.

Chapter 4 is devoted to anecdotal evidence from unique experiences of scholars which are unfamiliar to their readers (pp. 60-116). The oft-quoted K. Bailey, for instance, who referred to "informal controlled oral tradition" in rural villages of the Arabic Middle East, never provided synoptic versions of the oral stories which he heard during the middle of the last century. Therefore, it is impossible to know the degree of verbal agreement among the different recitations of the same story and to exactly determine its proximity to the Synoptic Problem of the New Testament.

In Chapter 5 D. discusses the “Evidence from Transcribed Oral Texts” (pp. 117-172). He starts with the observation that so far transcriptions of different versions of the same oral text have only been published by two New Testament scholars, J. D. Crossan and myself. In the first half of the chapter (pp. 123-142), D. demonstrates that the synoptic parallels from oral literature which Crossan presented do not support his claim that the verbal agreement among the Synoptic Gospels could not have been the result of oral tradition. Particularly helpful is the section where D. analyzes the original texts of modern Greek lament songs which Crossan had quoted only in English translation. D. is able to show that the verbal agreement between these parallel versions of Greek oral texts amounts to up to 38 percent (pp. 134-141). This is very similar to the amount of verbal agreement among the Synoptic Gospels. The oral texts which Crossan used simply do not prove what he claimed they prove.

In the second half of chapter 5 (pp. 142-171), D. reviews the parallel oral-traditional texts which I provided in part D of my book “Der mündliche Faktor und seine Bedeutung für die synoptische Frage” (TANZ 49 [2008] 259-304): sections from South Slavic Muslim epic songs, from the West African Sunjata epic, and from traditional stories told in the Chinook language of the Kathlamet people. D. agrees with my general conclusion that these parallel oral texts demonstrate that the level of verbal agreement among the Synoptic Gospels could be explained as the result of oral tradition (not only as the result of literary copying). Beyond that, D. corrects a mistake which I made in the interpretation of a text offered by A. B. Lord, improves some of my arguments, and adds two versions of another story of the Kathlamet people, which had so far not been referred to by other New Testament scholar (pp. 165-170).

A point where I differ slightly from D.’s judgement is his strong emphasis on the generic differences between some of the available oral-traditional texts and the Synoptic Gospels. Following John Miles Foley, D. demands “as grounds for comparison among traditions nothing less than the closest generic fit available” (pp. 12-15). On the basis of this demand, D. observes, for instance, “insufficient generic affinity between ... oral epic poetic texts and any of the Synoptic materials” (p. 124). But D. does not explain in any detail what difference it makes in terms of verbal agreement if the orally transmitted texts are epics or stories. One important difference I can think of is that according to experimental memory research poetry can be remembered much better than prose because human memory is supported by repetition (rhyme, meter, parallelism) which is an important element of poetry (TANZ 49 [2008] 197-2018). Does not the fact that Lord’s Serbo-Croatian epic texts followed a fixed metrical scheme (with its many repetitions) create a certain affinity to those extensive parts of the Synoptic tradition which follow the rules of the Semitic parallelismus membrorum (with its many repetitions)?

D. opens his 6th chapter (pp. 173-204) with the observation that the “explanatory power of studies drawn from experimental psychology have not yet been realized by New Testament scholars”. He describes the pioneering memory experiments that were conducted by the psychologist Frederic Bartlett at the University of Cambridge in the first half of the 20th century. In a second step D. disproves a thesis developed by Robert McIver and Marie Carroll and confirmed by April DeConick, namely that a sequence of verbal agreement of more than 16 words between two texts cannot be the result of human memory but only of literary dependence.

In my own analysis of McIver’s thesis, I came to a very similar conclusion: In their experiments, McIver und Carroll did not take into account the empirically demonstrable retention rates of people with a trained memory. As research results from experimental psychology and oral cultures reveal, persons with trained memories can generate text reproductions with unbroken sequences of up to 36 words that are exactly the same as in the original. Therefore, from the perspective of experimental psychology even the longest exact word-for-word parallels in the Synoptic Gospels can be accounted for on the basis of memorization (WUNT 2/425 [2016] 137-172).

Chapter 7 (pp. 205-266) contains D.'s most original contribution to the scholarly debate of the Synoptic Problem. In 2002/03 he recorded several Arabic oral-traditional narratives concerning the American missionary Roy Whiteman who had worked in northern Jordan from the late 1920s until his death in 1992. D. interviewed a number of elderly men who had been close companions of Whiteman for many years. Arabic transcriptions and English translations of the three most relevant narratives can be found in an appendix of D.'s book. These three narratives are between 1000 and 2000 words long and consist of twenty-one to thirty-six pericopes. Each pair of Whiteman narratives shares between six and eight pericopes. D. is able to demonstrate that the level of verbal agreement between the Whiteman narratives is similar to the level of verbal agreement in a substantial portion of the entirely narrative parallel pericopes in the Synoptic Gospels. In the remaining part of his final chapter D. focusses on analogies from oral-traditional narratives to the Synoptic minor agreements and to Synoptic verbal agreements in parenthetical remarks. It would have been helpful if D. had also offered a synopsis of the parallel Whiteman pericopes which highlights the verbal agreements in order to make them more visible, just as in the proceeding chapters of his very useful book.

In my judgment, D. has demonstrated convincingly that the amount of verbal agreement found among the Synoptic Gospels could have been the result not only of literary copying but also oral tradition. I further regard his concluding proposal as justified: "I suggest, therefore, that the discovery, analysis, and comparative presentation of the relevant sorts of oral-traditional data should be made a deliberate focus of research within New Testament [Synoptic] scholarship" (p. 266). As a matter of course, scholars who do not agree with this kind of empirical approach or regard the results which have been reached so far as unconvincing are invited to explain their reasoning (p. 240).

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