

BRAINWAVES REPORT BW/028

Q AND THE TOOTH FAIRY

Why the Q Hypothesis Could Never Have Been Right

Vanity of vanities saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 1:2 KJV)

I think it may be stated without exaggeration that Q is the most successful fallacy in the history of scholarship. It owes its success to the fact that it has acquired a name - the letter, 'Q' - which can be, and has been, reinterpreted every time the current theory encounters a problem. So 'Q' has a wide variety of meanings, any one of which can be called upon when required.¹

So I wrote in 2007. Some people were persuaded. Quite a number were not. Were they wise?

What we have here is an extraordinarily successful con trick in which the victims have no idea whatsoever that they have been taken in.

No historical evidence, either documentary or archaeological, has ever been found, to suggest that Q ever existed. The silence of the Fathers is damning. Not only do they express no grief at the loss of this most sacred document, the foundation of two of our canonical scriptures; they give no indication that they ever had it! And with no reason to believe that Q ever existed, it is vain to speculate as to how it might have comprised a solution to the Synoptic Problem. For that you need *historical evidence* that there ever was such a thing.

This widespread acceptance among Q theorists that the issue of evidence is of no consequence astounds me. In any academic discipline you may care to name – science, mathematics, history, law – we are taught that if our beliefs are not properly grounded on a solid foundation, they are of little worth. Why should academic theology be any different? With no solid historical basis, by forfeiting academic rigour, Q theory opens the door to those who on other grounds have decided that Christianity is no more than a bunch of unsubstantiated fairy tales, to claim total victory. It disposes of any suggestion that NT scholars are seriously engaged in the pursuit of Truth.

By even arguing over Q, its opponents have already conceded at least half of their case. The notion that something which is no more than a figment of some people's imagination could possibly provide a solution to *any* historical problem comes on a par with the King's subjects in Hans Christian Andersen's fable believing he could possibly be wearing a New Suit of Clothes which is in fact totally invisible. That was pure folly. There is nothing there to argue about.

That my milk teeth used to disappear from my bedside, replaced by a small coin, is not evidence that the tooth fairy came and removed them, however fervently I or thousands of other children may have believed that. *Their faith in it is no proof that the tooth fairy actually exists!* There are other explanations. (Or so I have been told.)² Yet today, in theology faculties all over the world, there are thousands of grown men and women gaily spending their lives in a quest of no more consequence than an investigation into the private life of the tooth fairy.³ And not realising it.

¹ Martin Mosse, *The Three Gospels: New Testament History Introduced by the Synoptic Problem*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007) Chapter 3, 'Q: A Post-Mortem', 91. See also Mosse, in Wiebe, ed., *Jesus and Christian Origins* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 98-101.

² Santa Claus provides another instance which readers may wish to verify (or falsify) from their own experience.

³ So for instance there are those who can oblige us with the very text Q would have carried, if it had ever existed. See D.R. Catchpole, *The Quest for Q* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).

Especially, since when asked to describe this amazing New Suit, believers all give different and conflicting descriptions!

Petrie makes this point in a colourful way. Speaking of the 'exasperating contradictoriness' of scholarly views as to the nature of Q, he writes:

'Q' is a single document; it is a composite document, incorporating earlier sources; it is used in different redactions; it is more than one document. The original language of 'Q' is Greek; the original language is Aramaic; it is used in different translations. 'Q' is the Matthaean Logia; it is not the Matthaean Logia. 'Q' has a definite shape; it is no more than an amorphous collection of fragments. 'Q' is a gospel; it is not a gospel. 'Q' includes the Crucifixion story; it does not include the Crucifixion story. 'Q' consists wholly of sayings and there is no narrative; it includes some narrative. All of 'Q' is preserved in Matt. and Luke; not all of it is preserved; it is better preserved in Matthew; it is better preserved in Luke. Matthew's order of 'Q' is the correct order; Luke's is the correct order; neither order is correct. 'Q' is used by Mark; it is not used by Mark.⁴

What happens then when the small boy points out, "Look at the King! The King! The King! The King is in the altogether,..."? There *could* be those who go on 'seeing' the naked King's Suit. They may even go on trying to convince others of its reality long after the hoax has been exposed. But not, I would think, very many.

However, those who don't see the joke risk becoming part of it themselves. For by making their Q theory unfalsifiable as per Popper, they reduce it to the level of an unscientific fantasy. Equipped with all the infallibility of a conspiracy theorist, they will go on echoing Tuckett's dictum on the nature of Q,

Until we can actually find a manuscript of Q, we can only speculate!⁵

Otherwise, presumably Farrer⁶ or someone very like him, will win as the last one standing, by routine application of Occam's Razor.⁷

The modern-day attempt to sit on the fence by replacing 'Q' by 'Q-material', and analysing that for significant theological content, or details of the imagined 'Q-community' which is supposed to have invented it, and its history,⁸ fares no better. As Farrer pointed out, the one characteristic of material common to Matthew and Luke but not in Mark was simply 'Luke-pleasingness.'⁹ It may tell us a bit about Luke, but not much more than that.

So, again, what will happen when the truth gets out?

I imagine, those gifted with a strong sense of humour will turn over the page, read and enjoy Peter Wallis's splendid parody 'Q', and then indulge themselves in a good hearty laugh. Those not so gifted may be more reluctant to join in. People have spent their entire working lives playing Q games.

Martin Mosse,

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⁴ C. S. Petrie, 'Q is only what you make it', *NovT* 3, 1959, 28-33, at 29-30.

⁵ C.M. Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996) 96.

⁶ Austin Farrer, 'On Dispensing with Q', 55-88, in D.E. Nineham (ed.), *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R.H. Lightfoot* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955).

⁷ There is an interesting correlation, worth exploring, between those who believe in Q and those who reject Occam's Razor, and *vice versa*.

⁸ Tuckett, *op. cit.*, gives us in full detail an illuminating and insightful account of this. Most imaginative also.

⁹ Farrer, *op. cit.*, 57.

Q

They asked me how I knew

That there was no Q.

Sadly I replied,

“It comes as no surprise –

Scholars do tell lies!”

They asked me, “was it true

There had been no Q?”

I said “if they tried

To cope with Q’s demise,

The truth they’d realise.”

They wonder what to do

If there is no Q;

I marvel how the wise

Fail to recognise

Falsehood in disguise.

Still, searching after Q

Anything might do –

“Try and visualise

That virtual’s the prize

When smoke gets in your eyes!”

Peter Wallis (1942 – 2014). Used by permission.