

## **Unit 2**

### **John among the Gospels**

Studying the Gospel of John is to work with a text of great literary artistry and theological depth, one whose influence on Christian theology has been profound, if not immeasurable. It is true to say that no other New Testament writing has played such an important role in the development of the Church's christological dogma, not least because of its particular presentation of Jesus as the Logos and Son who is sent by God as his authoritative agent to offer salvation to the world. A Gospel of such distinctive style and content has, inevitably, also been the subject of intense scholarly study, leading one recent commentator to warn – probably with more pessimism than is warranted – that the abundance of scholarly literature on John's Gospel is in danger of inflicting students with 'paralysis by analysis'.

The Gospel of John is traditionally attributed to the apostle John – one of the sons of Zebedee – although the actual identity of the author is never disclosed within the Gospel itself. Readers are simply introduced to an unnamed follower of Jesus (1:35-42; 18:15-18), a model disciple 'whom Jesus loved' (13:23; 19:26; 20:2-9), and about whom it is claimed towards the end of the Gospel that he is 'the disciple who bears witness about these things...and we know that his witness is true' (21:24). Whether he is the actual author of this writing has been much debated, but the description of this disciple as an authoritative and reliable witness to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection implies that he is viewed by those identified as 'we' in John 21:24 as the founder of the community from which this Gospel emerged (19:26, 35; 20:2-9). John's Gospel is also widely regarded as the latest of the four

canonical gospels. Whether this is the case depends on the dating of Matthew and Luke, but it certainly reached its present form before the end of the first century CE.

### **Similarities between John and the Synoptic Gospels**

The later dating traditionally attributed to John inevitably raises questions about the nature of its relationship with the other three canonical gospels. They all certainly possess a number of parallel features. As documents belonging to the literary genre of ‘gospel’ (*euangelion*), all four provide accounts of Jesus' life and ministry and end with narratives about his death and, with varying lengths, about his resurrection. But there are also more specific grounds for comparison between them, both collectively and individually.

**Mark and John** bear resemblance to each other in their broad outline of events. Both begin their actual narratives with the witness of John the Baptist, before describing miracles performed by Jesus and his repeated conflict with the Jewish authorities during his public ministry. Both also include Jesus' anointing at Bethany, an account of his entry into Jerusalem, his betrayal by Judas, an investigation by Jewish authorities, and a trial before Pilate. Furthermore, both Mark and John offer accounts of Jesus' mockery and his scourging, and of women witnesses present during the crucifixion and at the empty tomb.

In the case of individual Greek phrases shared by Mark and John, one in particular can be highlighted. The description of the ‘expensive ointment of pure nard’ (Mk 14:3; Jn 12:3) used to anoint Jesus is striking because both evangelists employ the unusual adjective *pistikon* (‘pure’) and they are in agreement about the ointment's value (three hundred denarii). Yet another oft quoted parallel is Jesus' command, ‘Stand up, take up your mat’

(Mk 2:11; Jn 5:8), whereas Jesus' prediction of his betrayal by Judas is, with the exception of one word, identical in both Gospels (Mk 14:18; Jn 13:21: 'Truly, I say to you that one of you will betray me').

There are fewer individual points of contact between **Matthew and John**, most of which are shared by Mark, one of Matthew's primary sources. Close verbal agreements with John are also rare in the case of Luke, although both share certain perspectives, particularly in their passion narratives, and include some details not found in the other two Gospels: these include the anointing of Jesus' feet rather than his head, while Judas' betrayal of Jesus is interpreted in terms of his possession by Satan. Pilate, in both gospels, makes a threefold declaration of Jesus' innocence, and two angels, rather than one, are seen at the tomb.

### **Differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels**

The differences between John and the Synoptics are far more numerous. Although they need not be outlined in detail at this point (since they are well documented in most standard works on John), they are part and parcel of what makes John distinctive, and one of the aims of this module is to investigate the nature and significance of this distinctiveness. In Unit 5 we will examine the Prologue, in which John does not seek to legitimate the unique identity of Jesus by beginning with a description of his birth and genealogy (as in the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives), but sets his origins against a cosmic stage, in the beginning, before creation.

The chronology and geography of Jesus' earthly ministry in John's Gospel also differ markedly from its Synoptic counterparts. The references to three distinct passovers in the

first half of the narrative (2:13; 6:4; 11:55) suggest that Jesus' ministry extends over three years rather than the one implied by the Synoptic accounts. And whereas the Synoptics focus on Jesus' teaching and activity in Galilee, according to John he spends far more time in Jerusalem, visiting the city on several occasions as part of his observance of the great Jewish pilgrimage feasts. Even the date of Jesus' death is different, taking place on the day of preparation for Passover (14 Nisan) rather than on the feast day itself. This earlier dating of Jesus' death undoubtedly lends itself to John's presentation of Jesus as the lamb of God, sentenced to death by Pilate at the time when the passover lambs are being slaughtered in the temple in preparation for the feast. But a good case has been made by some scholars in support of the historical accuracy of this dating, particularly as it removes the problem of how Jesus, according to the Synoptic Gospels, could be tried and sentenced to death on a Jewish feast day.

But what sets John firmly apart from the Synoptic Gospels is the content and style of Jesus' teaching. Parables are virtually non-existent and, rather than conducting brief debates with his Jewish contemporaries on issues such as prayer, fasting, sabbath and divorce, the Johannine Jesus delivers extended discourses full of symbolic language such as life, light, judgement and truth. These discourses, moreover, centre on Jesus' unique identity as the heavenly Son sent from above to make available, to the world below, the Father's gift of eternal life.

### **Assessing the Evidence**

What, then, is the nature of the relationship between John and the Synoptics? How do we explain the numerous differences between them and, at the same time, take into account some striking resemblances set within a similar overall framework? Such questions, as one would expect, have a long history in Johannine scholarship. Already at the beginning of the third century Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-220) stated that ‘John, last of all, realizing that the physical facts had been set forth in the Gospels, being urged by his friends and divinely moved by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel’ (quoted by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* VI.14.7). This assertion, that John wrote last and did so with an eye to the other canonical gospels, has led most Christian writers throughout the centuries to assume John’s awareness of, and indeed dependence on, the Synoptic Gospels. It has also led to the belief that John’s aim was to stress the spiritual or theological *significance* of Jesus’ ministry, either in the sense of wanting to supplement or even to replace the Synoptic Gospels, but that he did so in a way far removed from living Jesus traditions.

The theory of John’s dependence on the Synoptics prevailed as the dominant view until the appearance of a slim volume in 1938 entitled *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels*. In this book P. Gardner-Smith questioned whether there is sufficient evidence to claim that John knew and used the Synoptic Gospels as his primary sources. The appearance of this study coincided with the rise of form criticism, with its emphasis upon the early Christians as initially dependent on oral rather than written sources for their knowledge of Jesus. The similarities between John and the Synoptics, ascribed by previous generations of scholars to a literary relationship, were, according to Gardner-Smith, better explained as the result of the evangelists’ acquaintance with a common pool of oral traditions. Thus in the case of such

logia (=sayings) as ‘Stand up, take up your mat’, this is precisely the kind of statement that would have been easily memorised for the purpose of transmission by word of mouth.

While this pool of oral tradition could have existed in various forms, some layers reached John, and others reached Mark. To cite one example as a way of illustration: both Mark and John record virtually identical versions of John the Baptist’s declaration, ‘I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandal(s)’ (Mk 1:7; Jn 1:27). But a closer inspection of both versions of this saying reveals that the two evangelists use different adjectives for ‘worthy’; Mark employs the word *hikanos*, whereas John has *axios*. Since there is no difference in meaning, and the variation possesses no particular theological significance, these two synonymous adjectives represent independent Greek renderings of an underlying Aramaic statement first circulated orally in the earliest Christian communities. If John used Mark as a source, why did he go out of his way to differ from that source in details of largely minor importance?

The significance of Gardner-Smith's volume cannot be overestimated, because with its appearance a new consensus emerged and twentieth-century Johannine scholarship was dominated by the view that John’s resemblances to the Synoptics came through channels other than the written gospels. The important points of contact between them stem from their sources, not from the gospels themselves.

Further exploration of the form and content of John’s source (or sources) has, nevertheless, taken a number of directions. Critics continue to enquire: did John also have access to alternative written sources, sources that can account for some of his unique material and, in certain cases, bear resemblances to Synoptic traditions? Building on Rudolf

Bultmann's intricate source-critical analysis of John's Gospel, one theory in particular continues to be influential, namely that the evangelist made use of an already existing source for Jesus' miracle stories or 'signs'. This so-called 'Signs source' contained the seven miracles recorded by John, some of which possess parallels in the Synoptic Gospels (the healing of the official's son, the feeding of the five thousand). If Gardner-Smith's search for oral tradition behind John's Gospel was an offshoot of form criticism, the attempt at reconstructing a pre-Johannine signs source is indebted to redaction criticism, because what it attempts to do is to distinguish tradition from John's redaction of that tradition. There is, however, a methodological problem with a procedure of this kind. Source criticism and redaction criticism as applied to the Synoptic Gospels are based on the comparison of parallels between written documents (the text of Matthew can be compared with the text of Mark and so forth). But those who attempt to reconstruct an underlying written source independent of the Synoptics, can only appeal to evidence from within the text of John itself. Identifying the precise content and contours of such sources (and their adaptation by John) then becomes a very difficult, and many would say an impossible, task. For these reasons, the 'Signs Source' theory is now only advocated by a very small number of Johannine scholars (such as the German scholar Michael Theobald).

How to disentangle tradition from redaction is also a methodological issue faced by more recent voices in Johannine studies who have revived the theory of John's dependence on the Synoptics. A group of scholars led by the Belgian scholar Frans Neirynck have produced a series of studies in which it is argued that the Synoptics represent John's main source and form the basis of the Johannine narrative. Their method of analysis is to examine individual

passages in John, which, they claim, amount to a conscious and sustained reworking of Synoptic material, particularly the redactional elements in that material. If the redactional features in the Synoptics appear in individual Johannine passages, they must be interpreted as evidence of John's dependence on the Synoptics in their written form rather than the result of a common (oral) background in early Christian tradition.

In an early article attempting to identify the sources behind the resurrection narrative of John 20:3-10, Neirynck argued that Luke's brief depiction of Peter's visit to the empty tomb in 24:12 is an editorial composition (i.e., redactional rather than traditional) and forms the only basis of John's more elaborate retelling of the story, in which the figure of the Beloved Disciple is also introduced. Instances of verbal agreement between the two narratives can certainly be detected (particularly the phrase 'he stooped to look in and saw the linen cloths'). But other words and phrases in Luke 24:12 are striking by their absence from John's account, whereas another possible explanation of the affinities between these two resurrection accounts is that they stem from a common underlying tradition no longer extant. John is certainly capable of creative freedom in his narratives and discourses, and some of his departures from the Synoptic narratives may, in fact, stem from his knowledge of other sources.

### **New (Twenty-First Century) Directions**

And so the question remains: has the case for the independence of John from the Synoptics been proven? Or have we simply reached the point of paralysis by analysis or, perhaps more appropriately in this case, a point of paralysis due to the lack of concrete evidence? If some

of the tools used for Synoptic comparisons (source and redaction criticism) work less well for the study of John, what *can* be said about the nature of the relationship between John and the other canonical gospels? One problem of course is the polarity created by the two main positions – John is either totally independent of the other gospels or he is completely dependent upon them. The debate has also suffered from a rather one-directional view of what is meant by the word 'use' and by the word 'sources'. This is an issue that is dealt with at length in the new volume *John's Transformation of Mark* (2021).

Can the available evidence in John's Gospel accommodate a more mediating position, namely that John was familiar with one or more of the Synoptics, but did not use them as a source in the same way that Matthew and Luke used Mark? In other words, how plausible is the suggestion that John betrays knowledge of the other gospels without being closely dependent upon them? I draw attention to four issues that can, in this respect, provide some form of clarification.

First of all, it must be acknowledged that there *are* important connections between John and the Synoptics, particularly Mark, despite the evident differences between them. Granted that we cannot be absolutely certain about the chronological priority of Mark over John or about the availability of Mark in the various early Christian communities, it is noteworthy that John generally follows Mark's ordering of events, a factor not really adequately explained by the theory that both draw from a common pool of oral tradition (with a series of self-contained and separate units). What is also striking is that John follows the same order as Mark even where Mark's sequence is the result of his own editorial activity. For example, the feeding of the multitude is followed by the account of Jesus walking on the sea, and the

sandwiching of Peter's threefold denial between the account of Jesus' trial before the Jewish authorities occurs in both Gospels (Mk 14:53-72; Jn 18:15-27). If John did not know Mark, how can one account for overlaps with *distinctively Markan* content and techniques?

Secondly, although several significant Markan events are not recorded by John, at times there is evidence that he does betray indirect knowledge of them and presupposes that the same applies to his audience. John does not include an account of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, and yet the Baptist's words to his disciples about him having seen the Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove (1:32-34) assumes that the baptism has already taken place and that the original hearers or readers of the Gospel are familiar with the event. An even more intriguing example occurs in John 3:24 where the explanatory comment, 'For John had not yet been thrown in prison', presupposes that the audience already knows about John the Baptist's imprisonment by Herod, of which there is no narrative account in John's Gospel. The purpose of this remark, whose stylistic features are characteristic of John, is to relate the Gospel's chronology to the sequence of events as recorded by Mark. John emphasizes that Jesus' public ministry in Galilee and Judaea (narrated in 1:19-4:43) precedes the major period of his Galilean ministry which, according to Mark 1:14, only begins after the Baptist has been thrown in prison. What such examples demonstrate is that John presupposes his readers' familiarity with a relatively detailed account of Jesus' life - in all likelihood the account provided by Mark - and chooses not to repeat a significant portion of this information.

Thirdly, if John and his readers had prior knowledge of Mark, how did they acquire that knowledge? In what form did they encounter Mark's Gospel? Recent studies on the role of

oral communication (orality) in the ancient world prove to be most instructive in this respect. In an environment where literacy among the general populace was no more than 4-5% (and scrolls were probably not widely available), great importance was attached to the communication of the spoken (rather than written) word, even in communities where there would have been a mixed membership of literate and non-literate individuals. Now, if we are to situate John within a particular community, for which there is firm evidence within the Gospel (as I will attempt to demonstrate in a later Unit), the most plausible scenario is that a written text like the Gospel of Mark was being communicated orally to that community, even possibly from memory. Thus even if the author of John's Gospel had, at some time, read the text of Mark in its written form, the prominent and communal function of orality in relation to ancient texts lends support to the view that John was acquainted with Mark through hearing it being read aloud. In other words, recollection from memory rather than direct dependence on the written text provides a plausible explanation of the fact that both Mark and John share the same broad outline of events and certain verbal affinities.

It should not be overlooked that John's Gospel probably underwent a complex process of development over an extended period of time, even though its various stages of composition can no longer be identified with precision (the example of the 'epilogue' in John 21 can be noted, and, within the body of the gospel narrative, the clue provided by 14:31 that this was, at one stage, the ending of the Farewell Discourse). The tendency in gospel studies has also been to regard oral and written communication as two separate stages in the pre-history of a text (a period of oral transmission followed by a process of written composition). However, once again, a study of the function of orality in the ancient world reveals that the

interaction between the spoken and written word was in fact a process of *ongoing dialogue*. Even after written texts came into existence, their oral recitation, particularly if from memory, would have led to changes and additions being made to those texts. In the case of John's Gospel, changes and additions during the process of composition would have included material from other sources, even oral traditions influenced by the Synoptic Gospels (such as Luke), because such traditions probably continued in circulation even after the appearance of the written gospels.

Finally, to claim that John betrays awareness of Mark can shed light on some aspects of this gospel's aims. Reflections on this issue are as ancient as Clement of Alexandria's understanding of John as a 'spiritual Gospel', leading others after him to ponder whether John seeks to supplement or even displace the other Gospels. However, assessments of this kind do not really capture the essence of John's Gospel nor do they provide real insights into what makes this Gospel 'work'. It is not John's intention to correct or simply insert his own material between Synoptic scenes, nor can his aims be narrowed down to his desire to elucidate or provide a commentary on Mark. Other factors, including the changing situation of his community and the fact that many of his ideas come from elsewhere, have also shaped the composition and development of this very different gospel. And yet, in many respects John's Gospel does build on Mark, not in the sense of incorporating additional material into the core narrative, but in offering a more developed christological perspective on the Gospel story. His aim is to draw out what it means to believe in Jesus, in the words of Mark 1:1, as the Son of God and Messiah of Israel, for, according to the Fourth Evangelist, Jesus is none other than the incarnate Word sent into the world as the definitive revelation of God. During

this module we will investigate what accounts for this ‘distinctive christological perspective’ and examine some of the ways in which it finds expression in the Gospel's narratives and discourses.

### **KEY REFERENCES**

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Edwards, Ruth B., ‘Traditions, Sources and Relation to the “Historical Jesus”’, *Discovering John: Content, Interpretations, Reception* (London: SPCK, 2014; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), 33-44.

### **OTHER IMPORTANT STUDIES**

Dunn, James D.G., ‘John and the Synoptics as a Theological Question’, in R. Alan Culpepper & C. Clifton Black (eds), *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 301-13.

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