sciendo

Perichoresis
Volume 22. Issue 2 (2024): 95-114
DOI: 10.2478/perc-2024-0018

JOHN AND THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS. WHAT JOHN KNEW AND WHAT JOHN USED[1]

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ABSTRACT: The relationship of John's Gospel to the Synoptics Gospels is difficult to explain. That is the reason why there have been many proposals, even from the beginning of the church. Not even today, scholars have reached consensus. Rather, there are many competing explanations. Yet, they can be grouped into three categories, according to what John knew and what he used in writing his gospel: (1) John did not know the Synoptics; (2) John knew the Synoptics and used them as literary sources; and (3) John knew the Synoptics but did not use them. Of these three categories, the third one best explains the similarities and the differences between John and the Synoptics. But beyond stating that John knew the Synoptics but did not use them as literary sources, one is on a rather uncertain territory. Therefore, it is historically and literarily plausible to see John as being aware of the Synoptics and even having read them, but whether he chose to harmonize them, adapt them, supplement them, or reinterpret them, is less clear. In the end, it is clear that John wrote a different Gospel, yet it should be read alongside and not instead of the Synoptics.

KEY WORDS: John, gospels, Synoptic, sources, relationship between John and the Synoptics, oral tradition, similarities, differences.

Introduction

D. Moody Smith concluded his essay "The Problem of John and the Synoptics in Light of the Relation Between Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels" with the following assessment of the Fourth Gospel: "[...] its presence in the canon is not only an historical fact, but a theological blessing as well as an exegetical challenge" (Smith 1992:162). These three aspects in the study of the Fourth Gospel (i.e., history, the-

1 This is a slightly revised version of an earlier one that appeared in Semănătorul (The Sower) 2.1 (2021): 31-56. Used by permission from publisher.

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ology, and hermeneutics) have constituted issues of great debate among scholars, particularly among the liberals over the last two centuries (cf. Dunn 2003: part 3).

Baur and Bultmann are among the early theologians who doubted the historical reliability of the gospels and raised questions about their historical accuracy (see de Jonge 1992:409-21). Over time, this radical rejection of the gospels as unreliable sources and windows into history had given way to a view that tended to differentiate between the Synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel in terms of historical interests. It was argued that the focus of the author of the Fourth Gospel was not on historical facts, as was that of the Synoptics', but on theology (see e.g., Clement of Alexandria *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.7; Barrett 1978:78). The consensus today, however, "is no longer historical versus theological, but that all four Gospel writers offer a portrait of Jesus that is both historically based and theologically developed" (Culpepper 1998:21; see also Blomberg 2001, Carson 1981:83-145, Evans 2008:120-141, Robinson 1985:33). Nevertheless, scholars still rightly hold to the view that John is "the theologian *par excellence*" (Brown 2003.107; see also Bauckham 2007:112, Michaels 2010:28). Andreas Köstenberger states: "…once prepared by the Synoptic witness, the readers are readied to climb the Johannine peak" (2012:221).

Once the issue of the historical reliability of the gospels (and of the Gospel of John in particular) has been accepted as a presupposition in exegesis, the next highly debated issue (not unrelated to the previous) has been the way we should account for the differences between the Fourth Gospel's account of the life and death of Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels' presentation of the same. If all four gospels are equally historical and theological, how does one explain the differences between John and the Synoptics? Do such discrepancies betray a lack of knowledge of the Synoptic Gospels on the part of John? Or did John know and read the Synoptics Gospels, but chose not to use them as he wrote his gospel?

Such questions are legitimate even in the twenty first century, when postmodernism has called into question the validity of historical enquiry and the objectivity of meaning. Although the tendency these days is to seek for meaning in front of the text, in the reader-response, the text of the gospel is still the object of our study. One does not have the luxury of ignoring the text and the difficulties it presents us and of constructing whatever meaning he may wish to or she may feel like by filling in the "gaps" (see North 2007:19-21). The reader must start from the text and discover meaning within the text. Meaning is text-conditioned and text-determined, the text as we have it. This synchronic approach to the text of the Gospel of John that sees the text as meaning-laden and seeks to unearth this meaning through exegesis, however, must account for the so-called "aporiai" in John's narrative, that is, the apparent dislocations, abrupt changes, and awkward conjunctions that seem to point to disruptions

between the elements from the same context (e.g., Keener 2013:421-2). The presence of these apparent inconsistences forces the reader to dig deeper and find an explanation (for different explanations see Brown 1979, Culpepper 1983). In this process, the reader of the Gospel of John will inevitably raise the question of the sources and traditions of John, which he used, adapted, and possibly changed, more or less, which may account for these shifts in the text (Keener 2003:38). In other words, the serious student of the Bible will start with the text and look within the text for meaning—the synchronic approach, but will also go behind the text, to the sources employed by John, to explain the apparent inconsistencies—the diachronic approach (Ashton 2007:2-3, Egger 1999).

In this article, we are concerned to understand how John used his sources and, more specifically, whether John knew and used the Synoptic Gospels. Such concerns will result from a comparison of the Fourth Gospel with the Synoptic Gospels, which will bring to light both similarities and differences between them.

Different answers have been provided to account for both the differences and similarities between John and the Synoptics over the last two centuries of the modern critical scholarship (see e.g., Smith 2001, first seven chapters; for a summer see Green, Brown, Perrin 2013:922). James Dvorak, at the end of the twentieth century, summarized each view under three headings: dependence, independence, and mediating view (Dvorak 1998:201-13). More recently, William B. Bowes explored the issue from a similar perspective, but, avoiding the mediating category, he proposed four forms of relationship between John and the Synoptics: independent non-interaction, non-dependent interaction, dependent interaction in part, and dependent interaction in full (Bowes 2023: 113-32). Such categories are correct when approaching the subject from a source critical point of view, though we believe it is more useful and more precise to discuss the different views according to what John knew and what John used (cf. North 2020). These are more adequate criteria, since categories of independence and dependence are too rigid. Thus, the categories in which we will discuss John's Gospel in relation to the Synoptic Gospels are as follows: (1) John did not know the Synoptics; (2) John knew the Synoptics and used them; (3) John knew the Synoptics but did not use them. Evidently, each of these three categories supports variations and there are nuances within each, as we will see, especially when it comes to the sources that may have been available to John, but most views fall within these three broad categories.

The purpose of this article is to analyze these three views concerning the relationship of the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels, build upon previous studies, and bring recent relevant material in this discussion (especially from the last two decades) in order to adjudicate between them (Porter and Ong 2016, esp. Ramelli

2016:30-52, Labahn 2016:53-80, Blomberg 2016:81-100). In the end, it will be shown that the best explanation both of the differences and similarities between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics Gospels is that John knew the Synoptics (at least Mark's Gospel), but did not seem to have used them nor followed them extensively and verbatim. Rather, he chose to write an independent gospel with little overlap with the Synoptics and thus little influence from them. Beyond this general conclusion, we believe we are on speculative grounds.

An analysis of the relationship between the Synoptics and the Gospel of John is important because it will help the student to read the gospels adequately. Once a conclusion will be reached concerning the relationship of John and the Synoptics, the reader will be able to answer further questions with more precision, questions such as: How did John intend his readers to read his gospel in relation to the Synoptic Gospels? Should the reader of the gospels read John in view of the Synoptic Gospels? Or should the reader read the Synoptic Gospels in view of the Fourth Gospel? Or should the reader read the Synoptic Gospels at all, since he has John? Or should the reader read all four gospels synoptically? And more importantly, is the theology of John of a different order than that of the Synoptic Gospels? The answer to all these questions will receive some clarity and direction once the question of John's knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the Synoptic Gospels and their use (or lack of use) is answered.

A Comparison between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels

Anybody who has read John's Gospel in parallel with the Synoptics has noticed both similarities and, especially, differences between them. But it is important to see clearly what we are dealing with when we are talking about differences and similarities between them so that we may not exaggerate the differences nor neglect the similarities. Thus, we will list specific cases of differences and similarities and then see how these have been explained. In comparing John with the Synoptics, one may ultimately have to decide whether the similarities or the differences constitute the starting point. Those who seek to prove John's knowledge and use of the Synoptics will point to the obvious similarities, while those who favor John's lack of knowledge of the Synoptics and therefore independence from them will give more weight to the differences. Those who account equally for similarities and differences will choose a more mediating position that supports knowledge of the Synoptics on the part of John (hence similarities), but not necessarily dependence on them (hence differences).

Similarities

It is important to realize that there are clear similarities between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels (see e.g., Blomberg 1991:46-47; see Bowes' summary and

tables 2023:114-123). Otherwise, we may tend to exaggerate the differences and suppress the evidence to the contrary. The similarities are of different kinds.

Both the Synoptics and John, for instance, contain some of the same stories such as the feeding of the five thousand (Mk. 6:32–44 par. Jh. 6:1–15), and the walking on the water (Mk. 6:45–52 par. Jn. 6:16–21).

They also narrate incidents, though not identical, but similar in subject: healing of paralyzed (Mk.2:1ff cf. Jn.5:1ff) and of blind people (e.g., Mk.8:22ff cf. Jn.9) and raising of the dead (Lc.7:11ff cf. Jn.11).

Also, Jesus' teaching in both the Synoptics and John is very similar. For instance, they both present Jesus as defying the traditional interpretation of the Sabbath law (Lc.6:1ff cf. Jn.5:1ff).

Moreover, the macrostructure of John and the Synoptics (especially Mark) is identical. They both follow the same outline of Jesus' ministry: baptism of Jesus; Galilean ministry interspersed with Jerusalem and Samaria material; Jesus goes to Jerusalem, then passion, death, and resurrection. This outline is enriched by details present in all four gospels, such as: Jesus speaks to the crowds, performs miracles, has disciples following him, is in conflict with the Pharisees, etc. In this respect, according to Culpepper, both John and the Synoptics are gospel genre and were recognized as such even from the beginning (Culpepper 1998:18). James Dunn is right then to state: "The theological corollary is clear: from its earliest format, a gospel was 'a passion narrative with extended introduction,' the teaching and activities of Jesus set within a framework provided by the story of the cross and resurrection as climax so much so that it becomes at once questionable whether any gospel lacking that framework deserved the title gospel" (Dunn 1996:306). Therefore, the similarities are more and more evident as we near the end of the gospel account. For instance, in the resurrection appearance narratives, each Johannine account, with the exception of the risen Jesus' conversation with Peter, has a synoptic parallel, whether close or remote (e.g., Jesus' appearance to the women in Mk.16:1ff par. Jn.20:11-18) (Smith 1992:160).

Thus, one may see from this concise presentation of the similarities between the Synoptics and John that the greatest emphasis is placed on the macro-structure of the gospels, but not to the exclusion of verbatim parallels (e.g., Mk.14:3 par. Jn.12:3; Mt.26:3 par. Jn.11:47-53; Lc.23:4, 14, 22 par. Jn.18:38, 19:4, 6) (Michaels 2010:29, n.74; Keener 2003:426, North 2020:2). It is mostly for this reason that the Early Church canonized John. Of course, there is a long way from this observation to the statement that John used the Synoptics as literary sources. This is made even more difficult as one notices the dissimilarities at the micro-level of the Synoptics and John.

Differences

Several aspects of the differences between John and the Synoptics may be mentioned here (see e.g., Carson 1991:21-23, Blomberg 2001:153-55, Borchert 1996:37, Barrett 1978:51, Bird 2013:921, Powell 2018).

Firstly, John omits material that is characteristic of the Synoptics such as discourses (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount, the Olivet Discourse, narrative parables, aphoristic sayings), events in the life of Jesus (e.g., Jesus' birth, baptism, temptations, transfiguration), themes (i.e., kingdom of God), the Lord's Supper, stories of demon exorcism etc.

Secondly, John includes stories not found in the Synoptics (e.g., Jesus' encounters with Nicodemus and with the Samaritan woman), miracles (e.g., the healing of the crippled man at the Pool of Siloam and the man born blind, the turn of water into wine in Cana, the raising of Lazarus from the dead), discourses that prove Jesus' relationship to the Father (e.g., 5:17-47; 6:22-59) and the nature of his mission (e.g., 3:16-17; 6:53-58; 10:10; 17:2; 20:23) and discourses about the coming of the Paraclete (e.g., 14:25-31; 16:5-15), Jesus' high priestly prayer (chap.17), and distinctive themes (e.g., truth, light/darkness).

Thirdly, John seems to provide substitutes to what is omitted from the Synoptics (e.g., "signs"—*sēmeia* over "miracles"—*dynameis*; "eternal life" over "kingdom of God"; realized eschatology over "not yet" eschatology; the farewell discourse in chap. 13-17 over the Sermon on the Mount) (Kostenberger 2013).

Fourthly, a *prima facie* reading of John leads one to conclude that John's Christology is of a different order than that of the Synoptics. For instance, John clearly identifies Jesus as God (e.g., 1:1, 14; 5:18; 8:58; 20:28) and he places much emphasis on the "I am" statements (6:36—the bread of life; 8:12—the light of the world; 10:9—the door ; 10:11—the good shepherd; 11:25—the resurrection and the life; 14:6—the way, the truth, the life; 15:1—the true vine).

Fifthly, one may notice in comparing John with the Synoptics apparent contradictions especially in how the connection between John the Baptist and Elijah is to be viewed. While John records the Baptist's denial of being Elijah (1:21), the Synoptics record Jesus' affirmation of John's identity as Elijah (i.e., Mat.17:10-13).

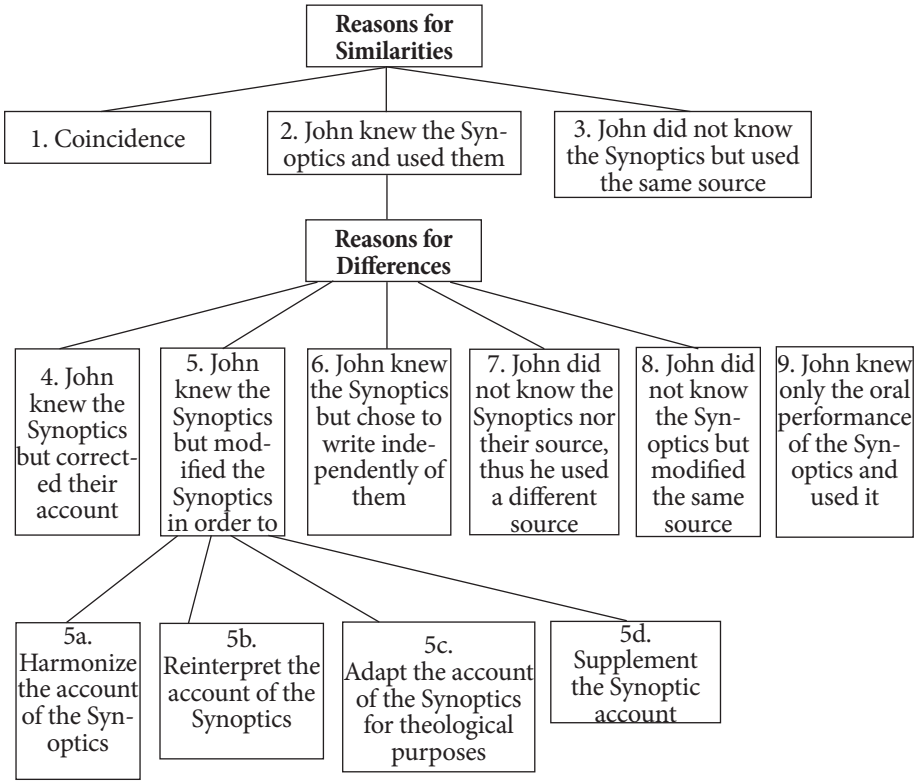
And lastly, there are chronological incongruities such as the cleansing of the Temple. In John, the cleansing of the Temple occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (2:13-22) whereas in the Synoptics it occurs before Jesus' arrest (e.g., Mc.11:15-19). Particularly noticeable here is the distinct events which constituted the catalyst of the events that ultimately led to Jesus' crucifixion. According to the Synoptics, what led to the plot of the Jews to kill Jesus was the cleansing of the Temple (e.g., Lc.19:45-48), while according to John, the event was the raising of Lazarus from the dead

(Jn.11:47-53). One may also mention here the apparent incompatibility between the emphasis of the Synoptics on Jesus' ministry in Galilee and John's presentation of Jesus making several trips to Jerusalem, the base of His ministry (Culpepper 1998:57).

There have been different ways of dealing with the difficulties that arise from reading all four gospels in parallel. Conservatives have sought to harmonize the gospels whereas liberals have sought to draw even a bigger chasm between John and the Synoptics to the point of no reconciliation. In this article, however, we are not so much interested in explaining away the differences nor in using them to disprove inerrancy and inspiration. Rather, we are interested to see if these differences point in some way to John's lack of knowledge of the Synoptics. Thus, we turn now to the question of the way we should account for both the similarities and the differences.

The Relationship between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics

Considering the similarities and differences there are many views that seek to explain the relationship between John's Gospel and the Synoptics. The possible explanations can be illustrated with the following chart (for a different chart, see Barrett 1992:65-66).



Here, we will group all views under 3 broad categories, even if there are major differences between views from the same category: John did not know the Synoptics (no. 1, 3, 7, 8, and 9); John knew the Synoptics and used them (no. 2); and John knew the Synoptics but did not use them as literary sources (no. 4, 5 and 6).

John did not know the Synoptics

All the various views in this category claim that John did not know the Synoptics and thus had not read them nor used them as literary sources (for a variation see Beutler 2007:23-24 and Koester 1982:178). What differentiates the views within this category is the focus in their arguments: either on similarities or differences. Those who seek to explain the differences between John and the Synoptics, claim that John used a source that was completely different from what the Synoptics used (no. 7) even to the point of being divergent. Raymond Brown, for instance, argues that "the many differences cannot be accounted for without resorting to non-synoptic material" (Brown 2003:100). The implication of such a view is that the similarities are pure coincidence (no. 1) or are based on common tradition (no. 3). Another possible explanation of the differences without recourse to complete independence is that John used the same source as behind the Synoptics, but modified it (no. 8), or that John knew the oral performance of the Synoptics and used it (no. 9).

Another way to differentiate between these views is based on the type of sources that lie behind John's Gospel: either oral (Dunn 1991:351-79, Borgen 1990:409-37; *contra* Neirynck 1992:438-50) or written (Bultmann 1971 followed by Fortuna 1988; *contra* Smith 1965). If it is oral tradition, then John might have known a common tradition with the Synoptics, that circulated at the time he wrote, which he either used (no. 3) or modified (no. 8), or John might have known an oral performance of the Synoptics (no. 9). If it is written tradition, then it might have been something very different from the tradition behind the Synoptics (no. 7).

Regardless of how one groups these views, they are all based on the belief that there were sources behind John's Gospel that were more or less different from the Synoptics, but nevertheless different (for the independent view see Gardner-Smith 1938, reviewed by Berheyden 1992:423-52, and followed by Morris 1969). In other words, John did not know the Synoptics, only a possible version of the Synoptics (i.e., oral performance), or, closer to reality, a source other than the Synoptics, whether similar or identical to the sources behind the Synoptics or different from them (see Greenberg 2020). So the views in this category stand or fall with the idea of sources behind John that are different from the Synoptics themselves. It remains for the views

in this category to prove the existence of such sources and John's lack of knowledge of the Synoptics.

The problem is that such irrefutable proof has not been adduced. In fact, the idea of sources behind John's Gospel, whether identical or different from those behind the Synoptics, raises more issues than it solves. For instance, while it is true that Luke claims to have studied sources in composing his gospel, we have no evidence in John that he did that. In fact, there may have been no need to, since the author of the Fourth Gospel claims to be John, an eyewitness to the events he relates in his gospel, whereas Luke and Mark were not (see Bauckham 2017 and 2008:120-140; however see North 2020:3). Michael Ramsey may be correct to attribute the unique character of the Gospel of John "to the interplay of inspiration and tradition (the "vertical" and "horizontal" if you will)—that is, on the one hand the testimony of the Advocate, or "Spirit of truth" ("he will testify about me," 15:26), and on the other the testimony of the eyewitnesses (those "with me from the beginning," 15:27), represented by "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (Ramsey 2010:30). Thus, there is a more natural explanation to the fact that John is different from the Synoptics: instead of postulating different sources behind the two, one may account for the differences in John to his take on the events he witnessed and his creative reflection on the facts, selecting those who fit his theological purpose, as we will see below.

Another problem with the idea that John relied on sources different from those behind the Synoptics is that such theory implies that either John or the Synoptics were incorrect, given the differences. From this point of view, the differences cannot be reconciled, and neither should we seek to; they stand as a witness to divergent sources for John and the Synoptics. But such a view turns us back to the issue of the historical reliability of the gospels (of either John or the Synoptics), an issue that has been answered. Today, we must start from what is widely accepted among scholars: all four gospels are historically accurate. Such a starting point eliminates any view that presupposes that one or more gospels got it wrong or were inadequate to convey the truth about Jesus and that would explain the contradictions. James Barker states: "Did John want to supplement or to supplant Matthew? On the analogy of extracanonical gospels, I argue that John intended his gospel to be read alongside Matthew's, not instead of it" (Barker 2015:xvii).

Thirdly, John's lack of knowledge of the Synoptics is historically unreasonable. Andreas Köstenberger contends that the argument that:

> John was unaware of the existence of these Gospels or that he had never read them, raises the question where John must have been located, especially if he wrote considerably later than the Synoptists, so that he remained unaware of or unexposed to these

other Gospels. Certainly, if the author of John's Gospel was John, the son of Zebedee, this is unimaginable (2013:23).

Fourthly, John's lack of knowledge of the Synoptics and therefore his use of other sources relies too heavily on a source theory that is speculative. For instance, concerning the theory of oral tradition, D. M. Smith argues that "Oral tradition, as real as it may have been is uncontrollable and ephemeral unless it survives to us in written form" (Smith 1992:152). But even when we postulate a written tradition behind John's Gospel, C.K. Barrett is quick to note that "Anyone who after an interval of nineteen centuries feels himself in a position to distinguish nicely between Mark and something much like Mark is at liberty to do so. The simpler hypothesis, which does not involve the postulation of otherwise unknown entities, is not without attractiveness" (Barrett 1978:45).

In light of these arguments, it is more plausible to look at the Synoptics as possible sources for John (besides his eyewitness testimony), in spite of the differences, than to postulate "unknown conjectural sources or traditions" (Belle 2007:336). Craig Keener contends: "scholars today are often unconvinced by hypothetical reconstructions of sources no longer extant. Unlike such sources, comparison with the Synoptics can afford an objective basis for comparison" (Keener 2007:322-3). And when one takes notice of the points where John overlaps with the Synoptics, one cannot continue to uphold complete lack of knowledge of the Synoptics (Keener 2003:426). To the theory that John knew and used the Synoptics we now turn.

John knew and used the Synoptics

This theory starts from the literary observation of similarities between John and the Synoptics and from the historical argument that John must of known the Synoptics and even read them.

The view that John must have known and used the Synoptics has been advocated most recently by the "school of Leuven" led by Frans Neirynck (1977:73-106; for a summary see Belle 2007:325-338). Another recent advocate of this position has been C. K. Barrett. He draws an important distinction between agreements and disagreements. In his view, "Differences can always be explained by means of what may be called internal considerations, considerations, that is, that are internal to the mind of the writer." On the other hand, "Agreements can hardly be explained otherwise than by external considerations, considerations that are not from the mind of the writer but from objective circumstance in his environment" (Barrett 1992:65-66). Based on this distinction, he concludes that John is literary dependent on the Synoptics.

Another important argument that Barrett uses in support of his theory of dependence is the argument from order. He lists ten key passages which relate incidents that appear in the same order in John as in the Synoptics and concludes that the similarity in order proves that John very likely knew Mark (see the list in Morris 1969:16). But the argument from order is rather meager, for the similarity in order can be easily explained as being largely determined by the order in which the events themselves happened (Dvorak 1998:203). Leon Morris states: "There is nothing remarkable in their being in the same order in the two Gospels" (1969:16-17).

Nevertheless, the basic argument of this position is that the simpler hypothesis is the most likely hypothesis. In this case, according to Occam's razor, the simpler hypothesis is that John knew and used Mark (and the other Synoptics) rather than postulating the more difficult and complex hypothesis of different sources (written or oral). It is rather obvious in comparing John with the Synoptics that John was quite aware of them and expected his audience to know at least Mark (Bauckham 1998:147-72; also Keener 2007:323).

This great emphasis on similarities, either of vocabulary or order, in the argument for John's literary dependence on the Synoptics, however, greatly neglects the striking differences between them and does not explain them satisfactorily. Andreas Köstenberger raises with other scholars the question

> why, if John knew the other gospels, he made so little use of them. In fact, while 93 percent of Mark is found in Matthew and Luke, only 8 percent of John parallels the Synoptics, and 92 percent is unique. What is more, even in the 8 percent of overlapping material, John rarely (if ever) is close enough in wording to justify the conclusion that he had one or several of the Synoptics in front of him as he wrote (2009:553).

Thus, the differences between John and the Synoptics leads one to conclude that while John may have known the Synoptics, he is not literarily dependent on them, at least not in the same way Matthew and Luke may be dependent on Mark (Carson 2005:259; *contra* Becker, Bond, and Williams 2021). In this regard, D. M. Smith writes: "Possibly the Fourth Gospel can be adequately explained without primary or fundamental reference to the Synoptic gospels, but also without denying the fourth evangelist's awareness of them" (1980:444) and Carson concludes: "the burden of proving direct literary dependence remains overwhelmingly difficult" (Carson 2005:260). J. N. Sanders and B. A. Mastin state this fact correctly: "But knowing Mark and using it as a source are two different things" (1969:10). This view is well-summarized by Beasely-Murray: "While the Fourth Evangelist did not use any of the synoptics as his sources, neither did his Gospel take shape in isolation from them" (1987:xxxvii).

As a result, we now turn to what might be the most probable explanation of the relationship between John and the Synoptics, that draws an important distinction between John knowing the Synoptics and John using them.

John knew the Synoptics but did not use them

If we cannot show from data available that John did not know the Synoptics, without resorting to speculative reconstructions of sources, nor that John was literary dependent on the Synoptics, the question is how we should explain the relationship in such a way as to account both for his knowledge of the Synoptics and yet for his decision to go in a different direction with his gospel. The views in this category differ among themselves not in their agreement that John knew the Synoptics but in what he did with that knowledge. Thus, we can distinguish at least three positions: John corrected the Synoptics (no. 4), John modified the Synoptics (no. 5), John wrote independently of the Synoptics (no. 6).

From the beginning we can reasonably state that the view that John corrected the Synoptics is inconceivable, for the following reason. Such a view presupposes that the Synoptics were incorrect at several points and therefore John felt the need, even the obligation, to write another gospel in order to replace and displace the three existing ones (see e.g., Windisch 1926). But such view is unthinkable, for "how could one divinely revealed text present itself as the replacement of three other divinely revealed texts?" (MacKay 2004:3). Moreover, all four gospels were preserved by the church, believed to be inspired, and read alongside one another. The early church did not pit one gospel against the others, as if God was not the author behind all four gospels or as if God contradicted himself. Thus, such a view raises both theological and historical issues that cannot be explained satisfactorily. One would need a reason why John, having presumably known the Synoptics, made considerable changes to their accounts (an explanation could be the difference in target audiences; see Dowell 1992:453-57). Thus, the theory of replacement and even correction has been long proven non-viable (see the critique of Bauckham 1998:158 and Smith 1984:180).

There remains, then, two other main views that must be considered. One view is that John modified the Synoptics for one of several purposes: to harmonize their account (no. 5a), to reinterpret their account (no. 5b), to adapt their account (no. 5c), or to supplement their account (no. 5d). The other view is that John, though he knew the Synoptics, chose to write a different gospel (no. 6).

Based on the evidence of similarities and differences, we believe there is something to take from each of these views while each view does not sufficiently explain the relationship between John and the Synoptics.

Take for example the idea that John harmonized the account of the Synoptics (e.g., Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius in *Hist. eccl. 3.24.2*). There may be some merit to this theory in the sense that we have in John's Gospel material not present in the other gospels that may help us better understand some details in them (Barker 2015:112). The same can be said of the view that John wrote to supplement the Synoptic account (Tenney 1948:197 and Guthrie 1990:298). Scholars have pointed to details in John that show that he expects the readers to know the Synoptics and thus John starts with that presupposed knowledge and adds to their account. In this way, John and the Synoptics interlock, that is, all four gospels "mutually reinforce or explain each other, without betraying overt literary dependence" (Carson 1991:50 who follows Morris 1969:40 in using the term „interlocking connections"). Likewise, it is not difficult to see that John writes a more profoundly theological and Christological gospel and therefore we can say that he reinterprets the Synoptics' account not so much to replace it but to "transpose" it to a different and even a higher scale (Kostenberber 2009:555 coins the term *Transpositionstheorie*). James Dunn states that John used the material he had available "to draw out fuller meaning of what Jesus had said and done" (2011:179). Not the least, John himself argues for a theological purpose (cf. Jn. 20:31-32) behind selecting and adapting the information available to him (i.e., by way of eye-witnessing and by way of the Synoptics) (Mackay 2004).

Thus, one can see that there is merit in all these views. And yet, each, on its own, lacks the ability to explain all the aspects of the relationship between John and the Synoptics and at the same time to account for John's unique take on the historical events.

For instance, Carson argues against the idea of harmonization and contends that

> …it is far-fetched to thing that John provides the information he does in order to escape from some difficulty he finds with the Synoptics. Nor is this an instance of perversely conservative harmonization, as if John cannot properly be read without referring to the Synoptics and vice versa, resulting in a reductionistic flattening of the individual witness of each gospel (1991:55).

Köstenberger believes that not even Carson's proposal of interlocking connections

> can account for all the aspects of the relationship… The notion of interlocking traditions helps alleviate the charge of historical discrepancies between John and the Synoptics, but it does so on the premise that these are, at least in part, undesigned coincidences. By contrast, I have suggested that John's transposition of various aspects of the Synoptic accounts was both conscious and deliberate (2009:562).

Moreover, in the words of James Dunn, we must "let John be John" and not try to constantly compare John with the Synoptics. We may reasonably state that John wrote independently of the Synoptics, having his own distinct voice among the gospels, yet he certainly knew them (no. 6). But even such a view does not account sufficiently for the similarities between John and the Synoptics.

In the end, one must not force the evidence one way or the other and seek to choose between the views from this category (i.e., John knew the Synoptics but did not use them extensively and verbatim). We must be content to state the obvious, even though it may not be satisfactorily specific, and contend that John knew the Synoptics, but we must refrain from resorting to speculative explanations. Thus, we believe that there is value in each attempt at explaining the relationship between John and the Synoptics (i.e., 5 and 6) and not see them as excluding one another.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to explain the relationship between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels, by looking at various attempts at accounting for both the similarities and the differences. We have grouped these views into three categories according to what John knew and used: John did not know the Synoptics, John knew the Synoptics and used them, and John knew the Synoptics but did not use them. We have seen that the only view that gives proper weight to both the differences and similarities is the third one. This view has the benefit of allowing for John's knowledge of the Synoptics (in light of the similarities) and at the same time allowing John a certain measure of independence and creativity (in light of the differences and of the advantage of an eye-witness account).

Such a conclusion has great implications upon how one should read John in relation to the Synoptics. First, there are two ways of reading John: reading John in light of the Synoptics and reading the Synoptics in light of John. All four gospels complement one another and should be read alongside one another. This is the reason the Early Church preserved a fourfold character of the written gospel. No individual gospel was thought to reproduce the gospel in its completeness (Dunn 1996:308). Calvin agrees with this: "He therefore so dictated to the four Evangelists what they should write that, while each had his own part, the whole formed one complete body. It is for us now to blend the four in a mutual connection, that we may let ourselves be taught as by the one mouth" (1995:6).

Another valuable implication is that John should also be read apart from the Synoptics in order to appreciate its distinctiveness. This recognizes the fact that John is not constrained by the synoptic accounts, since he himself was an eyewitness of the events. Rather, John stands on its own and makes its own sense as a self-contained narrative and as a theological treatise (Bauckham 1998:158). One could go even so

far as to claim with Calvin that, "This Gospel is a key to open the door to the understanding of the others" (1995:6).

Any explanation of the relationship between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics, however, is bound to be less than absolute even if one seeks the most probable explanation in light of the evidence. As a result, one must maintain humility regardless of which view he or she adopts and must refrain from being dogmatic. D. M. Smith is right about this: "The mystery of John's relation to the synoptic tradition may always divide scholarship but two things are certain: there is a relationship and it is mysterious" (1982:113)

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