

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## The Relationship Between John And The Synoptic Gospels

JAMES D. DVORAK, PHD

1

Since the beginning of the modern era, scholars have debated everything from the authorship of the fourth gospel to its purpose. Not uncommon among these debates has been that concerning the relationship between this gospel and the synoptic gospels. As D. M. Smith has noted, this particular debate stretches far back into history:



The relationship of John to the synoptic gospels has been a recurring problem, not only for two centuries of modern critical scholarship, but for Christian theology and exegesis over a much longer period.<sup>1</sup>

There has been no break in the debating over this issue. But there has been some change in what many scholars believe about the relationship between the gospels.

Until about World War II<sup>2</sup> the dominant view was that John knew and used one or more of the synoptic gospels when writing his account.<sup>3</sup> P. Gardner-Smith,<sup>4</sup> however, began a trend away from the dependence theory when he brought to light two of its shortcomings:

First, the existence of continuing oral tradition at the time when the Gospel was written, which renders the argument for John's dependence on the Synoptics less compelling; second, the concentration of critics on points of agreement between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics and their overlooking of the significance of the differences.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> D. M. Smith, "John and the Synoptics: Some Dimensions of the Problem," *NTS* 26 (1980) 425.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Cf. also P. Borgen, "John and the Synoptics," *The Interrelations of the Gospels* (ed. D. L. Dungan; Leuven: Leuven University, 1990) 408.

<sup>3</sup> L. Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 15.

<sup>4</sup> P. Gardner-Smith, *Saint John and the Synoptics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1938).

<sup>5</sup> This summary of Gardner-Smith's points is from G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco: Word, 1987) xxxvi.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Since that time many scholars have followed theories that view John as having written independently of the synoptics.

In most recent debates, the arguments concerning John's relationship to the synoptics have centered around three distinct positions<sup>6</sup>: (1) that John was literarily dependent upon one or more of the synoptics, (2) that John was literarily independent of the synoptics but that similarities between them are due to use of a common synoptic tradition(s), and (3) that John was literarily independent of the synoptics but was aware of them and their tradition(s).<sup>7</sup>

2

## I. LITERARY DEPENDENCE

The first theory that must be discussed is that which claims John was literarily dependent upon one or more of the synoptics. This position must be assessed carefully, since several distinct arguments have been made to forward it.

In America the argument for the thesis has arisen, at least in part, as a result of Norman Perrin's<sup>8</sup> suggestion that one can find traces of Mark's redactional work on the passion narrative in John's account.<sup>9</sup> He writes:

For a long time the general opinion of New Testament scholars was that the passion narrative existed as a connected unit before the gospel of Mark was written, and it was easy and natural to think that John had known and used a version of that pre-Markan narrative rather than the gospel of Mark. But today the tendency is to ascribe more and more of the composition of the passion narrative to the evangelist Mark himself and to doubt the very existence of a pre-Markan and non-Markan passion narrative extensive enough to have been the basis for the gospel of John.<sup>10</sup>

The principle here is simple and clear-cut: If elements of synoptic redaction have found their way into the fourth gospel, then John must have known not merely Markan

---

<sup>6</sup> A fourth position, offered by H. Windisch (*Johannes und die Synoptiker* [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1926]), is that John aimed to replace the synoptics. Recently variations of this theory have emerged, but they have not gained much support. Of them D. Guthrie (*New Testament Introduction* [4th ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990] 286-287) says that they may be dismissed "without further discussion." See also T. M. Dowell, "Why John Rewrote the Synoptics," *John and the Synoptics* (Leuven: Leuven University, 1992) 453-457.

<sup>7</sup> R. Kysar, "The Gospel of John in Current Research," *RelSRev* 9 (1983) 316.

<sup>8</sup> N. Perrin and D. C. Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (2d ed.; San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) 332-337.

<sup>9</sup> Kysar, "Gospel" 316.

<sup>10</sup> Perrin and Duling, *New Testament* 334.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

tradition but the gospel of Mark itself.<sup>11</sup> “Traces of indisputably Markan redaction in John should prove beyond reasonable doubt John’s knowledge and use of Mark.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, according to Perrin, the similarities between John and Mark in the passion materials<sup>13</sup> strongly imply that John knew and used Mark.

This redaction-critical stance should not be too hastily acclaimed, however. Perrin’s position seems to be based on the presumption that Markan redaction can be easily identified. Lloyd Kittlaus correctly observes that one cannot be sufficiently certain about what is and what is not Markan redaction.<sup>14</sup> In reality, of the linguistic and stylistic criteria used to establish redaction on the Markan side, eighty-five to ninety percent are missing from the Johannine parallels.<sup>15</sup> Also “the ones present are largely common Greek words or words without which a story could scarcely be told.”<sup>16</sup> In the end the unambiguity that redaction critics hoped for with this argument still turns up more ambiguity.

From Europe come much more extensive arguments for synoptic dependence. Among the most recognized is that of C. K. Barrett. He asserts that John had read Mark and was influenced both positively and negatively by its contents—that is, he reproduced in his own way some Markan substance and language and also emended some of the Markan material—and that a few of John’s statements may be most satisfactorily explained if he was familiar with matter peculiar to Luke.<sup>17</sup>

Barrett’s case rests heavily on the order in which certain key passages occur, for he feels that since John has the same order as Mark in ten incidents it is very likely that he knew Mark.<sup>18</sup> The list<sup>19</sup> of incidents Barrett cites is represented in the following chart.

---

<sup>11</sup> Smith, “Dimensions” 436.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 437.

<sup>13</sup> The “materials” of which Perrin and Duling speak are the trial scene set in the context of Peter’s denial.

<sup>14</sup> L. Kittlaus, “John and Mark: A Methodological Evaluation of Norman Perrin’s Suggestion,” SBLSP (Missoula, Scholars, 1978) 269-279. See also S. S. Smalley, “Redaction Criticism,” *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. I. H. Marshall; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 191, where one is reminded to be cautious in the analysis of any editorial activity because one is “not always sure who the ‘editor’ is.”

<sup>15</sup> Smith, “Dimensions” 437. See also E. J. Pryke, *Redactional Style in the Markan Gospel: A Study of Syntax and Vocabulary as Guides to Redaction in Mark* (SNTSMS 33; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> Smith, “Dimensions” 438. Examples of common words being used would be ἥρως, καθώς and φωνή in John 1:23; Mark 1:3 and ἐμβαίνω, μαθητής and πλοῖον in John 6:16–17; Mark 6:45.

<sup>17</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: Westminster, 1955) 34.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> This list is found in Morris, *Studies* 16.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

| INCIDENT                                             | MARK                  | JOHN        |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| The work and witness of the Baptist                  | 1:4–8                 | 1:19–36     |
| Departure to Galilee                                 | 1:14–15               | 4:3         |
| Feeding the multitude                                | 6:34–44               | 6:1–13      |
| Walking on the lake                                  | 6:45–52               | 6:16–21     |
| Peter's confession                                   | 8:29                  | 6:68–69     |
| Departure to Jerusalem                               | 9:30–31; 10:1, 32, 46 | 7:10–14     |
| The entry                                            | 11:1–10               | 12:12–15    |
| The anointing                                        | 14:3–9                | 12:1–8      |
| The last supper with betrayal and denial predictions | 14:17–26              | 13:1–17:26  |
| The arrest                                           | 14:43–52              | 18:1–11     |
| The passion and resurrection                         | 14:53–16:8            | 18:12–20:29 |

This argument is not a strong one. The similarity of order in which the key passages occur (which is the foundation of Barrett's argument) seems largely determined by the events themselves.<sup>20</sup>

The ministry of John the Baptist had to come first, and Jesus' departure for Galilee must follow that. The feeding of the multitude, which took place in Galilee, must come later than the departure for that region. Barrett next cites the walking on the lake, and this is the kind of sequence that would prove his point if there were enough examples. He goes on to Peter's confession, but it seems that Mk. 8:29 does not refer to the same incident as Jn. 6:68f. Jesus' departure for Jerusalem had to follow the Galilean ministry, and the entry to Jerusalem could scarcely come anywhere else in the sequence. Actually, Barrett here links two events, the anointing and the entry, but has to note that they are in the reverse order in the two Gospels, so this is not very convincing. The Last Supper, arrest, Passion, and

<sup>20</sup> L. Morris, "John, Gospel according to," *ISBE* 2.1104–1105.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Resurrection follow, and there is nothing remarkable in their being in the same order in the two Gospels.<sup>21</sup>

As it stands, “the evidence advanced to show that John depended on the Second Gospel in the writing of his own is rather meager.”<sup>22</sup>

Barrett bases his Lukan dependence theory partly on the fact that Mary and Martha, a disciple named Judas (not Iscariot), and Annas are mentioned in both John and Luke.<sup>23</sup> He also mentions several details that seem to link John and Luke: The betrayal is due to the possession of Judas by Satan, Peter’s denial is made at the supper and not after it, the high priest’s servant had his right ear cut off, at the tomb on Easter morning there were two angels instead of one, and “the details of the Johannine anointing story recall the Lucan as well as the Markan narrative.”<sup>24</sup> Neither of these lists is very impressive upon closer examination. That four people are mentioned in both John and Luke is surely not enough on which to base literary dependence. Nor does a small list of similar details require John to borrow from Luke.<sup>25</sup> Barrett’s argument for John’s reliance upon Luke is even less impressive than his case for dependence on Mark.

A more recent dependence argument coming from the European scene is the one offered by M. E. Boismard and A. Lamouille.<sup>26</sup> This very complex view of John’s dependence on the synoptics requires that John (or his redactors) have several versions or documents. D. M. Smith gives the following summary of Boismard and Lamouille’s stance:

For Boismard the influence of the Synoptics on John arrives on the scene rather late. First, there was an independent, primitive gospel narrative called by Boismard Document C (or John I); it was composed by an unknown author about AD 50 in Palestine. This document was taken up, within the “Johannine” school, by the Evangelist who composed the first recension of his Gospel in Palestine in the sixties (John II-A). He revised it extensively thirty-odd years later at Ephesus (II-B). Only at the stage of the second revision was he influenced by the Synoptics. But at that point he knew and used all three, and their influence upon him was

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 1104. See also Morris, *Studies* 16-17, for much the same coverage in somewhat greater detail.

<sup>22</sup> S. J. Kistemaker, *The Gospels in Current Study* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 125.

<sup>23</sup> Morris, *Studies* 18.

<sup>24</sup> Barrett, *Gospel* 37.

<sup>25</sup> In fact there is even some discrepancy in the list of details. Luke has Satan entering Judas before he first sought out the high priests (Luke 22:3). John connects Satan and Judas at the supper (John 13:2, 27). See Morris, *Studies* 18.

<sup>26</sup> M. E. Boismard and A. Lamouille, *L’évangile de Jean: Synopse de quatre évangiles en français* (Paris: Cerf, 1977). Kysar, “Gospel” 316, and D. M. Smith, “John and the Synoptics,” *Bib* 63 (1982) 102-113, will serve as summaries of Boismard and Lamouille for this study.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

significant. At the level of II-B the discourse material, added in II-A, was augmented and the Gospel received what is essentially its present shape. Finally, a later redactor (John III) worked the finished Gospel over, making some changes and additions, sometimes laying material from older level II-A alongside II-B material intended to displace it.<sup>27</sup>

While the Boismard-Lamouille analysis may be confusing to some, it is clear that they believe John was dependent on the synoptics, albeit a late influence.

6

The Boismard-Lamouille theory has been refuted by Frans Neirynck and others based on the conjectural nature of the argument. Neirynck's basic position is that John knows all the synoptic gospels,<sup>28</sup> and in that respect he does not differ with Boismard and Lamouille.<sup>29</sup> But Neirynck (and M. Sabbe<sup>30</sup>) rejects the theories of "hypothetical" sources behind John, whether written or oral.<sup>31</sup> "Not traditions lying behind the Synoptic Gospels but the Synoptic Gospels themselves are the sources of the Fourth Evangelist."<sup>32</sup> A substantial weakness of the Boismard-Lamouille theory, then, is that it is so detailed and complex that in its totality it rarely attracts a consensus of scholarly opinion.<sup>33</sup>

Neirynck's position is a more recent dependence argument coming out of Europe. His arguments<sup>34</sup> have helped the dependence viewpoint gain new impetus. His attempt to show dependence involves studying each of the synoptics, listing several possible Scripture parallels between them and John, stating several other scholars' arguments about these supposed parallels, and then formulating his conclusion.<sup>35</sup> For Matthew he concludes that "a great deal of the similarities between Matthew and John, in the passion and elsewhere, are found in material that is parallel to Mark, and they are explicable as independent *minor* agreements."<sup>36</sup> His argument for Luke does not differ much from his

---

<sup>27</sup> Smith, "John" 107.

<sup>28</sup> F. Neirynck, "John and the Synoptics," *L'évangile de Jean* (Leuven: Leuven University, 1977) 106.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, "John" 107. See also Borgen, "John," *Interrelations* (ed. Dungan) 409.

<sup>30</sup> M. Sabbe, "The Arrest of Jesus in Jn 18, 1–11 and its Relation to the Synoptic Gospels," *L'évangile de Jean* (Leuven: Leuven University, 1977) 205–234.

<sup>31</sup> Neirynck, "John" 103–106.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 106. See also F. Neirynck, "John and the Synoptics: 1975–1990," *John and the Synoptics* (ed. A. Denaux; Leuven: Leuven University, 1992) 15.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, "John" 111.

<sup>34</sup> Neirynck, "John and the Synoptics: 1975–1990" 16–59.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 35 (*italics his*). Keeping in mind that Neirynck believes that John knew and was influenced by all of the synoptics, it is very interesting that he adds to his conclusion on Matthew the somewhat anticlimactic phrase that "some of these similarities may possibly point to independent use of Mark, the common Gospel source of Matthew and John." Neirynck's conclusion here almost admittedly stands on unstable ground.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Matthean argument in methodology but has some minor differences in the conclusion. His Lukan argument is based on basically the same ground upon which Barrett<sup>37</sup> based his, except that Neirynck adds the similarity of themes between John and Luke to his argument.<sup>38</sup> His Markan argument is based on practically the same argument as Barrett's<sup>39</sup> but focuses more on the passion narrative.<sup>40</sup> It becomes obvious that Neirynck's position places great emphasis on the similarities between John and the synoptics, especially the similarities with Mark.

7

Donald Guthrie briefly describes the similarities as follows:

All the records include narratives and comments about John the Baptist, the call of the disciples, the confession of Peter, the entry to Jerusalem, the last meal and various sections of the passion narrative. In addition there are common narratives about the cleansing of the temple and an anointing of Jesus, but both placed in a different setting. These similarities may also be supplemented by a number of isolated words of Jesus and others. Yet the whole of this common material contains very little verbal agreement. There are a few other allusions which are hardly sufficiently close to be called similarities, such as the placing of resurrection appearances by both Luke and John in Jerusalem, the possible connection between the feet-washing incident in John and the words of Luke 22:27, and the parallel fishing episodes of John 21:1 ff. and Luke 5:1 ff.<sup>41</sup>

Craig Blomberg also shows that John is similar to the synoptics in three different categories: (1) John shares "a few of the same incidents from Jesus' pre-passion ministry," (2) John shares some "stories which narrate incidents unparalleled in the Synoptics but wholly in keeping with the type of thing which regularly happens in the first three gospels," and (3) "John records specific teachings of Jesus which closely resemble those found in the Synoptics, even if the contexts and important details vary."<sup>42</sup> As Guthrie indirectly suggests in his list of similarities, however, some of the similarities that Neirynck and others base their arguments on do not sufficiently explain the incredible amount of peculiarities of the gospel of John. In agreement with this, Raymond Brown writes:

---

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *supra*.

<sup>38</sup> Neirynck, "John and the Synoptics: 1975–1990" 45–46.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *supra*.

<sup>40</sup> Neirynck, "John and the Synoptics: 1975–1990" 48–49.

<sup>41</sup> Guthrie, *Introduction* 303. On Guthrie's comment that there is very little verbal agreement, see also B. de Solages, *Jean et les Synoptiques* (Leiden: Brill, 1979) 4–21. Cf. also C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987) 156–159.

<sup>42</sup> Blomberg, *Reliability* 156–157.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

If one were to posit dependency on the basis of similarities alone, one would have to suppose that the fourth evangelist knew all three Gospels and chose in an eclectic manner, now from one, now from another. However, even this suggestion does not hold up when one examines the *dissimilarities*.<sup>43</sup>

Blomberg suggests five categories of distinctives of John's gospel and gives brief examples of each.<sup>44</sup> First, and probably most obvious, involves John's selection (omission) of material. Numerous features about the life of Christ, found in all three of the synoptics, find no place in John. For example, Jesus' baptism, the transfiguration, the parables, and the institution of the Lord's supper are omitted from John. Instead John includes narratives and teachings that are not found in the synoptics: the miracle of turning water to wine, the raising of Lazarus, Jesus' early ministry in Judea and Samaria, his regular visits to Jerusalem, and extended discourses in the temple and synagogues as well as in private meetings with his disciples and his opponents.<sup>45</sup>

A second category Blomberg gives is that of John's theological distinctives. Whereas the synoptics seemingly unfold the messianic identity of Jesus somewhat gradually, climaxing with Peter's confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27–30), John's gospel from the very beginning directly identifies Jesus as fully divine.<sup>46</sup> This characteristic is particularly discernible, as well as reinforced, by John's record of Jesus' "I am" statements.<sup>47</sup>

A third category involves apparent contradictions of chronology. Here Blomberg gives the example of how the synoptics record Jesus' attendance only at the Passover Feast that immediately preceded his death, and they give no clear indication that he had ever been in Jerusalem as an adult prior to that occasion. John, however, recounts three Passovers and other lesser festivals with extensive teaching ministries of Jesus in the Jewish capital. Also, specific events of Jesus' last twenty-four hours seem to be full of apparent discrepancies. The day Jesus died, the number (and nature) of the various hearings and the hour of crucifixion differ between John's account and the synoptics.

Fourth, various other apparent historical discrepancies emerge. For instance, John shows no knowledge of Christ's birth in Bethlehem but tells how the Jews rejected Jesus since they knew that no prophet would come from Nazareth (7:52). There are also difficulties with the location of the temple cleansing: The synoptics place it toward the end of Jesus'

---

<sup>43</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) xlv.

<sup>44</sup> Blomberg, *Reliability* 153-156.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 153-154.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 154.

<sup>47</sup> For an excellent discussion of these sayings see L. Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 107-125.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

ministry (as if to be a catalyst for Jesus' arrest), while John places it early in Jesus' ministry.

Finally, Blomberg notes that the style of John's writing differs markedly from the synoptics. One of the differences is that in John Jesus is recorded as having extended discourses, while in the synoptics he is recorded as speaking in the shorter parabolic style. It is also notable that in John more thematic language is prevalent (e.g. light, life, witness, truth, glory, election, knowledge, abiding, the word, the world), whereas in the synoptics such topical writing is "relatively uncommon."<sup>48</sup> It seems, then, that arguments for John's dependence on the synoptics are severely hampered by the striking differences between them and are therefore improbable.



## II. LITERARY INDEPENDENCE

The second theory concerning John's relationship to the synoptics attempts to take into consideration the similarities and differences noted above. It "contends that John was not dependent on the Synoptics but that the similarities between the two are due to use of a common tradition."<sup>49</sup>

A momentous work in this area has been done by Bruno de Solages.<sup>50</sup> He contends that John only knew the tradition behind the synoptics, or at least behind Mark.<sup>51</sup> To establish his argument he begins his book with a statistical analysis to identify those verses of John that may reasonably be said to be paralleled in the synoptics. De Solages observes that one cannot fail to be struck by the relative scarcity of such correspondences as compared with those among the synoptics.<sup>52</sup> Totaling the corresponding verses, de Solages concludes that of the 868 verses in John only 153 (17.6%) have synoptic counterparts, most of which are found in the passion, feeding of the multitude, and Jesus' walking on the water.<sup>53</sup>

Following the analysis of corresponding verses, de Solages compares their order, particularly in the passion narrative.<sup>54</sup> In a table<sup>55</sup> he demonstrates how Mark and John

---

<sup>48</sup> Blomberg, *Reliability* 155.

<sup>49</sup> Kysar, "Gospel" 316.

<sup>50</sup> De Solages, *Jean*. See Smith, "John" 102–106, for an excellent review and summary of de Solages' work.

<sup>51</sup> De Solages, *Jean* 98–99; Smith, "John" 104; Kysar, "Gospel" 316.

<sup>52</sup> De Solages, *Jean* 21.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, "John" 103.

<sup>54</sup> De Solages, *Jean* 23–27.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

have the same sequence in the passion where they correspond, but this sequence is sometimes broken or interrupted by omissions or dislocations on one side or the other.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, de Solages attempts to set a percentage value on the verbal agreements between John and the synoptics in the passion, John 6, and certain common logia.<sup>57</sup> To do this, he uses three categories of agreement: (1) verbatim agreement, (2) equivalent words (i.e. words from the same root but with different inflection), and (3) synonyms. In the passion narrative he finds a total (i.e. total of verbatim, equivalent and synonymous wording) agreement of about 15.5 percent.<sup>58</sup> For the John 6:1–21 correspondences<sup>59</sup> he finds about a 27.2 percent total agreement, and for the logia correspondences<sup>60</sup> he finds very similar results. From these statistical data, de Solages rather confidently states that John does not use the synoptics as sources but must have been aware of and used their tradition by confirming, clarifying and correcting it.<sup>61</sup>

De Solages bases his view that John and the synoptists had a common tradition on the fact that John the son of Zebedee was the author of the fourth gospel and was an eyewitness to the historical Jesus.<sup>62</sup> Much of his foundation for Johannine authorship is based on the study of B. F. Westcott,<sup>63</sup> which is still very crucial in the study of Johannine authorship in modern scholarly circles. From internal evidence Westcott (and hence de Solages) has determined the following about the author of the gospel: (1) He was a Jew, (2) he was a Palestinian Jew, (3) he was an eyewitness, (4) he was one of the twelve apostles, and (5) he was the apostle John.<sup>64</sup> According to de Solages, if the apostle John is the author then several characteristics of the fourth gospel are explained: (1) the precision of the facts that are reported, (2) the independence toward the synoptics (which he sometimes neglects and sometimes corrects), and (3) the relative scarcity of traces of Matthew and Luke, who were not eyewitnesses.<sup>65</sup>

De Solages' view that John knows the synoptics (or at least Mark) but does not use them as sources makes very good sense in light of his statistical research. But some could (and

---

<sup>56</sup> Smith, "John" 103.

<sup>57</sup> De Solages, *Jean* 27-66.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, "John" 103.

<sup>59</sup> Smith reminds his readers that this passage corresponds to the synoptics throughout. The percentage of identical agreement is only 13.9 percent.

<sup>60</sup> These are John 4:44; 5:23b–29; 6:51; 8:51(52); 12:23b, 25–26; 13:16, 20; 14:25–26, 31; 15:19b, 20a–21, 26–27; 16:23.

<sup>61</sup> De Solages, *Jean* 67, 172–173, 182–185.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 200–201. See Smith, "John" 105.

<sup>63</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) v–xxviii.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> See Smith, "John" 105.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

would) take issue with de Solages on a possible weakness in his reasoning, as D. M. Smith observes:

The explanation that this state of affairs results from the author's having been not only eye-witness to the events he describes, but one of the Twelve, has a wondrous simplicity and attractiveness. But Solages hardly meets the objections that have been mounted against this view. Indeed, his references to scholarly discussions of the problems with which he deals are at best minimal. Moreover, the "supplementation theory" (Windisch) which Solages represents as basically explaining John's treatment, or omission, of the greater part of the Synoptic material, is more satisfactory as a general theory of their relationship when one does not examine individual cases or pericopes in order to assess how well they may actually be interpreted on this basis.<sup>66</sup>

11

Others (e.g. Brown, Peder Borgen) would disagree with de Solages' view that John had the same traditions as the synoptists. Rather, they would argue that John had a tradition similar to that of the synoptists.<sup>67</sup>

Borgen has offered an interesting argument for the possibility of John being able to write similarly to the synoptics (or their tradition). He proposes that one could look to Paul's letters in order to gain insight into "pre-synoptic usage of gospel materials."<sup>68</sup> First he compares 1 Cor 10:3–4, 16–17, 21; 11:23–29 and Mark 14:22–25, from which he determines that "between mutually independent versions of units of oral and/or written traditions there may be close verbal agreements in the form of sentences, word-pairs and sets, single words, and corresponding variant terms." Since the agreements between John 2:13–22; 5:1–18; 6:51–58 and the synoptics are neither closer nor more striking than those between the passages in 1 Corinthians and Mark, one could easily hold that John and the synoptics are mutually independent.<sup>69</sup>

Next, Borgen makes several observations about the nature of the tradition behind the gospels: They were handed down and received, activated and used in Christian communities, and sometimes commented on and interpreted.<sup>70</sup> Also, these expositions had largely the form of sentences, paraphrases and phrases of sentences, word sets, and words from the given tradition.<sup>71</sup> The transmission and exposition of tradition can take

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>67</sup> Brown, *Gospel xlv*; Borgen, "John," *Interrelations* (ed. Dungan) 410–411, 437.

<sup>68</sup> P. Borgen, "John and the Synoptics: Can Paul Offer Help?", *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 80.

<sup>69</sup> Borgen, "John," *Interrelations* (ed. Dungan) 410.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 410–11.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 411.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

both a written and oral form. The form behind the gospel, however, seems to be primarily oral. Borgen gives the following reasons for believing so:

- a) Paul states explicitly that 1 Cor. 11:23ff was brought orally to the church at Corinth. Thus there is a basis for assuming that the tradition as recorded in the Gospels was also primarily transmitted orally.
- b) Paul gives his exposition of the gospel in tradition in written form because he is not present himself and thus cannot interpret the tradition in person (i.e., orally). This evidence suggests that similar kinds of exposition in the four gospels primarily originated in oral settings.
- c) The material discussed in 1 Cor. 10 and 11 and in the Gospels belongs to identifiable pericopes.... This observation also speaks in favor of the view that the oral form is primary, although written form also may be used.<sup>72</sup>

12

After a rather complex comparison of Paul and Mark on the one hand and John and the synoptics on the other, Borgen comes to a twofold conclusion. (1) The agreements between John 2:13–22; 6:51–58 and the synoptics are neither closer, nor more striking, than those between the above-mentioned Pauline passages and Mark, and in the case of John 5:1–18 there are fewer agreements with the synoptics. To this extent the analysis of these three Johannine passages supports the hypothesis that John and the synoptics are mutually independent.<sup>73</sup> (2) Although written documents have been examined, the oral tradition seems to be the primary source behind the documents. Also, the parallels between the passages discussed in John and those in 1 Corinthians 10–11 give support to this interpretation. In all of these passages the traditions seem to be interpreted to meet the challenges that existed in the Christian communities.<sup>74</sup>

Borgen's argument does not go without objection. Among his primary objectors is Neirynck, who disagrees with him on several issues. First he claims that Borgen's "point of departure" is a comparison between the 1 Corinthians 11 passage and the Mark 14 passage—the versions of the Eucharist.<sup>75</sup> He claims that 1 Cor 11:23b–25 is irrelevant to the discussion of John and the synoptics because it is more liturgical than Mark 14:22–25.<sup>76</sup> He also claims that Borgen does not take into consideration the possible problems of Markan redaction and Pauline interpretation and that, in his discussion of tradition and exposition, he fails to define each word and differentiate between the two.<sup>77</sup> Borgen

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 437.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> F. Neirynck, "John and the Synoptics: a Response to Peder Borgen," *Interrelations* (ed. Dungan) 440.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 441.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

replied to the objections of Neirynck,<sup>78</sup> but the two seem to have reached a stalemate in their debating.

## III. MEDIATING VIEW

A third position that has been “cautiously hinted at by D. M. Smith”<sup>79</sup> has been called a “mediating view”<sup>80</sup> by some scholars. 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.”<sup>81</sup> Among others who have hinted at this idea are J. N. Sanders and B. A. Mastin.<sup>82</sup> Upon examining evidence advanced for John’s use of Mark, they remained unconvinced that Mark was a source but felt that John must have known Mark. They added: “But knowing Mark and using it as a source are two different things.”<sup>83</sup> Consequently, “mediating view” may be understood to mean that John wrote his gospel literarily independent of the synoptics but that he knew them and their tradition(s). This theory seems to best handle the major differences and the minor similarities (as noted above) between the fourth gospel and the synoptics.

Perhaps the best mediating view is that put forward by Morris and later reinforced by D. A. Carson: The Johannine narrative interlocks with that of the synoptists.<sup>84</sup> By “interlocking tradition” Morris means those places where John and the synoptics “mutually reinforce or explain each other, without betraying overt literary dependence.”<sup>85</sup> Carson explains:

Direct literary dependence should not in any case be the exclusive issue. When we see how free John is when citing or alluding to the Old Testament, we perceive that if he adopted a similar practice when citing or alluding to other written works it would be exceedingly difficult to reconstruct any part of them from the Gospel he has written. My views ... suggest that John had probably read Mark, and probably Luke. It is not impossible that he read Matthew, but that is harder to

---

<sup>78</sup> P. Borgen, “John and the Synoptics: A Reply,” *Interrelations* (ed. Dungan) 451–458.

<sup>79</sup> Kysar, “Gospel” 316.

<sup>80</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, “Synoptics and John,” *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. J. B. Green, S. McKnight and I. H. Marshall; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 795.

<sup>81</sup> Smith, “Dimensions” 444.

<sup>82</sup> J. N. Sanders and B. A. Mastin, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Harper, 1969).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

<sup>84</sup> Morris, *Studies* 40; Morris, “John” 1105; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 51; D. A. Carson, D. J. Moo and L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 161.

<sup>85</sup> Carson, Moo and Morris, *Introduction* 161; cf. Carson, *Gospel* 52.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

prove. But if he had them in front of him as he wrote, he did not consult them, or at least he did not make verbatim use of them. John wrote his own book.<sup>86</sup>

He goes on to say that the relationship between John and the synoptics should not be evaluated exclusively in terms of dependence one may have on the other, nor in terms of their divergence, but in terms of their interlocking connections. These interlocking connections explain the parallels with the synoptics and the “subtle touches” or similarities with them as well.<sup>87</sup>

14

Carson goes on to list seven different examples<sup>88</sup> of this type of connection, two of which are quoted here. The first is an example where John reinforces the synoptics:

At several points, John provides explicit theological justification for actions or motifs common in the Synoptics, but relatively unexplained. Consider, for instance, the commonly noted fact that the Synoptics report many exorcisms while John records none. It is true that the Synoptics provide some theological reflection on what Jesus is doing when he eliminates demons from human personalities (e.g., Mt. 12:25–28; Lk. 11:14–26); but it is the Fourth Gospel that provides “a theology of the devil.” Jesus’ opponents in John’s Gospel trace their paternity to the devil himself (8:44). The betrayer is moved and inspired by the devil (6:70; 13:2)... In short John, as usual, is profoundly interested in the undergirding theology.<sup>89</sup>

Next is an example where the synoptics reinforce John:

This interlocking cuts the other way. ... In other words, if John often usefully explains something in the Synoptic Gospels, the Synoptists frequently provide information that enables us to make better sense of something in the Fourth Gospel.... Although John’s prologue pronounces that Jesus is the Word that was with God and was God, and that has now become flesh, and although his Gospel happily refers to Jesus’ mother and even to his “father and mother,” nothing begins to even remotely explain by what means the one who shared the glory with the Father before the world began somehow became the son of Mary. For that, the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are far more helpful.<sup>90</sup>

This interlocking view alleviates the alleged contradictions between the synoptics and John. One such contradiction is that the synoptics only require about a year for the

---

<sup>86</sup> Carson, *Gospel* 51.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 52-53. See Morris, *Studies* 42-62, for 17 such examples of interlocking.

<sup>89</sup> Carson, *Gospel* 53-54.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 54.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

ministry of Jesus while John requires about three years. This contradiction of chronology falls into place if one accepts the Johannine evidence of a ministry lasting longer than a year and that a considerable part of it was spent in and around Jerusalem—which the synoptics do not record.<sup>91</sup> This particular example, as well as other chronological problems solved by this view, proves to be of inestimable value to the historian. “The implications of the interlocking patterns is that *at the historical level* what actually took place was much bigger and more complex than any one gospel intimates.”<sup>92</sup> Much in the quest to establish the historical reliability of the gospels can be gained when viewing the relationship between John and the synoptics in this way.

15

## IV. CONCLUSION

It is now beneficial to summarize the three basic positions scholars are taking on the subject of John’s relationship to the synoptic gospels. The first position claims to find evidence for a literary dependence of the fourth evangelist on one or more of the synoptics.<sup>93</sup> The second position contends that John was not dependent on the synoptics but that the similarities between the two are due to use of a common tradition.<sup>94</sup> The third view, called a mediating view, proposes that John wrote his gospel literarily independent of the synoptics but that he knew them and their tradition(s).<sup>95</sup> Many complex arguments have been made for each of these views, a few of which have been outlined above. It seems best, however, to view John’s relationship to the synoptics as mediating. This argument seems to make the most sense theologically and historically. It proposes that John perhaps read Mark and Luke (and maybe Matthew) but wrote his own gospel, not consulting or making verbatim use of any of the synoptic gospels. The main idea behind this view is that John and the synoptics have an interlocking tradition—that is, they mutually reinforce and explain each other. Because of this, the alleged contradictions between John and the synoptics are explained and dispelled, thus making all of the gospels theologically and historically reliable.

Blomberg makes the following observation about John’s gospel in light of the synoptics:

A careful comparison of the first three gospels demonstrates that the similarities between them far outweigh the differences. When one turns to the Fourth Gospel, however, one seems to be in a different world altogether. The person who reads the four gospels straight through from start to finish notices this most clearly; after

---

<sup>91</sup> Morris, *Studies* 43- 44.

<sup>92</sup> Carson, Moo and Morris, *Introduction* 163 (italics theirs).

<sup>93</sup> Kysar, “Gospel” 316.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. See Smith, “Dimensions” 444.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

having read many of the same stories three times over, he or she is amazed how different John is.<sup>96 97</sup>

James Dvorak has been teaching in biblical studies (primarily New Testament) at McMaster Divinity College for over twenty years, and has been in administration for over ten years. In addition to VP Academic duties, Jim teaches New Testament textual courses as well as the Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning course. He is also primary or secondary supervisor for a number of DPT and MA/PhD students. He is active in both ETS and SBL, typically presenting papers or moderating sessions at each conference every year. At SBL, he co-chairs the Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics unit with Xiaxia (Esther) Xue, an MDC PhD alumna. He also remains active in research and writing.

16

---

NOTE: This post is in compliance with the Fair Use clause of the US Copyright Act of 1976 (17 U.S. Code § 107). The US Supreme Court has issued several major decisions clarifying and reaffirming the fair use doctrine since the 1980s, most recently in the 2021 decision *Google LLC v. Oracle America, Inc.*

---

<sup>96</sup> Blomberg, *Reliability* 153.

<sup>97</sup> Dvorak, J. D. (1998). "The Relationship Between John and the Synoptic Gospels." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 41(2), 199–213.