

## *Did John Know the Synoptic Gospels?*

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### *(1) John vs. the Synoptics*

- Lack of **verbatim agreement** between John and the Synoptics. At best, the agreements between John and the Synoptics are minor – only a handful of words.
  - Feeding of the 5,000 (John 6) – even the word for fish differs.
- **Different order.** Apart from the Passion Narrative, it is rare to find two stories next to each other where there is a parallel between John and the Synoptics.
- **Fresh content:** most of the new Johannine material has no parallel in the Synoptics.
- **Narrative structure** – far greater stress on Jerusalem and Judea than on Galilee.
- **Major events missing** include Baptism, Transfiguration, Last Supper, Gethsemane.
- **Signs vs. Mighty Works:** the Synoptics speak of “mighty works” whereas John has seven “signs”. Only three overlap (Officer’s Son, Five Thousand, Walking on Water).
- **Kingdom and Parables:** parables proliferate in the Synoptics but are absent in John.
- **Christology:** John’s Jesus repeatedly says “I am . . . ” in radical contrast to the Synoptics, where the focus is on the “kingdom of God” and “Son of Man”.

### *(2) Could John have known the Synoptics?*

- Clement of Alexandria: “But, last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel.”
- This has been mainstream for most of Christian history. But the consensus broke down in the mid-twentieth century.
- 1938: Percival Gardner Smith argues that John did not know the Synoptics. The few commonalities are explained by oral tradition.
- C. H. Dodd developed Gardner Smith’s view and was highly influential.

- Many major Johannine scholars of the 1960s-1990s presuppose John's independence, e.g. Raymond Brown & Louis Martyn.
- Some scholars (e.g. Fortna) suggest that John used the "Signs Source".
- This is an element in a larger historical problem: what about the historicity of John? Can it tell us anything about the historical Jesus, or is it useless for that?

### (3) *What about History?*

- If John is independent of the Synoptics, then its historical value is enhanced – independent witness to the historical Jesus.
- Hints of eye-witness testimony in John (Beloved Disciple)?
- Many details in John have verisimilitude, e.g. Solomon's Portico (10.23), the Pool of Siloam (9.7), Roman soldiers at Jesus's arrest (18.3).
- Many broader elements of the plot are plausible:
  - Much more Judean ministry – more time for build up of conflict?
  - Longer (specified) ministry – at least two years.
  - Crucifixion on the day before Passover, not Passover itself.
- But famous problems remain, especially Jesus's voice, which sounds so similar to the narrator's voice. Jesus knows that he is pre-existent just as the narrator does, and the two voices are frequently indistinguishable (e.g. see 3.16).

### (4) *John's Creative Familiarity with the Synoptics*

- A writer can be *familiar* with a text without being *dependent* on it. If John knows the Synoptics, he uses them freely & creatively.
- John quotes the Old Testament freely and allusively and probably from memory.
- The Gospel's self-quotations provide similar examples.

**John 3.3: "Amen, Amen, I say to you, Unless someone is born from above, they are not able to see the kingdom of God."**

**John 3.7: "Do not wonder that I said to you, 'It is necessary to be born from above.'"**

**John 10.33: "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy."**

**John 10.30: "I and the father are one"**

John 10.36 “. . . You are saying, ‘You blaspheme’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’”.

(5) *John’s dramatic adaptation of the Synoptics*

- John writes in dramatic mode, adapting Synoptic narration into character speech:

Mark	John
1.2. <u>As</u> it is written in <u>Isaiah the prophet</u> . . 3 “ <u>A voice crying in the wilderness</u> , ‘Prepare <u>the way of the Lord</u> ; make straight his paths.’”	1.22. . . . “What do you say about yourself?” 23. He replied, “I am <u>a voice crying in the wilderness</u> : ‘Make straight <u>the way of the Lord</u> ,’ <u>as Isaiah the prophet</u> said.”
1.10. And immediately, coming out of the water, he saw the <u>heavens torn open</u> and <u>the spirit as a dove descending</u> into <u>him</u> .	1.32 And John witnessed, saying, “I saw <u>the spirit descending as a dove from heaven</u> , and it remained upon <u>him</u> .”
6.42: And  they all <u>ate</u> and <u>were</u> <u>satisfied</u> .	6.26: “Amen Amen I say to you, ‘You are seeking me not because you see signs but because you <u>ate</u> from the bread <u>and were satisfied</u> .”

- The phenomenon may explain the famous first person narration in the Prologue:

**John 1.14: “And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”**

Cf. Luke 9.32, “they saw his glory”.

(6) *John’s Presupposition of the Synoptics*

- John often appears to presuppose elements that are narrated in the Synoptics:

**3.24: “For John had not yet been thrown into prison.”**

**6.1: “After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias.”**

**11.1: “Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.”**

**18.11: “Jesus said to Peter, ‘Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?’”**

- John’s irony can become intertextual dramatic irony:

**7.41-2: “But some asked, ‘Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has**

not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?”

*(7) A Fourth Synoptic Gospel?*

- Tradition or Gospel? Some of the most striking links are structural and conceptual.
- The Synoptics and John are “Passion narratives with an extended introduction”.

Mark 1.1-10.52 425 verses <b>63.8%</b>	John 1.1 – 12.11 535 verses <b>61.7%</b>
Mark 11.1-11: Triumphal Entry Mark 11.1 – 16.8 241 verses <b>36.2%</b>	John 12.12-19: Triumphal Entry John 12.12 – 21.25 332 verses <b>38.3%</b>

- Literary conceit is the same: a hidden Messiah reveals his identity to an inner circle, but they only understand it after the Resurrection. The reader knows how the story concludes but the characters in the drama do not.

**Mark 9.9-10: “As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.”**

**Luke 24.5-8: “Why are you looking for the living among the dead? 6 He is not here, but has been raised! Remember how he spoke to you while he was still in Galilee, 7 saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of men who are sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise?” 8 And they remembered (ἐμνήσθησαν) his words . . .**

**John 2.22: “After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered (ἐμνήσθησαν) that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.”**

**John 12.16: “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered (ἐμνήσθησαν) that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.”**

*(8) John as the Hermeneutical Key to the Synoptics*

- John Calvin: “The Gospel of John is to us, as it were, a key by which we enter into an understanding of the others. For if we read St. Matthew, St. Mark and St Luke we shall not know well why Jesus Christ was sent into this world as when we shall have read St. John.”
- R. H. Lightfoot: ““It seems to me that St John’s Gospel, if considered by itself in isolation, is a riddle; but that if it is regarded as the crown and completion of our gospel records, it falls forthwith into place.”