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The Four Gospels in Canonical Perspective

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My scholarly life is consumed with the study of the four Gospels. I study them as individual units, seeking to understand what each evangelist is trying to say in the course of the narrative of Jesus that is related. I study them in comparison with one another, seeking to understand the differences so that I might better gain an understanding of both the individual emphasis that each evangelist has and also catch a glimpse of the unifying themes that pervade the Gospels as a whole.

I study them as component parts, seeking to understand the backgrounds of the traditions that influenced the evangelists. And I study them in their influence on the earliest church, so that I might better understand how they have shaped our theology and our church life. The story of Jesus Christ, and the four individual Gospels that testify to this good news of Jesus, is endlessly fascinating—but not without difficulties.

How do we embrace the wholeness of the canon of four distinct Gospels in our understanding of scripture in a way that is honest about the text and at the same time reflects the spiritual gift of an inspired scripture? In this article, I wish to explore this question because I am convinced that the spiritual health of the church depends to a great extent on how we answer it. Rightly discerning the nature of scripture is essential to rightly discerning God's continued activity in our midst.

THE PROBLEM OF THE FOUR-FOLD GOSPEL

Any student of the New Testament becomes quickly aware of the internal tensions among the four Gospels. The most obvious difficulty is found in comparing the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) with John. We are faced with two very different portraits of Jesus' ministry.[1] These differences can be categorized under the general headings of chronological differences, christological differences, and other narrational differences.

Chronological Differences

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' ministry is apparently only one year in length—at least we are not made aware of any longer period. In this ministry, Jesus confines most of his teaching and healing to the region of Galilee, and only in the final week of his ministry does he travel to Jerusalem, a week that culminates in his crucifixion. In contrast, the Fourth Gospel has at least a three-year ministry, which we can calculate through his repeated trips to Jerusalem at festival times. This significant difference in the basic chronological structure of the Gospels presents some interesting problems. For instance, in John the "cleansing" of the temple is very early in the Gospel, in Jesus' first trip to Jerusalem. In the Synoptic Gospels, of course, this can only take place in the one week he is in Jerusalem, the final passion week.

Other chronological differences are noteworthy. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' final meal is a Passover meal. His final words at the table are patterned in great part around the actions of the host at a Passover meal. In John, on the other hand, the final meal is explicitly not the Passover, because at Jesus' trial on the next day, the Jewish leaders are unwilling to enter the praetorium lest it make them unable to enter the tem-

ple for the Passover sacrifice. It is not surprising, then, that the final meal in John lacks any of the traditional language of the Passover, substituting instead the foot-washing incident that is so noteworthy in the Fourth Gospel. But much of the eucharistic language is found in John 6, following the feeding of the 5,000, which is specifically placed near the Passover!

Moreover, John writes of no trial before the Jewish council—which is not surprising since a "trial" has already been held without Jesus in which he has been condemned by the Jews (John 11:45–53). But the Synoptic Gospels do not know of this previous trial, and the council of chief priests and elders, which necessarily takes place in Jerusalem, is confined to the final week when Jesus is in Jerusalem.

Christological Differences

The picture of Jesus found in the Synoptics is far more one of a human being who, while performing miracles and astounding the teachers, fits more easily into a conception of a Davidic Messiah—which of course creates one of the problems of interpretation for his followers. In Mark especially, Jesus is deliberately secretive about his nature, charging his disciples and those whom he heals to "tell no one." Although he predicts his death in the Synoptics, the general picture is one who perceives the outline of conflict and death but is pulled along by the events that seem to overtake him.

Although Jesus is portrayed as having some prophet-like knowledge, he never goes out of his way to explain who he is. Identifying him is the task of his followers, or even at times bystanders (the centurion at the cross), but it is not Jesus' task to reveal his special relationship with God. The resurrection, though alluded to, remains somewhat of a surprise in all the Synoptic Gospels.

In John, on the other hand, Jesus is always well aware of his special relationship with God, and he is quite willing to tell people who he is. The prologue, of course, has already defined him as the Word of God, coexistent at creation. And his subsequent dialogues and monologues expand on this through remarkable "I am" statements; for example: I am the light of the world; I am the word come down from heaven; I am the good shepherd; before Abraham was I am. These metaphors are theological and challenge any concept of a Davidic Messiah. They clearly identify Jesus with God Himself, in a special and unique way that certainly would (and did) bring charges of blasphemy.

Narrational Differences

There are additional tensions between the Synoptic Gospels and John that hint at a very different conception of Jesus' ministry. In the Fourth Gospel, the disciples are drawn from John the Baptist's group of followers in the region of Judea. Indeed, there seems to have been a concurrent baptizing ministry of both John the Baptist and Jesus, something which is certainly not described in the Synoptic Gospels. In contrast, the Synoptics have the core of Jesus' followers called from ordinary occupations in the Galilee region.

A similar narrational difference is seen in the characterization of the opposition to Jesus. In the Synoptics Jesus spars with various Jews, notably the Pharisees, on various points of interpretation. But it awaits the final week in Jerusalem for any substantial formal opposition to be described. This opposition seems to come about because of the triumphal entry and Jesus' action in the temple. In John, on the other hand, the opposition to Jesus is a fundamental feature of that Gospel. "The Jews" enter as an opposing force early in the narrative and increasingly make their threats felt upon Jesus. This motif of growing opposition by "the Jews" is a striking feature of the Fourth Gospel, and it helps structure many of the events and actions of Jesus.

Essential Similarities

There are, then, significant differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels. But this too-brief sketch suggests, inappropriately, that the tensions between John and the Synoptics are greater than the extensive points of similarity. Despite the differences, both John and the Synoptics share an essential similarity in their

depiction of the ministry and purpose of Jesus, and especially of the central salvific role of his death and resurrection.

In each case, Jesus is seen as engaging in interaction with and healthy criticism of Judaism, which believed that its adherents were exclusively God's chosen people. He performs mighty acts of power, which often provoke challenges from the religious hierarchy of Judaism. He demonstrates concern for the marginalized, the poor, and the weak in each of the Gospels. And he invokes a special relationship with God the Father in such a way as to anticipate that this relationship will be extended to followers on the basis of belief in him as the special vehicle for presenting God's love and mercy.

Synoptic Differences

Although tensions exist between John and the Synoptics, it must also be noted that the term "Synoptics" itself hides significant differences in the presentation of the Jesus story. Matthew, Mark and Luke present very different accounts of Jesus, despite the overall sense of similarity. For instance, Mark's emphasis on secrecy ("do not tell anyone what you have heard") is never found except in vague hints in Matthew or Luke.

Mark's depiction of the disciples as ignorant, slow of understanding, and weak in faith—even running away in the final scenes of the Gospel—finds little sympathy in Matthew, where the disciples repeatedly respond with faith; or in Luke, where the disciples quickly assume the role of the church after meeting with Jesus following the resurrection. In short, the tensions that exist in an extreme case between John on the one hand and Matthew, Mark and Luke on the other hand, are found among the three Gospels we lump together as "Synoptics."

The four Gospels of our New Testament canon, then, do not tell identical stories. Far from it; their value is, indeed, that they tell four very different stories about Jesus. If all four stories were essentially identical, we would have little use for including all four Gospels in our Bible.

But the fact that the stories are significantly different—and the more one studies the Gospels the more one will learn to see the differences—does create a problem for the reader. How are we to assess and understand these differences? Do they undermine our confidence in the Gospels as essential documents of faith? Or is there a way to frame our discussion of the four-fold Gospel so that both critical inquiry and faithful response can be sustained in our reading of these same documents?

The Development of the Four-Fold Gospel Canon

Anyone familiar with early church history knows that the canon of scripture was developed over a period of time. The selection of what was "in" and "out" of the New Testament collection of books was not completed until the fourth century, although the main outlines began to take shape by the end of the second century. Of particular interest to our consideration of the role of the canon as guide to interpreting the Gospels is the early development of the core of the New Testament canon: the definition of four Gospels as the complete testimony to the life and teachings of Jesus.

The Gospels were all written, most probably, over a period of 25 years, from approximately 65 CE to approximately 90 CE. Most scholars agree that Mark was the first Gospel written, and most also agree that John was the last of the Gospels written.[2] Although there is still significant disagreement about the provenance and destination of the various Gospels, it is clear that they began to circulate extensively at an early period. Certainly, Mark was known sufficiently well to be used by Matthew and Luke as a key source for their later Gospels. It is quite possible, I think even likely, that Luke had Matthew available as well as an additional source for his Gospel, probably by the mid-80s of the first century.[3]

And it is highly probable that the Gospels were intended to circulate to the church at large and that a fairly rapid means of disseminating and copying the Gospels was developed in the early church.[4] As a result, it is reasonable to assume that by the end of the first century, most, if not all, of the Gospels in our canon

were circulating broadly among the churches. Although not all churches may have had all four, and certainly they may not have used all four equally, there is good reason to believe that the Gospels were widely disseminated very early.

In addition to the evidence of the Gospels' use in disparate areas, the church also seems early on to have settled on a convenient means of "packaging" the Gospels for ease of use and travel. The codex, a bound volume similar to our current book, was apparently used by the church instead of the papyrus scroll. This appears to be an innovation by the church because the codex was not used in Judaism and rarely in secular Greco-Roman society at this time.[5] What makes this innovation significant is that it helps explain the ease of dissemination of the Gospels, and it later became a convenient way to package the four Gospels into one volume because it was a more compact way of collecting written materials.

The actual development of the Gospel canon is one of which we know only vague boundaries. The earliest evidence from the church fathers of knowledge of written Gospels seems to come from Papias (70-140 CE), who indicated a knowledge of both written documents about the life of Jesus as well as continuing oral traditions.[6] Unfortunately, it is not clear from Papias' reference which Gospel(s) he might have had available, though he does refer to Matthew and Mark as writing Gospels.

There is some indication that Ignatius (d. 110 CE) had knowledge of the Gospel of Matthew, and possibly Luke and John, although the references are only paraphrases and are not definitive.[7] Justin Martyr, writing around 150 CE, makes numerous references to the "memoirs of the apostles," which he also called Gospels, and quotes both Luke and Mark in connection with this plural reference to the Gospels.[8] Justin's own student, Tatian (ca. 170 CE), developed the Diatesseron, which clearly was limited to our four Gospels, being a narrative harmony of them.

It was not until the end of the second century, however, that specific arguments for a four-fold canon were presented. Irenaeus of Lyon is probably the first writer to specifically argue for a strict four-Gospel canon.[9] Irenaeus appeals to arguments from nature to sustain the viability of a four-fold canon:

> It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are, since there are four directions of the world in which we are, and four principal winds … For the cherubim also were four-faced, and their faces were images of the dispensation of the Son of God. … For the living creatures are quadriform, and the Gospel is quadriform, as is also the course followed by the Lord. … For this reason were four principal covenants given to the human race, one before the flood, under Adam; the second, after the flood, under Noah; the third, the giving of the Law, under Moses; the fourth, that which revives man and sums up all things by means of the Gospel. … These things being so, all who destroy the form of the Gospel are vain, unlearned and also audacious, those who represent the aspects of the Gospel as being either more in number than previously stated, or, on the other hand, fewer.[10]

What is striking about Ireneaus' statement, though, is that he is clearly arguing against approaches to Scripture that are more expansive on the one hand and more limiting on the other in their use of Gospels. It is noteworthy that Hippolytus (a pupil of Irenaeus) engaged in a strenuous defense of the Gospel of John, suggesting that the four-fold canon was anything but a settled matter. Tertullian's arguments for the canonicity of both the Gospels and Paul's writings are also polemic in nature. It would appear that the extent and scope of the "canon" of Gospels was very much up in the air at the close of the second century.

The attempt to bring some closure to the Gospel canon may well have come from pressure from different directions. On one hand, there was certainly a profusion of Gospels. We know that in addition to the four Gospels of our canon there was a Gospel of Peter (used in Syria at least around the turn of the 3rd century), the Gospel of the Hebrews (attested by Clement of Alexanderia in the 2nd century), and the Gospel of the Egyptians (attested again by Clement of Alexandria).

There may have been many more—certainly the Gospel of Thomas and P. Egerton 2, as well as the later infancy Gospels, point to the continued impulse to create many more Gospels well into the 3rd and possibly 4th centuries. On the other hand there were attempts to limit the Gospel witness to only one Gospel, as Marcion did. The emerging four-Gospel canon, then, was a reaction against opposing forces within the church.

We might profitably examine the controversy surrounding Marcion's attempt at a limited canon. It has been suggested that Marcion provided the first impetus toward the formal development of a canon in the church. As is well known, Marcion (ca. 140 C.E.) championed only one Gospel, that of Luke (excised of some material), together with the letters of Paul. It is possible that Marcion's call for rejecting other Gospels and documents led the church to rally around the most used and revered documents and thus encouraged the formation of the canon. Certainly, his extreme view caused a reaction. But was it a reaction of creating scripture where none had been recognized before (thus Marcion's first "canon" was truly formative in nature), or was it a reaction against a reduction of the number of documents that were already coming to be considered valuable within the church? I think the latter is more probable, as John Barton and others have suggested.[11]

Marcion seems to have been functioning as an early historical critic, choosing to evaluate the Gospel testimony in light of his estimation of its historical value (i.e. what did Jesus really say, versus what are accretions from Gospel writers and interpretations from the Old Testament). Thus, his reduced Gospel of Luke was not so much the creation of a canon as a reaction against other Gospel writings. The church, especially seen in the reactions by Irenaeus and Tertullian, rejected this historical, critical approach in favor of various Gospel texts in their multiplicity and potential conflicting depictions.

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A similar incident in the formation of the canon can be seen with respect to controversies over the Gospel of John. We know of a pointed rejection of John in some quarters of the church in the second and third centuries. Some of this opposition was a reaction against Montanism, which used the Fourth Gospel's idea of the Paraclete to develop its ideas of continuing prophetic activity.[12] But perhaps a more common problem was the perceived difference between the Fourth Gospel and the other three Gospels. A certain Gaius in the Rome in the early 3rd century rejected the Fourth Gospel on the basis of critical issues. His comparison of John with the Synoptics led him to believe that the Fourth Gospel was inauthentic, and he attributed the authorship to Cerinthus, not John.[13] In reaction to both the Montanists and to Gaius, and a group that Irenaeus calls the "others" (*alii*), both Ireneaus and Hippolytus offer strong arguments in favor of including John within a developing canon of the church.

What is interesting about this canon of four Gospels is that it takes shape in spite of critical opposition, not just heretical use. One might argue that Marcion is actually arguing from within a Christian position; certainly Gaius was. They believed that the Gospel texts were corrupted and/or conflicting and thus did not accurately portray the story or teaching of Jesus accurately. In contrast, the church acknowledged the tensions between the Gospels and yet affirmed all four Gospel texts as Scripture, appropriate for use within the church. And as Irenaeus most elegantly claimed, these four Gospels are of necessity a unity—the one Gospel of Jesus is evidenced by four Gospels that have been well-received in the church over a period of time.

The development of the canon of the four Gospels, then, seems to have taken place in the following fashion. First, Gospels were circulated quite rapidly in the early church—certainly quickly enough that subsequent authors (Matthew, Luke) were able to use previous Gospel(s) to formulate their later versions. These Gospels as they were written were used by the churches, quite probably with individual churches using more than one, even as we do now.

At some point, the tensions in the Gospels gave rise to reactions that might be called critical or historical in nature: Tatian's development of the Diatesseron, Marcion's argument for a shortened historical Luke, Gaius' rejection of John. But the forces that had impelled the church to accept the Gospels in the first place rejected these "critical" approaches and embraced the four Gospels of our canon as a unity. At the same time, other Gospels were being produced that did not receive acceptance in the churches; often later theological interpretations, these were rejected from common reading and ultimately from the canon when it was finally "closed" by acclamation.

THE CANON AS CENTER OF INSPIRATION

The early controversies over the canon, as seen by the church's reaction to both Marcion's effort at a truncated canon (Luke only) and the reaction against including John, should give us some significant insight into the way the Gospels were perceived in the early period of collection and evaluation. What is especially apparent is that both the early critics of some of the Gospels, as well the proponents of the four-fold canon, were well aware of the differences among between the various Gospels. The differences in the chronology and depiction of Jesus' ministry were well known.

In the case of the critics, this was a compelling case against one or more of the Gospels. In other words, the early critics functioned somewhat as historical critics in suggesting that differences invalidated one or more of the Gospels. But what came to be the orthodox position, supported by the usage in the church and argued forcefully by such individuals as Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Tertullian, was that such differences were not only *not* problems but were even evidences of the validity of the Gospels.[14] In other words, the differences were not seen as striking at the core of the message but perceived as providing a diversity that was seen as a strength.

There is an important terminological issue at stake. In general the early church did not use the plural term "Gospels." Instead, it spoke of the Gospel (singular) being manifest in four forms. So, the common designation of the Gospels as "*the Gospel* according to Mark," "*the Gospel* according to Matthew," etc., is an important one. It shows the essential view that together, and only together, these four writings make up the one Gospel of Jesus Christ. Each is only part of the whole, and the Gospel is not complete without all four witnesses to it.

Given this deliberately "inclusive" approach to the Gospels in the early church, one can and should speak of the inspiration of the Gospel as much in reference to its acknowledgment of the multiplicity of expression (i.e. four witnesses, four writings) as in the actual material contained in each one. For it would truly be correct to say that without all four Gospels we would have a deficient Gospel. If the Gospel depends on four witnesses, each with a different voice, then the activity of the Spirit in inspiration must also embrace the collection and evaluation of which writings contain the necessary perspectives and which are extraneous to a proper estimation of Jesus' life and teaching.

The importance of the collection of four Gospels as part of the "inspirational" process also suggests that efforts to reduce the Gospels to a simple narrative of events, as the Diatesseron did, are antithetical to the very nature of Scripture.15 The canon of scripture embraces four different perspectives and different voices. This inclusion of diverse perspectives, it would seem, is part of the very nature of God's affirmed testimony about Jesus. Any loss of the tensions or voices within the four-fold Gospel is somehow taking something away from the very spirit of the Gospel in its fullest form.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE FOUR-FOLD GOSPEL CANON

If we approach the Gospels from a canonical perspective, I believe that it allows or even imposes a very different approach than is commonly assumed about Gospel narratives. In many ways, it opens up the Gospels for critical comparison and evaluation in a way that few Christians allow themselves to read the Gospels. If we see a crucial part of the inspiration of Scriptures involves the collection of the Gospels into

this four-fold canon, then a significant part of the meaning of the Scriptures must lie in how these different stories together come to be the single Gospel of Christ. The meaning of the Gospel, then, does not just lie in the "facts" of the individual Gospel accounts, but also in the diversity of depictions of Jesus and what this diversity means to the reader.

In the very earliest use of the Gospels, as they were disseminated and collected in the early church, it became apparent that the Gospels did not tell exactly the same stories. As I indicated earlier, this becomes clear the more one studies the Gospels. It was certainly clear to the early church fathers who studied and preached from the Gospels. But these differences and tensions were not seen as negatives; instead, the very multiplicity of accounts were part of the essential quality of the Gospel—without all four accounts one did not have the whole "Gospel," one did not have the complete inspired Scripture.

In what specific ways should this canonical approach to the four-fold Gospel influence the way that we read and interpret the Gospels? Let me suggest three ways that the canonical awareness should influence our reading.

Compare Various Accounts

In the first place, it allows and even urges the reader to be constantly aware of a variety of interpretations of Jesus' ministry. If we acknowledge four Gospels as being necessary to tell the whole story, to present the whole Gospel, then certainly each individual Gospel account is inherently partial and tentative. I would suggest that this means we are called seriously to compare the various accounts with a critical eye, because the "meaning" of the scripture is never fully or completely contained in any one Gospel account. In particular, comparison of parallel versions of events and teaching is crucial.

As an example, Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is often considered a major source for ethical teaching from Jesus. But we must be aware that many of the teaching units in the Sermon on the Mount have very different emphases and contexts when similar material is presented in Luke. The Beatitudes, for instance, in Matthew (Matt 5:3–12) have a significantly different focus than Luke's Beatitudes (Luke 6:20–26). Matthew speaks of blessings which are spiritual in nature, "blessed are the poor in spirit," while Luke focuses on real physical issues, "blessed are you who are poor." Luke's focus is all the more emphatic when we take into account Luke's additional woes, "woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." There are many ways that we might understand and interpret the differences between these two variant Beatitudes, but I would suggest that it is precisely this kind of comparison, this contrast between the two accounts, that is absolutely crucial if we are to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:7–15) is longer and has a slightly different focus than Luke's version (Luke 11:1–4); "forgive us our debts" is not essentially the same as "forgive us our sins," though they have points of commonality. But perhaps as important is that Luke has framed his Lord's prayer in the context of a number of other teachings on prayer—the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5–8) and the encouragement to pray (Luke 11:9–13)—so that Luke's model prayer is now interpreted by other teachings on prayer, ending with the promise that God will certainly send the Holy Spirit to those that pray earnestly. Again, the comparison of these may yield a variety of interpretations, but the difference in presentation is meaningful and should influence the way we come to understand Jesus' Gospel message.

So what do we make of this difference in how Matthew and Luke present this similar material? We should acknowledge that each offers the church an important direction for a life lived in Jesus, and yet that each one is not sufficient to fully explain the fullness of His teaching. Luke's Gospel emphasizes the reality and danger of material wealth, a message desperately needed in our modern time. But Matthew emphasizes an equally important message, that life in Jesus must also transcend the physical contingencies of our lives—it must also be spiritual in its focus. Each message is valuable; each is true. But the two messages

cannot easily be conflated or harmonized. The richness of the four-gospel canon is that it presents a multiplicity of interpretations that hint at the depth of Jesus' life and teaching.

Devote Attention to Authors' Perspectives

A comparison of the various Gospel accounts, which seems demanded by the fact that the canon frames multiple accounts, also suggests that we should devote attention to understanding the individual authors' theologies and perspectives. It is not insignificant, for instance, that Matthew focuses on specific scriptural fulfillment and presents Jesus as teaching in blocks. Matthew's perspective, then, is one that depicts Jesus as an authoritative teacher in a somewhat rabbinical fashion. The emphasis in Matthew is heavily focused on Jesus' authority, often in pointed contradistinction to the Pharisees.

Luke, too, presents Jesus as fulfilling scripture but in a very different way. Jesus brings all the hopes of the scriptures for healing and social revolution: Mary's song anticipating Jesus' birth (Luke 1:46–55) and Jesus' sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30) evoke the scriptures in ways that suggest that Jesus' life will bring a real change in the way people of faith act and live—a transformation that ultimately becomes a reality in the early church.

Are these approaches incompatible? No. But they are very different emphases, and one can only appreciate and appropriate the fullness of the Gospels when one acknowledges that Matthew and Luke are doing very different things. They present Scripture as functioning in very different ways—as "proof" text and as narrative structure—and each is an appropriate use of Scripture in the teaching and preaching of the church. Although each is appropriate, each also reflects different theological emphases that must be acknowledged when we approach the Gospels.

Similarly, Matthew's presentation of the disciples, who actually worship Jesus in his lifetime, and Mark's very different presentation of disciples who never really understand the significance of Jesus and run way afraid in the final hours, offers us very different perspectives of how Jesus was understood by his followers. And this different perspective is crucial for a full appreciation of Jesus and how he might interact with disciples—then and now. The disciples of these Gospels present different models of reaction to Jesus, both faithful and faithless—models that mark the extremes and the possibilities for our own reactions to Jesus today, even within the community of the church.

Read and Compare Entire Narratives

When we come to be aware of the critical role that the various evangelists play in the presentation of Jesus, that we have four very different stories of Jesus, which all must be taken into account in a theological interpretation, then we are also faced with the fact that the evangelists are in fact telling large stories. In other words, an important element in appreciating the four-fold Gospel is understanding that each Gospel is relating a complete narrative that has its own logic. Instead of focusing on individual pericopes as isolated teaching units, the canonical awareness should draw us into reading and comparing entire narratives. For it is in the logic of the entire narrative that the real focus of each Gospel becomes more apparent.

It is not enough to read segments of John and be unaware of the role that the growing tension between "the Jews" and Jesus plays in John's presentation of Jesus. There is clearly a developing tension, one that richly interprets Jesus' dialogues with his opponents, and finally ends with his rejection and death. The tensions of these conflicts, replete with miscommunication and double entendres, are part of the core message of the Gospel.

Similarly, Mark's message of Jesus' seemingly failed relationship with his disciples (who hear but never understand) ultimately poses a question for each reader of the Second Gospel: will he or she also hear but not understand, or will she or he respond with faith and obedience even in the face of danger or disappointment?

An awareness and appreciation of the canon of four Gospels—a canon that rejects easy harmonization but confronts us instead with four different stories of Jesus as the vehicle for making sense of Jesus and his life—removes easy and simplistic approaches. It demands hard work; it invites the reader into the mysteries of multiple accounts; it rejects any theology based on only one Gospel. The constant awareness of a four-fold Gospel is a challenge to our preaching and teaching, a challenge to our tendency to want easy answers to the deep questions of faith. The church's claim that one can have only four Gospels but must use all four is a daring claim. We who would claim to be people of scripture can ignore this claim only at our peril.

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ENDNOTES

1 The discussion on the relationship between John and the Synoptics is extensive. For a short summary of main issues, see C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955), pp. 34–45, and Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), pp. 27–41. A more extensive discussion of the relationship and its treatment in scholarly literature can be found in D. Moody Smith, *John Among the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). A good treatment of the distinctively Johannine themes can be found in D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

2 Here I must note that I stand in a minority position with regard to the date of the Fourth Gospel. As with a small group of scholars who suggest an early date for John, I think that John was written before Luke at least, placing it before 85 CE. See my book, *In Dialogue With Another Gospel?* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2001.)

3 This view, of course, presumes that instead of a "Q" document, Luke relied on Matthew for his common material. This approach can be seen helpfully in the papers of a section of the 2000 SBL meeting: "A Monopoly on Marcan Priority? Fallacies at the Heart of Q" by Mark Goodacre; "Luke's Rewriting of the Sermon on the Mount" by Mark Matson; and "A Pioneer Narrative Critic and His Synoptic Hypothesis: Austin Farrer and Gospel Interpretation" by Jeffrey Peterson. These papers can be found in the *SBL Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2000), 583-672.

4 See Richard Bauckham's book *The Gospels for All Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); and especially the articles "For Whom Were Gospels Written?" by Richard Bauckham; "The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Christian Generation," by Michael B. Thompson; and "Ancient Book Production and Circulation of the Gospels," by Loveday Alexander.

5 See especially Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early* Church (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 42,ff.

6 The fragments from Papias referring to the Gospel writings are found in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III.34.4, and III.34.15-16.

7 There are several references in the letters of Ignatius that seem to suggest knowledge of the Gospels. With Matthew, see *Smyrn.* 1.1, 6:1; *Polyc.* 2.2; *Eph.* 5.2. With Luke, see *Smyrn.* 3;1–2. With John, see *Magn.* 7.2; *Phil.* 7.1, 9.1; *Rom.* 7.3; *Smyrn.* 7:1. For Ignatius's use of Matthew, see William Schroedel, *Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 226–27. For his use of John, see Christian Maurer, *Ignatius von Antiochen und das Johannesevangelium* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1949).

8 Justin Martyr makes numerous references to "memoirs," see for instance, *1 Apol.* 66.3, where the memoirs (pl.) are called Gospels (pl.); *Dial.* 103.8 quoting Matthew and Luke; Dial. 106.4 quoting Matthew and Mark, and *1 Apol.* 67:3–5 where the "memoirs" are read in church services.

9 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.11.8.

10 Irenaeus, III.11.8-9.

11 John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), especially see pp. 35, ff.

12 This seems to be, in part, the issue at stake in Irenaeus's defense of the Fourth Gospel in *Against Heresies*, I. 27.2–4.

13 For a more extensive treatment of this controversy, see my book, *In Dialogue with Another Gospel*, 200–205.

14 This problem of differences in the scripture is alluded to, for instance, in Tertullian's assertion that the Scriptures are not to be used by heretics because they misuse them. He appears to be reflecting on certain attacks on the scripture's reliability. Yet Tertullian asserts that they, despite these problems, must stand as a unity for the proper use of the church. This argument presumes some difficulties yet understands these difficulties to be minor when viewed properly within the context of a faithful reading. (Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heresies*, 15–19).

15 A modern version of such attempts to reduce the scriptural voice to a simple harmonized narrative can be seen in F. Lagard Smith's, *The Narrated Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1984).