The Sayings of Jesus in Mark: Does Mark Ever Rely on a Pre-Johannine Tradition?

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What John Robinson dubbed “The New Look on the Fourth Gospel” way back in 1957\(^1\) reached a provisional climax with his posthumously published book, *The Priority of John*, in 1986.\(^2\) In it Robinson made a credible case for the older age of tradition in the Gospel of John than in the Synoptic Gospels for a significant minority of places where they run parallel and for the probable authenticity of the Johannine tradition in a number of those places and in various unparalleled segments of the Fourth Gospel as well. In 1998, Richard Bauckham edited another landmark volume that impinged on Johannine tradition criticism. While the theme of the entire work, *The Gospels for All Christians*,\(^3\) was broader than just concerns with the Fourth Gospel, Bauckham’s own essay, “John for Readers of Mark,”\(^4\) sketched an intermediate option between the older view of John as consciously supplementing the written form of the Synoptics and the more recent consensus of literary independence between the two corpora. Bauckham’s argument was compelling. Pointing to the “interlocking” phenomenon, he reminded scholars of how frequently the Fourth Gospel presumes knowledge like that found in the core Synoptic kerygma or explains things left ambiguous in that kerygma. While the actual verbal parallelism between John and the Synoptics remains too small to make arguments for literary dependence persuasive, it certainly seems likely that the author of the Fourth Gospel took for granted that most in his audiences knew the basic contours of the contents of the Synoptics, or at least of Mark, even if only via oral tradition and proclamation of the gospel message.

In 2006, Paul Anderson combined previously published studies with further reflection to produce a book-length treatment of *The Fourth Gospel and the

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Among other things, he argued in detail for what he calls a “bi-optic” approach to the historical Jesus quest, recognizing the “interfluentiality” and dialectic between John and the Synoptics, notably the Gospel of Mark. More specifically, Anderson envisages pre-Markan and early Johannine traditions influencing each other, with the resulting Mark and John drawing on the resulting confluences. His diagram of the relationships among the Gospels and their putative oral traditions is in fact much more complicated than this, but for a study of Mark and John this is the most important part of his hypothesis. Anderson has helpfully reiterated, clarified, and expanded his study in his 2011 textbook, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, and is increasingly calling for a “fourth quest of the historical Jesus”—one that treats the Fourth Gospel as an equal partner with the Synoptic Gospels as a potential historical source from which to mine authentic Jesus material.

The SBL “John, Jesus and History” Seminar has played an important role in the last several years of this “new look on the Fourth Gospel” and in what some day might be looked back on as the beginning of the “fourth quest.” Particularly significant for potential fourth questers has been volume 2 of the three-volume *John, Jesus and History* series, which appeared in 2009, on *Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel*. The third volume, yet to appear, will look respectively at glimpses of the passion, works, and words of Jesus “through the Johannine lens.” It is only fitting then, as the Seminar embarks on the next stages of its study, to tackle these same three divisions of the Johannine material in relationship to each of the Synoptic Gospels, beginning with the Gospel of Mark, which is generally accepted as the earliest of the three.

My mandate is to reflect on the sayings of Jesus in Mark and John. The yeoman’s share of the work on this topic has been meticulously undertaken by Philipp Bartholomä in his Louvain dissertation and published as *The Johannine...*