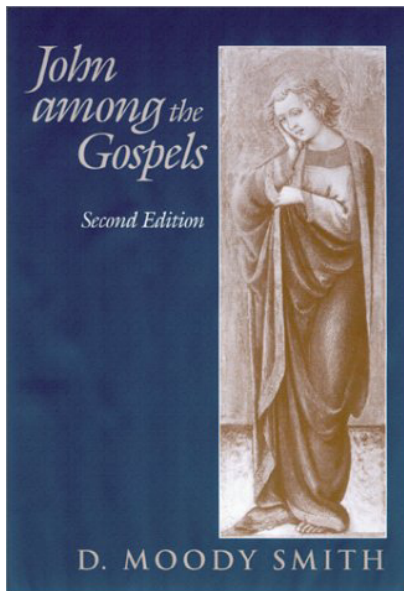


RBL 04/2005



Smith, D. Moody

John among the Gospels

Second edition

Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001.
Pp. xvii + 262. Paper. \$16.95. ISBN 157003446X.

M. Eugene Boring
Brite Divinity School (Emeritus)
Fort Worth, TX 76133

D. Moody Smith has been interested in the sources of the Fourth Gospel since at least since 1959, when he began work on his doctoral thesis at Yale, published in 1965 as *The Composition and Order of the Fourth Gospel* (New Haven: Yale University Press). His dissertation was devoted to an analysis and evaluation of Rudolf Bultmann's source theories, which included the claim that, while the Fourth Evangelist wrote independently of the Synoptics, the editorial work of the final redactor was influenced by them. Smith adopted this stance himself, which he then regarded as the "consensus" of scholarship. Since then, Smith's numerous publications on the Johannine writings, including three commentaries on the Gospel, have all dealt with the issue of John and the Synoptics directly or indirectly, and on several occasions he has explicitly addressed this issue. Four essays published in various journals from 1965 to 1982 that focus on the topic have been reprinted in *Johannine Christianity: Essays on Its Setting, Sources, and Theology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984), with additional articles and lecture series on the subject since then. Thus, the first edition of this book (not reviewed in *JBL*), which gathered up the research and reflections of three decades, was already a milestone in the history of the discussion. The present expanded edition incorporates Smith's response to recent studies and represents the definitive presentation of the state of the discussion. A major contribution of this edition is its thorough analytical summaries of key works in the history of the discussion, always presented with balance and fairness

even when the author's own view is clear. The reader who is unable or uninclined to work through a large bibliography in English, French, and German finds here both a roadmap and a bird's-eye view of the whole landscape. Fairly often, the bird's-eye view is narrowed to include detailed samples of the argument of key authors on specific texts, so that the reader has an up-close exposure to pivotal contributions to the discussion.

Smith first sketches the problem of the Fourth Gospel's relation to the Synoptics in early Christianity and the development of what became the standard solution: John knew the other Gospels, presupposed that his readers knew them, and wrote a "spiritual Gospel" to supplement and interpret them (Clement of Alexandria). When this became problematic, the solution received a negative spin (e.g., by Hans Windisch): John was aware of the Synoptics and wrote not to supplement but to displace them. In a variety of forms this "consensus" that John knew and was influenced by the Synoptics persisted until the twentieth century and beyond. (Smith speaks frequently of "consensus," aware that each such "consensus" has several significant exceptions; "prevailing opinion" might sometimes be a preferable expression.)

The heart of the book documents the development of the independence theory in the twentieth century (B. W. Bacon, Hans Windisch, P. Gardner-Smith), the formation of a consensus (the impact of Gardner-Smith, C. H. Dodd, and the influential commentaries of Rudolf Bultmann, Raymond E. Brown, Rudolf Schnackenburg), the relation between John and Luke (Julius Schniewind, F. C. Grant, J. A. Bailey, P. Parker, F. L. Cribbs, R. Maddox), the renaissance of the problem with reference to the passion narratives (redaction-critical approaches, Anton Dauer, Rosel Baum-Bodenbender), followed by the dissolution of the consensus (M.-É. Boismard, Franz Neiryneck, Anton Dauer and H.-P. Heekerens, Hartwig Thyen, Bruno de Solages). The first edition concluded with a chapter summarizing the character of the comparison and prospects for its future study. This edition includes an additional chapter, entitled "John, an Independent Gospel," in which Smith examines the problem in the light of historical issues, concentrating on the setting and presentation of Jesus' ministry and relationships. He also offers his own detailed analysis of the passion narrative. The conclusion makes explicit his stance, which has been implicit throughout, that there are "significant reasons for emphasizing the independence of the Fourth Gospel, whether or not at some compositional or redactional level it was influenced by Mark or the other Synoptic Gospels" (241).

The issue is important, worthy of the time and energy Smith and others have devoted to it. The stance one takes to it significantly influences (not to say "determines") one's conclusions regarding a number of interrelated issues, including: (1) the date and provenance of the Fourth Gospel, and thus (2) one's understanding of the development of early Christian history, literature, and theology, (3) the nature of the Gospel genre, (4)

issues of text, form, and redaction criticism, (5) the usefulness of the Fourth Gospel as a source in studies of the historical Jesus, (6) issues of biblical and systematic theology such as the Eucharist, and (7) exegesis of the Gospel itself.

Of these, the exegetical issue is paramount for Smith, and it is clear what he is against—exegesis of John as though it were only a commentary on or development from the Synoptics. Thus by “independence” he does not necessarily mean that the author was ignorant or neglectful of the Synoptics but that the meaning of Johannine texts must not be derived primarily by assuming that he had the Synoptics (or any one of them) as his base text, and noting additions, omissions, and modifications in the style of Synoptic redaction criticism. For Smith, it would be an untenable exegetical procedure to consider John a “fourth Synoptic” in the manner of F. Neirynck and to adopt or adapt the exegetical methods used in interpreting Matthew and Luke (on the presuppositions of the two-source theory) as the model for exegesis of John.

For Smith, John could be “independent” of the Synoptics if its distinctiveness is seen as primarily the product of an independent witness (195), even if “at some compositional or redactional level it was influenced by Mark or the other Synoptic Gospels” (241). Thus, it is not important to Smith to argue that John neither “knew” nor “used” the Synoptics, and Smith never does so. He is fully aware that the question of whether or not John is “dependent” on the Synoptics cannot be posed in yes-or-no terms. He thus avoids explicitly sorting Johannine scholars into two categories and uses a wide variety of expressions to describe the possible relationship of the Fourth Gospel to the other three, only a sampling of which I note here: “acquainted with” (14), “to some extent indebted” (14), “devours and digests” (16), “knew, used, presupposed” (22), “derived from” (58), “direct literary dependence” (66), “had at his disposal” (72), “knowledge of the Synoptics as a genre” (80), “some direct contact” (83). Some of this variation is the product of wanting accurately to portray the view of each author; some seems merely stylistic. Though Smith himself does not construct a systematic categorization of the possibilities, the book incites the interested reader to attempt a more systematic grid: from “unavailable” (the author could not have located the Synoptics even if he were searching for them) and “unknown” (they might have been available, but the author did not know them) through “uninfluenced” (they were present and known but had little or no effect on his own writing) and various degrees of availability, knowledge, influence, use, dependence. The extremes would be “absolutely unavailable” (because not yet written) to “exclusive dependence” (the author had no other sources except the Synoptics). When these stages are combined with the possibilities of which of the Synoptics the author may have known, and the time(s) at which the influence possibly occurred (not at all, pre-Evangelist tradition, Evangelist’s composition, post-Evangelist redactor), the various

ways in which Synoptic influence on John could be conceived are indeed “almost infinite” (71).

Despite Smith’s awareness of the complexity of the issue, he still tends to discuss the issue and sort scholars in terms of “independence” versus “dependence.” However, in a 1979 treatment of the issue (now found in *Johannine Christianity*, pp. 170–71), Smith states that, while it still seemed more plausible to explain the phenomena of the text on the hypothesis that John did not know or use the Synoptics, he was beginning to conceive of a scenario in which John knew or knew *of* them and yet produced an independent, distinctive Gospel. According to this scenario, the independent and distinctive Johannine traditions (especially miracle stories, sayings and discourses, and a passion tradition) were developed early in the history of the Johannine community. After the Johannine traditions had received their distinctive shape and tenor, the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew became known to the Johannine community, and (especially Mark) may have had a catalytic effect in generating the comprehensive Johannine narrative. Even so, according to this scenario, one should not speak of the Synoptics, or of any one of them, as a “source” for the Gospel, which nonetheless did not receive its narrative form without their influence.

In my opinion, it is regrettable that Smith has not developed this (in my opinion) promising scenario. The way it impinges on the issue of the Gospel genre is particularly important. If (contrary to his previous scenario) John in fact received its narrative form without any influence from the Synoptics, this would mean one of two things: (1) The narrative form of the Gospel is not particularly distinctive but a Christian adaptation of the genre of Hellenistic biography (a popular view nowadays) that John could have made with no awareness of the Synoptics; (2) the narrative form of the Gospel is a distinctively Christian genre (not necessarily “unique”), and the same dynamics in the tradition that induced Mark to create a distinctive narrative form were also operative on John, who would be the second inventor of the Gospel genre. However, if, as Smith previously proposed, John was “generically” aware of the Synoptics without seeing his task as merely supplementing, interpreting, or replacing them, the distinctiveness of the Gospel genre could be maintained without requiring John to be dependent on them for the content of his narrative or portraying him as having devised this distinctive genre on his own. The analogy of the epistolary genre of 2 Peter comes to mind. There is no doubt that the author knew the Pauline epistles (2 Pet 3:15–16)—a distinctive genre related to other epistolary literature in somewhat the way that New Testament Gospels are related to other narratives. And there is hardly any doubt that he knew 1 Peter (2 Pet 3:1). Yet there is scarcely any literary evidence of 2 Peter’s “dependence” on earlier epistles; underlining of common words and analysis of common order fail to demonstrate that the author knew 1 Peter; indeed, without 2 Pet 3:1, 15–16, it could be argued that 2 Peter was “independent”

of the Pauline letters and 1 Peter. No one, however, doubts that 2 Peter “knew” the Paulines and 1 Peter in the generic sense, yet was not greatly “influenced” or “dependent” on them. One could contrast the relationship of 2 Thessalonians to 1 Thessalonians, where dependence is closer to the category of Synoptic interrelationships.

One thus finishes this book with a sense of gratitude for its information and analyses, but wishing that Smith had argued his own thesis more vigorously. Perhaps the fact that the book was originally projected as only a chapter, a *Forschungsbericht* for a larger project, inhibited him from doing so. He tends to assume the stance of the previous “consensus” and to ask whether recent arguments are compelling that John was “dependent” on the Synoptics. Thus the issue of the “burden of proof” is always in the background. Beginning where Smith does, it is all but impossible for anyone to “prove against reasonable grounds for doubt” (58) that John knew the Synoptics. It is equally difficult, of course, to “prove” the opposite thesis, to which Smith himself is inclined. Here as elsewhere, the burden of proof is always on the scholar making a case. In this book, Smith does not argue a case but adopts the stance of a careful, fair-minded reporter who stands within the previous “consensus,” weighs the opposing evidence, and finds it wanting. It is not clear whether Smith still thinks his previous proposal sketched above could be persuasively documented in detail, but one would like to see the strongest case made for it, and no one is better equipped to do this than D. Moody Smith.