

Proving Jesus' Authority in Mark and John

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*Overlooked Evidence of a
Synoptic Relationship*

By

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NOTICES

Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. The use of the names Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John to identify the authors of the indicated gospels is based upon traditional usage rather than an agreement that they were the actual authors.

CHAPTER ONE

IS JOHN'S GOSPEL A THEOLOGICALLY CORRECTED RE-WRITE OF MARK'S GOSPEL?

The gospel of John disagrees with the synoptic gospels (Mark, Luke, and Matthew) about a wide range of issues on several narrative levels, including, but not limited to, theology, chronology, the gospel message, factual details, the nature of Jesus, the depiction of Jesus and his family and his disciples, and the reason Jesus was put to death. Particularly conspicuous, John's gospel omits all exorcisms, parables, and healing missions, all of which play significant roles in the synoptic gospels' depiction of Jesus and his message. John's extensive range of departures raises a host of questions for New Testament and Early Christian studies.

Given these differences, scholars argue over whether John has any literary relationship to one or more of the synoptic gospels. The consensus seems to be closely divided between those who think there is no literary connection between John and any of the other three and those that believe John may have been partially influenced by some oral traditions that can be traced back to the synoptic gospels.¹ But few, if any, believe that John had direct knowledge of any written version of any of the synoptic gospels.²

The primary reasons for rejecting the idea that the author of John knew a written version of one of the synoptic gospels are that John has little verbal agreement with any of them and has too few stories that look very much like the ones in the other three. Even in cases where John has a story suggesting a parallel to a synoptic gospel story—consider, for example, his versions of healing the paralytic on the mat, the healing of blindness with saliva, or Jesus' anointing with oil at Bethany—his story details are often so very different that many scholars believe that such stories may derive from some independent source and may on occasion not even be based on the same incident as the one in the synoptic gospels.

In the present work I will argue that 1) John knew a written version of either Mark's gospel or a written source known to and used by Mark; 2) John had deep and profound objections to the content of Mark's gospel as

regards many of the differences noted above; 3) John did a rewrite of Mark's gospel, using Mark's narrative as a structural outline and replacing many of Mark's stories with alternative narratives that dealt with the same underlying issues but addressing them from John's perspective; and 4) John used a specific set of editing techniques that made it difficult to recognize the underlying literary relationship between the two gospels. A subsidiary argument (addressed in the concluding chapter) will be that, of the three synoptic gospels, John had to know written Mark (or Mark's source), but that it is also possible he may have also known written Matthew or written Luke. My focus, however, will be on Mark.

To simplify the argument, I have sliced out of Mark and John a set of stories that revolve around a specific narrative theme, how Jesus proved his authority from God, that highlights some of the most significant differences between the two gospels. Of necessity, I will also have to look at several other stories as well, for purposes of narrative context and sequential agreement. The chief problem I face, given the differences between the two texts, is how do I show the existence of a literary relationship based on John's knowledge of written Mark?

The Evidence for Literary Relationships among Mark, Luke, and Matthew

The primary method for trying to establish a literary relationship between two or more manuscripts based on a common written text consists of looking for several similar stories or narrative arcs that share a lot of the same words or phrases and unfold in approximately the same sequential order. Consider, for example, the synoptic gospels.

All three of those gospels contain a large core of similar stories that frequently share many of the same key words or phrases and follow in the same sequential order. Such a coincidence would be unlikely unless there was some sort of literary relationship between the three gospels based on a written source. Scholars call this collection of common stories the "triple tradition." The attempt to identify the relationship of each of the three gospels to the other two is known as "the synoptic problem."

To appreciate the degree of literary relationship between Mark, Luke, and Mathew consider the following statistics. Raymond Brown notes that there are 661 verses in Mark, 1,068 in Matthew, and 1,149 in Luke.³ He estimates that 80 percent of Mark's verses have parallels in Matthew and 65 percent have parallels in Luke.⁴ This means that half of Matthew and over one-third of Luke draw upon Mark as a source. Since Mark has no birth narrative, and if we don't count the lengthy ones in Matthew and

Luke, the percentage of Mark present in the other two gospels becomes significantly higher.

Further study of the synoptic gospels showed that in all the major instances where one of the three gospels disagreed with the other two on the wording or the sequential order of stories, either Mark and Luke agreed against Matthew or Mark and Matthew agreed against Luke. This strongly suggested that Mark was the hub and the other two used Mark as a written source. It is almost universally accepted among scholars that Mark was the first of the four gospels to be written. This means that if a literary relationship between Mark and John exists, the latter depended on the former.

Unfortunately, this solution to the synoptic problem has a slight flaw. In a few minor instances, Luke and Matthew agree against Mark. Scholars readily acknowledge this problem but, nevertheless, continue to accept Markan priority as the best solution for unraveling the synoptic gospel literary relationship.

In addition to the “triple tradition, scholars also recognize a “double tradition.” Matthew and Luke have several additional passages with similar wording, many of which appear in the same sequential order, but none of these passages have a parallel in Mark. Brown estimates that about 220–235 verses fall into this category.⁵ John S. Kloppenborg estimates that this collection of verses encompasses 106 textual units (as opposed to verses) and that about one-third of these units follow the same sequential order.⁶ This material makes up about twenty percent of Matthew and Luke.

This “double tradition” suggests a strong written literary relationship between Matthew and Luke independent of Mark. With only slightly less unanimity than there is for Markan priority, scholars believe that Matthew and Luke, working independently of each other, knew a now-lost common written source that scholars have dubbed “Q,” from the German word *quelle*, meaning “source.” Outside of the passages in Matthew and Luke we have no independent evidence that such a source ever existed. But did Matthew and Luke work independently of each other?

In recent years, a strong and vocal dissent to the Q hypothesis has arisen from a small but growing community of scholars. Based on an earlier thesis known as the “Farrar theory,” Mark Goodacre and allies take the position that the agreements between Luke and Matthew arise from Luke’s use of Matthew’s gospel as a source.⁷ This would account not only for why Luke and Matthew share so much common material but would also resolve the other problem of the “minor disagreements” of Matthew and Luke against Mark. If Luke used both Matthew and Mark, then the

minor disagreements with Mark would be the result of Luke occasionally choosing Matthew over Mark.

In this study, I will occasionally refer to the Q source. I use the term only in the sense of material common to Matthew and Luke but not present in Mark. I take no position as to whether Q was an earlier lost document or whether Luke copied from Matthew. Nevertheless, we should recognize that a very large majority of New Testament scholars routinely accept that two of the gospel authors made substantial use of a now-lost written gospel that preceded at least three if not all four of the canonical gospels.

Johannine Source Issues

John's gospel features an individual known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved,"⁸ routinely referred to by scholars as "the Beloved Disciple," and at the end of the gospel the author says, "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true."⁹ John never mentions this individual by name and his identity is subject to substantial debate. He was apparently an important figure in the Johannine community who, according to John, died at some earlier point in time.¹⁰ So at least for this passage, the beloved disciple was not the author.

Prior to the development of biblical criticism, it was commonly thought that the gospel was the work of "John, the son of Zebedee," one of the key members of the twelve apostles, and that the gospel was written down shortly after his death.¹¹ Few scholars presently accept that identification.¹² Brown notes that, questions of author identity aside, "there are features in the gospel that offer difficulty for any theory of unified authorship."¹³ These include differences of Greek style, breaks and inconsistencies in sequence, repetitions in discourses, and passages "that clearly do not belong to their context."¹⁴

Another problem is that the gospel appears to be completed at the end of John 20, which says, "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."¹⁵ Yet it continues with new stories and teachings in John 21. It is commonly argued that John was composed in at least two stages, an initial gospel and at least one later edition by someone routinely referred to as "the Redactor." Several scholars believe the Redactor added in John 1:1–18 and John 21 and made several editorial changes to the original version. Urban Von Wahlde has argued for at least three stages in the composition of John.¹⁶ Even among

those who agree with the idea of multiple editions of the text, there are still disagreements as to which verses belong to which edition.¹⁷

Many scholars try to resolve some of the textual problems by moving passages and sections around to create a more fluid flow, although there is significant disagreement as to what should be moved and where it should be placed. Why John's Redactor would have moved passages from one location to another also requires explanation. Several scholars have suggested it was the result of *accidental* displacement.¹⁸

While not all, or even most, scholars believe in such wholesale rearrangement, many of them would agree that, due to geographical and chronological issues, perhaps there should be a reversal in the order of John 5 and John 6.¹⁹ I don't directly address this issue in the present study but as a by-product of the analysis in Chapter Four there is some evidence that the present order of John 5 and John 6 is correct.

Several scholars believe the compositional issues are due to the author's use of a variety of source texts.²⁰ Perhaps the most influential form of source theory goes back to Rudolf Bultmann, who, Brown says, proposed three basic predecessor texts.²¹ One was a "signs" source, a collection of miracles, a few of which John extracted for his gospel.²² I challenge that thesis in the course of this work, showing that the miracles in John, despite differences in appearance, are, for the most part, derived from Mark.

Bultmann's second proposed source is referred to as the "Revelatory Discourse Source," a collection of discourses attributed to Jesus, some of which were interspersed into John.²³ In this study I don't do a broad analysis of discourses or other speeches, but in Chapter Five I do take a detailed look at the Discourse on Bread in John 6. While I don't examine the issue of a Discourse narrative behind John, the analysis in Chapter Five strongly indicates that the Discourse on Bread does not come from a larger collection of discourse narratives known to John but not to the authors of the synoptic gospels.

The third proposed Bultmann source is a Passion and Resurrection text similar to the synoptic gospel version but having some important differences.²⁴ A study of that subject is beyond the scope of the present work, but in Chapter Three we do look at the story of Jesus chasing the money-changers from the Temple and how Mark and John interacted with that episode.

All three of Bultmann's propositions have been challenged in one way or another by various scholars. Although I don't engage Bultmann's views in the present work, or the scholarly interaction with Bultmann, it is the argument in this work that Mark, or a source known to and used by Mark, was the primary influence on the structure and composition of John's

gospel. (From time to time I will refer to John's use of Mark. It should always be understood to refer to either Mark or a written source known to and used by Mark in the composition of his own gospel.) This does not mean that John didn't also have other sources that also played a role, but only that Mark's gospel was one of the most important and influential of his sources.

Methodology

While verbal agreement can be a very important and useful tool in establishing a literary relationship, there are other literary markers that can also be used. These include such elements as editorial biases, plot characteristics, personality types, theological themes, symbols, literary seams indicating a break in the narrative, editorial anomalies, vagueness indicating that something is being covered up or disguised, chronological signals, narrative frames, and sequential relationships with surrounding stories. In the present study, we will look to see if such clues populate the stories in Mark and John and what they can tell us about John's knowledge of Mark.

Take, for example, this passage in John about "signs" Jesus performed. "When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the *signs* that he was doing (emphasis added)."²⁵ Note the plural form of "signs." The problem is that John's Jesus hasn't yet performed multiple signs. He doesn't perform his second sign until well-after this passage, and he conspicuously describes that later miracle as "the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee."²⁶

In another example, John says, "A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the *signs* that he was doing for the sick (emphasis added)."²⁷ John again uses a plural for "signs" that he did for the sick, and again we have an anomaly. At this point in time, John has described only one healing, the previously mentioned "second sign." (The first sign was changing water into wine.)²⁸

These "signs" references are among many passages and anomalies in John that puzzle Johannine scholars. I will argue later that these references to "signs," when considered in a surrounding narrative and thematic context, are editorial artifacts left over from John's redaction and rearranging of passages, and that they originally referred to earlier healings and exorcisms in his source material. Such clues can help us identify what John knew and what he may have changed.

I have broken the study down into four broad sub-themes related to the issue of how Jesus proved his authority, each assigned to a separate chapter. By separating out story-types, we can more closely focus on a particular theme within a particular story set and significantly narrow the focus on similar stories in each gospel and reduce the possibility that Mark and John may have different incidents in mind.

- Chapter Two features stories in which Jesus proves his authority.
- Chapter Three features stories in which Jesus declines to prove his authority.
- Chapter Four features stories in which critics challenge the validity of Jesus' proof.
- Chapter Five features stories in which Jesus fails to provide his offered proof of authority.

The analysis in these four chapters shows that John used a few specific editorial techniques to redesign Mark's gospel, and these practices are substantially responsible for why John's stories look so different from Mark's. These editorial procedures include:

- Replacing stories based on proof through healing with stories based on proof through words;
- Combining multiple stories with similar themes into a single episode that often disguises the underlying incidents;
- Moving stories from their original sequential location, where they served one function, and placing them into different locations as substitutes for an objectionable story;
- Moving problematic passages out of one story and into another, changing the narrative context and impact;
- Eliminating, wherever possible, negative portrayals of Jesus' family; and
- Eliminating, wherever possible, any negative portrayal of the disciples, especially Peter.

Let me briefly comment on the last two points, negative images of Jesus' family and his apostles. I refer to this technique as the "apostle filter." In the present work, we see this clearly in play when dealing with negative images of Jesus' family. Its use regarding the disciples in the present study is very limited and not intuitively obvious unless you know about other stories where John followed this practice.

Mark has frequent occasions in which Peter and the disciples are cast in a negative light. For example, Mark depicts Peter having an erroneous understanding of who Jesus is and shows Jesus rebuking Peter by saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”²⁹

John, in a variation of the same episode, depicts Peter as having a perfect understanding of who Jesus is, and changes the Satan accusation to eliminate the criticism of Peter. “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.”³⁰ John then adds a gloss. “He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.”³¹ John has redirected the criticism from Peter to the fall-guy, Judas.

On two other occasions, immediately after each of Mark’s two miracles of the loaves, the disciples are criticized for not understanding the meaning of the miracle.³² John has only one miracle of the loaves, but John arranges for Jesus to criticize persons other than the disciples for their failure to understand the miracle.³³

I will on occasion refer to the use of the “apostle filter.” These two examples should be enough to show how John uses it.

By understanding John’s editorial practices and making use of numerous literary clues in John’s gospel, we can read Mark’s stories through a Johannine filter, identifying what John would object to and what type of changes he would want to make. Once we know what the issues are, it becomes much easier to identify where and how John addresses these issues and to reverse engineer John’s gospel to show how his stories were composed and why they don’t look like Mark’s stories.

The four chapters taken together will show that John knew all of Mark’s stories about proving Jesus’ authority and that he substituted carefully crafted alternative narratives that replace Mark’s theology with John’s theology. The evidence will also show that John was thoroughly familiar with the sequential order of numerous stories in Mark and often followed that story order in constructing his own narrative.

How the argument unfolds

As indicated above, I have organized the analysis around four sub-themes, each related to the wider topic of how Mark and John address various questions related to the questions about how Jesus proves his authority. Let me provide a quick overview before moving into the substantive discussions.

In Chapter Two, *Jesus Proves His Authority*, I examine three stories in Mark, all in very close narrative proximity, in which Jesus offers proof of authority for various actions. In Mark 2:1-12, Jesus proves he has authority to forgive sin by healing a paralytic on a mat. In Mark 2:23-28, Jesus, relying on scriptural exegesis, proves he has authority in certain circumstances to authorize people (in this case his disciples) to violate the Sabbath because “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord *even of* the sabbath (emphasis added).” In Mark 3:1-6, the very next story, Jesus, proves that he has authority to heal on the Sabbath because, it is *lawful* to do good on the Sabbath.

Mark’s three stories reveal aspects of Jesus’ authority in piecemeal form but do not necessarily define all of Jesus’ authority. The first story deals only with forgiving sin, leaving open the possibility that Jesus may not have authority in other areas. In the second and third stories Jesus uses scriptural exegesis to argue that his actions are lawful. These Sabbath stories portray Jesus as a law-abiding Jew and the healing of the paralytic shows healing as proof of authority when Jesus appears to act outside of the law.

John 5 also has a story about Jesus healing a paralytic on a mat, and there is enough similarity to Mark’s story to at least generate debate among scholars as to whether Mark and John are both describing the same incident. John’s story, however, is very different from Mark’s, and he places it on the Sabbath. During the story, Jesus authorizes the paralytic to violate the Sabbath by picking up the mat and walking, and Jesus defends his right to heal on the Sabbath because, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.”³⁴

John’s single story includes all three authority issues that Mark’s three narratively-close stories cover, but John handles the proof of authority in a completely different manner. His defense to the Sabbath violations, that Jesus emulates the Father, places Jesus’ authority above of the law, and that defense leads to charges of blasphemy. More importantly, Jesus doesn’t present the issue of Jesus’ authority in bits and pieces or leave open the question of any limits. In one fell swoop, he claims, “The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son . . . and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.”³⁵

As proof of his authority, Jesus offers only his words. “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who *hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life*, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life (emphasis added).”³⁶ In contrast to Mark, John asserts Jesus has all authority to execute judgment in all matters and that includes operating

outside of the law. He offers only his words as proof of authority and if you believe in him you will receive eternal life.

Chapter Two provides a detailed analysis of these stories in Mark and John and demonstrates that John 5 is built up and around the story elements in Mark's three stories but that John has made several alterations and changes based on his theological objections to Mark's content.

In Chapter Three, *Jesus Declines to Prove His Authority*, I look at stories where Jesus is asked to prove his authority in situations where no violation of the law is involved and Jesus declines to offer proof of his authority.

I look first at a story in Mark in which Pharisees try to test Jesus by asking him for a sign and Jesus declines to provide a sign. I then look at a story in John where people ask Jesus to provide a sign and Jesus declines to do so. Although the stories in Mark and John look nothing alike the evidence shows that each have embedded their versions of these stories at precisely the same point in a parallel sequence of stories, suggesting that John substituted his version for Mark's.

From there I turn to the story of Jesus chasing the money-changers from the Temple and Jesus' tricky approach to avoid justifying his authority to challenge Temple practices. Mark and John have very different takes on this story and, in addition, John moves the incident two years earlier than Mark. After reviewing the stories in Mark and John we turn to the question of why John placed his money-changers story where he did.

This required that we look at a second story in Mark, which described how the authority of Jesus was widely recognized in Galilee for the first time. In Mark's second story, Jesus exorcised an unclean spirit from a man in a synagogue in Capernaum.³⁷ The crowd reacted with astonishment. "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."³⁸

John doesn't show exorcisms and we can't expect him to tell the same story as Mark. But he does tell a story with the same plot theme, the first occasion on which Jesus' authority was widely recognized in Galilee. That story is John's relocated account of the chasing of the money-changers. I will argue that John moved the money-changers story into the same narrative location where Mark placed the exorcism story and used it as a substitute for Mark's exorcism story, thereby replacing an exorcism showing authority with a story in which Jesus declines to prove his authority. John's rearrangement, as we shall see, directly challenged Mark's depiction of exorcism as valid proof of Jesus' authority.

To prove that John used the money-changers story as a replacement for Mark's exorcism story I look at a long narrative arc containing several stories in Mark that appear before and after the exorcism and show that John has a parallel set of stories that deal with the same story themes in the same sequential order. At the conclusion, we will see long narrative arcs in Mark and John that contain parallel sets of stories in almost exact sequential order and which, I suggest, can only be reasonably explained by a literary relationship based on a written source.

In Chapter Four, *Jesus' Critics Challenge the Validity of His Proof*, I examine Mark 3:20-35, an integration of two stories about problems Jesus had with his critics and his family when it came to proving his authority. In Mark, exorcisms play a major role in establishing the general authority of Jesus as someone having a relationship to God in some capacity. In this story, which appears to revolve around strange behavior by Jesus during an exorcism, Jesus' family thinks he is out of his mind; his critics accuse him of performing exorcisms by working with Satan, indicating that Jesus is a sinner who was accused of having an "unclean spirit;" and Jesus appears to reject his family for not being among his followers.

From John's perspective, Mark's story contains so many objectionable factors it's hard to imagine how John could address the issues Mark raises. But John is quite creative, and he came up with some fascinating but very heavily disguised replacements for Mark's stories.

It will be my argument that John 8:31-59 and John 9, following immediately after, were designed to replace Mark's problematic narrative. I will argue that John 8:31-59 replaced Mark's attacks on Jesus' immediate blood-line family with attacks on a different blood-line family, the descendants of Abraham, leaving Jesus' immediate family in the clear. I will then argue that John took Mark's story about Jesus healing a blind man with saliva, placed the event on a Sabbath, and transformed it into a debate over whether Jesus was a sinner, substituting that healing of a blind man on the Sabbath for the accusation that Jesus worked with Satan.

In Chapter Five, *Jesus Fails to Prove His Authority*, I look at Mark's problematic story about Jesus returning to his hometown synagogue, where the congregation knew Jesus' family members by name, and turned against Jesus and rejected him. The evidence will show that Mark's story is very heavily redacted and that he intended to cover up an underlying story indicating that Jesus tried to heal somebody as proof of his authority to deliver the gospel message but that he failed to do so, causing the congregation to reject him. We will also look at Luke's very different much longer story that also dances around the question of Jesus' failure to heal as proof of authority.

Again, because John doesn't use healings as proof of authority, he replaced the healing portion of the story in a way that doesn't show Jesus losing his miraculous powers. I will argue that John 6:25-59, the Discourse on Bread, which takes place in a synagogue in Capernaum where the congregation knows Jesus' family members by name, serves as a substitute for the story of Jesus' failure to heal. In this alternative story, Jesus uses a very difficult teaching with unusual Eucharistic overtones as an explanation for his relationship to the Father and the gospel message, but the congregation rejects this teaching. In John, the failure is a failure to provide convincing words rather than a failure to convince through healing.

As a final note on the argument, the goal of this study is to establish a strong *prima facie* case for the proposition that John knew Mark's written gospel (or his written source) and used it as his primary source. It is not intended as a full and complete proof of the underlying thesis. It serves only as an introduction to a much larger body of evidence based on other portions of Mark and John that have not been fully analyzed in this study. Given the enormous range of scholarly work on these gospels, I cannot in this work address all or most potential scholarly objections, but such objections are welcome, as they can help focus attention on those areas that need or deserve further attention.

CHAPTER TWO

JESUS PROVES HIS AUTHORITY

Mark 2:1-12 and John 5 both tell a story about Jesus' encounter with a paralytic man seated on a mat. Both stories use the phrase "Stand up and take your mat and walk."³⁹ In both stories the man is depicted as a sinner.⁴⁰ In both stories Jesus is accused of blasphemy for making himself equal to God.⁴¹ In both stories the healed paralytic walks away without thanking Jesus. And in both stories Jesus says that "the son of Man" has the authority to act as he acted.⁴²

At first blush, the two stories seem to be based on the same event, but many and perhaps most scholars are not so convinced. The two stories, on a narrative level, look almost nothing alike. Mark's story is short, takes place in Capernaum, revolves around the forgiving of sin, and features several actions by companions of the paralytic that are missing from John's account. John's story is rather lengthy by comparison, takes place in Jerusalem, has no companions to the paralytic, the accusation of blasphemy is based on different actions by Jesus, many arguments and claims in John's story are missing from Mark, details looking similar to Mark don't occur in quite the same manner, and, very importantly for our analysis, John's events take place on a Sabbath, a feature not present in Mark's story.

Among New Testament scholars there is some debate as to whether a literary connection exists between John's story of the healing of the paralytic and Mark's.⁴³ Because of the many differences between the two gospel accounts most scholars reject any connection, arguing that the two stories constitute separate independent events. At the same time, however, many if not most scholars have also called into question John's claim that the healing happened on a Sabbath.⁴⁴

John P. Meier, for example, who sees the two gospel stories as independent of each other, does believe the Sabbath infraction was a later amendment to the underlying tale.⁴⁵ Johannine scholar Urban von Wahlde acknowledges the awkwardness of the Sabbath claim and suggests that it was probably added to the text to explain what followed afterwards.⁴⁶ Much of what follows, though, depends on the claim that the event

happened on a Sabbath. This suggests to me that John inserted the Sabbath claim in order to address additional issues not present in Mark's story.

While Mark's story about the paralytic doesn't occur on the Sabbath, it appears in very close narrative proximity to two stories that do take place on the Sabbath and both involve hostile confrontations. One tells of Jesus authorizing the apostles to pluck grain on the Sabbath⁴⁷ and the other deals with Jesus healing a man with a withered hand, which follows immediately after the grain incident.⁴⁸ The close positioning of these two Sabbath violation stories after Mark's account of the paralytic provides a clue that something in those Sabbath stories may have induced John to incorporate some of those Sabbath issues into his own account of the paralytic.

Mark's close narrative sequence of three stories—sinful paralytic, apostles picking grain, and Jesus healing on the Sabbath—raises several theological questions. Each deal with a different aspect of Jesus' authority. In Mark's paralytic story, Jesus announces his authority to forgive sin and offers as proof of this authority the power to heal the paralytic. In the grain plucking incident Jesus authorizes his disciples to violate the Sabbath, makes what appears to be a legalistic argument showing that his actions come under the law, and declares that Jesus "is Lord *even of* the Sabbath (emphasis added)."⁴⁹ In the healing on the Sabbath incident, Jesus argues that his actions fall under the law.

Broadly speaking, Mark's three closely connected stories offer several piecemeal declarations of areas where Jesus has authority and what sort of proof he offers. Taken together, the three stories seem to stand for the proposition that Jesus' authority can be found either from exegesis of Jewish scripture or from acts of healing. This leaves open the possibility that there may be areas where Jesus does not have authority or that Jewish law limited his authority.

John has a very different take. Because he places the healing of the paralytic on a Sabbath, his story also includes two Sabbath violations. When Jesus heals the paralytic, that allegedly violates the Sabbath. When Jesus tells the paralytic to pick up his mat, this, too, raises issues about violating the Sabbath. These two Sabbath violations in John, on a thematic level, parallel Mark's two violations. Both have Jesus authorize someone to violate the Sabbath, (the apostles in Mark and the paralytic in John,) and, in close narrative connection, both have a healing on the Sabbath.

John, therefore, combines in one long story, variations of all three stories that Mark places in separate incidents that appear in close narrative proximity to each other. This should be considered a strong clue that John is working from a narrative like the one in Mark. But, John addresses the issue of authority and proof differently.

In John's story, forgiving sin, authorizing a Sabbath violation, and healing on the Sabbath all come under a wider mantle of authority. John's Jesus declares that "The Father judges no one but has given *all judgment* to the Son (emphasis added),"⁵⁰ eliminating the piecemeal declarations in Mark. This, implicitly, places Jesus above the law as his authority to judge all comes directly from the Father. This is made more explicit when Jesus defends his Sabbath actions by saying, "My Father is still working, and I also am working."⁵¹

As to proof of his authority, John's Jesus offers words, not deeds. John doesn't offer the healing of the paralytic as proof of Jesus' authority. He shunts that issue off to the side. To prove his legitimacy, Jesus declares, "Very truly, I tell you, *anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me* has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life (emphasis added)."⁵²

These initial observations suggest that John addressed multiple issues spread out through Mark's three stories. For these and other reasons explained below, it is my view that John knew written versions of Mark's three-story sequence and found his depiction of these issues troubling, causing him to do a rewrite of Mark's three stories, bringing all his problematic concerns together within the context of his version of the story of the Sabbath healing of the paralytic on the mat.

To the best of my knowledge the idea that John merged the story of the paralytic with that of the two Sabbath conflicts remains original with me. John's transformation of the material has made it extremely difficult to see the many connections between all three stories in Mark and John 5, but careful analysis below will reveal that John 5 does indeed derive from a combination of these three stories in Mark.

The Paralytic on the Mat in Mark 2:1–12

According to Mark, early in Jesus' mission, before he had aroused any antagonism from hostile opponents to his teachings, he had developed a reputation for healing and exorcism.⁵³ Upon completing a mission that involved numerous exorcisms and healings he returned home to Capernaum.⁵⁴ When the residents learned he had come back, a large crowd gathered, blocking access through the doorway.⁵⁵

As the crowd listened to Jesus, four men carrying a paralytic on a mat appeared.⁵⁶ Unable to get past the crowd in order to reach Jesus, they climbed on to the roof of his house, dug a hole through it, and lowered the paralytic on the mat down before him.⁵⁷ Duly impressed with their faith, Jesus turned to the paralytic and said, "Son, your sins are forgiven."⁵⁸

Nearby, several scribes were seated. Somehow, among the din and from a distance, they were able to hear Jesus' words from inside the house and they began to discuss amongst themselves what Jesus had just said.⁵⁹ "Why does this fellow speak in this way? *It is blasphemy!* Who can forgive sins but God alone (emphasis added)?"⁶⁰

Jesus realized they were discussing this issue and rebuked them. "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But *so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins* (emphasis added)"⁶¹ he turned to the paralytic and said, "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."⁶² (Note here the slight variance in the instruction between what Jesus tells the scribes he would say to the paralytic and what he actually says to the paralytic. In John, Mark's version of the statement to the scribes is exactly what John says to the paralytic. This suggests one of the two evangelists may have slightly altered a written source.)

The now-healed paralytic followed Jesus' command by picking up his mat and walking away, but he never said anything to Jesus about what happened. Implicitly, Jesus had healed the paralytic moments earlier when he told the man his sins were forgiven but nobody, including the paralytic, realized that until Jesus told him to get up. The crowd was amazed at what happened and glorified God. "We have never seen anything like this!"⁶³ Mark doesn't specifically say how the scribes reacted but they may have been among those who were astonished at what had just transpired.

The main message of this story is that Jesus, the "son of Man," has authority to act outside of the law to forgive sins and that healing the paralytic proves he has that authority. Keep in mind that the story only shows an authority to forgive sins; it doesn't indicate any other authority that Jesus may have regarding other actions.

The Paralytic on the Mat in John 5

John's story of the healing of a paralytic on a mat is much longer than Mark's, taking up all of John 5, and encompasses a wider range of activity than Mark's because John placed the event on a Sabbath. This leads to more extensive confrontations because of alleged Sabbath violations in addition to accusations of blasphemy. I have divided John 5 into four broad sections, each described below.

John 5:1–9a: In this section Jesus comes upon the Jerusalem gate and sees many invalids lying about the porches around a pool known for its curative powers. He noticed one particular invalid, a man lying on his mat

unable to walk, who looked as if he had been suffering by the pool for a long time. John says the affliction had lasted for 38 years but we are not told how he knows that detail.

Jesus approached the man and asked if he would like to be made well. The man responded that he has no one to help him into the water when it is stirred up (presumably when the healing powers are released) and whenever he tries to get over to the pool people get in front of him and block his way. Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.”⁶⁴ Suddenly, the man was cured. He picked up his mat and walked off but said nothing to Jesus about what had just happened.

John 5:9b–13: As the man walks off with his mat, John tells us for the first time that this day was a Sabbath. This meant that carrying the mat pursuant to Jesus’ instructions would have been a violation of the Sabbath proscription against labor. As the healed paralytic walked on, some Jews confronted him about this illegal behavior.

The man responded that the person who had made him well told him to pick up the mat and walk. When the crowd asked who told him to do this, he looked around, but Jesus had disappeared into the crowd and the man didn’t know his name.

John 5:14–18: Later, Jesus encountered the man in the temple and said, “See, you have been made well! *Do not sin any more*, so that nothing worse happens to you (emphasis added).”⁶⁵ Implicit in Jesus’ instruction, but not specifically set forth, is that the man had been made well because his sins had now been forgiven.

During this second encounter between the man and Jesus, the healed paralytic identified Jesus to the crowd as the man who cured him and told him to pick up the mat. This led the Jews to start “persecuting” Jesus for “doing such things on the Sabbath.”⁶⁶ Presumably, but not explicitly stated, the complaint is about Jesus healing on the Sabbath as opposed to telling the man to pick up his mat and violate the Sabbath, but it may also be the case that both actions are the subject of the accusation. The text is also vague as to the nature of this persecution at this point in time and there is no indication yet of any actual attempt to physically harm Jesus. In response, Jesus confronted the crowd and defended his actions by declaring that “My Father is still working, and I also am working.”⁶⁷ This defense places Jesus above the law, acquiring his authority through the Father and not scripture.

According to John,

For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.⁶⁸

Despite the alleged threats, no physical assault actually takes place. I say alleged because John doesn't describe any hostile actions. He merely asserts that this is what the Jews wanted to do. This is the first reference to any previous desire to *kill* Jesus for the Sabbath violation, and presumably it relates back to the earlier vague reference to "persecution," but this alleged hostile desire is revealed only in the later context of wanting to kill Jesus for blasphemy.

Note here a slight but significant editorial shift from Mark's version of the story. In Mark, it is Jesus' statement that sins have been forgiven that leads to the charge of blasphemy; in John, Jesus also said, implicitly, that the sins had been forgiven, but that is not what leads to the accusation of blasphemy. It is his very next statement, that he and the Father are both working, that induces the crowd to charge blasphemy.

In both stories, Jesus forgives sins and in both stories Jesus is accused of blasphemy for equating himself with God. But John has placed a narrative barrier between the forgiving of sins and the charge of blasphemy by inserting a statement in between the two events, a statement introduced as a defense against the charge of violating the Sabbath. John has shifted the story away from accusing Jesus of blasphemy for forgiving sins and has placed the blasphemy in the context of defending his Sabbath actions by claiming that he and the Father are both working. John's non-legalistic defense applies to both the forgiving of sins and the control over the Sabbath.

John 5:19–47: Although the crowd had just expressed its desire to kill Jesus for violating the Sabbath and for blasphemy, Jesus remains in place, unharmed, and launches into a long speech in which he defines his relation to the Father and argues that if the Jews believed in Moses they would believe in him, because Moses wrote about him. The speech is steeped in Johannine theology and it is mostly material that Mark would not have included if it was found in his source.

Among the things Jesus says in this speech we have the following.

- "The Father judges no one *but has given all judgment* to the Son (emphasis added)."⁶⁹
- "Very truly, I tell you, *anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me* has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life (emphasis added)."⁷⁰
- For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.⁷¹
- "and [the Father] has given him [i.e., Jesus] *authority to execute judgment*, because he is the *Son of Man* (emphasis added)."⁷²

John and Mark both link “authority” to make judgments inconsistent with the law to the fact that Jesus is “the Son of Man.” But in Mark, Jesus offers the healing as proof of his authority. In John, on the other hand, Jesus doesn’t claim that healing the paralytic *proves* he has authority. Jesus just asserts that he has been given all authority to execute judgement and offers eternal life to those who “hear his words and believes him who sent me.”

John also expands on Jesus’ authority, saying that Jesus, like the Father, has “life” within himself. In other words, the authority to execute judgment in John is not merely just to forgive sins but, more importantly, to grant eternal life to all who believe in him.

In Mark, Jesus was given authority to forgive sins and heal in the present. John has expanded upon that principle, saying that he has been given authority to determine who will receive eternal life in the future, a power which includes the authority to forgive sins but encompasses so much more.

John 5 ends with Jesus still addressing the crowd and invoking Moses as his witness. Despite the alleged death threats, no further action is described. No one tries to stone or arrest Jesus. The next thing we know, Jesus is heading towards Galilee at the beginning of John 6.

Comparing John and Mark re Healing the Paralytic

John and Mark share several story elements in their respective accounts of the healing of the paralytic but some of the most important parallels appear in differing contexts. We also find several significant differences in the story details. Because of the different contexts and major inconsistencies most scholars tend to consider the two stories independent of each other, based on unrelated incidents. However, as I will show below, when we examine the way in which the two stories differ, we will see that John has simply replaced Mark’s underlying theological motifs with a Johannine agenda. When this is accounted for we will see that John and Mark worked from a common version of the underlying story about healing of the paralytic.

I’ll start with a brief summary of the ways in which John and Mark intersect with regard to the healing of the paralytic. Next, I’ll review the significant ways in which the two stories diverge. Lastly, I’ll show how almost all of those differences can be reconciled.

Points of Intersection

When we compare the two stories about the healing of the paralytic certain common elements emerge but in some instances the contexts differ.

- In both stories there is a paralytic on a mat.
- In both stories the man suffered because of past sins. Mark's Jesus says, "your sins are forgiven." John's Jesus says "See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you." While they don't use the same words, John and Mark are clearly expressing the same thought.
- In both stories the man is made well because the sins are forgiven. In Mark, the forgiveness is directly expressed and serves as the crux of the story. In John, the principle is clearly implied by Jesus' warning to the paralytic about avoiding sin in the future, but John has put some narrative distance between the act of curing the paralytic and the explanation of how he was cured. This served to remove forgiving sin as the basis of the blasphemy charge.
- In both stories Jesus is accused of blasphemy for equating himself with God. But the two stories disagree as to what statement served as the basis of the blasphemy accusation. John has eliminated the debate over forgiving sin and inserted a non-legalistic Sabbath defense between the statement about sin and the hostile reaction to Jesus' actions. If we remove the Sabbath claim we have a direct narrative link between forgiving sin and Jewish accusations of blasphemy, as Mark has it.
- In both stories Jesus defends his actions on the ground that the "Son of Man" has the authority to do what he did. Mark says, "the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." John says Jesus has "authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man." John's version of the story gives Jesus a wider range of authority, more specifically, the right to grant eternal life (implicitly by forgiving the sins of those who have faith in Jesus as the man sent by God to bring salvation.)
- In both stories Jesus tells the man to "stand up, take your mat." Mark adds "Go to your home." John adds "walk." The parallel wording here was sufficiently close that Kurt Aland identified it as a synoptic parallel.⁷³ (But recall that Mark uses John's exact words as Jesus' statement to the scribes as to what Jesus would say to the paralytic.)