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*Expanded Interfluentiality: A Review of Part III:  
Paul Anderson's Theory of Gospel Inter-Relationships*

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In *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus*, Paul Anderson has provided a fresh way of looking at the relationship between the Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels. As with all aspects of the book, this theory reflects careful scholarship that mixes both 'big picture' ideas and detailed analysis into a helpful blend of conclusions. In reviewing this theory, I will first summarize its key features and some of its foundational assumptions. Then my evaluation of the theory will focus on some of these assumptions, questioning these in certain respects, intensifying them in others. Given the constraints of this review and my own limitations as a Johannine non-expert, the resulting conclusions will themselves necessarily be general and tentative. Nevertheless, it is my hope that this review will provide a helpful contribution to the discussion of Anderson's valuable and stimulating book.

*The Theory: 'Interfluential, Formative, and Dialectical'*

Any good theory of literary relationships must account for all the specific phenomena one encounters in the writings under examination. This is where many theories of John-Synoptic relationships fall short, accounting for some phenomena (usually the differences) but not others (often the similarities). Thus, in addition to the well-known aporias of John (Anderson, pp. 32-33), Anderson is careful to note the full range of similarities and differences one encounters between John and the Synoptic Gospels. For example:

(1) There are at least 31 *distinctive accounts common to all four canonical Gospels*, essentially tracing a common narrative of Jesus' career from John the Baptist, through a Galilean ministry, to Jerusalem with Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection appearances. However, these parallels are far from identical in wording and style (pp. 128-30).

(2) There are at least 40 *memorable sayings common to John and Mark*, though none are extensive or precise verbal parallels (pp. 130-33).

(3) There are at least 21 *points of similarity between John 6 and Mark 8* and 24 *points of similarity between John 6 and Mark 6*, but none of these are identical contacts (pp. 28-29, 104-105).

(4) At least three dozen times *Luke's rendering of events departs from Mark's and instead bears striking similarity to John's version*, though again the similarities are not identical (pp. 112-14).

(5) The '*Johannine thunderbolt*' found in the *Synoptic double tradition* material has clear parallels with distinctive Johannine themes and at least half a dozen specific passages in John, though again the similarities are not in extensive or precise verbal parallels (pp. 117-18).

Anderson proposes that the kind and degree of these similarities and differences between John and the Synoptics necessitates envisioning a process of bi-directional influences—an 'interfluentiality'—that could not be directly literary but must have occurred during the oral phases of the development of the Gospels. Anderson's theory thus essentially presents a four-stage process leading to the final forms of the canonical Gospels:<sup>7</sup>

(1) *A pre-Gospel stage*. The Johannine tradition developed as an independent stream in distinctive ways (e.g. distinctive passion narrative, signs stories, etc.). There was some interfluentiality between the pre-Markan and early Johannine streams, and the Johannine oral traditional material from this period eventually became a source for Luke–Acts and possibly Q.

(2) *An early Gospel stage*. The Gospel of Mark was written (c. 70 CE), and an early edition of the Gospel of John was written (c. 80-85 CE) at least in part to respond to Mark. This early edition of John was a narrative from the ministry of John the Baptist to Jesus' resurrection, distinguished by non-Markan 'signs' and dialogues and culminating in the conclusion of Jn 20.30-31.

(3) *A later Gospel stage*. The Gospels of Luke (c. 85 CE) and Matthew (c. 90 CE) were written, employing Mark, Q and other distinctive traditions. There was some interfluentiality between the Matthean and Johannine streams around the time of the writing of Matthew and between the two editions of John.

(4) *A final Gospel stage*. A final edition of the Gospel of John was written, incorporating the prologue of chapter 1, the material of chapters 6 and 15–17, the epilogue of chapter 21 and some other material (e.g. the 'beloved disciple' and eyewitness references).

One of the key distinguishing features of Anderson's theory is his characterization of the ways in which the Johannine stream of tradition

7. This four-stage schema is my own summary. For Anderson's summaries, see Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel*, pp. 126, 193-99.

interacted with each of the Synoptic streams, and distinctively so. He proposes that these Gospel inter-relationships followed discernible patterns from the perspective of the Gospel of John and the Johannine community:

(1) *John's relationship with Mark* was interfluent, augmentive and corrective: John influenced and was influenced by the Markan tradition, and the first edition of John was written both to augment and to correct Mark in its order and theological stance (pp. 104-112).

(2) *John's relationship with Q* is more speculative, but the early Johannine tradition may have influenced this Gospel source (pp. 117-19).

(3) *John's relationship with Luke* was formative, 'orderly' and theological: the early Johannine oral tradition influenced Luke in terms of content, and quite possibly in terms of order and theological outlook (pp. 112-17).

(4) Finally, *John's relationship with Matthew* was reinforcing, dialectical and corrective: the Johannine and Matthean streams mutually reinforced one another in their basic stances within their Jewish settings, while John was written in part to correct rising institutionalism reflected in the Matthean tradition (pp. 119-25).

Just as any good theory must account for the observable phenomena, so also any theory is only as good as its assumptions. Most of Anderson's assumptions are directly stated and defended in his work, while some are dependent upon the work of others, and some even remain unstated and implicit. While several of these assumptions could be mentioned, the following are worth considering in a review such as this, since each of them has been questioned to some extent by recent scholarship:

(1) The Gospels of Matthew and John reflect distinctive Christian sectors or versions of Christianity, with distinctive formative histories and historical concerns.

(2) The theory of Markan Priority certainly, and the Two-Source Theory most likely, is the best explanation of the literary inter-relationships among the Synoptic Gospels. Matthean and Lukan traditions are also acknowledged as independent sources, in support of Four-Source constructs.

(3) The 'standard' dates for the final forms of the canonical Gospels are correct: Mark finalized around 70 CE, Matthew and Luke between 70 and 100 CE and John around 100 CE.

(4) Extracanonical Gospels such as *Thomas* are largely dependent upon the canonical Gospels and are thus relatively insignificant for consideration of first-century inter-Gospel relationships.

*Evaluating the Theory: Questioning and Intensifying Assumptions*

Within the framework of these and other foundational assumptions, Anderson's theory of Gospel relationships works very well indeed. It explains the phenomena one encounters in the canonical Gospels in a coherent and compelling way, particularly the perplexing aporias of John and the strikingly similar yet frustratingly imprecise parallels between John and the Synoptics. Thus, Anderson's theory of interfluentiality deserves much careful reflection well beyond the scope of this review.

My own purpose in the rest of this review is to 'kick the tires' of the above assumptions, particularly the first two, to explore what such a theory of interfluentiality might look like if these assumptions were somewhat different than they are in Anderson's presentation. I agree to a fair extent with the last two of these assumptions, so I will only give a few brief comments at this point. Although I agree that the *Gospel of Thomas* postdates the canonical Gospels, I think it possible that some of the uniquely Thomasine sayings have roots back to the first century, roots that may have some points of contact with the Johannine tradition. I also think it worthwhile to explore the possibility that Johannine and proto-Thomasine communities had some degree of interaction, though perhaps not until after the finalization of the Gospel of John. As for the dates of the final forms of the canonical Gospels, although I agree as to the relative dates of the Gospels, I would push one or two of them slightly earlier. If Matthew in particular is earlier than Anderson's assumption, it could have some impact on his ideas regarding the relationship between the Johannine and Matthean streams of tradition.

Although these are fruitful areas to explore, I wish to engage in detail the first two assumptions noted above, beginning with the second: that the Two-Source Theory is perhaps the best explanation of the literary inter-relationships of the Synoptic Gospels. To be fair, Anderson is cautious in his reference to Q, and it is undoubtedly true that Q remains the dominant theory in the academy. Nevertheless, there seems to be a growing scepticism regarding Q, varying from a settled uneasiness with detailed hypothetical reconstructions of its text and community, to an

outright denial of its existence.<sup>8</sup> My own scepticism regarding Q leads me to ask the following question: what if the Matthean–Lukan double tradition does not reflect a distinctive written source used independently by both Matthew and Luke, but rather is part of common oral traditional material incorporated into the Gospel of Matthew alongside Mark and subsequently taken over by Luke via Matthew?

It has long been recognized that the Synoptic double-tradition material is attested in the earliest Christian writings outside the Gospels. As early as the 50s CE, Paul refers to traditional teaching from the Matthean–Lukan mission discourse (1 Cor. 9.14), along with other distinctively Synoptic material (e.g. 1 Cor. 7.10-11; 11.23-25; 1 Thess. 4.16-17a). Other possibly pre-70 CE references to distinctively Synoptic or even specifically double-tradition material are found in Hebrews and James (e.g. Heb. 5.7; Jas 2.5; 5.1-3, 12), and the late first-century *Didache* and *1 Clement* contain similar material, much of it paralleled in the Synoptics as double-tradition material (e.g. *Did.* 8.3-10; 16.1-8; *1 Clem.* 13.1-3). Several of these references are even explicitly acknowledged in some way as traditional material believed to originate with Jesus of Nazareth (1 Cor. 7.10-11; 9.14; 11.23-25; Heb. 5.7-9; *Did.* 8.3-10; *1 Clem.* 13.1-3), virtually the only such early material explicitly described as Jesus tradition outside the Gospels. Thus, one could say that every explicit citation of Jesus tradition pre-dating or contemporaneous with the Gospels is ‘Synoptic-like’,<sup>9</sup> at least half of it even specifically double-tradition material. Furthermore, this non-Gospel, Synoptic or double-tradition material is found in a wide variety of sources and settings, from Palestinian Jewish Christianity to Diaspora Jewish or Gentile Christianity, and from Jacobean to Pauline communities.

Q theorists have typically explained these phenomena as further evidence of Q’s existence, and even its widespread early use. However, in addition to better arguments against the existence of Q, if one wants to acknowledge such a widespread influence for Q, it becomes even

8. For a significant critique of Q which nevertheless maintains Markan priority, see Mark S. Goodacre, *The Case against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002); Mark S. Goodacre and Nicholas Perrin, eds., *Questioning Q: A Multidimensional Critique* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004).

9. Although it is an agraphon, the saying of Acts 20.35 is no exception in that it is a pithy aphorism in the character and style of the Synoptic tradition, known and used by one of the Synoptic Evangelists.

more difficult to explain the fact that we have no external attestation to such a prevalent and important document. It is also somewhat difficult to explain the fact that most of these references are paraphrases without precise verbal parallels in the Synoptics or a reconstructed Q. If one dispenses with Q, one possible explanation is that there was a wide-spread common fund of oral Jesus tradition that came to be expressed primarily in the Synoptics as triple and double tradition. This oral triple-tradition material is that which was incorporated into Mark and subsequently into Matthew and Luke, and this oral double-tradition material is that which was incorporated into Matthew's Gospel alongside Mark, and subsequently incorporated by Luke alongside Mark, with each stage tempered by continued interaction with this ongoing oral tradition.

So how might this suggestion affect Anderson's theory of John–Synoptic relationships? Before I answer this question, I must address the first assumption of Anderson's theory listed above: that the Gospels of Matthew and John reflect distinctive sectors or versions of Christianity in which and for which the Gospel was written. This assumption has come under fire recently, particularly through the work of Richard Bauckham.<sup>10</sup> To be fair, Anderson's work reflects a relatively mild form of this assumption: Anderson does not propose a distinctive Matthean *community* but only a distinctive Matthean version of Christianity, he does see some significant interaction between these communities or groups, and his specific approach to multiple editions of John within the Johannine community is not unduly complex. Nevertheless, I wish to poke and prod this assumption a little, to see how it might stand up to some critical modification.

First, I must say that, at least with regard to the concept of a Johannine community, Anderson has the better of the argument against Bauckham. Various indications within the Gospel, particularly the well-known aporias, point to some sort of theory of multiple written editions. Other factors point to this editing taking place within a distinctive community over some period of time. The 'he' and 'we' of Jn 21.24, in spite of Bauckham's recent arguments for a "we" of authoritative

10. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

testimony',<sup>11</sup> still seem to me to make the best sense as a distinction between the beloved disciple as the 'he' who witnessed and authored, and a community as the 'we' who subsequently witnessed and wrote. Furthermore, the prior reference to the rumours surrounding the beloved disciple's death vis-à-vis Christ's return (Jn 21.21-23) seem most likely to reflect concerns immediately following the beloved disciple's death. Other external factors point to a Johannine community with a hand in the Gospel's formation, including the stylistically and thematically similar Johannine epistles (two from 'the elder') with their clear community focus and distinctive concerns, along with later patristic tradition that acknowledged Johannine influence and disciples in Asia Minor (e.g. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.22.5). Taken together, these and other factors point to an early Johannine community that remained noticeably distinct in its patterns of practice and expression even as it interacted with other Christian groups.

However, there are two factors, both aspects of Anderson's own theory, which combine to suggest that the degree of personal interaction among these early Christian communities was perhaps even greater than that suggested by Anderson. The first factor is the degree of interfluentiality proposed by Anderson. I think he is correct in his assessment that the kind and degree of similarities and differences between John and the Synoptics necessitate a significant, ongoing process of bi-directional influences at the level of orality, whether that is first-level orality (oral communication deriving from personal experience or an oral source) or second-level orality (oral communication deriving from a written source). I would push this even further to say that the kind and degree of similarities and differences *among all the canonical Gospels* necessitates a significant, ongoing process of *multi-directional influences* at the level of orality. If this is so, it makes a second observation of Anderson's all the more significant: that when we speak of traditions, particularly oral traditions, we are necessarily speaking of *people*: tradents and transmitters of tradition.<sup>12</sup>

When these observations are combined, they suggest that the kind and degree of interfluentiality described by Anderson necessitates a corresponding kind and degree of personal interaction among the various early Christian communities. The logical conclusion is that there was a considerable degree of personal interaction—a 'personal

11. Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, pp. 369-83.

12. E.g. Anderson, *Fourth Gospel*, p. 106.

interfluentiality’, if you will—among the earliest Christians across whatever distinctive communities may have been present. And here is where Bauckham can contribute more positively to the discussion, for he has rightly highlighted the intentional and extensive social networking of the early Christians across geographical and ‘denominational’ boundaries.<sup>13</sup> In light of this proposed high degree of personal interfluentiality among the earliest Christians, my previous suggestion finds a sharper focus, that there was a widespread *common fund of oral Jesus tradition* that came to be expressed primarily in the Synoptics as triple and double tradition. This intentional and extensive social networking among early Christians, both tradents and transmitters of tradition, across geo-graphical and community boundaries was inevitably reflected in the wide distribution of a common fund of oral Jesus tradition, a fund that was Synoptic-like or even somewhat double traditional in terms of form and content. As each of the Gospels was written, and particularly Mark as the earliest and most influential, a second-level orality came into play as the written Gospel reinforced and informed the widespread common fund of oral Jesus tradition.

How might these modified assumptions and my tentative suggestions affect Anderson’s theory of John–Synoptic relationships? In general terms, these modifications could muddy the waters somewhat in terms of the precise nature of the early Christian communities and distinctive streams of tradition. Anderson’s Johannine community remains intact, along with its interfluent engagement with other Christian communities and traditions. However, the internal and external evidence for an autonomous Matthean community is much less compelling than for a Johannine community, most of the evidence being of the notoriously difficult ‘mirror-reading’ variety. If there were no such autonomous Matthean community, then perhaps the Johannine engagement with the Matthean tradition is not the interaction of two communities or even sectors of Christianity, but rather simply the reaction of the Johannine community to some known interpretations of the common Jesus tradition that were ‘in the air’, interpretations that made their way into Matthew’s Gospel.

13. Richard Bauckham, ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written?’ in *The Gospels for All Christians*, pp. 30-44. See also the chapter in the same volume by Michael B. Thompson, ‘The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation’, pp. 49-70.

Indeed, this could be the case to a great extent across the other lines of interfluentiality Anderson describes. What Anderson describes as distinctive bi-directional interactions with distinctive Markan, Q, Lukan and Matthean streams of tradition, could simply be the Johannine community's use and interpretation of, and contribution and reaction to, the common fund of oral Jesus tradition in the variegated (but not necessarily community-distinctive) forms and interpretations in which it was found at the end of the first century CE, whether accessed through first- or second-level orality. This suggestion would necessitate a re-working of Anderson's patterns of interfluentiality noted above, along something like the following lines:

(1) With the widespread Jesus traditions or interpretations that cohered generally with the Johannine outlook, the Johannine engagement was interfluential, reinforcing and augmentive. The Johannine community influenced and was influenced by this common fund of oral Jesus tradition and its most common interpretations, and the first edition of John was written in part to reinforce and augment this wide-spread form and interpretation of Jesus tradition. This finds expression in the common narrative thread running through all the canonical Gospels, and in the commonalities in teaching material among them.

(2) With particular Jesus traditions or interpretations that cohered partially with the Johannine outlook, the Johannine engagement was dialectical and corrective. The Johannine community responded to these particular Jesus traditions or interpretations in dialectical fashion, and both editions of John were written in part to correct these particular forms and interpretations of Jesus tradition. This finds expression particularly in differences of order and theological stance between John and each of the Synoptics.

In more specific terms, one could still note more particular connections such as that between Luke and John, with Luke informed at a second-level orality by a first edition of John's Gospel (is this one of the 'many' Luke mentions at the beginning of his Gospel?). Other particular connections between Gospels by second-level orality may be possible. However, such distinctive connections would be set within a much broader framework that defies any attempt at a complex, comprehensive theory of Gospel relationships.

*Conclusion: Expanded Interfluentiality*

Paul Anderson's theory of the relationship between John and the Synoptics is a valuable and stimulating contribution to the discussion of this perplexing issue. In my evaluation I have probed two assumptions that underlie Anderson's theory, assumptions that, when modified, have some important implications for the theory as it stands. In a way these modifications expand Anderson's own concept of interfluentiality toward the idea of a widespread common fund of oral Jesus tradition and interpretation that intersected with each Gospel's prehistory even as each tradent or community had some distinctive traditions and interpretations. However, one should not consider this a complete denial of Anderson's theory. I would continue to affirm the core concept behind his theory: that of a distinctive Johannine community engaging in variegated ways with the earliest Jesus traditions and their interpretations, an engagement that spanned an extended period of time and produced an initial and a final edition of John's Gospel.