

## **The Synoptic Logion of the Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit: Is it missing, unknown, or embedded in John's Gospel?**

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All the Synoptic Gospels include the logion of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that Lord Jesus condemns as unpardonable sin. John, however, does not include it in his Gospel. Is it intentional or accidental? We may deem it unlikely that John intentionally or accidentally omitted it insofar as Synoptic Gospels attest it as originated from Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees over the source of his demon-casting. And it would have been a serious mistake to not warn against such a grave sin for the audiences in the Johannine community. The concept of the "sin unto death" in 1 John 5:16 implies that the community members would have acknowledged the danger of committing a sin equivalent to the Synoptic unpardonable sin. It, then, is not impossible that the audiences of the Gospel of John would have had some recognition of the danger of committing as grave a sin as unpardonable in the last day. In fact, John includes many passages parallel to the Synoptic logion of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This writer will look into those passages with the working hypothesis that John embeds the sin of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in his recount of Jesus' controversy with the Jews rather than thinking that he was ignorant of or discarding it from his Gospel.

### **I. The Synoptics' Account of the Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit**

Let's look into some features of the logion of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit found in the Synoptic Gospels first. Matthew presents it in the context that Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees after He heals a demon-possessed man who was blind and

mute (12:22). They accuse Jesus' healing as based on the power of Beelzebub. Jesus corrects their wrong interpretation of His power of miracle performance, saying that He drives demons out by the Spirit of God, and it is a sign of the arrival of God's Kingdom upon them (12:28). Jesus distinguishes speaking a word against the Son of Man from speaking against the Holy Spirit, and committing the latter sin leaves one without a hope of pardon from God (12:32). Jesus further explains the relationship of the sinner who commits the unpardonable sin and the nature of his/her sin with the analogy of an evil tree that bears bad fruits: "evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him"(12:35). This analogy helps clarify the nature of the sin of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. A good man does not commit this sin and then becomes an evil man. Rather, an evil man commits the sin against God's Spirit, because he is an evil man by nature with evil things stored up in him.

Mark includes the logion in his Gospel (3:20-30). He, however, does not include the story of healing of a demon-possessed man, but the charge hurled by the teachers of the Law, that He drives demons out by the prince of demons, assumes Jesus' demon-casting as already done in the context. Mark does not include Jesus' analogy of good/bad tree and good/bad fruit in the story. But the charge that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebub is the element that Matthew does not note in the story (3:22).

Luke departs from the Matthean/Markan version of this story by redacting it to suit his own theology of the Holy Spirit. Recounting the same story, Luke puts the story of Jesus' demon-casting (11:14-28) between the teaching of the Lord's prayer and six woes against the Pharisees (11:37-54), while dealing with Jesus' instruction about the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the context that Jesus assures them to persevere at

the time of persecution (12:1-12). Luke recasts the logion of speaking against the Spirit as connected to believers' sin of disowning (ἀρνεόμαι) Jesus before men. Those who disown Jesus will be disowned (ἀπαρνεόμαι) by Jesus in front of the angels of God (12:9). Since denial of Jesus is the reason for their failure to enter God's Kingdom in the last day, it inevitably is connected to the logion of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which is described as an eschatological unpardonable sin in the verse next to it (12:10).

For this reason, Luke seems to intend his audiences to understand the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as the sin of denying Jesus as Lord in times of persecution. What Luke develops in the story is that he distinguishes denial of the Son of Man from speaking against the Son of Man (12:8-9). Matthew, saying that "speaking a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven," distinguishes it from speaking against the Holy Spirit without clarifying the meaning of "speaking." Luke specifies the meaning of "speaking" as denial, and suggests its object as Jesus and the situation as "before men." Luke suggests all these elements to constitute the unpardonable sin of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Another facet in Luke's account is the role that the Holy Spirit will play at the time of trial: He will teach them at that time what they should say (12:12). So, the words spoken about Jesus at the time of trial will tell whether or not one commits the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Luke, thus, clarifies that denial of Jesus before men is unpardonable whereas speaking a word against Jesus may leave a room for pardon.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke makes this distinction probably for explaining the two contrastive stances of Jesus' disciples. According to his typology, Peter is reckoned as one speaking against the Son of Man and later forgiven whereas Judas as one denying the Son of Man before men and not forgiven. This coincides with Luke's inclusion of Jesus' assurance of Peter's restoration that would follow after his denial (22:31-34).

## II. Elements of Blasphemy Controversy in John's Gospel

John includes in his Gospel neither the story of demon-casting nor the warning against the sin of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This is probably related to the fact that he does not include any story of Jesus' demon-casting in his Gospel. He includes only seven miracle stories and he does not maintain a positive view about believing in Jesus based on seeing His miracles (2:23-25; 4:48; 20:29). Another related feature is that John never describes a certain disease as caused by demon-possession as the Synoptic accounts do (Matt 12:22; Mark 9:17; Luke 11:14). But, what John's account shares with the Synoptic Gospels is twofold. First, the accusation, that Jesus is demon-possessed, is found both in Mark and John (Mark 3:22; John 7:20; 8:48; 10:20). Second, the role of the Holy Spirit to teach what they should say is mentioned both in the Synoptics and John (Matt 10:19-20; Mark 13:11; Luke 12:12; John 14:26; 15:26-27; 1 John 2:27).

Besides these, we find a number of elements of the blasphemy controversy shared by John and the Synoptics. John 8-10 seems to be the place in which the concept of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is explicated as the sin of denying Jesus in public according to the Luke's conceptualization. The unforgivable nature of the Pharisees' opposition and denial of Jesus is concluded in Jesus' condemnation of them as the children of the devil, who "now stands condemned." The realized concept of the eschatological judgment, in John, absorbs the concept of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as presently fulfilled in their opposition to Jesus.

Let's look into the common elements. First, both the Synoptics and John include the Jews' indictment of Jesus as associated with demons/Satan. But there is a slight difference also. Mark notes the Pharisees' accusation of Jesus as possessed by Beelzebul.

Demonization of Jesus or accusing him of having an evil spirit is due to his power to cast out demons. But in John, their accusation is due to His teaching that He is greater than Abraham (8:52), or He claims to be God (10:33). Whereas miracle performance provides contexts to hurl accusation against Jesus in the Synoptics, it provides the vindication of Jesus' testimony in John. The defenders of Jesus say "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"(John 10:21).

Second, the Pharisees are the main antagonizers both in the Synoptic Gospels and John. Jesus condemns them as "hypocrites"(Matt 23:13; Mark 7:6; Luke 12:56; 13:15), "blind guides"(Matt 23:16), "snakes," and a "brood of vipers"(Matt 23:33; Luke 3:7). They are sons of hell (Matt 23:15) who lead people astray from the Law of God by perverting the meaning of the Law for the sake of their own interest. John's account does not include this sharp indictment of them. But, Jesus' judgment of them as the devil's children cannot be less stringent than other verdicts. Although they are described as Pharisees in John and the Synoptic Gospels, there is no evidence to suggest that they are the same people. In John the people who are condemned as the children of the devil are described as the Jews "who had believed in Jesus" (John 8:31). Here, the perfect participle of πιστεῦειν indicates the fact that they believed in Jesus by seeing signs, but have turned against Jesus because they cannot accept Jesus' teaching (e.g., John 6:60-66). But, in the Synoptic Gospels, Pharisees who oppose Jesus as demon-possessed are not described as ex-believers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gundry says, "In shifting the tradition behind Luke 12:10 to a new context, Matthew does not alter Jesus' addressing the saying to nondisciples; but he does change those nondisciples from future recipients of the Spirit's ministry through the disciples to present recipients of the Spirit's ministry through Jesus." Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, Reprinted (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 238.

This discrepancy causes a problem in interpreting John's account of Jesus' controversy with the Jews from the vantage point of the Synoptics' blasphemy logion. But, if we think that John applies it to the gentile evangelistic context, the problem can be greatly reduced. Matthean Pharisees' denial of Jesus as God's Son can be understood as God's own people's willful rejection of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the Pharisees, as the teachers of the Law, were the people who were supposed to acknowledge Jesus as Christ and worship Him. But, they did not believe in Him as Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt 16:16) and persecuted Him as their ancestors persecuted the prophets from Abel to Zechariah (Matt 23:35). This is an apostasy in terms of Matthew's understanding that Jesus is the Davidic Messiah prophesied in the OT. The Johannine Pharisees' rejection of Jesus as God's Son falls within the same perimeter of apostasy in terms of their intentional denial of Jesus as the Christ. John's description of them as ex-believers points to their having been in-house people before rejecting the covenant of salvation introduced by Jesus.

Third, both in the Synoptics and John, Jesus is the center of the controversy. Although the controversy involves the miracle of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, on the one hand, and Jesus' teaching in John, on the other, its nature is the same in terms of opposing Jesus and the totality of Him. One may think that the Christology embedded in the Synoptics lacks the recognition of Jesus' divinity, so that opposition against Jesus is not over the Christological controversy as it is in John, but the Synoptics' Christology

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew says the Pharisees as the main opponents to Jesus in correspondence with his anti-Pharisaic theology (12:14, 24; 15:12; 23:26). Mark describes scribes as always opposing Jesus and trying to kill Jesus (9:14; 10:33; 14:1) and this is consistent with Mark's use of them as interlocutors of Jesus in Beelzebub controversy. Luke describes the interlocutors to be crowd. Some argue that Luke has a friendly attitude to Pharisees and alters Matthew's account. But Luke was likely to show that the Jews in general regarded Jesus as demon-possessed like magicians and sorcerers in his time. Introducing Jesus' warning against apostasy and sinning against the Holy Spirit, Luke presents Pharisees as hypocrites they should guard against.

also recognizes Jesus as the eschatological Judge (Matt 10:32-33; Mark 14:62), one about whom the Holy Spirit testifies (Matt 10:20; Mark 13:11; Luke 12:12), and one who has the authority to forgive sins, a work which they recognized as the work only God could do (Matt 9:6; Mark 2:9; Luke 7:48). When we see the logion of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit from this perspective, it is possible to regard the opposition of the Pharisees to Jesus' performance of demon-casting as not merely a denial of miracle, but a denial of Jesus' ministry and what it represents about Him.

The verdict against the Pharisees, therefore, is straightforward. In the Synoptic Gospels, they are judged as committing the sin of the unpardonable sin, whereas in John they, as the children of the devil, are described as standing condemned by God along with their father, the devil. In John, the judgment overtone is clear. Lincoln suggests that the whole Gospel of John is written against the backdrop of the trial motif between Jesus and the Jews.<sup>4</sup> The judgment motif is embedded throughout this trial motif, but more clearly appears in the phrases that include the verb κρίνω and the noun κρίσις (5:22, 27, 30; 7:14; 9:39; 12:31, 47, 48; 16:8, 11). Over other places, John 8 is the place in which the judgment motif is condensed in a ferocious disputation between Jesus and the Jews.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter alone, the verb κρίνω occurs 5 times (8:15, 16, 26, 50) and noun κρίσις once (8:16). The lawsuit motif is orchestrated with the verb μαρτυρέω in 8:14 and 8:16, in which John cast the story against the backdrop of the OT Law that requires two witnesses to indict a sinner.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Lincoln, Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> H. Ridderbos, The Gospel of John A Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 324. W. Beilner, Christus und die Pharisäer. Exegetische Untersuchungen über Grund und Verlauf der Auseinandersetzungen (1959), 150.

<sup>6</sup> John 8:17 says "In your own Law (νόμος) it is written that the testimony of two men is valid."

The Jews reject Jesus' testimony that He is "the light of the world"(8:12-13), "from above"(8:23), one who came from God (8:42), one who knows God (8:55), and the "I AM" who was before Abraham was born (8:58). Responding to this testimony, they accuse Jesus of being "a Samaritan" and a "demon-possessed" person who deserves death (8:48, 52). In this context of lawsuit, Jesus makes a counterindictment and mentions death several times. He says "I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins"(8:24). Jesus' saying here is not merely a prediction of their death, because it is truism that they will die some day. The future tense "will die"(ἀποθανεῖσθε) indicates the spiritual death and needs to be interpreted along with 8:51 (if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death) and 5:24 (whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life). When we understand it (ἀποθανεῖσθε) as divine volitional future, it includes a sense that Jesus issues the eschatological divine judgment in the proleptic sense. The verdict for them is death. This is emphasized in the condemnation that they are the children of the devil who already stands condemned. They are, thus, described as belonging to the side of the cosmic enemy of God, to have the verdict leave no room for God's pardon. Jesus says "I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are right, because I am not alone"(8:16). This indicates that God's last day judgment against them is realized in the Jesus' present judgment of them. Thus, this shows that the denial of the Son of Man by the in-house people brings about God's verdict of death, which ensures the final eschatological death. John's narration of the lawsuit, therefore, shows that their sin is an unforgivable sin, reminiscent of the Synoptics' blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

### III. John's Relationship to the Synoptics In Terms of the Blasphemy Logion

The question of the compositional relationship between John and the Synoptics has resulted in a mass of literature. C. H. Dodd argued that John depends upon an independent oral tradition of Jesus' mission rather than on written sources.<sup>7</sup> This view, however, is inadequate to explain the many Synoptics' parables, stories, and discourses that are not dealt with in John, unless the independent oral tradition, John uses, happens to include only the stories and discourses which appear in John. Disagreeing with Dodd, Barrett argues that John might have used a written source of Mark for the composition of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>8</sup> But this view needs to explain why John excludes from his Gospel many stories and discourses found in Mark.

From these two positions, we cannot make a right judgment until all the individual narratives are scrutinized in a careful comparison against the backdrop of a historical, cultural, and theological context. It seems that the independent oral tradition theory and the literary dependence theory are not mutually exclusive. It is also probable that John read Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and when writing his Gospel, he did not directly quote from them, but freely mixed his memories with the oral tradition to suit his theology and teachings. Aside from the historical question, Carson suggests the interlocking nature between John and the Synoptics in terms of their ability to give us a whole picture of an episode of Jesus' mission.<sup>9</sup> To take literary approach helps to enhance our understanding of what might have motivated individual writers in their unique ways of redacting the same tradition. Focusing on the similarity of the ideas and words in

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<sup>7</sup> C. H. Dodd, Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

<sup>8</sup> C. K. Barrett, The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> D. A. Carson, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 49-58.

John's and the Synoptics' account, Lincoln argues that John reworked the Synoptics' parallels of Jesus' trial narrative discourses "to suit his own implotment in terms of the lawsuit motif."<sup>10</sup> The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, then, being a part of the trial narratives in the Synoptics, does not preclude that John reworked the blasphemy logion to spread it in the lawsuit schema that structures John's treatment of the trial of Jesus.

If John used both his memory of the blasphemy logion and the independent oral tradition of the Jews' trial of Jesus, John could recast the controversy to spread throughout the time of Jesus' mission. The logion of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, then, according to John, is not the sin of the Pharisees alone but the sin of the entire Jews who would oppose Jesus as one sent from God. In John, Jesus' controversy with the Jews happens at the time of Jesus' Temple cleansing for the first time. He says that he would raise the temple in three days after its destruction (2:19). Later, His disciples believed that this would indicate his death and resurrection (2:22). But people who did not believe are regarded as standing already condemned because of their unbelief (3:18). Jesus' realized forensic judgment is also embedded in John 5 in which the Jews who oppose Jesus are described as receiving the verdict of God's condemnation (5:18, 24). God entrusted all the judgment to the Son (5:22), because He is the Son of Man (5:27). And His judgment is just, because He seeks not to please Himself but Him who sent Jesus (5:30). This motif of judgment shades John's narration of Jesus' controversy with the Jews, Pharisees, and ex-believing Jews all together, to indicate John's extension of the concept of the unpardonable sin to everybody who stands against Jesus and ensures in them Jesus' forensic verdict of death. The extension of the verdict from the Pharisees to the ex-believing Jews appears clearly in John 8, in which Jesus' interlocutor, the

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<sup>10</sup> Lincoln, Truth on Trial, 308.

Pharisees (8:13) at the beginning of the disputation is changed to Jews in 8:22. In 8:31, the ex-believing Jews turn to be Jesus' enemies and receive the condemnation that they are the children of the devil (8:44). From 8:44, the interlocutor remains to be the Jews who accuse Jesus of being demon-possessed and they try to stone Him to death (8:59). Some may think that the shift in interlocutors in John 8 indicates "different controversies from various stages in the community's history."<sup>11</sup> But from the consistency of the undercurrent theme of lying and murdering in John 8:1-59, the narrative of John 8 needs to be understood as an event that happened in the single setting of the feast of the Tabernacle that starts from John 7. The episode of Jesus' trial in John 8 summarizes the point that whoever stands against Jesus is reckoned as belonging to the father, the devil, who is a liar and a murderer from the beginning. Those who are condemned as such, with the verdict of eschatological death, do not have the hope for restoration with God, inasmuch it is judged by Jesus, the Son of Man, who will sentence life or death according to one's confession about Him (5:24-30).

#### **IV. What Obviated the Synoptics' Logion of Blasphemy in John?**

Up to this point, we have assumed that John knew the Synoptics' logion of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and embeds it to suit the purpose of the Gospel. What, then, are the reasons that may have obviated the literary form of this story from John's Gospel? Several hypotheses are in order. First, some think that the blasphemy logion, being invented in a later period, was read back into the story of Jesus' demon-casting.<sup>12</sup> A prophet in the church, according to this view, would have tried to instruct the Christians

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>12</sup> M. E. Boring posits that the logion was originated by a Christian prophet with high Christology and was read back into the setting of Jesus' earthly ministry. M. E. Boring, "The Unforgivable Sin Logion Mark III 28-29/Matt XII 31-32/Luke XII 10: Formal Analysis and History of the Tradition," *NovTest* 18 (1976), 258-79.

not to falsely accuse the mighty works and hinder the proclamation of Jesus. The blasphemy against the Spirit, then, is a concept which nicely serves to warn against the believers' rejection of the Spirit-directed witness about Jesus. This anachronistic reconstruction does not explain how the logion slipped into the three Gospels while being omitted in John's Gospel. Further, there is no substantial manuscript evidence to this hypothesis, and it is unlikely that the Gospel writers adopted a later tradition of Satan's empowerment of Jesus for miracle performances so as to cause an embarrassment to readers.<sup>13</sup>

Second, as mentioned before, John's omission of the logion may be related to the absence of the account of demon-casting in his Gospel.<sup>14</sup> John does not deal with Jesus' demon-casting, probably because he would have not wanted the believers to understand Jesus' demon-casting against the backdrop that first century sorcerers and magicians were regarded as able to drive demons out.<sup>15</sup> Jesus is not merely a person who depends on the power of the Spirit to perform miracles, but the Son of Man who Himself imparts God's Spirit to His disciples. This introduction of new theology would have not left much room for squeezing the story of the Beelzebul controversy and the blasphemy logion in his Gospel. Furthermore, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John does not posit diseases as caused by demon-possession. The invalid man who has been at the pool near Sheep Gate for 38 years lies there sick, for no one helps him to put his body in the water, rather than for a

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<sup>13</sup> Twelftree believes the authenticity of the logion of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in terms of the "harshness and severity of the saying." "Blasphemy," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Ed., J. B. Green, S. McKnight, I. H. Marshall, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 76. So views J.D.G. Dunn, "Prophetic 'I'-Sayings and the Jesus Tradition: The Importance of Testing Prophetic Utterances within Early Christianity," *NTS* 24 (1978), 175-98.

<sup>14</sup> G. W. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993). R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*. II (New York: Crossroad, 1968-82), 218. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 350.

<sup>15</sup> This feature is sharply contrasted with Mark's inclusion of more than 18 occurrences of demon-casting. Mark tends to include as many miracle stories while limiting Jesus' teachings and discourses.

demonic activity (John 5:1-15). The man born blind is not sick because of his sin, but, for the glorification of God (John 9). In John, Satan and the demons are regarded as more than powers to cause evils, but who stand in antagonism to Jesus' ministry and God's Kingdom. The Pharisees and Jews in John 8, standing against Jesus' teaching that he is sent from God, receive the judgment from Jesus that their father is the devil (8:44). John, thus, presents the earthly conflict between Jesus and the children of the devil as a spiritual battle caused by the cosmic conflict between God and Satan. For John, demonology is tightly intertwined with cosmology.

Third, one may perceive the absence of the logion in John's Gospel in the light of the absence of the concept of the Kingdom of God in this Gospel. The Synoptic Gospels present exorcism as a visible sign of the coming of the promised Kingdom of God. But John does not focus on the Kingdom of God as a central theme which brings other stories into its fabric of theology. In the Synoptic Gospels, the Beelzebub controversy, demon-casting, the coming of God's Kingdom, and the logion of blasphemy are held together in the same literary and theological context, although Luke somewhat deviates from this. But John includes none of these, and the concept of God's Kingdom is dealt with in the context of both Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus and Pilate's interrogation of Jesus. God's Kingdom has not arrived yet in John's account, but one can see it by being born again (3:3). It is not here on earth but in another place, the preparation of which Jesus needs to be lifted up from this world. Being interrogated by Pilate, Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place"(18:36).

John's futuristic presentation of the Kingdom of God escapes our intellects that are affected by the notion of Johannine realized eschatology. The Kingdom of God is not something to arrive through the Spirit's power of driving demons out, but will be realized in the Father's house after Jesus' death and resurrection. Demons are not cast out; on the contrary, the prince of this world is described to come to deliver Jesus to the hands of the chief priests (14:30). The devil wounds the heel of Jesus on the cross and Jesus needs to go back to the Father in heaven in order to prepare many places for the disciples' dwelling in God's house (14:1-4). In John, the establishment of God's Kingdom is done through Jesus' death and resurrection. The coming of the Spirit of Truth would happen only at that time. When He comes, the dwelling in God's Kingdom is embodied in terms of the Spirit's indwelling in the believers (14:17-21, 26). John, thus, presents the new outlook on the coming of God's Kingdom in the nutshell of Johannine pneumatology, as he recast it in relation to Jesus' death and resurrection. We, therefore, think the absence of the logion of blasphemy in John cannot be properly reasoned apart from dealing with John's pneumatology, to which we will now turn.

Fourth, Johannine pneumatology does not afford the logion of blasphemy to be inserted in his Gospel. Matthew presents that demon-casting is done by the Spirit of God and this is the sign of the arrival of God's Kingdom upon them, whereas Luke describes that Jesus casts demons out by the finger of God, as a mark of the arrival of God's Kingdom (11:20). Luke's deviation from Matthew's rendering would not carry a meaning theologically different from what Matthew says, because both the Spirit of God and the finger of God equally point to the presence of God or the power of God. Luke's redaction of Matthew's version may have been caused by his understanding of the function of the

Spirit as prophetic rather than as merely a power to perform miracles and healings.<sup>16</sup> This new way of looking at the Spirit's eschatological work is more fully elaborated in John's Gospel, that the Spirit is the Counselor which Jesus would impart after his death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit, in John, is never described as a power to bring out healing or demon-casting, but as the Spirit of Truth which is sent from the Father and the Son to indwell in believers and teach all things reminding everything Jesus has said (14:26).

Whereas Matthew and Mark note the Spirit of God as the power for miracles, Luke puts an emphasis on Him as testifier about Jesus at the time of trials (12:12). John takes this notion and develops it, so as to say that He is the Counselor to instruct the disciples all things about Jesus and participates in the work of witnessing to people about Jesus at the time of persecution (15:26-16:4). And His witnessing to people is done through indwelling in their minds so that they may persevere through the time of persecution. The Holy Spirit being the Counselor and the Spirit of Truth regarding Jesus, the logion of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit does not appear to fit the story of demon-casting. John's presentation of the work of the Spirit as essential for people's being born again affects John to recast the concept of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in terms of Jesus' death and resurrection as well. Therefore, the concept of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not cast in connection with demon-casting but with one's stance toward

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<sup>16</sup> E. Emmrich, "The Lucan Account on the Beelzebub Controversy," *WTJ* 62 (2000), 276. Emmrich points out that the concept of the prophetic work of the Holy Spirit controls Luke's narration of the Beelzebub controversy. Luke does not portray demon-casting as based on the power of the Spirit, but on the finger of God. He thinks that the reason for Luke's substitution of the finger of God for the Spirit of God is to emphasize the post-Pentecostal dimension of the Spirit's witnessing role about Jesus. If this understanding is valid, John seems to rely on Luke's tradition to not associate the work of the Spirit with Jesus' performances of miracles. Contra Emmrich's view, however, we should remember that Matthew and Mark also note the Spirit's prophetic function as operative at the time of persecution, but they do not link it to the blasphemy logion.

Jesus, the Son of Man who will raise the dead to life with his loud cry (John 5:28; 15:22; 16:8-11).

Fifth, John's realized eschatology interweaves all the preceding elements, and subsume the Synoptics' blasphemy against the Holy Spirit under it. John presents Jesus' *parousia* as partially fulfilled in terms of the Holy Spirit's coming to the disciples and indwelling in them (14:3, 16). The eternal life is not only the eschatological gift from God, but also a present possession that they have. Jesus says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die"(11:25-26a). Likewise, eschatological judgment is not only the event of the future, but a present reality to them. John says "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remain on him"(3:36). Judgment day is coming and the unbelievers will rise to be condemned (5:29). But the present aspect of God's judgment is operative in their life because the prince of this world "now stands condemned"(16:11). In this respect, the sin of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit has two paradoxical facets. It anticipates the eschatological condemnation from God, on the one hand, and, involves the present guilt they have before God, on the other (9:41; 16:8).

The Synoptic Gospels too acknowledge the present aspect of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as a divine verdict. In Matthew's account of the logion, Jesus does not merely predict someone's committing the sin of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, but He passes a judgment against the Pharisees opposing Him. Jesus' saying, "anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come," involves both a present and a future sense (12:32b). He implies that the Pharisees'

sin of opposing Him as God's Son is not pardonable even "in this age." Matthew indicates their present unpardonable state more intensely by concentrating Jesus' seven woes against the Pharisees in chapter 23. Luke brings the woes next to the blasphemy logion in the same chapter (Luke 11:37-54), to show the present effect of their sin more sharply. This implies that the Pharisees' stubborn opposition to Jesus brings upon them the condemnation like the OT intentional sin brought against the sinners. Taking this realized aspect of Jesus' judgment, John elaborates on the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as the sin that incurs God's present condemnation through Jesus' verdict against His opposers.

Up to this point, we have seen the several reasons that could have influenced John not to include the literary form of the Synoptics' logion of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The common elements of the blasphemy logion that appear in John and the Synoptics show that John adopted them back to spread into the entire period of Jesus' mission and elaborate on its concept in accordance with his own theology and purpose. The omission of its literary form in John produces a positive effect of embedding its concept in the narration of various episodes included in it, by which John provides the readers clearer understanding as to what would constitute the unpardonable sin, and thereby as to what sin is equivalent to the Synoptics' blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. John's conceptualization of the unpardonable sin can be seen in the light of the notion of apostasy.<sup>17</sup> The apostasy concept is a rubric by which John may have appropriated the Synoptics' concept of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and extended it to the

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<sup>17</sup> For study about the theme of apostasy in John, Dongsu Kim, *An Exegesis of Apostasy Embedded in John's Narratives of Peter and Judas Against the Synoptic Parallels* (The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

context of the gentile evangelism where a similar opposition to Jesus and the evangelists may have been posed.

### **V. Apostasy as the Johannine Unpardonable Sin: A Hypothesis**

Apostasy is a loose term that affords different conceptualization, and often is confused with backsliding. But I propose that apostasy be understood as the unpardonable sin and thereby the sin equivalent to the Synoptics' blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Conversely, the definition of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can illuminate on the meaning of the term, apostasy.

Concerning the meaning of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, Tertullian, Hilary, and other Fathers believed that sin against the human nature of Jesus is pardonable, whereas the sin against the divine nature is unpardonable.<sup>18</sup> Cyprian thinks that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit means apostasy, or the denial of Christ, and therefore a lapsed person can scarcely be forgiven.<sup>19</sup> Emphasizing the literal aspect, Berkohf and Grudem suggest that it refers to the literal speaking against the Holy Spirit by ascribing what is done by His power to Satan.<sup>20</sup> These interpretation appear to have struggled with the questions involved in the distinction between speaking against the Son of Man and the speaking against the Holy Spirit. This kind of looseness in concept could probably have caused the readers of Matthew and Mark to be confused as they read the story of Judas' betrayal and Peter's threefold denial of Jesus. Would Judas's betrayal of Jesus be put in the category of unpardonable sin? What about Peter who denied Jesus? He

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<sup>18</sup> George Smeaton, The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Reprint (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1988), 217.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 507-509. L. Berkohf, Systematic Theology. Fourth Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 252-53.

seems to have been forgiven after the denial as he repented genuinely with bitter weeping (Matt 26:73).

Both Peter and Judas went through a time of persecution, did things harmful to Jesus, and appear to have made a similar repentance at least on literal level. Luke, therefore, omits Judas' mourning, probably knowing the confusion that Matthean and Markan account could have brought about, but the confusion is not completely resolved. John, however, does not have to pose a confusion regarding this aspect, because he does not use the Synoptics' wording of the blasphemy logion at all. But he illustrates structurally what constitutes the unpardonable sin in the narratives of Jesus' lawsuit by reworking the Synoptics' blasphemy against the Holy Spirit logion. Luke posits the logion in the context of persecution in which the disciples might be tempted to deny Jesus. He warns them that denial of Jesus is committing the unpardonable sin of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. John embeds this motif throughout the trial motif discourses and the narratives of Jesus' controversy with the Jews, and lead to the same effect of warning against the unpardonable sin.

In John, this unpardonable sin is not only applied to the Pharisees, but to the Jews who opposed Jesus, and even to the ex-believing Jews who turned their backs on Jesus because of the persecution brought about by the Jewish Council. The motif of the ex-believers' apostasy is clear in John's account that many of Jesus' disciples left Him and never followed Him again (John 6:66). This is the story equivalent to 1 John 2:19, which describes that many of the members of the Johannine church left it because of the cost of faith in Jesus. The secessionists, who left the church, denied Jesus as having come in the flesh from God (1 John 2:22; 4:2) and received the condemnation of being "antichrists"(1

John 2:18). They are regarded as the children of the devil and connected to Cain in terms of their genealogical heritage (1 John 3:10, 12). In fact, their willful denial of Jesus, according to the elder of 1 John, amounts to committing the sin that leads to death, God's eternal condemnation, and, therefore, the elder does not encourage the disciples to pray for them (1 John 5:16). This reflects the unforgivable nature of the sin of apostasy, and can be understood against the OT backdrop of the prohibition of intercessory prayer (Jer 7:16; 10:14; 16:5). God decided to bring judgment against Judah for its apostasy, and restoration with God became out of the question.

In John's explication, therefore, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, or the speaking against the Holy Spirit, is nothing more than denial of the Son of Man by the followers of Jesus. Judas Iscariot, for example, is the disciple of Jesus who represents the apostates in John's typology. The connectedness of John's account that Jesus knew "from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him," with the verdict of him as "a devil" (6:70, 71) indicates Judas' unbelief from the beginning and thereby his being under the eschatological wrath of God (John 3:36). Judas' plan to betray Jesus is intertwined by Satan's will, and after Judas receives from Jesus the bread dipped in the bowl, Satan enters him (13:2, 27), to indicate that Judas renders himself to be controlled by Satan. Being possessed by the devil, he runs out of the room where the last supper is given and comes back to Jesus with the soldiers holding torches and weapons to arrest Him (18:3). Jesus describes Judas as the son of perdition (17:12), one on whom God's wrath remains until he will rise to be condemned in the end time (5:29).

John's portrayal of Judas as an arch-apostate is orchestrated with his portrayal of the ex-believing Jews as ones on whom divine judgment remains. Jesus' condemnation of

them as the children of the devil who will die in their sins is the counterattack on their accusation of Jesus as demon-possessed or as doing miracles by the power of Beelzebub. Their sin against Jesus is unpardonable, because rejection of Him is nothing short of rejection of God Himself. When Jesus issues the forensic verdict against them, God's eschatological judgment is proleptically realized in them. This realized judgment of apostasy incurs a positive effect on the believers that they should remain in the faith (8:31; 15:1-17) and not commit the unpardonable sin against Jesus, the agent of God's eschatological judgment.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Seeing the different facets in the Gospels' treatment of the logion of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, we find a tendency that later Gospel writers develop earlier version of the blasphemy logion in a manner of clarifying its concept and applying it to the situation of the believers to whom each Gospel writer addresses. John neither ignores it nor discards it from his Gospel, but elaborates on it with a view to suit it to his theology and moral teachings. As John embeds the logion's concept in the retelling of Jesus' trials by the Jews, he emphasizes its Christological import and alerts the disciples to its moral consequences in the community. We may term John's conceptualization and recasting of the concept of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as apostasy.

In fact, apostasy is one of the foremost concerns in John's mind who wrote this Gospel in the milieu of persecution of the church. Jesus expects that the world would hate the disciples because of their belief in Him and warns them against apostasy: "All this I have told you so that you will not go astray" (σκονδαλίζω, 16:1). "A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God" (16:2). At such time

they should remember Jesus' warning and persevere in faith that the indwelling Spirit of Truth will testify about Jesus through them (15:26-27). To deny Jesus is to speak against the testimony of the Spirit of Truth, *i.e.*, to make the Spirit of Truth a liar. This is what the author of Hebrews also warns believers against, saying, "How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?"(10:29). Here the denial of Jesus' redemptive work amounts to insulting the Spirit of grace, because the Spirit's testimony is about Jesus' accomplishment of redemption. Denial of the new covenant Jesus accomplished means speaking against the Holy Spirit, and, for such denial, no sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin is left (Heb 10:26).

In the context of progressive clarification of the earlier tradition of Jesus' mission, John construes the Synoptics' sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as denying Jesus who has come in the flesh. And this sin is not contained in the foil of the Pharisees' antagonism against Jesus, but is now fulfilled again in the evangelistic context of the members of the community. Rather than warning against apostasy with the vague Synoptic concept of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, John shows that it can be embodied from within the community of faith through prism of Judas' experience as vivid illustration of the sin. As Sproston points out, Judas, in the Johannine realized eschatology "symbolizes the final apostasy."<sup>21</sup> He is a devil and anyone who would not believe in Jesus and deny Him would fall in the same eschatological condemnation by God. With this apologetic recasting of the Synoptics' teaching of the blasphemy against

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<sup>21</sup> Wendy E. Sproston, "Satan in the Fourth Gospel," in *Studia Biblica*. Ed., E. A. Livingston, JSNTSup 2 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 310.

the Holy Spirit, John summons the believers to “continued right belief in line with God’s verdict and to appropriate conduct as witnesses called to continue Jesus’ witness in the face of a hostile world.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lincoln, Truth on Trial, 331.

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