

## ***Jesus' Baptism: Its Historicity and Implications***

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*The historicity of Jesus' baptism by John is virtually certain. The historicity of the theophany (the Spirit's descent and divine voice) is probable, but its timing as contemporaneous with the baptism is open to question. As a prophetic call-vision, the theophany quite possibly happened at a later time. Based on an exploration of John's baptism and ministry within the context of Second-Temple Judaism, the significance of Jesus' baptism is explored: it is a significant turning point in Jesus' life; Jesus is identifying with Israel's need to repent, and he is in agreement with John's vision for a reconstituted Israel; since Jesus is a disciple of John, the beginning of his ministry involves baptizing within John's movement. It is also important to understand Jesus' later ministry along a trajectory that begins with Jesus' association with John. This later ministry shows both continuity with and development beyond Jesus' early involvement with John.*

*Key Words: Jesus' baptism, John the Baptist, theophany, Jesus and the spirit, Jesus as Son of God, Jesus as disciple of John, Jesus and Israel, Jesus and eschatology*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Many scholars have made the assertion that Jesus was baptized by John,<sup>1</sup> and indeed some have stated that it is one of the most sure facts we can know about Jesus. It is surprising, however, that few have fully set out and weighed the arguments surrounding the event.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this essay is twofold: First I will set out the historical

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evidence that leads to a conclusion that Jesus' baptism by John is historical. Second, I will explore the implications of this event for understanding the historical figure of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 11; J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 234.

<sup>2</sup> A notable exception is J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991-94) 2.100-105.

## 2. THE HISTORICITY OF JESUS' BAPTISM BY JOHN

Since the focus of this essay is the historicity of Jesus' being baptized and its significance, we cannot simply make the assertion of historicity; we must weigh the historical evidence and render a historical judgment.

The issue before us is made somewhat more complicated by the fact that in the texts reporting the incident there are actually two events being narrated: the baptism of John by Jesus and the theophany of the Spirit's descent and the heavenly voice. The two are usually linked in the narratives. For example, Mark 1:9 narrates Jesus' baptism, and 1:10b-11 provides the theophany narrative. Mark 1:10a links these two as taking place one right after the other: "And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw...." For the purposes of our discussion, I begin with an examination of the baptism itself and then turn later to an examination of the theophany, though at times, of course, the two must be addressed together.

### 2.1. An Examination of the Historicity of the Baptism

The evidence for Jesus' baptism is found in a number of accounts, both canonical and extracanonical. The question immediately arises whether or not these sources are independent of each other, and thus whether the criterion of multiple attestation would apply to this event.<sup>3</sup>

The baptism of Jesus is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels (Mark 1:9-11 Matt 3:13-17 = Luke 3:21-22):

#### *Matthew 3:13-17*

<sup>13</sup> Τότε παραγίνεται ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀπο τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰορδάνην πρὸς τὸν Ἰωάννην τοῦ βαπτισθῆναι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ.  
<sup>14</sup> ὁ δ' Ἰωάννης διεκώλυεν αὐτὸν λέγων, Ἐγὼ χρεῖαν ἔχω ὑπὸ σοῦ βαπτισθῆναι, καὶ σὺ ἔρχῃ πρὸς με;

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#### *Matthew 3:13-17*

<sup>15</sup> ἀποκριθεὶς δ' ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν, Ἔφες ἄρτι,

#### *Mark 1:9-11*

<sup>9a</sup> Καὶ ἐγενετο ἐν ἐκείναις ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ τῆς Γαλιλαίας

#### *Luke 3:21-22*

<sup>21a</sup> Ἐγενετο ἐν τῷ βαπτισθῆναι ἅπαντα τὸν λαόν

#### *Mark 1:9-11*

#### *Luke 3:22-22*

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<sup>3</sup> In this discussion I assume a two-source hypothesis for the Synoptic Gospels. While aware of its problems and alternatives, I find the two-source hypothesis the most plausible, and it continues to find considerable scholarly support. For recent discussion, see C. M. Tuckett, *The Revival of the Griesbach Hypothesis* (SNTSMS 44; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); R. H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

οὕτως γὰρ πρέπον ἐστὶν ἡμῖν  
πληρῶσαι πάσαν  
δικαιοσύνην. τότε ἀφήσιν  
αὐτόν.

<sup>16a</sup> βαπτισθεὶς δ' ὁ Ἰησοῦς  
εὐθύς ἀνάβη ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕδατος·

<sup>16b</sup> καὶ ἰδοὺ ἠνεόχθησαν  
[αὐτῷ] οἱ οὐρανοί, καὶ εἶδεν  
[τὸ] πνεῦμα [τοῦ] θεοῦ  
καταβαῖνον ὡσεὶ περιστερὰν  
[καὶ] ἐρχόμενον ἐκ αὐτόν·

<sup>17</sup> καὶ ἰδοὺ φωνὴ ἐκ τῶν  
οὐρανῶν λέγουσα, Οὗτός  
ἐστὶν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός,  
ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα.

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee  
to John at the Jordan, to be  
baptized by him.

<sup>14</sup> John would have prevented  
him, saying, "I need to be  
baptized by you, and do you  
come to me?"

<sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, "Let  
it be so now; for it is proper for  
us in this way to fulfill all  
righteousness." Then he  
consented.

<sup>16a</sup> And when Jesus had been  
baptized, just as he came up  
from the water,

<sup>16b</sup> suddenly the heavens were  
opened to him and he saw the  
Spirit of God descending like a  
dove and alighting on him.

<sup>17</sup> a voice from heaven said,  
"This is my Son, the Beloved,  
with whom I am well pleased."

<sup>9b-10a</sup> καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη εἰς τὸν  
Ἰορδάνην ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου. καὶ  
εὐθύς ἀναβαίνων ἐκ τοῦ  
ὕδατος

<sup>10b</sup> εἶδεν σχιζομένους τοὺς  
οὐρανοὺς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα εἰς  
ὡς περιστερὰν καταβαῖνον  
εἰς αὐτόν·

<sup>11</sup> καὶ φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν  
οὐρανῶν, Σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ  
ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα.

In those days Jesus came from  
Nazareth of Galilee

<sup>9b-10a</sup> and was baptized by John  
in the Jordan. And just as he  
was coming up out of the water,  
<sup>10b</sup> he saw the heavens torn apart  
and the Spirit descending like a  
dove on him.

<sup>11</sup> And a voice came from  
heaven, "You are my Son, the  
Beloved; with you I am well  
pleased."

<sup>21b</sup> καὶ Ἰησοῦ βαπτισθέντος  
καὶ προσευχομένου

<sup>21c-22a</sup> ἀνεωχθῆναι τὸν οὐρανὸν  
καὶ καταβῆναι τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ  
ἅγιον σωματικῶ εἶδει ὡς  
περιστερὰν ἐπ' αὐτόν.

<sup>22b</sup> καὶ φωνὴν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ  
γενέσθαι, Σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ  
ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα.

<sup>21a</sup> Now when all the people  
were baptized,

<sup>21b</sup> and when Jesus also had been  
baptized and was praying,

<sup>21c-22a</sup> the heaven was opened,  
and the Holy Spirit descended  
upon him in bodily form like a  
dove.

<sup>22b</sup> And a voice came from  
heaven, "You are my Son, the  
Beloved; with you I am well  
pleased."

It is quite evident that Matthew and Luke have used Mark in constructing their accounts of Jesus' baptism. This is particularly clear in the theophany portion of the text. The question arises, however, whether or not Q was also a source for Matthew and Luke. Several

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lines of evidence support a Q source for Jesus' baptism. First of all, at a few points Matthew and Luke agree with each other's texts against Mark. With respect to the baptism narrative, both Matthew and Luke make the following editorial changes to Mark's text: (1) Both drop the reference to John and the Jordan (Matthew does use it earlier in 3:13). (2) Both after Mark's aorist indicative use of the verb βαπτίζω to an aorist participial form (Matthew uses

the nominative, while Luke uses the genitive). (3) Both include the name Ἰησοῦς in the statement about Jesus' being baptized, whereas Mark had the name earlier in v. 9. With respect to the theophany narrative, Matthew and Luke make several changes as well: (4) Both change Mark's use of the verb σκίζω ("to tear") to the verb ἀνοίγω ("to open"), but they use different forms of the verb: Matthew uses the aorist passive indicative form, while Luke uses the aorist passive infinitive. (5) Both change Mark's prepositional phrase εἰς αὐτόν ("on him") to ἐπ' αὐτόν ("onto him"). (6) Both alter Mark's word order τὸ πνεῦμα ὡς περιστέρων καταβαῖνον ("the Spirit like a dove descended") by shifting the verb καταβαῖνον ("to descend") to precede the phrase ὡς(εἰ) περιστέρων ("like a dove"). So, the Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark include omission of the same words, addition of the same words, alteration of grammatical forms, and alteration of word order. We should note, however, that in three of the six agreements observed above (1, 2, and 4) Matthew and Luke alter Mark's text at the same point, but how they alter the text is only similar, not identical. This renders the evidence not quite as compelling as it otherwise might have been.

A second line of evidence is the text of Q itself,<sup>4</sup> which suggests that the presence of a baptism/theophany pericope is needed from a narrative perspective.<sup>5</sup> The immediately prior pericopae in Q are John's preaching of repentance (Q 3:7-9) and his announcement of a coming figure (Q 3:16-17). The immediately succeeding pericope is Jesus' wilderness temptation (Q 4:1-13). In the temptation pericope, the devil twice inaugurates his temptation with the statement, "If you are the Son of God ..." (Q 4:3, 9). Asking if Jesus was the "Son of God" appears somewhat incongruous unless it is a reference back to the voice in the theophany that stated, "You are my Son...." So, from a narrative perspective, it makes better sense that the devil calls into question the theophanic declaration than that there is a repeated

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question without a reference. Another narrative piece of evidence is that, without the baptism of Jesus, the prior pericopae concerning John the Baptist lack a clear link to the ministry of Jesus. Why begin with John (Q 3:7-9; 3:16-17) if there is no link between John and Jesus at this point in the text?

The above evidence does not lead to certainty,<sup>6</sup> but the weight of the evidence leads me to a conclusion of probability: the text of Q most likely contained an account of Jesus' baptism and the theophany. While this conclusion allows one to claim that an account of the baptism of Jesus probably has at least two independent sources, the fragmentary nature of the evidence precludes a reconstruction of the Q text apart from perhaps a few phrases.

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<sup>4</sup> I use the convention of the SBL Q Seminar in citing Q texts by their Lukan reference; e.g., Q 3:16 = Matt 3:11 = Luke 3:16.

<sup>5</sup> The Q source is frequently identified as a "Sayings Gospel," but this is strictly speaking not true, at least in an exclusive sense. Texts that are widely recognized as part of Q are narrative material. Three of the more prominent ones are Q 7:1-10 (healing the centurion's servant); Q 7:18-23 (John's inquiry of Jesus); Q 11:14-23 (the Beelzebul accusation).

<sup>6</sup> Scholars of Q differ on this question. J. S. Kloppenborg (*The Formation of Q* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987] 84-85) does not include the baptismal account in his reconstruction of Q. For bibliographic references supporting and rejecting this position, see J. S. Kloppenborg, *Q Parallels* (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge, 1988) 16.

The Fourth Gospel does not provide an account of the event itself but it does acknowledge that Jesus' baptism occurred by placing it on the lips of John the Baptist, who is a witness testifying to the event:

***John 1:29-34 (Greek)***

<sup>29</sup> Τῇ ἐπαύριον βλέπει τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐρχόμενον πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ λέγει, Ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου.

<sup>30</sup> οὗτός ἐστιν ὑπ' ᾧ ἐγὼ εἶπον, Ὅπισω μου ἔρχεται ἀνὴρ ὃς ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν.

<sup>31</sup> καγὼ οὐκ ᾔδειν αὐτόν, ἀλλ' ἵνα φανερωθῇ τῷ Ἰσραὴλ διὰ τοῦτο ἦλθον ἐγὼ ἐν ὕδατι βαπτίζων.

<sup>32</sup> Καὶ ἐμαρτύρησεν Ἰωάννης λέγων ὅτι Τεθέαμαι τὸ πνεῦμα καταβαῖνον ὡς περιστερὰν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἔμεινεν ἐπ' αὐτόν.

<sup>33</sup> καγὼ οὐκ ᾔδειν αὐτόν, ἀλλ' ὁ πέμψας με βαπτίζων ἐν ὕδατι ἐκεῖνός μοι εἶπεν, Ἐφ' ὃν ἂν ἴδῃς τὸ πνεῦμα καταβαῖνον καὶ μένον ἐπ' αὐτόν, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ βαπτίζων ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ.

<sup>34</sup> καγὼ ἐώρακα, καὶ μεμαρτύρηκα ὅτι οὗτός ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ.

***John 1:29-34 (English)***

<sup>29</sup> The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

<sup>30</sup> This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'

<sup>31</sup> I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

<sup>32</sup> And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.

<sup>33</sup> I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

<sup>34</sup> And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

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What may be observed in the Evangelist's account is that the baptism is assumed to have occurred (v. 31), and John bears witness to the Spirit's descending like a dove. Interestingly, John does not recount the theophanic voice but, rather, recounts his own divine revelation (v. 33). Instead of the divine voice, acknowledging Jesus as "my beloved Son," it is John himself who bears "witness that this is the Son of God" (v. 34b).

It is generally acknowledged that the Fourth Gospel is independent of the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>7</sup> The account of John's witnessing to Jesus based upon his baptism reveals little verbal agreement apart from the phrase τὸ πνεῦμα καταβαῖνον ὡς περιστερὰν ("the Spirit descending like a dove," v. 32). It would be difficult to narrate the event without such a stock phrase. Its use here suggests knowledge of the event rather than use of the Synoptic Gospels as a source. This reference to Jesus' baptism in the Fourth Gospel is, therefore, an independent witness to the event.

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<sup>7</sup> For a helpful survey of the debate, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987) xxxv-xxxvii. While most scholars do conclude that the Fourth Gospel is independent of the Synoptics, two scholars who hold to a minority view on the subject are C. K. Barrett and F. Neirynck.

There are also a few extracanonical references to Jesus' baptism.<sup>8</sup> The *Gospel according to the Hebrews* is quoted by Jerome in his commentary on Isaiah (on Isa 11:2, in *Esaiam* 11:1-3). The fragment containing the reference to Jesus' baptism is cited as *GHeb* §2:<sup>9</sup>

***GHeb* §2 (Latin)**

...sed iuxta euangelium quod Hebraeo ser moire conscriptum Iegunt Nazaraei: *Descendet super euni omnisfons Spiritus Sancti. Dominus autem: spiritus est, et ubi spiritus Domini, ubi libertas....*

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***GHeb* §2 (English)**

...but according to the Gospel which was written in the Hebrew language and read by the Nazoraeans: The whole fountain of the Holy Spirit came upon him. The Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom....

***GHeb* §2 (Latin)**

*Porro in euangelio cuius supra fecimus mentionem, haec scripta reperimus: Factum est autem cum ascendisset Dominus de aqua, descendit fons omnis Spiritus Sancti, et requieuit super eum, et dixit illi: fili mi, in omnibus prophetis expectabam te, ut uenires, et requiescerem in te. Tu enim es requies mea, tu es filius meus primogenitus, qui regnas in sempiternum.*

***GHeb* §2 (English)**

Further in the Gospel which we mentioned above we find that the following is written: It happened then when the Lord ascended from the water, that the whole fountain of the Holy Spirit descended and rested upon him and said to him: My son, I expected you among all the prophets that you should come and that I should rest upon you. For you are my rest, you are my first born son, who shall reign in eternity.

*GHeb* §2 alludes to the event of Jesus' baptism with a clause, but the emphasis is on the theophany. No mention is made of John the Baptist in the extant text. The theophany consists of the descent of the Spirit without mention of a dove. The voice that speaks in the theophany is the Spirit. There are a few phrases that are similar to the Synoptic accounts: (1) *Factum est autem cum ascendisset Dominus de aqua* ("when the Lord ascended from the water"); (2) *descendit fons omnis Spiritus Sancti* ("the whole fountain of the Holy Spirit descended"); (3) *fili mi* ("my son"). While these phrases are similar, they also manifest differences. The first identifies Jesus as "the Lord." The second adds to the identification of the Spirit the descriptors "the whole fountain" and "Holy." The third is simply a direct address rather than a statement of identity, as it is in the Synoptic Gospels. When *GHeb* §2 does make a statement of identity, it is considerably expanded beyond that contained in the Synoptic Gospels: *Tu*

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<sup>8</sup> There are also other extracanonical references to John the Baptist, but they do not refer to Jesus' baptism. These include: Josephus, *Ant.* 18.116-19; *Prot. Jas.* 8:3; 10:2; 12:2-3; 22:3; 23:1-24:4; *PCairo* §2; *GEbion* §§2-3; *GThom* §§46, 47, 78, 104; cf. *GThom* §§11, 27, 51.

Later traditions may also be found in Gnostic literature, Mandaean literature, and the Slavonic Josephus. See the discussion in R. L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-historical Study* (JSNTSup 62; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) 43-45, 77-78 n. 93.

<sup>9</sup> This text and translation are cited from A. E. J. Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition* (VCSup 17; Leiden: Brill, 1992) 98.

*enim es requies mea, tu es filius meus primogenitus, qui regnas in sempiternum* ("For you are my rest, you are my firstborn son, who shall reign in eternity").

While there are similarities between this account in *GHeb* §2 and the canonical Gospels, they may be explained as stock phrases required to tell the same event. When this observation is combined with the considerable differences between *GHeb* §2 and the canonical Gospels, we may conclude that there does not appear to be direct dependence upon the canonical Gospels.<sup>10</sup>

Another extracanonical source for Jesus' baptism is the *Gospel according to the Ebionites*, which is quoted by Epiphanius (*Panarion* 30.1 3.7-9). The section relevant to Jesus' baptism is cited as *GEbion* §4:<sup>11</sup>

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#### ***GEbion* §4 (Greek)**

<sup>1</sup> Καὶ μετὰ τὸ εἰπεῖν πολλὰ ἐπιφέρει ὅτι τοῦ λαοῦ βαπτισθέντος ἦλθεν καὶ Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἰωάννου.

<sup>2</sup> Καὶ ὡς ἀνήλθεν ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕδατος, ἠνοίγησαν οἱ οὐρανοὶ καὶ εἶδεν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἐν εἴδει περιστερᾶς, κατελθούσης καὶ εἰσελθούσης εἰς αὐτόν.

<sup>3</sup> Καὶ φωνὴ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ λέγουσα· σὺ μου εἶ ὁ υἱὸς ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ ἠδόκησα, καὶ πάλιν· ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκα σε.

<sup>4</sup> Καὶ εὐθὺς περιέλαμψε τὸν τόπον φῶς μέγα. Ὁ ἰδὼν, φησὶν, ὁ Ἰωάννης λέγει αὐτῷ· σὺ τίς εἶ, κύριε (om. MS. M);

<sup>5</sup> Καὶ πάλιν φωνὴ ἐξ οὐρανοῦ πρὸς αὐτόν· Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐφ' ᾧ ἠδόκησα.

<sup>6</sup> Καὶ τότε, φησὶν, ὁ Ἰωάννης προσπεσὼν αὐτῷ ἔλεγεν· Δέομαί σου, κύριε σὺ με βάπτισον. Ὁ δ' ἐδώλυσεν αὐτόν λέγων· Ἄφες, ὅτι οὕτως ἐστὶ πρέπον πληρωθῆναι πάντα.

#### ***GEbion* §4 (English)**

<sup>1</sup> after much is said in the Gospel it continues: After the people had been baptized Jesus also came and was baptized by John.

<sup>2</sup> And when he ascended from the water the heavens opened and he saw the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descending and coming to him.

<sup>3</sup> And a voice from heaven said: "You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased;" and next: "This day I have generated you."

<sup>4</sup> And suddenly a great light shone about that place. When John saw it, they say, he said to him: "Who are you Lord?"

<sup>5</sup> And again a voice came from heaven which said to him: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

<sup>6</sup> After this, it says, John fell down before him and said: "I implore you, Lord, you baptize me." But he refused him and said: "Let it be, since it is necessary that everything will be fulfilled."

<sup>10</sup> The independent witness of the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* is maintained by Klijn, *ibid.*, 36-37; E. Hennecke, W. Schneemelcher, and R. McL. Wilson (eds.), *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963-65) 1.159; R. Cameron (ed.), *The Other Gospels: Non-canonical Gospel Texts* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1982) 84.

<sup>11</sup> This text and translation are cited from Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition*, 98. In the translation, I have replaced archaic language with modern equivalents and added quotation marks. I have also added verse numbers to make references easier in the discussion below.

The account of Jesus' baptism in *GEbion* §4 is quite similar to the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels. Much of the wording is similar and appears to be dependent upon the Synoptic Gospels, particularly Matthew and Luke. For example, §4.1 appears quite similar to Luke 3:21, which describes the people being baptized, and then Jesus is baptized. Furthermore, §4.6 is quite similar to Matt 3:14-15 in recounting John's asking to be baptized by Jesus, but his response is to deny the request with the explanation that it is a fulfillment. What is also of note in *GEbion* §4 is the repetition of the theophanic voice, once in the second person addressed to Jesus (§4.3) and the second time in the third person addressed to John (§4.5). This repetition appears to be a conflation of Luke's second-person address by the theophanic voice ("You are...," 3:22) and Matthew's third-person address ("This is...," 3:17).

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These extensive similarities between *GEbion* §4 and the Synoptic Gospels, and distinctive elements in Matthew and Luke incorporated therein indicate that it is probably dependent upon at least these two Gospels. Therefore, the *Gospel according to the Ebionites* cannot be counted as an independent witness to Jesus' baptism.<sup>12</sup>

A third extracanonical reference that is of interest is recorded in the *Gospel according to the Nazareans*.<sup>13</sup> The relevant fragment is quoted by Jerome in *Adversus Pelagianos* 3.2. This section is cited as *GNaz* §2:

#### ***GNaz* §2 (Latin)**

*In Evangelic juxta Hebraeos, quod Chaldaico quidem Syroque sermone sed Habraicis litteris scriptum est, quo utuntur usque hodie Nazareni, secundum Apostolos, sive ut plerique autumant, juxta Matthaeum, quod et in Caesariensi habetur bibliotheca, narrat historia:*

*Ecce, mater Domini et fratres ejus dicebant ei: Joannes Baptizna baptizat in remissionem peccatorum: eamus cum baptizemur ab eo. Dixit autem eis: Quid peccavi, ut vadem et baptizer ab eo? Nisi forte hoc ipsum quod dixi, ignorantia est.*

#### ***GNaz* §2 (English)**

In the Gospel according to the Hebrews which was written in the Chaldaic and Syriac language but with Hebrew letters, and is used up to the present day by the Nazoraeans, I mean that according to the Apostles, or, as many maintain, according to Matthew, which Gospel is also available in the Library of Caesarea, the story runs:

See, the mother of the Lord and his brothers said to him: "John the Baptist baptizes for the remission of sins, let us go to be baptized by him." He said to them, however: "What sin have I committed that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless perhaps something which I said in ignorance."

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<sup>12</sup> The dependence of the *Gospel according to the Ebionites* upon the canonical Gospels is held by Klijn, *ibid.*, 38; Hennecke, Schneemelcher, and Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1.155; Cameron, *Other Gospels*, 103.

<sup>13</sup> An alternative spelling for the name of this Gospel is *Nazoreans*.



In *GNaz* §2 Jesus is invited by his mother and brother to join them in being baptized by John. But Jesus refuses because John's baptism is for the forgiveness of sins, and Jesus claims to have committed no sin. A text that denies the event of Jesus' baptism certainly cannot be used as a witness to the event. But it must be included here for two reasons: (1) it is an opposing witness, and (2) it is a valuable witness to the developing Christian response to Jesus' baptism by John. We should also note that scholars differ over whether or not the *Gospel according to the Nazareans* is dependent upon Matthew's Gospel or not.<sup>14</sup>

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From the above examination of the early texts that refer to Jesus' baptism, we may conclude that the criterion of multiple attestation supports the authenticity of this tradition. Three and probably four independent witnesses may be identified: Q 3:21-22 (probable); Mark 1:9-11; John 1:29-34; *GHeb* §2 (I will count this as four independent witnesses from this point on).<sup>15</sup> A difficulty arises that we should note at this point. While we have several independent witnesses, not all of the witnesses give us an account of the event of Jesus' baptism. While Q is probably an independent witness to the fact that Jesus was baptized, no account can be reconstructed. Similarly, the Johannine account does not describe the event itself but assumes it. The account in *GHeb* §2 alludes to the baptism but focuses on the theophany. Thus, while we have four independent witnesses to the *fact* of Jesus' being baptized, we really have only one extant *description* of the event - namely, Mark 1:9-11.<sup>16</sup>

A second criterion that supports the authenticity of Jesus' baptism by John is the criterion of embarrassment. This criterion holds that material that had the potential to embarrass or cause difficulty for the early church is probably authentic. This is based on the premise that it is unlikely that the early church would have created material that would be embarrassing to its claims concerning Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

Mark's account states without equivocation that Jesus was baptized by John (1:9). Two problems are created by such an account: (1) Why does Jesus place himself in the subordinate position to John implied by submitting to his baptism? (2) Why does Jesus submit to a baptism that is "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4)? Mark's balancing of the baptismal scene (1:9-10a) with the theophany (1:10b-11) is perhaps the only way in which he mitigates the impact of these two problems.

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<sup>14</sup> Hennecke, Schneemelcher, and Wilson (*New Testament Apocrypha*, 1.146) and Cameron (*Other Gospels*, 97) conclude that the *Gospel according to the Nazareans* is a secondary expansion of Matthew, whereas Klijn (*Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition*, 37) concludes that "this Gospel originated in an environment in which traditions used by the Gospel of Matthew were known but that such traditions had a different development."

<sup>15</sup> Crossan's discussion (*Historical Jesus*, 234) adds Ignatius as another independent witness; see Ign. *Smyrn.* 1:1; Ign. *Eph.* 18:2.

<sup>16</sup> A second issue could also be raised at this point: Is literary independence the same as historical independence? Just because these four sources are independent on a literary level, they are not necessarily part of a totally independent historical tradition, for they could still be expressions of the same presynoptic stream of tradition. However, since we are limited to the one extant description of the event, this is an issue that can be set aside at this point.

<sup>17</sup> Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.168-71.

But these two questions are quite clearly issues in the early church, for the developing tradition concerning Jesus and John attempts to deal with the embarrassment caused by them. Luke's account (3:21-22) downplays these two issues by narrating John's arrest

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(3:19-20) prior to the account of Jesus' baptism. Placing the events in this order has the effect of providing narrative distance between John and Jesus. Furthermore, Luke's account refers to the baptism only in passing, using it to help set the scene for the theophany.<sup>18</sup>

Matthew addresses the problem in quite a different manner. His account adds a verbal exchange between John and Jesus. John evidently recognizes Jesus for who he is,<sup>19</sup> and so he expresses his need to be baptized by Jesus. But Jesus declares that he must be baptized by John "to fulfill all righteousness."<sup>20</sup> Thus Matthew both subordinates John to Jesus and at the same time removes the stigma of a baptism for forgiveness by having the act "fulfill all righteousness?"

The Fourth Gospel mitigates these issues in yet another way. It does not narrate the baptism at all. Rather, it only alludes to the baptism in the course of explaining that the purpose of John's baptizing ministry was to identify the Son of God for John the Baptist, in order that he might be revealed to Israel" (1:32). The basis for John's witness to Jesus is the theophany (descent of the Spirit), and the content of John's witness is what in other texts is the content of the theophanic voice: "I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit? And I myself have seen and testified that this is the Son of God'" (1:33-34).

In *GHeb* §2 the baptism is not explicitly stated but only implied: "It happened then when the Lord ascended from the water..." We are not told why he was ascending from the water. The rest of the text expands the theophanic voice which not only emphasizes Jesus' divine sonship but also states that he came in fulfillment of prophecy.

The text of *GEbion* §4 does state that "Jesus ... came and was baptized by John" (§4.1). But the rest of the text (§4.2-6) expands upon the theophany by having the voice speak twice, the first time in the second person (following Mark and Luke) and the second in the third person (following Matthew). Based upon this twofold revelation, John seeks to be baptized by Jesus (also following Matthew).

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<sup>18</sup> The main clause is Ἐγένετο ... ἀνεφθῆναι τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ καταβῆναι τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον.... This intervening ἐν τῷ + infinitive phrase and a genitive absolute set the time reference for the theophany. This could be translated literally as "It happened that, when all the people had been baptized, and Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heaven opened and the Holy Spirit came down...."

<sup>19</sup> How John recognizes Jesus in this manner is not explained and is somewhat problematic. In Matthew's Gospel the voice from heaven is not addressed to Jesus (not "you are my Son...") but to someone else (rather, "This is my Son..."), evidently John and/or the crowds. But the exchange between John and Jesus takes place prior to the declaration of the voice from heaven. So how John has the knowledge to make his request of Jesus is unknown.

<sup>20</sup> Compare the combination of Luke's and Matthew's emphases in *GEbion* §4.

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Subservience is emphasized by *GEbion* §4.6 with the descriptive addition not found in Matthew: "John fell down before him and said, 'I implore you....'"

Finally, *GNaz* §2 addresses the problems caused by the baptismal story in yet a different way. It explicitly denies that Jesus was baptized, because he had no need for the forgiveness of sins: "See, the mother of the Lord and his brothers said to him: 'John the Baptist baptizes for the remission of sins, let us go to be baptized by him.' He said to them, however: 'What sin have I committed that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless perhaps something which I said in ignorance.'"

It is quite evident from Mark 1:9-11 through *GNaz* §2 that there is a developing trajectory in which the baptism by John is downplayed (and then ultimately denied), and the theophany is emphasized. This trajectory reveals the early church's increasing discomfort with Jesus' baptism by John. It is quite unlikely that Jesus' baptism by John was a creation of the early church. Applying the criterion of embarrassment, therefore, Jesus' baptism by John is historically probable.

The two criteria of multiple attestation and embarrassment support the conclusion with a high level of probability that Jesus was baptized by John. This conclusion is widely supported among scholarly circles.<sup>21</sup> But a minority position has been expressed that, while John and Jesus both existed, their paths never crossed - a position most clearly argued by Morton Enslin<sup>22</sup> He argues that John never baptized Jesus and provides three reasons for this view: (1) The Gospel accounts increasingly reduce "John from an independent prophet ... into a conscious forerunner of Jesus...."<sup>23</sup> (2) Josephus' description of John the Baptist is different from the Gospels in the reason provided for John's execution, and it lacks any reference to John's announcement of a coming figure (which is the emphasis in the Gospels).<sup>24</sup> (3) John's disciples continued as a viable movement after John had supposedly dramatically identified Jesus as the coming figure.<sup>25</sup>

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These three reasons, however, are not adequate to support the claim that Enslin is making. With respect to his first reason, it is evident that the Gospels' interpretation of John as Jesus' forerunner is from a Christian perspective. But, as noted above, the Gospels'

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<sup>21</sup> To cite a few particularly influential perspectives: Sanders (*Jesus and Judaism*, 11) lists Jesus' baptism by John as one of the "almost indisputable facts" about the life of Jesus. Crossan (*Historical Jesus*, 234) concludes that "Jesus' baptism by John is one of the surest things we know about them both." The Jesus Seminar (R. W. Funk [ed.], *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998] 54) considered the description in Mark 1:9 of Jesus' baptism by John to be worthy of a red vote (77% red; 18% pink; 5% grey; 0% black; average .91). Cf. W. B. Tatum, *John the Baptist and Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar* (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge, 1994) 148.

<sup>22</sup> Morton S. Enslin, "John and Jesus," *ZNW* 66 (1975) 1-8. Cf. also Ernst Haenchen, *Der Weg Jesu: Eine Erklärung des Markus-Evangeliums und der kanonischen Parallelen* (2d ed.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968) 58-63.

<sup>23</sup> Enslin, "John and Jesus," 2-4, quote from p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

presentation of Jesus' baptism by John is also characterized by discomfort that it happened at all. In this instance then, the various Christian attempts to interpret John as Jesus' forerunner is evidence of a historical relationship needing to be interpreted rather than evidence of a Christian creation. In this light, Enslin's observation supports the historicity of the baptism rather than the reverse.

Enslin's second reason (Josephus' account) has two problems. It is true that Josephus' reason for John's execution by Herod Antipas is different from the Gospels, but his reason does not contradict the Gospels; rather, it complements them. The Gospels view John's arrest and execution from a religious perspective, while Josephus' explanation is sociopolitical. With the inextricable link in Second-Temple Judaism between the religious and the sociopolitical dimensions of life, the explanations by the Gospels and Josephus are but two sides of a coin.<sup>26</sup> The second problem with Enslin's reason is an argument from Josephus' silence about John's proclamation of a coming figure. Not only is an argument from silence questionable, in this instance it fails to appreciate Josephus' own editorial biases, particularly his anti-eschatological and anti-messianic orientation.<sup>27</sup> Since it serves Josephus' purposes to portray John the Baptist positively, he can hardly attribute to John an orientation that he strenuously opposed.

Enslin's third argument raises an interesting point but is only valid if its premise is true - that John dramatically identified Jesus as the coming figure. This premise is questionable, however, on at least two counts. John's question from prison (Matt 11:2-6 Luke 7:18-23), which probably has a historical core,<sup>28</sup> portrays John as a disillusioned skeptic, or at best, a hesitant inquirer - hardly one who dramatically

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announces Jesus' true identity! Second, the identification of Jesus as John's announced figure is more likely due to early Christian theological reflection (e.g., Matt 3:14-15; John 1:29-34).

Enslin's reasons for arguing that John did not baptize Jesus do not hold up under critical reflection. The preliminary conclusion reached above must therefore stand. As a historical event, Jesus' baptism by John is highly probable, to the point of being virtually certain.

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<sup>26</sup> For further development, see Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 373-77; J. E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second-Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 213-59.

<sup>27</sup> This orientation may be seen, for example, in Josephus' extremely negative portrayal of the various prophetic movements in the Second-Temple period, whose eschatological features he scorned (e.g., J.W. 2.259; *Ant.* 20.168). Cf. R. A. Horsley, "Popular Messianic Movements around the Time of Jesus," *CBQ* 46 (1984) 471-95; R. A. Horsley and J. A. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) 88-134, 160-89; Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 310-12, 333-48.

<sup>28</sup> So W. G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfillment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus* (trans. D. M. Barton; London: SCM, 1958) 110-11; M. Dibelius, *Die urchristliche Überlieferung von Johannes dem Täufer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1911) 33-39; J. D. C. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1975) 55-60; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (AB 28; 2 vols.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981-85) 1.662-64; against M. Goguel, *Au Seuil de L'Evangile: Jean Baptiste* (Paris; Bayot, 1928) 60-63; C. H. Kraeling, *John the Baptist* (New York: Scribner's, 1953) 130-31; Walter Wink, "Jesus' Reply to John: Matt 11:2-6 // Luke 7:18-23," *Forum* 5 (1989) 121-28. Cf. the discussion in my *John the Baptizer*, 278-82.

We must turn now to the second of the two elements contained in these texts reporting Jesus' baptism by John: namely, the theophany narrative.

## **2.2. An Examination of the Historicity of the Theophany**

The theophany narrative has two components: the descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove and the voice from heaven announcing Jesus, "my Son, the Beloved."

The discussion above concerning multiple attestation of the baptismal accounts would also apply to the theophany accounts. The existence of four independent witnesses would support the historicity of the theophany.<sup>29</sup>

However, a number of problems arise concerning the historicity of the theophany. First, of all, to portray Jesus as endowed with the Spirit and identified as God's Son fits very well with early Christian theological reflection concerning Jesus.<sup>30</sup> Applying the criterion of dissimilarity calls the historicity of the theophany into question.

Second, it also serves the early Christians well from an apologetic perspective to address the problems of Jesus' baptism by John. We saw above that the developing tradition increasingly emphasized the theophany and downplayed the baptism. Even in Mark, where the two items are given more equal weight, the very presence of the theophany immediately succeeding the baptismal account helps to miti-

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gate the difficulties with the baptism. Crossan calls this "theological damage control"<sup>31</sup>

Third, the manner in which the theophany is narrated appears to be a midrash of a number of Hebrew Bible texts, gathered here to provide an initial interpretation of the person of Jesus. For example, the theophanic voice is a combination of Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1. These texts interpret Jesus as God's son, who is the expected Davidic Messiah and the Spirit-anointed servant of Yahweh.<sup>32</sup>

These three points show that the theophany is subject to weighty problems when examined from a historical perspective. However, other observations may be made that mitigate these problems somewhat. The first mitigating factor is that the two components of the theophany encapsulate two key elements of the historical Jesus tradition from later in his

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<sup>29</sup> It is interesting that Crossan (*Historical Jesus*), for whom multiple attestation is a paramount criterion, rejects the theophany out of hand as "theological damage control" (p. 232) and yet maintains that "Jesus' baptism by John is one of the surest things we know about them both" (p. 234).

<sup>30</sup> In Mark, our earliest usable account (Q being earlier but not sufficiently reconstructable to use separately from Mark), the theophany also functions as the first half of an *inclusio* that frames the Gospel of Mark at a narrative level. The second half of the *inclusio* is the account of Jesus' crucifixion. For discussion, see D. Ulansey, "The Heavenly Veil Torn: Mark's Cosmic *Inclusio*," *JBL* 110 (1991)123-25. Cf. S. Motyer, "The Reading of the Veil: A Markan Pentecost," *NTS* 33 (1987) 155-57.

<sup>31</sup> Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 232.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. the full elucidation of this midrash by Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2.106-7.

ministry. First, Jesus attributed his power in ministry to a special endowment of the Spirit, and the presence of the Spirit was evidence that the kingdom was present (e.g., Matt 12:27-28 = Luke 11:19-20; Matt 12:31-32 = Mark 3:28-29 = Luke 12:10; cf. Luke 4:16-21). Second, Jesus speaks of a special relationship with God as his father (e.g., Matt 26:39 = Mark 14:36 = Luke 22:42; Matt 11:25-26 = Luke 10:21; cf. Matt 11:25-27 = Luke 10:21-22). These two components are central to the vocation Jesus articulates and lives,<sup>33</sup> and they can be placed within the thought world of first-century Judaism without a specifically Christian slant to them. Applying the criterion of coherence<sup>34</sup> to this matter suggests that the content of the theophany could derive from an experience that Jesus had.<sup>35</sup> The matter could be expressed more strongly: the presence of the Spirit and a filial relationship with God are experiential in nature rather than conceptual. If Jesus experienced them, then we may ask, "What inaugurated this experience?" A conceptual answer is inadequate; the question requires an experiential answer. In other words, at some point in his early ministry, Jesus had an inaugural experience that formed the basis for the vocation he subsequently articulated and lived.<sup>36</sup>

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Another mitigating perspective may be noted from the prophetic nature of Jesus' ministry. If Jesus was perceived by himself and others as a prophet, then it is reasonable to

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<sup>33</sup> The historicity of these two components is widely recognized by scholars, though opinions will differ on specific texts. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 11-67; N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 2: *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 648-53. Cf. G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

<sup>34</sup> For a description of this criterion, see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.176-77.

<sup>35</sup> James Dunn (*Jesus and the Spirit*, 63; cf. 62-65) states: "it is certain that Jesus believed himself to be empowered by the Spirit and thought of himself as God's son. These convictions must have crystallized at some point in his life. Why should the traditions unanimously fasten on this episode in Jesus' life if they had no reason for making the link and many reasons against it."

<sup>36</sup> John Meier (*Marginal Jew*, 2.108) counters: "To be sure, the narrative encapsulates nicely two main themes of Jesus' preaching and praxis. But what else would we expect from a Christian narrative that sought to supply an initial definition of who Jesus is?" His objection does not, however, address the coherence these two themes have with the ministry of Jesus. In fact, Meier (p.108) affirms that, prior to beginning his ministry, "Jesus no doubt developed intellectually and experienced existentially these key insights into his relationship with God as his Father and the powerful activity of the spirit manifest in his own life. Indeed, it is possible that the crystallization of these key themes may have had something to do with Jesus' own parting company with John. But to be any more specific about exactly when and how this happened (e.g., at the moment of his baptism) risks going beyond reasonable inference from the data and falling into the psychologizing of Jesus practiced by the old 'liberal lives.'" I beg to differ: affirming the historicity of an experience that has been stated in the text is not "psychologizing" at all. Psychological speculation on *why* he had the experience (e.g., the death of his father at a young age created a need for a "father figure") would be psychologizing, and this should be rejected. Meier, however, throws the baby out with the bath water on this point.

Joel Marcus ("Jesus' Baptismal Vision," *NTS* 41 [1995] 512-21) in a very interesting paper also calls into question the specific content of the theophany (the descent of the Spirit and the designation of Jesus as God's son). But he goes on to observe that Jesus "possessed a strong sense of prophetic authority.... Such a sense of prophetic authority does not come out of nowhere; it almost demands a radical experience of divine encounter to explain its existence" (p.513). He suggests that Jesus did, in fact, experience a prophetic call-vision but proposes that its content was instead another visionary experience that Jesus narrates: "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning" (Luke 10:18). This is certainly a promising suggestion and worthy of consideration. I would, however, propose that it could just as easily be incorporated as an additional part of Jesus' prophetic call-vision along with the Spirit's descent and the designation as God's son, rather than replacing them.

assume that at some point he experienced a prophetic call-vision. If so, then this theophany could be understood to function as a prophetic call-vision for Jesus.<sup>37</sup>

A third mitigating factor is the presence in the theophany narrative of the description "like a dove" (Matt 3:16 = Mark 1:10 = Luke 3:22; cf. John 1:32). Much ink has been spilled discussing the possible origins and significance of this imagery,<sup>38</sup> but none has been entirely

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satisfactory. This lack of a convincing or obvious background suggests its authenticity according to the criterion of dissimilarity.<sup>39</sup>

One final point needs to be brought into the equation. The sources narrate the baptism and the theophany together, with the latter happening at the occasion of the former. The implication is that Jesus' sense of call to his ministry begins with the theophany experienced at his baptism. The narrative sequence of the Synoptic Gospels would support such a development: Jesus is baptized, receives his prophetic call-vision, and then immediately launches into his public ministry. However, the evidence of the Fourth Gospel presents a different picture: after his baptism, Jesus is part of John's movement and engages in a baptizing ministry in association with John and his ministry. By implication, at some later point in time Jesus does launch out and begin his public ministry as we know it. If so, it is quite possible that a prophetic call-vision may have led to this switch in the direction of his activities, but this would have taken place at some time subsequent to his baptism.<sup>40</sup> In other words, after his baptism, Jesus participates with John in his baptizing ministry, and then later, after a prophetic call-vision, Jesus launches out into his public ministry as narrated in the Synoptic Gospels. It is quite possible, then, that two temporally separate events were later linked together. This linking could have been done by Jesus in his narration of the events to his disciples (for Jesus' telling them would be the only way they would find out about them), or it is the early Christian witness that has linked the theophany with the baptism, using the former to interpret the latter.

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. M. J. Borg, *Jesus - A New Vision: Spirit, Culture and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987) 40-42; Wright, *Victory of God*, 536-37; B. Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 148-49.

<sup>38</sup> A few of the many discussions concerning this issue include L. E. Keck, "The Spirit and the Dove," *NTS* 17 (1970) 41-67; S. Gero, "The Spirit as a Dove at the Baptism of Jesus," *NovT* 18 (1976) 17-35; P. Garnet, "The Baptism of Jesus and the Son of Man Idea," *JSNT* 9 (1980) 49-65; D.C. Allison, Jr., "The Baptism of Jesus and a New Dead Sea Scroll," *BARev* (Mar-Apr 1992) 58-60; R. S. Poon, "The Background to the Dove Imagery in the Story of Jesus' Baptism," *Jian Dao* 3 (1995) 33-49; R. A. Campbell, "Jesus and His Baptism," *TynBul* 47 (1996) 204-9; L. E. Vaage, "Bird-Watching at the Baptism of Jesus: Early Christian Mythmaking in Mark 1:9-11," in *Reimagining Christian Origins: A colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack* (ed. E. A. Castelli and H. Taussig; Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1996) 280-94. See also the survey of alternatives presented by W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 1.331-34.

<sup>39</sup> For discussion of this criterion, see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.171-74. I am indebted to Craig A. Evans for this suggestion. See his discussion of this criterion in "Authenticity Criteria in Life of Jesus Research," *Christian Scholar's Review* 19 (1989) 15-16, 25-27.

<sup>40</sup> For further discussion of the implications of the account in the Fourth Gospel, see below. For an exploration of the temporal separation of the baptism from the prophetic call-vision, see my earlier discussion, "John the Baptist and His Relationship to Jesus," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (ed. B. Chilton and C. A. Evans; NTFS 19; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 225-26.

The weighing of this evidence is not easy. My own judgment is that it is *probable* that Jesus did at some time experience a prophetic call-vision, and it is *somewhat probable* that it incorporated the elements of divine sonship and spirit anointing. It is *possible* that such a call-vision may have taken place at Jesus' baptism, but there are also problems with their association. It is equally possible that it occurred at some point in time subsequent to the baptism. The focus of this essay is on Jesus' baptism by John and so, given the prominence of reinterpreting the theophany narrative with Christian theological and apologetic concerns, it is best methodologically to proceed first with examining the significance of Jesus' baptism by John apart from the possible implications of the theophany. And this is how I will proceed

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below. However, I will conclude with a couple of observations concerning the implications of the theophany for understanding the baptism of Jesus.

### **2.3. Summary**

This investigation of the historicity of the baptism narrative and the associated theophany narrative has led to the following conclusion. First of all, the baptism of Jesus by John is historically very probable or even virtually certain. This conclusion is in agreement with a number of scholars whose judgment is that this is one of the most certain things we can know about Jesus.

On the other hand, the theophany narrative is somewhat problematic. It is probable that Jesus experienced some type of prophetic call-vision early in his ministry. But there are difficulties with associating such an event with Jesus' baptism, rendering such a link only a possibility. It is, therefore, methodologically preferable to focus our attention on the significance of Jesus' baptism apart from the possible association with the prophetic call-vision of the theophany narrative. This possible link will be considered briefly later.

Having established the historical probability of Jesus' baptism by John, we must now turn to an examination of the character of John's baptism as well as other elements concerning John.

## **3. JOHN AND HIS BAPTISM IN THE CONTEXT OF SECOND-TEMPLE JUDAISM**

Before considering the relationship between John and Jesus, we must consider briefly certain key elements that contribute to our understanding of John.<sup>41</sup> These include John's baptism, his prophetic proclamation, his prophetic role, and other features of his life and death. Since I have discussed elsewhere matters of authenticity and the historicity of many of the texts that

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<sup>41</sup> This section is a slight revision of part of my earlier essay, *ibid.*, 187-210. It is used with the permission of the editors.



concern John the Baptist, I will not repeat such discussion here but refer the reader to that earlier work.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.1. John's Baptism

To understand John, it is most helpful to begin with the event that is probably most distinctive about him - his baptism. The ritual use of water in ablutions is a widespread religious phenomenon, and it was certainly practiced within first-century Judaism and Christianity. That John performed a water rite identified as a "baptism" is one of

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the most sure pieces of historical information we possess concerning John.<sup>43</sup> Specific features of John's baptism may be understood within the context of Second-Temple Judaism (this is elaborated below), and yet the form and functions of his baptism have features that were distinctive within his context. John was in continuity with his tradition and yet innovative at the same time. The fact that John was given the appellation or nickname "the baptizer" or "the Baptist"<sup>44</sup> suggests that those who give him this nickname recognized that baptism was important to John and that it was also distinctive. For this reason, it is interesting to observe that baptism was not simply something that John performed - it was also something that he preached.<sup>45</sup> He not only called people to repentance and baptism, he also had to explain the significance of his baptism.

Though other forms of ablution were practiced in Second-Temple Judaism (e.g., handwashing, footwashing, sprinkling), John's baptism involved bathing, that is, an immersion.<sup>46</sup> This is not surprising, since bathing was a common form of Jewish ablution.<sup>47</sup> Most descriptions of John's baptism associate it with the Jordan River (e.g., Mark 1:5, 9-10). The use of flowing water (or "living" water) was required in the Hebrew Bible for the most severe forms of uncleanness,<sup>48</sup> and in Second-Temple Judaism flowing water or rivers were

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<sup>42</sup> *Idem*, *John the Baptizer*.

<sup>43</sup> It is independently attested in several sources: Matt 3:11 = Luke 3:16; Mark 1:4; John 1:25; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.117.

<sup>44</sup> John is so identified in several independent sources: e.g., Matt 11:18 = Luke 7:33; Mark 1:4; *GThom* §46; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.117.

<sup>45</sup> Mark 1:4 = Luke 3:6; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.117.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. the expression ἐν τῷ ... ποταμῷ in Mark 1:5 and ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος in Mark 1:10, which suggests that bathing was the form that John's baptism took. Furthermore, the verb βαπτίζω and the nouns βάπτισμα and βαπτισμός, used of John's baptism, are not the usual terms for a Jewish ritual bath (exceptions are Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38; Heb 9:10). The verb signifies "to dip;" "to immerse," "to plunge into;" or "to submerge." BAGD, 131; LSJ, 305-6; A. Oepke, "βάπτω, κτλ.," *TDNT* 1.529-38. G. R. Beasley-Murray ("Baptism, Wash," *NIDNTT* 1.143) points out that the verb λούω is the most common verb used for complete washing or bathing, while νίπτω is used for partial washing, such as handwashing.

<sup>47</sup> E.g., Leviticus 14-15; 16:4, 24; Sir 34:25 (31:25); Tob (BA) 2:5; Tob (S) 2:9; *T Levi* 2:3B1-2; 9:11; *Jub.* 21:16a; *As. Mos.* 9.4:13; *Sib. Or.* 4:165; *Apoc. Mos.* 29:11-13; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.198, 203, 282; *Life* 11-12; *J.W.* 2.129-32, 149-50; *Ant.* 3.263; 18.36-38; Philo, *Spec.* 1.119, 269; *Deus* 7-8; CD 10:10-13; 11:1, 21:22; 1QS 3:4-9; 11QTemple 45:7-10.

<sup>48</sup> Lev 14:5-6, 50-52; 15:13; Num 19:17; Deut 21:4; cf. *in. Miqw.* 1:6-8.

associated with repentance and forgiveness.<sup>49</sup> In light of this context, John's use of flowing water for his baptism is quite understandable. The particular river associated with John's baptism is the Jordan River. While this may have no significance, it does place John in the wilderness

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context.<sup>50</sup> Both the wilderness and the Jordan River were important symbols of the Exodus and Conquest in the ideology of prophetic movements of the Second-Temple period.<sup>51</sup> Since other features of John's ministry show links with such ideology, John's use of the Jordan River probably does have symbolic significance.<sup>52</sup>

An interesting feature of the form of John's baptism is that it is described as being performed "by John" (ὁπ' αὐτοῦ, Mark 1:5; cf. v. 9), and John himself states, "I baptize..." (Matt 3:11 = Luke 3:16; Mark 1:8). All evidence in Second-Temple Judaism points to Jewish ritual bathing practices' being self-administered. John's participation in the act of baptizing, therefore, is probably John's innovation and may have contributed to his nickname, "the baptizer."

How was John's baptism understood to function? The evidence indicates that the answer to this question involves several interrelated functions. First, John's baptism was an expression of conversionary repentance - a reorientation of one's life in returning to a relationship with God.<sup>53</sup> This is borne out by the NT phrase βάπτισμα μετανοίας ("a baptism of repentance") used to describe John's baptism (Mark 1:4 = Luke 3:3), and the important role that repentance evidently had in his preaching (Matt 3:8 = Luke 3:8 Matt 3:2; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.117).<sup>54</sup> John preached imminent judgment coming upon all and called people to repentance and baptism. Neither was optional - repentance and its expression in baptism went hand in hand. It was a "repentance baptism."<sup>55</sup> The practice of "confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5 = Matt 3:6)

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<sup>49</sup> *T. Levi* 2:3B2; *Sib. Or.* 4:165-67; *Apoc. Mos.* 29:11-13. Cf. the discussion of these texts in my *John the Baptizer*, 116-22.

<sup>50</sup> For an examination of the relationship between the Jordan River and the wilderness, see R. W Funk, "The Wilderness," *JBL* 78 (1959) 205-14.

<sup>51</sup> E.g. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.259, 261-62; *Ant.* 20.97, 168. Cf. R. A. Horsley, "'Like One of the Prophets of Old': Two Types of Popular Prophets at the Time of Jesus," *CBQ* 47 (1985) 457-58; J. Ernst, *Johannes a' er Täufer Interpretation - Geschichte - Wirkungsgeschichte* (BZNW 53; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989) 278-84; Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 335-39.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. my *John the Baptizer*, 181-83, 360-66.

<sup>53</sup> The term "conversionary" repentance expresses John's continuity with the Hebrew Bible's prophetic call to return (שוב) to Yahweh, as exemplified in Isa 30:15; Ezek 18:30-32. J. Behm and B. Würthwein ("νοέω, κτλ.," *TDNT* 4.980-99) distinguish between this prophetic emphasis and repentance associated with ritual expressions of penitence, such as fasting or sackcloth and ashes. Cf. F. Laubach and J. Goetzmann, "Conversion," *NIDNTT* 1.353-59; W. L. Holladay, *The Root Subh in the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1958) 116-57.

<sup>54</sup> Ernst (*Johannes der Täufer*, 68) argues on the basis of the phrase εἰς μετάνοιαν in Matt 3:11 that conversionary repentance is God's act when a person is baptized, but this is unconvincing. The phrase is better understood to be Matthew's redaction, linking repentance to baptism at this point in the text because it had been removed earlier (cf. the use of Mark 1:4 in Matt 3:2). Cf. Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 334.

<sup>55</sup> R. A. Guelich, *Mark* (WBC 34A; Dallas: Word, 1989) 1.18-19. The conceptual possibility of linking conversionary repentance with an immersion rite may have been provided by Isa 1:16-17 as well as the example

while being baptized is probably an expression of this close link between the baptism and repentance. The ethical content of John's

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preaching contributes not only to the message of judgment (e.g., Matt 3:7-10 = Luke 3:7-9) but also to the call to an ethically reoriented life following baptism. Josephus describes John as "one who exhorted the Jews to practice virtue and act with justice toward one another and with piety toward God, and so to gather together by baptism" (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.117; cf. Luke 3:10-14).

Second, for John and those being baptized, baptism was understood to mediate divine forgiveness.<sup>56</sup> In Mark 1:4 = Luke 3:3, John's repentance-baptism is linked with "the forgiveness of sins." In Jewish thought forgiveness of sins was usually associated with repentance (e.g., Isa 55:7) but not with an ablution. According to John, however, it was not just repentance that was required, for baptism and repentance were inextricably linked. It was repentance-baptism that was essential.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, the baptism did more than simply symbolize a forgiveness already received on the basis of the repentance alone. Since the baptism was neither optional nor secondary to the forgiveness of sins, the baptism should be understood to mediate the forgiveness in some way.<sup>58</sup>

An interesting implication of this function of baptism is that, since people were baptized "by John" rather than performing it for themselves, John could be considered a mediator of the forgiveness.<sup>59</sup> The mediatorial role of "the baptizer" in performing baptism to mediate forgiveness is parallel to the mediatorial role of a priest in performing a sacrifice to mediate forgiveness in the sacrificial system

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(e.g., Lev 5:5-40). This parallel is striking in light of the NT tradition that John came from a rural priestly family (Luke 1:5, 23).<sup>60</sup>

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of Naaman in 2 Kgs 5:10, 14-17. The idea is clearly expressed in Second-Temple Jewish literature; e.g., 1QS 3:6-9; *T. Levi* 2:3B; *Sib. Or.* 4:162-70.

<sup>56</sup> This function is described as understood from the perspective of John and his followers. Others may have perceived John's baptism in quite different terms. For example, the Temple hierarchy probably viewed John's baptism as "cheap grace."

<sup>57</sup> A relationship between repentance, an immersion, and forgiveness is also expressed in *T. Levi* 2:3B; *Sib. Or.* 4:162-70; 1QS 3:6-9. Cf. the discussion in my *John the Baptizer*, 207-13.

<sup>58</sup> This interpretation is corroborated by understanding the preposition εἰς in the phrase εἰς ἁμαρτιῶν to be expressing the purpose or goal of the repentance-baptism - that is, "with a view to forgiveness of sins." At this point the NT evidence is in tension with Josephus' statement that John's baptism was "not for seeking pardon of certain sins but for purification of the body, because the soul had already been cleansed before by righteousness" (*Ant.* 18.117). For discussion, see my *John the Baptizer*, 165-68, 190-92.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. L. Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. J. E. Alsup; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 1.36; Becker, *Johannes der Täufer und Jesus von Nazareth* (Biblische Studien 63; Zurich: Neukirchener, 1972) 38-40. This suggests that prophetic symbolism may have played a part in John's role in performing the baptism; cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 43; C. H. H. Scobie, *John the Baptist* (London: SCM, 1964) 113; Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 332-34.

<sup>60</sup> See the discussion below.

These first two functions are closely related: John's baptism was an immersion performed by John through which a person expressed conversionary repentance and received divine forgiveness.

A third function of John's baptism was that it purified from uncleanness. Josephus states that "baptism certainly would appear acceptable to him [i.e., God] if used... for purification of the body..." (*Ant.* 18.117). While elements of Josephus' explanation of John's baptism are historically problematic, especially the statement that distinguishes the body and the soul,<sup>61</sup> nevertheless, it is quite probable that John's baptism was understood to purify. In the Hebrew Bible and later Jewish thought, the use of immersions was predominantly concerned with cleansing from uncleanness,<sup>62</sup> so that if John's baptism had nothing to do with cleansing it would be quite unusual - and no evidence supports such a claim.<sup>63</sup> In the Hebrew Bible it would appear that actual immersions were only used when the contagion (i.e., that which caused the uncleanness) was something physical. But in the Second-Temple period, the use of immersions expanded to include cleansing from uncleanness caused by moral contagion as well. For example, *Sib. Or.* 4:165-67 contains an exhortation to "wash your whole bodies in perennial rivers. Stretch out your hands to heaven and ask forgiveness for your previous deeds..."<sup>64</sup> John's use of bap-

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tism to cleanse from moral contagion is consistent with this expanded use of immersions in the Second-Temple period. It also coheres with John's concern with repentance and forgiveness in conjunction with his baptism.

The state of uncleanness from which John's baptism cleansed would have been considered serious because it was concerned with moral contagion. This may explain why John's baptismal ministry is associated with the Jordan River, for, as we observed above,

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. the discussion in my *John the Baptizer*, 165-68, 194-95.

<sup>62</sup> In the Hebrew Bible the use of ablutions functioned as part of a large structure involving cleanness and uncleanness. This structure is not concerned with physical cleanliness but with the status resulting from contact with a source of impurity (e.g., a contagion such as a corpse [Numbers 19] or discharges [Leviticus 15]) and the necessary cleansing to restore to a state of cleanness. Two different forms of contagion may make a person unclean: (1) physical contagion, such as leprosy (Leviticus 14) or discharges (Leviticus 15), and (2) moral contagion, such as sexual immorality (Leviticus 18). These are not two forms of uncleanness but only two types of contagion. The terminology of ablutions is also used metaphorically to refer to cleansing from sin, but an actual immersion does not seem to be in view (e.g., Ps 51:2,7; Isa 1:16-17; Ezek 16:4, 9). For further discussion, see J. Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (SJLA 1; Leiden: Brill, 1973); D. P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (SBLDS 101; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987). Helpful summaries include D. P. Wright, "Unclean and Clean (OT)," *ABD* 6.729-41; G.J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 15-29. Cf. my *John the Baptizer*, 96-108.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. the parallel between John's baptism and the expected figure's baptism, and the description of the expected figure, who is described in the imagery of the threshing floor as one who will "clean the threshing floor" (δικαιοκαίρω; Matt 3:12 = Luke 3:17).

<sup>64</sup> Cf. *Sib. Or.* 4:162-70; *T. Levi* 23B1-14; *Apoc. Mos.* 29:11-13; *IQS* 3:6-9; 5:13-14. Cf. my *John the Baptizer*, 108-32.

flowing or "living" water was required for cleansing the most serious cases of uncleanness in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>65</sup>

Fourth, John's baptism foreshadowed the ministry of the expected figure that John announced. Matt 3:11 = Luke 3:16 contain John's saying: "I baptize you with water... he will baptize you with holy spirit and fire" (cf. Mark 1:8; cf. John 1:26-27). The imagery of "holy spirit" and "fire" removes the activities of the expected figure from the realm of a literal water rite, and yet the verb "baptize" is used to characterize his activities. Just as the term "baptize" is used to refer to John's physical activity of baptizing, so it is also used metaphorically to refer to the expected figure's activity. This invites a comparison between the functions of their two baptisms. For example, they both cleanse. John's baptism is used to express conversionary repentance and the expected figure's baptism with holy spirit might be understood to complete the conversion. It also allows for the contrast between the two, with the expected figure being mightier and having a greater baptism.<sup>66</sup>

This function of John's baptism colors it with an eschatological fervor that coheres closely with John's announcement of imminent judgment and restoration. John's baptism is the final opportunity to prepare for the eschatological judgment and restoration to be brought by the expected figure.<sup>67</sup>

Fifth, John's baptism functioned as an initiatory rite into the "true Israel" John announced to everyone the necessity of his repentance-baptism to be prepared for the imminent, eschatological judgment and restoration to be carried out by the expected figure. John's baptizing ministry, therefore, created a fundamental distinction between the repentant and the unrepentant, the prepared and the unprepared,

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those who would receive the expected figure's restoration and those who would be judged. While John called upon individuals to respond, within the context of Second-Temple Jewish thought, the effect should be viewed corporately. It was all Israel (i.e., ethnic Israel) that was viewed as facing imminent judgment, and it was only the prepared who would experience the fulfillment of the ancient hopes and promises for restoration (i.e., a remnant, or true Israel). Since repentance-baptism was the necessary rite for preparation and the ones prepared were the group who would be restored, John's baptism was the rite that changed the status of a person from nonmember to member.<sup>68</sup>

The initiatory function of John's baptism has been rejected by some scholars.<sup>69</sup> But two observations may alleviate their objections. First of all, an initiatory rite does not necessarily

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. the emphasis on using rivers or running water with respect to immersions that express repentance in *T. Levi* 2:3B2; *Sib. Or.* 4:165; *Apoc. Mos.* 29:12-13.

<sup>66</sup> The Hebrew Bible expresses the hope for a greater eschatological ablution in Ezek 36:25-26; cf. Isa 4:4; Joel 3:18; Zech 13:1; 14:8; Mal 3:2-3. Cf. the language used of the Qumran community's own ablutions in 1QS 3:6-9 and the eschatological expectation of a final ablution in 1QS 4:19-22.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Goppelt, *Theology*, 1.37-38; Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 333.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. C. J. Bleeker (ed.), *Initiation* (NumenSup 10; Leiden: Brill, 1965).

<sup>69</sup> E.g., Becker, *Johannes der Täufer*, 38-40. Ernst (*Johannes der Täufer*, 340) and Goppelt (*Theology*, 1.35) understand John's baptism to create a separation but fail to recognize the corporate implications of this. Others

need to initiate someone into a closed community, such as the Qumran community, for example. An examination of the sectarian groups in Second-Temple Judaism reveals a wide variety of group structures. Many of these groups maintained a sectarian identity and yet remained integrated into Jewish life (e.g., the Pharisees or the early Christian movement).<sup>70</sup> Second, such a view generally focuses on John as only preaching judgment.<sup>71</sup> While this certainly is an emphasis in John's preaching, the evidence indicates that John also announced imminent restoration (e.g., the promise of a holy spirit and the imagery of gathering grain into the granary). In light of Jewish self-understanding as the elect, covenant people of God and a hope for national restoration, John's

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announcement of restoration as well as judgment would have been understood corporately.

That John's baptism functioned as an initiatory rite is also suggested by Josephus' statement in *Ant.* 18.117: John "exhorted the Jews to practice virtue and act with justice toward one another and with piety toward God, and so to gather together by baptism [βαπτισμῶ συνιέναι]." The verb σύνειμι means "to come together" or "to gather together," with the implication of a common purpose, and the gathering together accomplishes this purpose.<sup>72</sup> Elsewhere, Josephus uses this same verb to describe Jews joining a group or party or the meeting together of such a group. For example, shortly after describing John the Baptist, Josephus uses the same verb in *Ant.* 18.315 to describe two brothers, Asinaeus and Anilaeus, who became armed bandits: "young men of the poorest class gathered together [συνησεσάν] around them" to form a peasant army.<sup>73</sup> In this statement by Josephus concerning John's preaching, the dative βαπτισμῶ is usually translated "in baptism;" "for baptism," or "to baptism;" but these expressions do not adequately express the sense of the term in the unusual expression βαπτισμῶ συνιέναι. In light of Josephus' use of this verb, the dative should probably be understood as an instrumental of means: "by means of baptism." John was calling his audience to gather together into some form of group, and baptism was the means by which

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who reject the interpretation of John's baptism as an initiatory rite include Kraeling, *John the Baptist*, 119-20; H. Thyen, "ΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΑ ΜΕΤΑΝΟΙΑΣ ΕΙΣ ΑΦΕΣΙΝ ΑΜΑΡΤΙΩΝ" in *The Future of Our Religious Past: Essays in Honour of Rudolf Bultmann* (trans. C. E. Carlston and K. P. Scharlemann; ed. J. M. Robinson; London: SCM, 1971) 132-33 n. 6. Examples of those who support an initiatory function for John's baptism include Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 114-16; O. Cullmann, "The Significance of the Qumran Texts for Research into the Beginnings of Christianity," in *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (ed. K. Stendahl; London: SCM, 1958) 215; Goguel, *Jean-Baptiste*, 291; B. Reicke, "John's Baptism," in *Jesus, the Gospels, and the Church: Essays in honor of William R. Farmer* (ed. E. P. Sanders; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1987) 214-19.

Whether an immersion had an initiatory function within the Qumran community is also debated. I have argued elsewhere that 1QS 2:25-3:9; 5:7-15 do support this function; for discussion and relevant literature, see my *John the Baptizer*, 133-62. Also related is the question of whether Jewish proselyte baptism (an initiatory rite) predated John's baptism or whether it is in fact a post-70 CE phenomenon. The latter position best accounts for the evidence. Cf. D. Smith, "Jewish Proselyte Baptism and the Baptism of John," *ResQ* 25 (1982) 13-32; Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 122-30.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979) 233-34.

<sup>71</sup> E.g., Becker, *Johannes der Täufer*, 38-39.

<sup>72</sup> BAGD, 787; LSJ, 1705; cf. the only NT use of this verb in Luke 8:4.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. σύνειμι in Josephus, *J.W.* 1.129; 4.132. For a discussion of these texts and their relation to στάσις ("strife"), see my *John the Baptizer*, 199-201.

the group was gathered. From an individual's point of view, baptism was the means by which he/she was "gathered into" or joined the group.<sup>74</sup>

The initiatory function of John's baptism is also implied by John's call to conversionary repentance. In the saying in Matt 3:9 = Luke 3:8, John affirms the covenant promises ("God is able ... to raise up children to Abraham"), but he denies that simply being a member of ethnic Israel is sufficient ("do not presume to say to yourself, 'We have Abraham as our father'"). For John, then, it is only those who have undergone repentance-baptism who have become the true "children of Abraham."<sup>75</sup>

Sixth, it is also possible that John's baptism functioned, at least implicitly, as a protest against the Temple establishment. It was

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concluded above that John's baptism mediated divine forgiveness and John, as "baptizer," was the mediator of that forgiveness. We also observed that this had significant parallels to atoning sacrifices of the Temple cult, and thus John's baptism functioned as an alternative to those sacrifices. In Second-Temple Judaism, if the Temple was criticized, it was usually the priestly aristocracy's wealth and corruption that was the focus of the criticism.<sup>76</sup> The saying of John in Matt 3:7-10 = Luke 3:7-9 is virtually identical in both Gospels, but the audiences are quite different. Matthew has "Pharisees and Sadducees," while Luke has "crowds." If the Matthean text is a more accurate identification of the original audience for the saying,<sup>77</sup> then the pointed rebuke in this text could imply that John was critical of the Temple establishment, especially in light of the close connection between the Sadducees and the Temple.<sup>78</sup>

### 3.2. John's Prophetic Proclamation

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<sup>74</sup> For further development and argumentation, see my *John the Baptizer*, 199-200.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Luke 1:17, which describes John as one who was "to make ready for the Lord a prepared people." Matthew Black (*The Scrolls and Christian Origins: Studies in the Jewish Background of the New Testament* (BJS 48; New York: Scribner's, 1961] 97) compares the self-understanding of the Qumran community and John the Baptist at this point as being the formation of "a new Covenanted Israel" or "the new Israel."

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple and Evidence of Corruption in the First-Century Temple," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1989 Seminar Papers* (SBLSP 28; ed. D. J. Lull; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 522-39. An implicit link between criticism of the Temple and the use of immersions for forgiveness may also be observed in the Qumran community's criticism of the Temple, as well as in *Sib. Or.* 4:8,27-30 (cf. 4:162-70).

<sup>77</sup> For a defense of this position, particularly with respect to the Matthean reference to "Sadducees," see my *John the Baptizer*, 175-78.

<sup>78</sup> For further development of this function, see *ibid.*, 203-5. Few other scholars recognize this function. Thyen (BAITIZMA, 151) goes no further than to describe John's baptism as "a polemic substitute for temple-sacrifice." Kraeling (*John the Baptist*, 15-27) attributes John's wilderness existence to "some bitter experience" (p. 16) that, as a rural priest, had alienated him from the temple establishment. Cf. E. Linnemann, "Jesus und der Täufer," in *Festschrift für Ernst Fuchs* (ed. G. Ebeling, E. Jungel, and C. Schunack; Tübingen: Mohr, 1972) 228; B. Witherington, "Jesus and the Baptist - Two of a Kind," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1988 Seminar Papers* (SBLSP 27; ed. D. J. Lull; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 228.

Not only was John perceived to be a "baptizer," he was also understood by many people to be a prophet.<sup>79</sup> In a manner reminiscent of prophets in the Hebrew Bible, John announced imminent judgment, called the people to repentance-baptism, and proclaimed the imminent coming of a figure who would bring judgment and restoration.<sup>80</sup>

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In the subsequent discussion, we examine John as prophet from two perspectives: the content of his prophetic announcements and the public role of prophet itself.

The most distinctive element of John's prophetic proclamation was his announcement of an expected figure. The NT interprets this figure to be messianic (Luke 3:15) and to have been fulfilled in Jesus. But it is reasonable to ask how John's description might have been understood in light of contemporary Jewish expectation. The texts that describe John's expected figure (Mark 1:7-8; Matt 3:11-12 = Luke 3:16-17) include the following elements in the description: (1) his activities include judgment and restoration; (2) he is coming; (3) he is mighty (i.e., mightier than John); (4) he will baptize with holy spirit<sup>81</sup> and fire, and (5) his judgment and restoration are portrayed using imagery of the threshing floor.

A survey of the Hebrew Bible and Second-Temple Jewish literature reveals a wide variety of expected figures who could be characterized as bringing judgment and restoration (thus satisfying the first element of John's expected figure). These include human agents such as the Davidic or Aaronic Messiah, the eschatological prophet or Elijah-*redivivus*, supernatural figures such as the archangel Michael, Melchizedek, or the Son of Man,<sup>82</sup> and

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<sup>79</sup> Luke 7:26 = Matt 11:9; Mark 11:32 = Matt 21:26 = Luke 20:6. Josephus' description of John as one "who exhorted the Jews" and had "great persuasiveness with the people" (*Ant.* 18.1 17, 118) is consistent with the role of prophet. Josephus does not explicitly identify John as a prophet. While he presented John primarily from a positive perspective, Josephus was very negative about those who claimed to be prophets during the Second-Temple period, especially those who were popular prophets (i.e., those whose ministry was involved primarily with the common people - the peasants). Cf. my *John the Baptizer*, 307-17, 333-42, esp. 308 n. 4.

<sup>80</sup> John is sometimes characterized as being a prophet of judgment only (e.g., Becker, *Johannes der Täufer*, 38-39), but this characterization ignores the restorative implications of the expected figure's baptizing with a holy spirit and of the clause "he will gather the wheat into his granary" (Luke 3:17). Furthermore, it fails to appreciate the prophetic dynamic that the announcement of judgment and call to repentance has as its necessary corollary the hope of some form of restoration or blessing; otherwise the call to repentance is meaningless.

<sup>81</sup> It is sometimes argued that πνεῦμα should be translated "wind" rather than "spirit." For advocates of this view, see B. Best, "Spirit-Baptism," *NovT* 4 (1960) 236-43. This is usually argued on the basis that "holy" is a Christian interpolation into John's use of the term πνεῦμα, and that the imagery of wind is implied in John's picture of winnowing at the threshing floor. However, the evidence for the first claim is inadequate, particularly if the term "holy spirit" is understood in light of Jewish description and expectation as "a spirit of holiness." The second point of incorrect, for πνεῦμα is neither mentioned in the picture of the threshing floor, nor is the picture actually describing winnowing at all, and so wind is not even implied. For further discussion, see my *John the Baptizer*, 275-77, 295-97; idem, "The Activity of John the Baptist's Expected Figure at the Threshing Floor (Matthew 3.12 = Luke 3.17)," *JSNT* 43 (1991) 103-11.

<sup>82</sup> The figure in Dan 7:14 is described as being "like a son of man" and is not identified by the title "Son of Man." However, the *Parables of Enoch* (*1 Enoch* 37-71) indicate that by the first century the description of Daniel's human-like figure had been transformed into the title used to describe a supernatural figure of judgment and restoration, at least in one line of interpretation. For discussion of the extensive research into the Son of Man, see C. C. Caragounis, *The Son of Man: Vision and Interpretation* (WUNT 38; Tübingen: Mohr, 1986) 9-34; A. J. Ferch, *The Son of Man in Daniel 7* (AUSDDS 6; Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1983) 4-39.



even God himself. Furthermore, the second and third elements describing John's expected figure (coming and mighty) are also used in Second-Temple literature to

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describe each of these expected figures (with the exception of Elijah-*redivivus*, for whom no description as mighty is extant).<sup>83</sup>

With respect to the fourth and fifth elements of John's description of the expected figure, the evidence is not as balanced between the different figures. While, for example, the Davidic Messiah and the Son of Man are each portrayed as *receiving* a spirit,<sup>84</sup> the only figure who is described as *bestowing* a spirit upon others is God. In some texts this spirit is described as "holy," and water/ablution imagery (i.e., similar to "baptize" imagery) is used to describe this bestowal.<sup>85</sup> The use of fire imagery is associated with the judgment brought by Michael/Melchizedek, Elijah-*redivivus*, and possibly the Son of Man,<sup>86</sup> but fire is also used to describe God's judgment, and some of these descriptions also use language associated with water (e.g., "river of fire").<sup>87</sup> Threshing-floor imagery, including winnowing, burning chaff, and gathering wheat, is only used to portray God's judgment and restoration<sup>88</sup> and never to portray the activities of other expected figures.

Since the characteristics and imagery used in John's depiction of his expected figure were drawn from the Jewish Scriptures and were "in the air" in Jewish expectation of John's day, it is reasonable to conclude that the elements of John's depiction are consistent with his Scriptures and his cultural milieu. The most specific characteristics and imagery in the preceding analysis (ablution language to describe bestowing a holy spirit and a farmer working at a threshing floor) lead us to conclude that John's expected figure was most likely understood to be God himself.<sup>89</sup> However, at least three points cause us to question this initial conclusion. First, John compares this expected

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<sup>83</sup> Examples of relevant texts that describe each figure as coming and mighty are provided here; for elaboration and other texts, see my *John the Baptizer*, 219-60. The Davidic Messiah: Zech 9:9; 1QS 9:11; Mic 5:2; *Pss. Sol.* 17:40; the Aaronic Messiah 1QS 9:11; 4QTest 14-20; Michael/Melchizedek: Dan 12:1; 1QM 17:6; cf. 11QMelch; the Son of Man: Dan 7:13; *1 Enoch* 49:2-3; 52:4, 9; 69:29; Elijah-*redivivus*: Mal 3:2 (cf. 4:5); God: Isa 41:10; *1 Enoch* 1:3-4, 7-9.

<sup>84</sup> Davidic Messiah: Isa 11:2; *Pss. Sol.* 17:37; the Son of Man: *1 Enoch* 62:2.

<sup>85</sup> E.g., Ezek 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29; *Jub.* 1:23; 1QS 4:21. References to a messianic figure's bestowing a spirit may be found in *T. Jud.* 24:3 and *T. Levi* 18:11, but these texts are problematic; cf. my *John the Baptizer*, 233-34 n. 61.

<sup>86</sup> Michael / Melchizedek: 11QMelch 3:7; Elijah-*redivivus*: Mat 3:2-3; *Liv. Pro.* 21:3. In *1 Enoch* 54:6 angels cast the wicked into fire who have evidently been judged by the Son of Man.

<sup>87</sup> E.g., *Sib. Or.* 2:196-97, 203-5, 252-54, 315; IQH 3:28-31.

<sup>88</sup> E.g., Isa 27:12-13; Jer 13:24; 15:7; Mal 4:1; Wis 5:2.3.

<sup>89</sup> The identification of John's expected figure as God is supported by P. C. Bretscher, "Whose Sandals? (Matt 3:11)," *JBL* 86 (1967) 81-87; Hughes, "John the Baptist," 191-219; Thyen, "BAITIZMA," 136; Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 50, 305. Alternatively, various scholars have identified John's expected figure with each of the expected figures discussed above with the exception of Michael / Melchizedek. For the Davidic Messiah, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 1.313-14; Dunn, "Spirit-and-Fire Baptism," 59-92; Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 62-73; for the Aaronic Messiah, see E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (trans. J. Marsh; London: SCM, 1955) 24 (cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1313); for the Son of Man, see Becker, *Johannes der Täufer*, 34-37; Lohmeyer, *Johannes der Täufer*, 157-60; Kraeling, *John the Baptist*; on Elijah-*redivivus*, see A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (2d ed.; trans. W. Montgomery;

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figure to himself ("he who is mightier than I," Mark 1:7; Matt 3:11 = Luke 3:16), which would have been considered quite arrogant if the figure was God.<sup>90</sup> Second, John states that this figure wears sandals that John is unworthy to untie (Mark 1:7; Matt 3:11 = Luke 3:16). While one may speak anthropomorphically of God wearing sandals (cf. Pss 60:8; 108:9), John's statement loses some of its import if in fact John cannot untie the sandals in the first place. Third, John's query from prison concerning Jesus' identity ("Are you the one who is coming [ἐρχόμενος]?") alludes to John's earlier proclamation concerning the mightier one "who is coming after me" (ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος). By considering the possibility that a human (i.e., Jesus) was his expected figure, John indicated that his expected figure was other than God.

The tension between key features that point to John's expected figure as being God himself and other pieces of evidence that point to a human figure may be partially resolved by observing the relationship between God and other expected figures in Jewish expectation. Each of the other expected figures was understood to bring judgment and restoration as God's agent - it was God's judgment and restoration being carried out by the expected figure. In fact, in some cases the text blends God as the bringer of judgment and restoration with another expected figure who does it as God's agent. For example, in *Pss. Sol.* 17:1-3 God is the king and savior who will judge and restore his people, and yet in vv. 21-46 God raises up a Davidic Messiah to accomplish the task<sup>91</sup> In the same way, the Hebrew Bible describes God as saving Israel from Egypt and equally of Moses as saving them from Egypt. In such contexts a reference to God identifies a belief in a divine/heavenly prime cause for the judgment or restoration, but a reference to a past human figure or an expected figure identifies a historical/earthly outworking of the same judgment or restoration. Thus, John's expected figure primarily manifests the characteristics of God himself because this was evidently his focus - that is, a focus on

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what God was going to do, rather than who was going to accomplish it or how it would happen in historical/earthly terms. Yet, the other features that point to a figure other than God indicate that John expected God to work through an agent.<sup>92</sup>

John clearly expected judgment (Matt 3:7-10 = Luke 3:7-9),<sup>93</sup> but he did not announce judgment only. The reference to baptizing "with holy spirit and fire" (Matt 3:11 = Luke 3:16;

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London: Black, 1911) 372-73; J. A. T. Robinson, "Elijah, John and Jesus," *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM, 1962) 28-33; repr. from *NTS* 4 (1958) 263-81.

<sup>90</sup> Kraeling, *John the Baptist*, 54.

<sup>91</sup> E.g., Isa 9:2-7; Jer 23:3-4; Ezek 34:22-23; 37:21-24; CD 19:10-11, 15; I IQMelch 2:13; *T. Mos.* 10:2-3. I am indebted to Craig Evans for pointing out this same ambiguity in 4Q451, which refers to both the "Messiah" and the "Lord." But it is ambiguous which one is the "he" who brings the salvation described in the text.

<sup>92</sup> For further discussion, see my *John the Baptizer*, 254-58, 284-88.

<sup>93</sup> On John and judgment, see H. Merklein, "Die Umkerpredigt bei Johannes dem Täufer und Jesus von Nazaret," *BZ* 25 (1981) 29-46; P. Wolff, "Gericht und Reich Gottes bei Johannes und Jesus," in *Gegenwart und*

cf. Mark 1:8) might refer to a single activity,<sup>94</sup> but it is better understood to refer to the expected figure bestowing a "holy spirit" as a restorative action on the repentant and the "fire" as an act of judgment on the unrepentant.<sup>95</sup> The two actions are linked, however, for it is one "baptism," which is an act of purging, that accomplishes both judgment and restoration. We should note that the expected figure's baptism is not producing these two groups (i.e., the repentant and the unrepentant); it is people's response to John's preaching and baptism that does this. The expected figure's action was to complete the process, bringing each group to their appropriate end - either restoration or judgment.

While the imagery of the farmer at the threshing floor is different from the imagery used in the expected figure's activity of baptism, the sense is similar (Matt 3:12 = Luke 3:17). The burning of chaff in unquenchable fire is a referent to the judgment of the unrepentant, while the statement "he will gather his wheat into the granary" alludes to restoration. This much is quite evident. However, what is frequently misunderstood is the precise activity of the farmer on the threshing floor. Usually, this metaphor is understood to be a farmer winnowing the wheat from the chaff. However, the verb διακαθαίρω does not signify "to winnow" but "to cleanse, clean thoroughly,"<sup>96</sup> and the object of the verb is not grain but the threshing floor. Furthermore, the instrument in the farmer's hand, a winnowing shovel (πτύον), is actually used for piling the wheat and chaff and removing them from the winnowing floor, not for the winnowing itself. The instrument for the act of winnowing itself is a winnowing fork

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(θρῖναξ).<sup>97</sup> Thus, the activity of John's expected figure being portrayed metaphorically here is *not* the separation of the repentant from the unrepentant (i.e., the wheat from the chaff) but, rather, taking each group to its appropriate end, whether blessing or judgment. As in the preceding discussion concerning the parallels between John's baptism and the expected figure's baptism, so it is implied in this metaphor also: it is the response to John's preaching and baptism that separates the repentant from the unrepentant (i.e., the wheat from the chaff), while the expected figure brings about the final judgment and restoration for these respective groups.

From this discussion we may now glean clues to what John perceived about the judgment and restoration. First, the judgment and restoration are imminent. The mightier one "is coming" (Matt 3:11 = Mark 1:7 = Luke 3:16), and "the axe is already (ἤδη) laid at the root of the trees" (Matt 3:10 = Luke 3:9). Second, the judgment involves the removal of the unrepentant. It is not clear whom John perceived the unrepentant to be. With his baptism functioning as an alternative to the Temple sacrifices, one sector of Jewish society that fits this category for

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*kommendes Reich: Scyllillergabe Anton Vogtle zum 65. Geburtstag* (BBS; ed. P. Fiedler and D. Zeller; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1975) 43-49.

<sup>94</sup> E.g., Dunn, "Spirit-and-Fire Baptism," 81-92.

<sup>95</sup> Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 289-95. Cf. *Jub.* 1:23; *T. Levi* 2:3B7-8; *Sib. Or.* 4:188-89; 1QS 4:20-21; 1QH 16:12; 17:26. The authenticity of baptizing "with holy spirit" is a matter of considerable debate. For discussion of the alternatives, see my *John the Baptizer*, 272-77.

<sup>96</sup> BAGD, 183; LSJ, 396.

<sup>97</sup> See *Letters of Alciphron* 2.23.1 for the noun πτύον used with the verb διακαθαίρω to describe the final cleaning of the threshing floor following the winnowing process. For further discussion, see my *John the Baptizer*, 295-300; idem, "Activity of John the Baptist's Expected Figure," 103-11.

John was probably the Temple aristocracy. John's ethical and purity concerns, his expectation of restoration, and his criticism of Antipas's second marriage suggest that another possible sector was the Roman imperialist powers and the people who supported them. Third, while it is difficult to be more precise about John's perception of the judgment and restoration,<sup>98</sup> we can observe that John is *not* expecting the "end of the world" or the "destruction of the universe." John *does* expect a radical shift in the sociopolitical and religious life of Israel and the world, but it takes place within the continuity of the space-time universe. We should note that the fire in John's pictures only consumes the unfruitful trees (Matt 3:10 = Luke 3:9) and the chaff (Matt 3:12 = Luke 3:17); the orchard, the wheat, and the threshing floor all remain afterward.<sup>99</sup> The implication is that the unrighteous

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are removed and the righteous are blessed with a new situation, but one that is in continuity with their present, human existence.

### 3.3. John's Prophetic Role

Having examined the content of John's prophetic proclamation, we may now turn to the public role of prophet itself.<sup>100</sup> It is sometimes thought that the last prophet was Malachi. His

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<sup>98</sup> This is due to the fragmentary nature of our evidence as well as the observation made earlier, that John focused on the divine/heavenly perspective rather than on the historical/earthly specifics.

<sup>99</sup> This is contrary to those who interpret John in an apocalyptic framework. Kraeling (*John the Baptist*, 42), for example, states concerning John's view that "judgment has become a cosmic event of such scope and magnitude that it beggars analogy in terms of human experience." The use of "fire" imagery to portray judgment should hardly be used to characterize John the Baptist as an apocalyptic figure. Cf. Becker, *Johannes der Täufer*, 105.

<sup>100</sup> Bruce Chilton ("John the Purifier," in *Jesus in context: Temple, Purity, and Restoration*, by Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans [AGJU 39; Leiden: Brill, 1997] 203-20) has recently called into question my analysis of John as prophet. He states that "the irony of the allegedly critical consensus which has emerged is that it so neatly confirms the evaluation of John in the Gospels' presentation" (p. 203). However, the Gospels do *not argue* that John is a prophet at all; rather, they assume it. That John was a prophet appears to be widely recognized and is found in many diverse strands of the tradition. I would suggest instead, that what the Gospels *argue* in their presentation is an *interpretation* of John's prophetic role; namely, that John is the prophetic forerunner of Jesus. This is, in fact, the Gospels' evaluation of John. Chilton's discussion clearly rejects the historicity of this forerunner role as a later Christian interpretation, and I would agree with him in this evaluation. However, in rejecting the prophetic role itself, Chilton fails to distinguish the social role John played in Jewish society as a prophet and the Christian interpretation of that role. In so doing, Chilton throws the baby out with the bath water. This is consistent with his rejection of any "recoverable message that explains his activity. Historically, his activity is itself as much of his program as we are ever likely to grasp" (p. 219). My own analysis of the traditions concerning John in the Gospels and Josephus is not as skeptical. Chilton's alternative to John as prophet is to portray John as "purifier," alluding to his baptizing activity (p. 212). He notes, however, that John is quite distinct from Bannus, the Qumran community, and other groups (pp. 212-17). His portrayal, dependent on Josephus' statement concerning John, is that "John's baptism was to serve as a ritual of purity following a return to righteousness" (p. 218; cf. pp. 218-19). Chilton's view appears to take Josephus at face value, not considering his biases or hellenizing tendencies. While I concur with Chilton that John's baptism is integral to his program, I think that to portray John's role as "purifier" is to create a unique category just for him. There is no evidence that "purifier" was a socially recognized role within Second-Temple Judaism. But a man who has a program, proclaims this program to crowds, and practices a symbolic action as part of this program might just be perceived in what is a socially recognized role in Second-Temple Judaism - a prophet. And such a perception does not require a Christian presentation at all.

book is where the prophetic portion of the Hebrew Bible's canon ended, and some later texts support such a view.<sup>101</sup> Yet numerous figures did in fact arise during the Second-Temple period who were believed by their followers to be prophets. Analysis of the social roles of these prophets reveals three different types of prophets: those whose prophetic role also involved being priests, those whose prophetic role also involved functioning as wise persons, and those whose prophetic role involved

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relating to the common people.<sup>102</sup> These may be identified respectively by the descriptive names *clerical prophet*,<sup>103</sup> *sapientiel prophet*,<sup>104</sup> and *popular prophet* (the term *popular* is being used in the sense of that which relates to the populace or common people; one might consider using the term *populist* instead).<sup>105</sup>

While John may have come from a priestly family, he was not a priest while engaged in his prophetic ministry; thus he was not a clerical prophet. Instead, John was a popular prophet. His audience and following appear to have been drawn primarily from the common people - the Judean rural peasantry and the urban poor from Jerusalem.<sup>106</sup>

Examination of other popular prophets during the Second-Temple period reveals two subtypes, depending upon whether in their prophetic role they functioned as leaders of prophetic movements or whether they remained lone individuals. I use the nomenclature *leadership popular prophets* and *solitary popular prophets*<sup>107</sup> to distinguish between these subtypes.<sup>108</sup> Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson

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<sup>101</sup> E.g., 1 Macc 9:27; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.37-41; *t. Sola* 13.3.

<sup>102</sup> For further discussion of prophetic typologies and analysis of all three types of prophets, see my *John the Baptizer*, 307-48. For a similar typology, see Horsley, "Like One of the Prophets," 435-63; Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, 135-89.

<sup>103</sup> Examples of this type of prophet include John Hyrcanus I (Josephus, *J.W.* 1.68-69; *Ant.* 13.282-83, 299-300, 322), and Josephus himself (*J.W.* 3.351-54, 400-402, 406-7; cf. *Life* 1-6). Cf. discussion in my *John the Baptizer*, 317-22; David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 138-44.

<sup>104</sup> Examples of this type of prophet include those identified as Essenes (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.159), including Judas the Essene (*J.W.* 1.78-80; *Ant.* 13.311-13), Menahem (*Ant.* 15.373-79), Simon (*Ant.* 17.345-47), as well as those identified as Pharisees (*Ant.* 17.41-45), including Samaias (*Ant.* 14.172-76; cf. the name Pollion in *Ant.* 15.3-4). Cf. discussion in my *John the Baptizer*, 321-32; Aune, *Prophecy*, 144-52.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 333-46; Horsley, "Like One of the Prophets," 435-63; Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, 135-89.

<sup>106</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 18.118; Matt 3:5 = Mark 1:5; Matt 21:31-32 = Luke 7:29-30; Luke 3:10-14; 3:15, 18; Matt 21:26 = Mark 11:32 = Luke 20:6.

<sup>107</sup> Bruce Chilton ("John the Purifier," 209 n. 25) criticizes this nomenclature as a "solecism." In so doing, Chilton focuses upon the name only and fails to take into consideration the discussion that the name attempts to encapsulate. Perhaps the suggestion above - using the term *populist* - might alleviate the concern.

<sup>108</sup> Examples of leadership popular prophets include the Samaritan (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.85-87), Theudas (*Ant.* 20.97-98), several unnamed prophets when Felix was procurator (*J.W.* 2.258-60; *Ant.* 20.167-68), the Egyptian (J.W. 2.261-63; *Ant.* 20.169-72; Acts 21:38), an unnamed prophet when Festus was procurator (*Ant.* 20.188); cf. also Acts 5:36. Examples of solitary popular prophets include several unnamed prophets during Herod's siege of Jerusalem (J.W. 1.347), Joshua ben Hananiah (J.W. 6.300-309), one unnamed prophet during the Jewish War (J.W. 6.285), and several other unnamed prophets during the Jewish War (J.W. 286-88). For further discussion, see Horsley, "Like One of the Prophets," 435-63; Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, 135-89; Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 333-46.

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concluded that John the Baptist was a solitary popular prophet (though they use the nomenclature *oracular prophet*).<sup>109</sup> However, several streams of evidence point to the alternate conclusion, that John was a leadership popular prophet - that is, in his prophetic role, John was the leader of a movement. First of all, as we concluded above, John's baptism functioned as an initiatory rite into the true, remnant Israel.<sup>110</sup> Second, Josephus' description of the crowd that was excited by John's teaching and that led Antipas to fear an outbreak of strife (*Ant.* 18.118) implies a certain amount of group formation. Third, John's perception of imminent judgment and restoration discussed above also implies the formation of a distinctive identity held by those who had been baptized by John. The cumulative effect of this evidence points to the formation of a group. Group formation only implies a distinctive identity by a group of people, manifesting an insider/outsider or "us and them" perspective. This does not necessarily mean that they were organized or maintained a separatist communal lifestyle, as did the Qumran community. As the prophet whose proclamation and activities brought about the formation of this group and provided its distinctive self-perception, John constituted the group's leader and is thus best understood to be a leadership popular prophet.<sup>111</sup>

### 3.4. *John's Life and Death*

Having examined his public roles, we conclude this survey of John the Baptist by briefly considering a few other facets of what may be known about him.

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In his infancy narrative, Luke recounts the events surrounding the expectation and birth of John into a priestly family in rural Judea (Luke 1:5-25, 39-45, 57-79). Some scholars have proposed that behind Luke 1 stands a source derived from followers of the Baptist, a source that was subsequently Christianized, but others have disputed this claim.<sup>112</sup> Whatever the case,

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<sup>109</sup> Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, 172-73; cf. Horsley, "Like One of the Prophets," 450-54.

<sup>110</sup> Horsley and Hanson (*Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, 178) recognize this function: "Baptism in the Jordan was the rite ... by which persons passed into the eschatologically reconstituted community of Israel which would survive Cod's judgment." Yet they do not appear to realize the implication of this: it was the people's response to John's prophetic proclamation and baptism that formed this "reconstituted community."

<sup>111</sup> For examination of the implications of this in comparison with other leadership popular prophets, see my *John the Baptizer*, 355-77. For an application of sociological theory on social structure and alienation to John in this regard, see Carl R. Kazmierski, "The Stones of Abraham: John the Baptist and the End of Torah (Matt 3,7-10 par. Luke 3, 7-9)," *Bib* 68 (1987) 22-40, esp. 32-34. Joan Taylor (*Immerser*, 233) rejects this category for John, saying that "there is no evidence that he predicted that signs and wonders would take place...." I grant this, but the paradigm I proposed for the various types of prophets, of which leadership popular prophet was one, is based on the social role played by the prophet, not on the type of prophecy uttered.

<sup>112</sup> For discussion and bibliography, see Wink, *John the Baptist*, 60-72; and more recently, Brown, "Gospel Infancy Narrative Research from 1976 to 1986: Part II (Luke)," *CBQ* 48 (1986) 660-70.

it is widely recognized that using this account for historical purposes is problematic. Nevertheless, John's rural priestly heritage is widely accepted.<sup>113</sup>

Subsequent to the discovery of the Qumran scrolls, speculation raged over whether or not John was himself a member of the Qumran community because of some similarities between their belief system and John's.<sup>114</sup> This speculation was fueled by the intriguing reference concerning John's upbringing in Luke 1:80, that "he was in the wilderness until the day he publicly appeared to Israel." In light of Josephus' description of celibate Essenes who adopted and raised children (J.W. 2.120), Luke's statement was interpreted to mean that John was raised in the Qumran community. However, concrete evidence of John's membership in the Qumran community is lacking. And even if John had been a member at one time, aspects of his teaching are sufficiently different from the teaching found in the Qumran scrolls that one would be forced to conclude that John had broken away from them. Thus, while it is an intriguing hypothesis, it remains speculation.<sup>115</sup>

The NT identifies the locale of John's activities as the wilderness (Matt 3:1 = Mark 1:4 Luke 3:2; Luke 1:80) and the region around the Jordan River (Matt 3:5-6 = Mark 1:5; Luke 3:3), including the east bank of the Jordan (John 1:23; 3:26; 10:40).<sup>116</sup> This location was

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consistent with John's emphasis on imminent judgment and restoration because it puts him and his audience in touch with important symbols from their past history. The wilderness and the Jordan River were symbols associated with the Exodus and Conquest. It is interesting to observe the parallel between John and other leadership popular prophets on this point. For them, and probably for John also, the Jordan River and the wilderness functioned as reminders

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<sup>113</sup> E.g., P. W. Hollenbach, "Social Aspects of John the Baptizer's Preaching Mission in the Context of Palestinian Judaism," *ANRW* 2.19.1 (Berlin, de Gruyter, 1979) 852-53; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1.317; Kraeling, *John the Baptist*, 21-25; Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 55-57; Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 269-72; R. A. Horsicy, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 91-92.

<sup>114</sup> E.g., W. H. Brownlee, "John the Baptist in the New Light of Ancient Scrolls," in *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (ed. K. Stendahl; London: SCM, 1958) 33-53; J. A. T. Robinson, "The Baptism of John and the Qumran Community," *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM, 1962) 11-27; A. S. Geysler, "The Youth of John the Baptist: A Deduction from the Break in the Parallel Account of the Lucan Infancy Story," *NovT* 1 (1956) 70-75; O. Betz, "Was John the Baptist an Essene?" *Bible Review* 6 (Dec. 1990) 18-25.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. the critique by Walter Wink, *John the Baptist and the Gospel* (Th.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1963) 75-103; Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 351 n. 4. The discussion by Joan Taylor (*Immerser*, 15-48) is also helpful.

<sup>116</sup> Willi Marxsen (*Mark the Evangelist* [2d ed.; trans. J. Boyce et al.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1969] 35-38) questioned the historicity of the wilderness tradition but did so on the incorrect assumption that "wilderness" and "region around the Jordan" are incompatible references to the same locality. The term "wilderness" (ἐρημος) does not necessarily refer to a desert without water - only an uninhabited, uncultivated area. Josephus (*J.W.* 3.515) describes the Jordan River "meandering through a long wilderness area." For further discussion, see C. C. McCown, "The Scene of John's Ministry and Its Relation to the Purpose and Outcome of His Mission," *JBL* 59 (1940) 113-31; R. W. Funk, "The Wilderness," *JBL* 78 (1959) 205-14. On the references to John's locality in the Fourth Gospel, see C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) 236, 279. Cf. also the discussion in Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 278-84.

of God's redemptive actions taken on their behalf in the past and as symbols of hope in a similar redemption in the imminent future.<sup>117</sup>

John's location also leads us to consider his conflict with Herod Antipas. The accounts in both the NT and Josephus' *Antiquities* place John in direct conflict with Antipas, and they identify Antipas as the one responsible for his arrest and execution. Yet, as tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, Antipas had no jurisdiction over Judea, which was under direct Roman rule. John's locale, however, being the lower Jordan River Valley, placed John near Perea and in it when John crossed into the Transjordan. It would have been while he was across the Jordan in Perea that Antipas could have arrested John.

Furthermore, in this location John would have had contact with the Nabateans, a trading people whose border was less than 20 km to the east and who had a major trade route passing from Nabatea through Perea and into Judea. At first John's locale may appear insignificant, but it actually contributes toward understanding the conflict between John and Antipas. The Synoptic Gospels explain that Antipas arrested John for condemning his marriage to Herodias (Matt 14:3-4 = Mark 6:17-18 = Luke 3:19-20), but Josephus explains that Antipas arrested John because "he feared his great persuasiveness with the people might lead to some kind of strife" (*Ant.* 18.118). The wife that Antipas had divorced in order to marry Herodias was the daughter of Aretas IV, king of Nabatea. The marriage had been part of a treaty that had provided peace between the Nabateans and the Roman province of Perea. But this divorce was taken as an insult by the Nabatean royal family and later led to the war between Aretas and Antipas in which Antipas was defeated and had to be rescued by

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the Romans (*Ant.* 18.109-25). John's proximity to and contact with the Nabateans rendered his attack on Antipas's new marriage a political threat to the stability of the region.<sup>118</sup> It is interesting to note that Josephus refers to John's arrest and execution by Antipas (*Ant.* 18.116-19) in the context of narrating how Herod's divorce of his first wife precipitated the war between Antipas and Aretas. In other words, his narrative order suggests a link between Herod's divorce and John's arrest; the NT account makes this link explicit.

The explanation of John's conflict with Antipas in the NT is personal and moral (John condemned his marriage), while Josephus' explanation is public and political (Antipas feared strife). While appearing contradictory, these two explanations are actually quite compatible. The NT explains that John condemned Antipas's second marriage because Antipas had married his brother's wife. This action was contrary to the Torah (Lev 18:16) and resulted in impurity (Lev 20:21). Implied in John's condemnation was the charge that the ruler of Galilee and Perea, regions with a large Jewish population, was breaking the Jewish Torah and was therefore unclean. These charges would probably not have greatly concerned Antipas, whose

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<sup>117</sup> Josephus, *J.W.* 2.259, 261-62; *Ant.* 20.97, 168. Cf. Horsley, "Like One of the Prophets," 457; Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 361-66.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Kraeling's statement (*John the Baptist*, 90-91; cf. 87-91) that John's rebuke "was not only embarrassing, it was politically explosive. It meant aligning the pious Jewish inhabitants of Peraea with those of Arabic stock against their sovereign and thus fomenting sedition and encouraging insurrection." On this point, see also H. W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (1972; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 142-45; Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 366-70.



religious persuasions appear to have been minimal at best. But such charges would raise the level of discontent among his Jewish subjects. When this discontent is placed within the context of John's proclamation of judgment and restoration (which would include judgment of Antipas and restoration of faithfulness to the Torah) and his announcement of an expected figure who was coming to bring this judgment and restoration, John's personal attack of Antipas had clear political implications. The implications of the NT portrayal of John are thus quite consistent with Antipas's fear that John's "great persuasiveness with the people might lead to some kind of strife."<sup>119</sup>

The Roman authorities responded to the rise of leadership popular prophets and their movements with swift and brutal military action, usually resulting in the execution of the leader and the scattering and/or death of the followers.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, John was arrested

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by Antipas, imprisoned in Machaerus,<sup>121</sup> and later executed.<sup>122</sup> Our sources are silent on whether or not any followers experienced a similar fate.<sup>123</sup>

#### 4. IMPLICATIONS OF JESUS' BAPTISM BY JOHN FOR UNDERSTANDING JESUS

Having ascertained the probability that Jesus was baptized by John, and having established an understanding of John's baptism and other elements of his ministry within the context of first-

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<sup>119</sup> Cf. Ellis Rivkin, "Locating John the Baptizer in Palestinian Judaism: The Political Dimension," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1983 Seminar Papers* (ed. K. H. Richards; SBLSP 22; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983) 79-85; Taylor, *Immerser*, 213-59.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. the references above to these prophets in Josephus' *Antiquities* and *Jewish War*.

<sup>121</sup> The Synoptic Gospels do not state the location of John's arrest and execution. Mark 6 begins with Jesus in Galilee (6:1-2) and then states that Antipas hears of Jesus' ministry (6:14-16). The narrative continues with the lurid account of Antipas's banquet and John's beheading (6:17-29). It is sometimes claimed that Antipas's hearing about Jesus in Galilee places John's arrest and execution in Tiberias, the location of Antipas's home in Galilee. But this is an unnecessary assumption based on a rather superficial reading of the text. The record of John's execution is a flashback in Mark's narrative and should be treated as such. Mark simply does not state where the banquet and beheading took place (cf. the silence in Matt 14:1-12; Luke 2:18-20). Josephus, on the other hand, states clearly that John was executed at Machaerus (*Ant.* 18.119). Machaerus was located east of the Dead Sea in Antipas's territory. It was an excellent fortification and contained a beautiful palace. Due to its higher altitude, it would have been cooler in summer than Tiberias (cf. Josephus, *J.W.* 7.164-77, 186-89). It is an eminently plausible location for John to have been imprisoned and executed, particularly since it is only a few miles from John's location in the lower Jordan River Valley.

<sup>122</sup> On the problems surrounding the NT account of Antipas's banquet and John's beheading, see Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 149-71; Gnilka, "Das Martyrium Johannes' des Täufers (Mark 6,17-29)," in *Orientierung an Jesus: Zur Theologie der Synoptiker für Josef Schsuid* (ed. P. Hoffmann; Freiburg: Herder, 1973) 78-92.

<sup>123</sup> Antipas did not, evidently, engage in wholesale execution of John's followers, as the Romans themselves sometimes did with followers of leadership popular prophets. As a client ruler responsible to Rome, Antipas was probably astute enough to realize that such an action would result in an outcry to Rome from his subjects. If this had happened, he might have been disposed in a manner similar to that of his tyrannical brother, Archelaus (cf. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.111; *Ant.* 17.342-44).

century Judaism, we are now ready to bring these two together in order to appreciate the implications of Jesus' baptism by John for our understanding of Jesus.<sup>124</sup>

#### **4.1. *The Turning Point in Jesus' Life***

Prior to being baptized, Jesus had lived the life of a peasant artisan in the Galilean town of Nazareth. We do not know what led Jesus to make the trek south to where John baptized in the Jordan. For Jesus, being baptized was a turning point in his life - he would never re-

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turn to that former life. The baptism was the point at which Jesus turned from his former peasant artisan life and turned to a life of ministry. Whether this turning began back in Galilee and was culminated in being baptized or whether it began with the baptism and the implications were worked out afterwards is a nuance that we are unable to address for lack of evidence. But whatever the case, the event of Jesus' baptism is significant as identifying the pinnacle of this turning point.

But the issue of "turning" point has a deeper issue associated with it. Mark describes John's baptism as "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4b), and when people were baptized, they did so "confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5b). No account, Mark's included, states that Jesus confessed his sins when he was baptized, nor do the accounts specify from what Jesus needed to repent - from what Jesus needed to "turn." As addressed above, the later accounts attempt damage control because of the theological problems that this baptism of repentance creates. We must address the historical question that it raises: From what did Jesus need to repent?

In their attempt to mitigate the potential theological damage that the issue raises, as explored above, our sources are not going to be directly helpful. We are left with three alternatives at this point. First of all, we could simply take the approach found in early Christian Gospels. In the first section of this essay we noted the theological concerns about this issue developing in the time period of Matthew through the *Gospel according to the Nazareans*. However, our historical concerns are different from their theological concerns. From a methodological perspective, a theological presupposition cannot take the place of considering historical questions and their evidence.<sup>125</sup>

Second, we could make possible inferences about Jesus' state of mind from what we may know about his background and suggest possible sins of which Jesus may have been guilty. This is the approach of Hollenbach. He proposes that, as a carpenter, Jesus was a middle-class artisan upon whom the poor of society depended. Jesus would have seen the

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<sup>124</sup> The focus in this essay is specifically on the implications of Jesus' baptism by John. Elsewhere I have explored other implications of the relationship between John and Jesus; see my "John the Baptist and His Relationship to Jesus," 214-29.

<sup>125</sup> It is frequently recognized that the conversation between Jesus and John at the baptism in Matt 3:14-15 is Matthew's attempt to mitigate the theological issues raised by Jesus' being baptized according to a baptism of repentance. The passage is questionable historically due to its single attestation and its manifest apologetic concern. Cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1.323.

abuses that this social stratification would have allowed. "[T]hrough John's preaching Jesus discovered that he had participated directly or indirectly in the oppression of the weak members of his society."<sup>126</sup> There are a number of difficulties with

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Hollenbach's approach, but the two most telling are that it is highly speculative, and ultimately we would be psychologizing about Jesus' state of mind. There is, in fact, no historical evidence of a particular sin for which Jesus needed to repent. The texts are silent.

Third, we could return to the nature of John's baptism and investigate further the character of repentance and confession of sin. This approach is suggested by Meier and proves to be the most helpful way forward on this issue. He points out that

[c]onfession of sin in ancient Israel did not mean unraveling a lengthy laundry-list of personal peccadilloes, with the result that worship of God was turned into a narcissistic reflection on the self. Confession of sin in ancient Israel was a God-centred act of worship that included praise and thanksgiving. Confession of sin often meant recalling God's gracious deeds for an ungrateful Israel, a humble admission that one was a member of this sinful people, a recounting of the infidelities and apostasies of Israel from early on down to one's own day, and a final resolve to change and be different from one's ancestors.<sup>127</sup>

Meier points to the prayers of confession by Ezra as well as prayers by the initiates into the Qumran community as examples.<sup>128</sup> These prayers of confession are not for personal sins at all but for Israel's sins as a nation.

This approach is further supported by observing the character of John's message. He was addressing all Israel - that is, Israel as a nation - and calling them to a radical reconstitution of Israel in light of its imminent eschatological future. If this is so, then John was calling for the people to respond to who they were as a nation, not really who they were as individuals. Of course, it was individuals who had to respond, and many could respond out of a personal sense of responsibility for Israel's state. But equally, many of those in Israel who would be considered faithful could respond out of a belief in and desire for John's reconstituted Israel.<sup>129</sup> Thus, without having to speculate about Jesus' personal state of mind, we can conclude that Jesus did indeed participate in John's baptism, and it was for him a baptism of repentance. Jesus was acknowledging Israel's sin and need to turn around, and he was committing himself to do what he could to bring this about.

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<sup>126</sup> P.W. Hollenbach, "The Conversion of Jesus: From Jesus the Baptizer to Jesus the Healer," *ANRW* 2.25.1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982) 199; cf. 198-200.

<sup>127</sup> Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 113-14.

<sup>128</sup> Ezra 9:6-15; Neh 9:6-37; IQS 1:18-2:2.

<sup>129</sup> With this understanding, I am disagreeing with scholars who interpret John's program as providing purity to people considered unclean and thus had only an individualist focus, such as B. Chilton, *Jesus' Baptism and Jesus' Healing: His Personal Practice of Spirituality* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 1998) 1-29, esp. 28-29; idem, "John the Purifier," 218-19; Taylor, *Immersion*, 49-100.

#### 4.2. *The Earliest Stage of Jesus' Ministry*

A second area to be investigated is the implications of Jesus' baptism for appreciating what the earliest stage of Jesus' ministry involved.<sup>130</sup> I am defining this earliest stage as Jesus' ministry *prior to* the arrest of John the Baptist.

Those who were baptized by John became part of John's reconstituted Israel or, in other words, part of John's movement. In so doing, they became identified as followers of John. It would appear that John had two types of followers. First of all, there were those who were baptized and returned to their homes, though they were still part of the reconstituted true/remnant Israel being formed through John's ministry. Second, there were those who were baptized and remained with him to participate more fully in his program and to be taught by him. John had disciples with whom he practiced fasting (Matt 9:14 = Mark 2:18 = Luke 5:33) and whom he had taught to pray, perhaps in a distinctive fashion (Luke 11:1). These disciples were with him (John 1:35; 3:25-26) and were available to serve him (Matt 11:2 = Luke 7:18). Josephus may also have been referring to these disciples when he describes those who gathered around John as those who were "excited to the utmost by listening to his teachings;" and "they seemed as if they would do everything which he counselled" (*Ant.* 18.118).<sup>131</sup>

Through his baptism by John, Jesus was not only in agreement with John, he was joining John's movement and becoming a follower of John. In the next section we consider John 3 in greater detail, but it is sufficient at this point to observe that this text suggests that Jesus stayed with John the Baptist for some time. Therefore, of the two types of disciples John had, Jesus was one of those who remained with John to participate fully in his program.<sup>132</sup>

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This conclusion raises at least one important question: Did Jesus participate for a time in John's ministry and movement?<sup>133</sup> The Synoptic Gospels identify the start of Jesus' public ministry as beginning after the arrest of John (Matt 4:12 = Mark 1:14; cf. Luke 3:19; 4:14). But this leaves unexplained why Jesus remained in Judea after being baptized, not returning to Galilee until John's arrest.<sup>134</sup> Data from the Fourth Gospel helps to fill in this gap.<sup>135</sup> John

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<sup>130</sup> The material in this section is a revision of a portion of my earlier work, "John the Baptist and His Relationship to Jesus," 218-22.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. other references to John's disciples, such as Matt 14:12 = Mark 6:29; Acts 18:25; 19:3-4.

<sup>132</sup> Others who conclude that Jesus was a disciple of John include Goguel, *Jesus*, 269-70; O. Cullmann, *The Early Church* (London: SCM, 1956) 177-82; Robinson, "Elijah, John and Jesus," 39-40; W. R. Farmer, "John the Baptist," *IDB* 2.959; Dodd, *Historical Tradition*, 272-75; M.-E. Boismard, "Les Traditions Johanniques concernant le Baptiste," *RB* 70 (1963) 29; Wink, *John the Baptist*, 38, 55. Josef Ernst ("War Jesus ein Schüler Johannes' des Täufers?" in *Von: Urchristentum zu Jesus: für Joachim Guilka* [ed. H. Frankemölle and K. Kertelge; Freiberg: Herder, 1989] 13-33), on the other hand, argues against such a conclusion, but he fails to appreciate the significance of Jesus' baptism by John with respect to this issue.

<sup>133</sup> Two other questions that I have considered elsewhere are: (1) Did Jesus change and move beyond the framework provided by John's ministry and movement, and if so, what produced this change? (2) In what ways is Jesus' later ministry in continuity with John, and in what ways is it different? See my discussion in "John the Baptist and His Relationship to Jesus," 223-29.

<sup>134</sup> Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 122.

3:22-24 describes Jesus' going with his disciples into the Judean countryside, where he remained with them and baptized.<sup>136</sup> John was also baptizing nearby.

This brief scenario could be interpreted in at least three different ways. First, Jesus had a baptizing ministry with his own disciples that was separate and distinct from John's activities.<sup>137</sup> Jesus could even be understood to be competing with John as a rival.<sup>138</sup> Second, Jesus' baptizing ministry may be understood as aligned with John's in such a way that Jesus baptizes under the umbrella of John's baptizing movement.<sup>139</sup> Third, Jesus began baptizing in association with John (as in the second alternative), but gradually they parted company over differences (as implied in the first alternative).<sup>140</sup>

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Given the limited data within the Fourth Gospel, choosing between these alternatives is difficult but not impossible. Two preliminary observations may be made to guide the process. We must distinguish historical data contained in this text from what the fourth Evangelist is doing with this material and the narrative framework in which it is now found. Second, our understanding of the relationship between John and Jesus arising out of this text must cohere with what we may deduce from our other sources.

Applying these two observations to the question at hand makes the second alternative the most probable of the three. Separate activities and rivalry (the first alternative) might be implied by the statement that Jesus had his own disciples (John 3:22; cf. 1:35-51) and the complaint about Jesus by John's disciples in John 3:26. However, the reference in 3:22 to Jesus' having disciples may be the result of the Evangelist's editorial activity. It makes this text consistent with the larger narrative framework, especially the account in John 1 about John's disciples leaving him to follow Jesus. On the other hand, having disciples per se does not preclude Jesus' activities from being part of John's movement. In fact, it is eminently plausible for Jesus to have his own followers and to be baptizing in a separate location and yet to be associated with John's movement.<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, we should observe that any indication

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<sup>135</sup> The historical reliability of these traditions concerning the Baptist and Jesus are widely accepted. For discussion see, e.g., Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 122, esp. n. 23; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 92; J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *The Proclamation of Jesus* (trans. J. Bowden; London: SCM, 1971) 45-46; Dodd, *Historical Tradition*, 279-87, 290-93; Linnemann, "Jesus und der Täufer," 219-36, esp. 221-23; Boismard, "Traditions Johanniques," 33; Robinson, "Elijah, John and Jesus," 39-43; J. Murphy-O'Connor, "John the Baptist and Jesus: History and Hypotheses," *NTS* 36 (1990) 363; Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 206-10.

<sup>136</sup> The statement in John 4:2 is generally understood to be a later editor's correction of 3:22 (and 4:1) because of the difficulties perceived by having Jesus portrayed as one who baptized. Cf. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966) 1.164; Jeremias, *Proclamation of Jesus*, 45-46.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 92; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (trans. K. Smyth et al.; New York: Crossroad, 1980-82) 1.410-11.

<sup>138</sup> Wink (*John the Baptist*, 94) suggests rivalry but interprets this to be the results of the portrayal by the fourth Evangelist.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 122; Murphy-O'Connor, "John the Baptist and Jesus," 365; Hollenbach, "Conversion of Jesus," 204-6.

<sup>140</sup> Cf. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 153-56. M. Goguel develops an extensive thesis based on this last alternative but one that suffers from extensive speculation; cf. Goguel, *Jean-Baptiste*, 235-74; idem, *The Life of Jesus* (trans. O. Wyon; New York: Macmillan, 1945) 271-76.

<sup>141</sup> Meyer (*Aims of Jesus*, 283-84 n. 23) makes this point and cites Anton Fridrichsen: "'the man of God' in the ancient Orient 'is never isolated. He is always the centre of a circle taught by his words and example...'"

of separateness or rivalry in the Fourth Gospel is only between some of their disciples, not between John and Jesus. The Fourth Gospel portrays John in support of Jesus (3:27-30) and Jesus in support of John (4:1-3).

Finally, the statement in 3:22b-23a makes no distinction between the activities of Jesus and John: Jesus "...was baptizing, and John was also baptizing..." (...ἐβάπτιζεν. ἦν δὲ καὶ ὁ Ἰωάννης βαπτίζων...). Jesus had, prior to this point in time, been baptized by John (for the implication of this baptism, see above). Subsequently he held the opinion that John was a prophet, that no one was greater than John (Matt 11:9-11 = Luke 7:26-28), and that John's baptism was from God (Matt 21:24-27 = Mark 11:28-33 = Luke 20:2-8). Jesus' own baptizing ministry, therefore, must be seen in continuity with what precedes it (i.e., his own baptism) and what follows it (i.e., his high opinion of John). Therefore, to read into this text that Jesus was engaging in a baptizing ministry separate from and in opposition to John's movement may be an attempt to preserve a distinctive Jesus similar to the attempt by the Evangelist himself.<sup>142</sup>

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Therefore, of the three alternatives listed above, the second alternative is to be preferred over the first. But what about the third alternative, which asserted that Jesus began baptizing in association with John but that later they parted ways in disagreement? This alternative is to be distinguished from *later* differences between Jesus and John as found in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g., Matt 11:16-19 = Luke 7:31-35; see below). The focus of this alternative is the relationship between John and Jesus while both engaged in baptizing ministries. Growing tension and disagreement between them at this point in their ministries is an assertion based primarily on interpreting John 3:25 ("Now a discussion arose between John's disciples and a Jew concerning purification [μετὰ Ἰουδαίου περὶ καθαρισμοῦ]") as a reference to a debate between John's disciples and Jesus or one of Jesus' disciples. This is one possible conclusion given the context. But it could also refer to a more generic debate between members of various religious movements in this wilderness area who emphasized the role of ablutions for purification.<sup>143</sup> In light of the ambiguity of the text, no alternative can command high probability. But perhaps a third alternative is more likely than the others. It is based on observing that the issue of the debate is defined as purification (καθαρισμός). Elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel, this term is used for the traditional Jewish rites of cleansing (John 2:6). This usage is reflected in similar contexts in the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>144</sup> But in no other text anywhere is this term used of John's baptism. What is more likely, then, is that the debate concerned a more traditional view of Jewish purification or purification rites versus the way that John's baptism functioned.<sup>145</sup> If so, then it is unlikely that the debate was between John's disciples and Jesus or Jesus' disciples.

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<sup>142</sup> Cf. the Johannine interpretation of John and his baptism in John 1:6-9, 15, 19-42. Wink, *John the Baptist*, 93-93; Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 76-77.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. W. B. Badke, "Was Jesus a Disciple of John?" *EvQ* 62 (1990) 202.

<sup>144</sup> E.g., Mark 1:44 = Luke 5:14; Luke 2:22; cf. also the use of the related verb, καθαρίζω, in the Synoptic Gospels.

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Brown, *John*, 1.151-52.

Within this broader context of debate (John 3:25), we are introduced to the specific problem that John's disciples had with Jesus (3:26). This next verse states that John's disciples came and complained to John about Jesus. Sometimes the assumption is made that the disciples' complaint about Jesus arose out of the debate in the preceding verse. Charles Scobie, who is a proponent of this interpretation, proposes emending μετὰ Ἰουδαίου to μετὰ Ἰησοῦ or μετὰ τῶν Ἰησοῦ to support this interpretation.<sup>146</sup> However, while 3:25 may be vague, this ingenious textual emendation remains pure speculation. This view must remain conjectural, as Scobie admits: "we may *conjecture* that Jesus and his disciples were not strict enough [concerning

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rites of ritual purity] for John's liking."<sup>147</sup> The next pericope (3:26-30) does in fact make specific the nature of the complaint by John's disciples: more people are going to Jesus to be baptized than to John (3:27; cf. 4:1). While this could have given rise to division between the two, this text portrays John and Jesus as refusing to make this an issue (3:27-30; 4:1-3). This is consistent with the portrayal of their relationship in the Synoptic Gospels.

To summarize, Jesus was baptized by John and probably remained with him for some time in the role of disciple. Later, in alignment and participation with John and his movement, Jesus also engaged in a baptizing ministry near John. Although he was still a disciple of John, Jesus perhaps should be viewed at this point as John's right-hand man or protégé.<sup>148</sup> While tensions may have arisen between John's disciples and those around Jesus, the two men viewed themselves as working together. Only later, after the arrest of John, did a shift take place in which Jesus moved beyond the conceptual framework of John's movement in certain respects. Yet Jesus always appears appreciative of the foundation that John's framework initially provided for him.

#### ***4.3. The Ideological Framework for the Earliest Stage of Jesus' Ministry and Extrapolations to His Later Ministry***

I continue to use the term *earliest stage* to identify the period of Jesus' ministry prior to the arrest of John. By *later ministry* I refer to Jesus' ministry after John's arrest - the ministry that is the focus of the Gospel narratives.

In being baptized by John, Jesus indicated his essential agreement with John's message. Presumably he heard John himself proclaim his message. To summarize the discussion above, John announced that Israel as the people of God had sinned and gone astray, and so they were facing the imminent, eschatological judgment of God. To be saved from this judgment, the

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<sup>146</sup> Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 154; following Goguel, *Jesus*, 274, and nineteenth century scholars. Cf. also Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:413.

<sup>147</sup> Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 155; emphasis mine. Cf. the rejection of this view by Dodd, *Historical Tradition*, 280 n. 2. The text does manifest a textual problem at this point, but it is only between the singular μετὰ Ἰουδαίου and the plural μετὰ Ἰουδαίων. No textual evidence exists, however, for the emendation.

<sup>148</sup> Murphy-O'Connor ("John the Baptist and Jesus," 363) calls Jesus John's "assistant." Cf. R. E. Brown ("Jesus and Elisha," *Perspective* 12 [1971] 87), who suggests that "Jesus was to the Baptist as Elisha was to Elijah."

people had to change fundamentally inwardly and outwardly (i.e., repentance understood as conversion) and to express this repentance by receiving his baptism. Those who responded with repentance and baptism would be saved from the imminent judgment and would participate in the eschatological reconstitution of the true/remnant Israel, brought about by God's coming representative, whose arrival is imminent.  
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Jesus, at least at this point in his life, is essentially in agreement with John.<sup>149</sup> While such a conclusion is hardly startling, it does bring with it a number of implications concerning the ideological framework that characterized the beginning of Jesus' ministry. First of all, it implies that Jesus began his ministry with an ideological framework of an eschatology characterized by imminent judgment and restoration. While it is quite plausible that Jesus' eschatology would change and develop beyond this point (and evidence suggests that it probably did), a historical portrait that paints a noneschatological Jesus<sup>150</sup> is quite implausible, especially in light of the pervasive elements of eschatological thought in the Gospel portraits of the later ministry of Jesus.<sup>151</sup>

Second, it implies that Jesus' ministry began within an ideological framework of re-visioning Israel around a reconstituted true/remnant Israel. Jesus participates in John's baptism in agreement with John's re-visioning of Israel. This suggests that an examination of Jesus' later ministry may reveal a similar concern for reconstituting Israel, but that Jesus' re-visioning may be somewhat different from John's. One example of this concern in the later ministry of Jesus is Jesus' choosing of "the Twelve," symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 10:1-4 = Mark 3:13-19a = Luke 6:12-16; cf. Mark 6:6b-7 = Luke 9:1-2; Matt 19:28 = Luke 22:28-30).<sup>152</sup>

Third, Jesus' essential agreement with John at the beginning of his ministry implies that judgment and restoration and the re-visioning of Israel would be effected through divine participation. John articulated God's involvement in two ways: an expected figure and a holy

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<sup>149</sup> Jesus could, of course, at some later point in time change his opinion on some matters and move beyond John. See the discussion below, and my "John the Baptist and His Relationship to Jesus," 226-29.

<sup>150</sup> E.g., M. J. Borg, "A Temperate Case for a Non-eschatological Jesus," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1986 Seminar Papers* (ed. K. H. Richards; SBLSP 25; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) 521-35; M. J. Borg, "Jesus and Eschatology: A Reassessment," in *Images of Jesus Today* (ed. J. Charlesworth et al.; Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1994) 42-67; S.J. Patterson, "The End of Apocalypse: Rethinking the Eschatological Jesus," *TToday* 52 (Apr. 1995) 29-48.

<sup>151</sup> For recent defenses of an eschatological Jesus, see Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*; Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). For a critique of a Cynic Jesus, see Hans D. Betz, "Jesus and the Cynics: Survey and Analysis of a Hypothesis," *JR* 74 (1994) 453-75; Paul R. Eddy, "Jesus as Diogenes? Reflections on the Cynic Jesus Thesis," *JBL* 115 (1996) 449-69. See the response by David Seeley, "Jesus and the Cynics Revisited," *JBL* 116 (1997) 704-12. E. P. Sanders (*Jesus and Judaism*, 91-95) puts this point in a larger context when he argues convincingly that Jesus must be understood on a trajectory that runs from an eschatologically oriented John the Baptist to an eschatologically oriented early church. Cf. his later articulation of the same point: idem, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993) 94-95.

<sup>152</sup> Cf. the development of this point by Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 95-106; Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 101-2, 141-45; J. P. Meier, "The Circle of the Twelve: Did It Exist during Jesus' Public Ministry?" *JBL* 116 (1997) 635-72; R. P. Meier, *Jesus and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

This essay on Jesus' Baptism is the first in a series of papers presented to and discussed by members of the Institute for Biblical Research Jesus Group. The second essay is by Scot McKnight and will be concerned with Jesus and the Twelve. It will be published in a future issue of *BBR*.



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spirit. In Jesus' later ministry, the Spirit certainly plays a key role in his thought (e.g., Matt 12:28 = Luke 11:20; Luke 4:18-21).<sup>153</sup> And, of course, the role of an expected figure in Jesus' thought has many entry points for exploration, for the term "Son of Man" to that of "Messiah." Recent scholarly debate has explored the historicity, meaning, and possible implications for Jesus' self-understanding, and further development here is far beyond our scope. The two points to note here are, first of all that, whatever Jesus' views on these matters later in his ministry, they were originally shaped by his involvement with John the Baptist. Second, in his later ministry, Jesus understood that he himself had a role in the judgment and restoration and revisioning of Israel, and one way that this self-understanding could be expressed is in relation to John's original expectation. Jesus' response to John's question from prison (Matt 11:2-6 = Luke 7:18-23) suggests a continued relationship with John's expectation and yet clear development beyond it.<sup>154</sup>

What I am arguing here is that it is appropriate to extrapolate from the ideological framework of John's ministry to the earliest stage of Jesus' ministry and then beyond, to later points in Jesus' ministry. This latter extrapolation is appropriate for, in his later ministry, Jesus maintains a high opinion of John (e.g., Matt 11:7-15 = Luke 7:24-30) and defends his own ministry based upon the fact that John's baptism was of God (Matt 21:33-27 = Mark 11:27-33 = Luke 20:1-8).

#### ***4.4. The Possible Association of the Theophany Narrative with Jesus' Baptism***

In the first part of this essay, I concluded that the baptism of Jesus by John is historically *very probable*, to the point of being virtually certain. Also it is *probable* that Jesus did experience at some time a prophetic call-vision, but there are problems with directly associating the former with the latter, for there is some evidence to suggest that originally they were two separate events. If so, then either Jesus later told his disciples about the early experiences that brought the two together, or early Christians used the prophetic call-vision to interpret the baptism. It was, therefore, preferable methodologically

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to examine Jesus' baptism apart from the possible association with the prophetic call-vision of the theophany narrative.

I should make clear from the earlier discussion that I consider it probable that Jesus did experience some form of prophetic call-vision and that it likely involved the components associated with the theophany narrative. The difficulty was not with the event itself but with the two events having to take place at the same time and the fact that, therefore, the baptism had to be understood in light of the theophany. I did say, however, that we would return to

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<sup>153</sup> Cf. the classic development by Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*.

<sup>154</sup> For further discussion see my *John the Baptizer*, 278-82.

make a couple of brief observations on the baptism *if* it was associated with the theophany, and this is where we now proceed.<sup>155</sup>

First of all, the association of the two impacts the discussion above concerning the implications of Jesus' baptism. For example, it strengthens the first point made above, that Jesus' baptism was the turning point in Jesus' life - from peasant artisan to public ministry. If at his baptism Jesus also experienced a prophetic call-vision, then this event is even more decisive in Jesus' life. As well, the earlier discussion of Jesus' baptizing within John's movement portrays Jesus as a disciple of John, working "under John." However, if Jesus experienced the prophetic call-vision at the same time, and if it included the elements of divine sonship and spirit-anointing, then the period during which Jesus was baptizing should perhaps be understood as "alongside John."<sup>156</sup>

Second, if the content of the prophetic call-vision included a reference to divine sonship and an experience of the spirit, then the theophany is related conceptually to John's own prophetic announcements. John announced an expected figure who would baptize with a holy spirit and fire. Both elements in the theophany are related: the announcement of divine sonship may be linked to the expected figure that John proclaimed, and the baptizing with a holy spirit was linked to Jesus' own spirit-anointing. At this point, Jesus was not baptizing with a holy spirit; rather, he was himself anointed. Perhaps the implication is that the one who would ultimately baptize others must himself first be baptized by that same spirit.

Third, the prophetic call-vision and its dual elements of divine sonship and spirit-anointing can themselves be explored for their implications for understanding the ministry of Jesus. The announcement of divine sonship could be explored for the implications it would have for the self-understanding of Jesus - his sense of having a special relationship with God as father and his role within the plans

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and purposes of God for Israel (whether understood as messianic or otherwise).<sup>157</sup> The divine anointing by the spirit - the action that confirmed and empowered the divine announcement - could be explored for the implications it also had for Jesus' self-understanding. However, with these issues we are moving beyond specifically exploring Jesus' baptism itself, which is beyond the scope of this essay.

## 5. CONCLUSION

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<sup>155</sup> Some scholars assume the link between the baptism and theophany, and in their discussion of the baptism actually focus almost exclusively on the significance of the theophany. E.g., R. A. Campbell, "Jesus and His Baptism," *TynBul* 47 (1996) 191-214.

<sup>156</sup> I am indebted to Darrell Bock for this suggestion. It may be an implication of John 3:30.

<sup>157</sup> For example, if the divine announcement ("You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," Mark 1:11) is understood to combine the images of Messiah (Ps 2:7) and servant of Yahweh (Isa 42:1), this might contribute to explaining why Jesus later radically reinterpreted messiahship to be a suffering figure. See the discussion in the literature of the possible Hebrew Bible texts being alluded to in the divine announcement; e.g., Guelich, *Mark*, 1.33-34; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1.336-39; Meier, *Marginal Jew* 2.106-7.

In this essay I have argued that, within the realms of historical probability, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. As such, the baptism was for Jesus a significant turning point in his life, from his former life as a peasant artisan in Nazareth to a life of ministry. By responding to John's message to the nation of Israel, which called Israel to repent and be baptized, Jesus participated in repentance-baptism, acknowledging Israel's need for repentance. As such, Jesus was agreeing with John's vision of a reconstituted Israel - a true/remnant Israel that would be prepared for imminent divine judgment and would participate in God's eschatological restoration and blessing. Jesus thus begins his ministry within an ideological framework marked by this eschatological orientation. For the earliest part of this ministry, Jesus was involved with John and his program. He remained with John as one of his disciples and participated with John in a baptizing ministry.

The theophany narrative, though linked in the texts with Jesus' baptism, may have taken place at a later point in time. Best understood as a prophetic call-vision, this event is also historically likely but with less probability than the baptism itself. There is, however, a possibility that it did take place at the same time as Jesus' baptism. If so, it adds new components to the significance of the event, but it does not materially alter the conclusions drawn about the baptism itself.

Jesus' later ministry manifests some differences from and developments beyond what has been presented here.<sup>158</sup> But this later ministry also demonstrates significant points of continuity. The later ministry of Jesus must be understood along a trajectory that begins with John the Baptist and ends with the early Church. As such, therefore, Jesus' baptism by John and its implications make a significant contribution to our understanding of the historical Jesus.

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<sup>158</sup> For such a sketch, see *my* "John the Baptist and His Relationship to Jesus," 223-29.