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Was Jesus a Disciple of John?

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The early relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist has long been a topic of controversy. Some have argued that the two men never even met. Others have affirmed, usually with little provided evidence, that Jesus began his ministry as a disciple of John.

In a paper published in *The Evangelical Quarterly* in January 1988,¹ the argument was made that the earliest explanation of the rite of baptism was not that it depicted death and resurrection but that it was a declaration of adherence. The following paper will argue that Jesus, baptized by John, did indeed become John's disciple, but that the common conventions of that discipleship were broken by the Baptist himself in order that Jesus might carry out his messianic ministry. If such an argument can be supported, it will reconcile some apparently contradictory Gospel statements and add evidence to the view that the earliest meaning attached to baptism was adherence.

Let us begin by considering an often overlooked factor in the Baptist's work—the ongoing lives of those whom he baptized. While several scholars who have produced significant works on John the Baptist have argued that John was not concerned to gather a community of faith,² a closer look at two key passages—Matthew 3:7-10 (= Luke 3:7-9) and Matthew 21:23-27—will indicate that the gathering of followers was John's primary concern.

In Matthew 3:7-10 we find the Baptist's familiar scathing denunciation of the religious leaders (or crowds) who came for

¹ William B. Badke, 'Baptised into Moses—Baptised into Christ: A Study in Doctrinal Development', *Evangelical Quarterly* 60 (January 1988), 23-29.

² Such as Charles Scobie, *John the Baptist* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 132; W. Wink, 'John the Baptist', *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), 487.

baptism without the desire for true repentance.³ How was true repentance to be demonstrated? John asserted that it was by fruit which was in keeping with repentance. In other words, the stress was not on removal of defilement but on entrance into a new ethic, on acceptance of a new lifestyle which would continue indefinitely. In fact, if simple removal of past defilement were the major goal, John would have baptized all who showed any desire for cleansing.

Matthew 21:23–27 describes Jesus' attempt to trap his opponents. His question was, 'Where did the authority for John's baptism come from?' Interestingly, as Jesus' opponents pondered over their reply, they did not debate with themselves about whether John's baptism had true cleansing power, but focused on the fact that they had not believed John (presumably referring to his preached message about repentance and coming doom) though the people understood him to be a prophet. In other words, the term 'baptism of John', far from merely describing the rite he performed, had taken on a technical meaning encompassing John's message, including his demand for a change of lifestyle. To agree that the baptism of John was from God would have been to declare that John had been authorized by God to gather a community following his teachings.

This finding is supported as well by a later passage—Acts 19:1–7—in which Paul in Ephesus discovers some disciples of John who lack information about the Holy Spirit (probably about his arrival at Pentecost rather than his existence). Obviously these men have been living under a different teaching or at least a teaching which has not been updated. But notice the question Paul asks them: Not, 'Who is your teacher?' but 'Into what, then, were you baptized?' Baptism was seen as the entry rite into their discipleship, constituting them as followers of John the Baptist.

To what extent, then, did John gather a community? John Hughes has argued that people associated with the eschatological prophet would naturally have remained as a group for a time and have adhered to his distinctive beliefs.⁴ It is clear that the very fact of John's role as the prophet who declared the One who was told to come would almost certainly have drawn those baptized by him into a conceptual community at least. They would want to hear what he had to say about the coming era, and they would align themselves with his message.

³ The historicity of the message, if not always the audience, in Matthew is generally accepted by scholars.

⁴ John H. Hughes, 'John the Baptist: Forerunner of God Himself, *Novum Testamentum* 14 (July 1972), 213.

John himself reinforced such a tendency by demanding the fruits of repentance. This made his message not merely intellectual but ethical, thus making it plain that he possessed teaching which had to be lived out in experience. In this light, a passage like Luke 3:10–14, which provides examples of his instructions to disciples, is less likely to be a creation of Hellenistic Christianity⁵ than an authentic cross-section of the sort of teaching he gave regarding the fruits of repentance which he demanded.

While it is apparent that John had disciples and that baptism was considered to be the means of entry into that discipleship, it is also true that the baptized formed two groups—those who remained physically with John and those who returned to their homes in far-flung areas. John obviously treated the former group as disciples, providing them with rules for fasting and teaching them prayers, among other things (Matthew 9:14; Luke 11:1). But those who left him and went back to their own towns and villages appear to have been in the majority. Could they still have been considered the Baptist's disciples, a part of the eschatological community he had formed?

If nothing else, we may at least assume that those who left John behind were profoundly influenced by their experience of having repented, been baptized by a prophet of God, and having heard his message. John had screened his candidates and had demanded an ongoing change of ethic. Candidates had probably been interviewed⁶ and had given solemn promises to follow the lifestyle demanded. Beyond this, John pointed to a mightier One to come, thus presumably assuring that those he baptized would remain in his teaching until the mightier One appeared. It hardly seems possible that the baptized would simply return to their previous occupations without a consciousness that a fundamental change had come into their lives.

But ancient practice provides us with further evidence. In Judaism, as in the Hellenistic world, there is ample room for a sort of 'remote' discipleship in which people could adhere to a teaching or ethic without being physically with their teacher.

⁵ Note especially Hartwig Thyen, 'Baptisma Metanoias eis Aphesin Hamartion', in *The Future of our Religious Past*, ed. James M. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 136.

⁶ That screening and interviews were part of John's procedure would seem to follow readily from the fact that he appeared to know which of the prospective candidates were evidencing the beginning fruit of repentance. So A. Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (London: Robert Scott, 1909); Jean Steinmann, *John the Baptist and the Desert Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 80.

While the contemporary references are to adherence to the way of a dead master (for example, John 9:28; cf. Luke 16:29, 31; 24:7; Mishnah *Aboth*. 1.12; 5.19; b.*Yom.* 4a; b.*Suk.* 28a; b.*Sot.* 13a; and the Qumran community's veneration of the Teacher of Righteousness), there is no reason why the same principle could not operate with a living master who was physically removed from his followers. Jesus himself sent at least one disciple away from him, though there is no indication that the man thus ceased to be his disciple (Luke 9:38–39; cf. John 5:14–15). The most common term for believers in the Book of Acts was 'disciple', though Jesus, while very much alive, was not present physically.

We may reasonably argue, therefore, that those baptized by John considered themselves to be adherents to his teaching, and thus to be disciples of John, regardless of whether or not they remained at the Baptist's side. The baptism of John had placed them within a prophetic-ethical teaching demanding a whole new lifestyle. It constituted a people who believed John (Matthew 21:25) and who undoubtedly saw themselves as a cleansed remnant awaiting the Coming One and the eschaton to follow.

It has long been held by many scholars that, just as all the others of those baptized by John became his disciples, so Jesus began his ministry as a disciple of John.⁷ While it is often argued that Jesus achieved his messianic consciousness only because of the influence of the Baptist, we need not take that extreme. If Jesus did begin as John's disciple, we could argue that he did so within his role as the Servant, that Jesus as a righteous human being would do the required righteous deed in aligning himself with God's prophet for his time, and that discipleship under John would guarantee that Jesus would be seen as being in harmony with John's teaching and in fact extending John's message to its fulfilment.

But can we safely assert that Jesus did accept discipleship

⁷ Some representatives of this view would include David F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, ed. Peter C. Hodges (1840; reprinted Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 233–234; Maurice Goguel, *The Life of Jesus* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933), 269–270; Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1956), 177–182; John A. T. Robinson, 'Elijah, John and Jesus', in *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 39ff.; W. R. Farmer, 'John the Baptist', *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 959; C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 272–275; M.-É. Boismard, 'Les Traditions Concernant Le Baptiste', *Revue Biblique* 70 (1963), 29; Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 38, 55; C. S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1986), 366.

under John (or at least allowed himself to be viewed in that way)? Let us consider some reasons why such a connection is not only possible but likely. First, as we have seen, John's baptism created adherents to his teaching—believers of John (Matthew 21:24–25). If Jesus did not place himself under John's teaching by being baptized, he would have been the only one who did not and would have contradicted the very demand made by the Baptist himself (Matt. 3:7ff.).⁸

Second, we find discipleship terminology in John the Baptist's description of Jesus in Matthew 3:11 and parallel passages. Kendrick Grobel sparked a great deal of debate with his article, 'He That Cometh After Me'.⁹ He argued that *erchetai opisō mou* means 'a follower of mine'. Against the traditional interpretation that the phrase relates to a time comparison (that is, 'he who will come next in time after me'), Grobel argued that the verb is present and should be interpreted as present, though a future sense is possible. Further, *opisō* is almost never temporal in contemporary literature.¹⁰ Grobel pointed out that John's later question from prison (Luke 7:18) did not refer to the one who comes after but simply to '*ho erchomenos*' because 'the one who comes after' would mean 'the disciple'.

Walter Wink, who argues that Matthew 3:11 does show Jesus to be John's disciple, has gone so far as to write that 'there is no other way to interpret his retention of *opisō mou* in 3:11.' Further, Wink argues that Matthew in Matthew 4:12, 17 is clearly showing Jesus as John's successor, the disciple who outshines his master.¹¹

In Mark 1:7 we have a further clue to a discipleship relationship between John and Jesus. This is the reference to 'sandals' and to John's unworthiness to untie them. Clear subordination is intended, but it is instructive that Judaism saw the task of untying a master's sandals as too demeaning for a disciple to perform (b.Ket. 96a). While this reference dates to a later period, there is little reason to doubt that it reflected long-standing custom.¹²

⁸ Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, 275, referring to Jesus as a disciple of John, writes: 'If, as the Synoptic Gospels report, he accepted baptism at his hands, how else should he be regarded?'

⁹ Kendrick Grobel, 'He that Cometh after Me', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 60 (December 1941), 397–401.

¹⁰ He pointed out that Bauer's lexicon finds no other temporal use for this word except this passage and its parallels. The most recent edition of Bauer cites III Km. 1:6, 24; Eccl. 10:14. Here each citation refers to succession and could serve as a parallel usage to Matthew 3:11 seen temporally. But the number of citations is small, and the word is never so used elsewhere in the New Testament.

¹¹ Wink, *John the Baptist*, 38.

¹² See the discussion in David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Arno, 1956), 266–267.

Matthew 3:13–17, the description of John's hesitation to baptize Jesus, has often been dismissed as a creation of the church to cover the embarrassment of the fact that Jesus received baptism from his forerunner. Matthew, however, shows no other signs of an anti-Baptist polemic, and one wonders why he would introduce one here. Some have noticed that the Baptist's reluctance in the account is strange. Even given that he had interviewed Jesus and discovered that he was the Messiah, why would John suddenly see *himself* as being in need of a baptism of repentance? We have no indication that John lived anything but a holy life to this point. It is not easy to believe that contact with the Messiah would now cause John to see himself as so personally sinful that he could no longer be considered part of the remnant unless he too was baptized.

If, however, the Baptist understood Jesus to be asking to become a disciple, the passage would make very good sense in its historical context. Assuming that John had indeed recognized Jesus as the Coming One, we would wonder what other response he could have made than to object, 'I need to be baptized by you', that is, 'I need to become *your* disciple.' Jesus' counter-argument that he needed to fulfil all righteousness (Matt. 3:15) is congruent with this interpretation, since 'doing righteousness', in the Old Testament sense meant 'carrying out the will of God'. Jesus, as the righteous man, would naturally see alignment with and submission to God's prophet as necessary in order to do God's will. Thus his baptism is not to be seen as a recognition of personal sin, nor as some sort of foreshadowing of his death, but as the logical act of a righteous man.

We have argued that John's baptism produced disciples of two types—those who stayed with John and those who went home but maintained a 'remote' conceptual and ethical discipleship. Further, we have considered evidence that Jesus himself initially became John's disciple through baptism.

Our discussion of the role of Matthew 3:10–17 and parallels as evidence that Jesus began as a disciple of John may have struck a discordant note with some readers. The Synoptic Gospels all present John's proclamation of the Coming One *before* they describe the baptism of Jesus. If Jesus was already numbered among John's disciples when John announced him ('he who comes after me'—Matt. 3:11), why did his baptism occur after the announcement (Matt. 3:13–17)?

Here the Fourth Gospel may be of some help, for it reflects a separate tradition with a number of peculiarities. First, the Gospel of John alone portrays the Baptist's declaration of Jesus as 'the lamb of God' (John 1:29). Second, there is every indication

that, for the Evangelist, the designations both of Jesus as the 'one who comes after me' and 'the lamb of God' (if we opt in favour of the authenticity of the latter) belong to the period *after* Jesus' baptism. The key is the reference in John 1:29 to 'the next day', that is the day when John declared Jesus to be the lamb of God. The previous day (1:26), John had used the designation 'one who comes after me'. Immediately following is John's testimony about his understanding of Jesus, including an oblique reference to Jesus' baptism (1:32). But notice that the Baptist is here referring to a past event not logically connected to either of the two days cited in 1:26 and 1:29. It seems likely that the Evangelist's source had the following chronology: the baptism of Jesus; an announcement regarding Jesus when he was not present; and a repeat announcement when Jesus was present.

Why, then, do the synoptics put the Baptist's declaration first and then the baptism of Jesus. It may simply be a function of grouping certain types of content. All of John's preaching is presented first to clear the way for the baptism of Jesus, which must lead immediately to Jesus' temptation. If this is the reason, the Synoptics are really saying nothing about chronology. The Fourth Gospel's account, which is more chronological, may well reflect the true order of events.

If Jesus began as a disciple of John, how did he achieve such greatness while John faded into obscurity? It will be our argument that the Baptist himself helped the process along by announcing Jesus as the Coming One. The whole issue of John's open avowal of Jesus has been a subject of sharp debate for many years. It is often asserted that such sayings were the creation of the church as part of an anti-Baptist polemic. This, of course, has always left us with the contradiction that the Gospels demonstrate a high regard for John. Let us again consider the Fourth Gospel in attempting to delineate further the true relationship between the Baptist and his greatest disciple.

That John and Jesus both practised baptism in reasonably close proximity at the same time, as John 3 relates, has increasingly been recognized as a reliable tradition.¹³ That rivalry would spring up

¹³ So, for example, Goguel, *Life of Jesus*, 275; W. F. Flemington, *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1948), 21-22; C. H. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 287; Boismard, 'Les Traditions Johanniques . . .', 35; Robinson, 'Elijah, John and Jesus . . .', 39-43; E. Bammel, 'The Baptist in Early Christian Tradition', *New Testament Studies* 18 (1971), 110; Pierson Parker, 'When Acts Sides with John', in *Understanding the Sacred Text*, ed. J. Reumann (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1972), 201-205.

between the followers of John and of Jesus was to be expected, but what is surprising, given customs of the day, is that Jesus became so popular so soon and yet that the rivalry was as subdued as it was.

Let us pick up the account at John 3:25. There have been many interpretations of this dispute over 'washings' (as well as attempts to emend 'with a certain Jew' to 'with those of Jesus' or 'with Jesus'¹⁴). The most reasonable explanation of the verse in its context is surely that this controversy dealt with the relative merits of the baptisms of various religious sects.¹⁵ Otherwise, the verse has little relation to the following description of rivalry between disciples of John and of Jesus.

The dispute about washings led to the argument of John's disciples (3:26ff.) that it was not right for Jesus to gather as many disciples as he did through baptism. Notice the language in 3:26. First, Jesus is described as the one who had been 'with' John, a further indication that he was understood to be John's disciple. Second, the disciples of John clearly understood Jesus to be the one concerning whom John had testified.

Did such a rivalry as is depicted in John 3:25ff. actually occur? To answer, we must assert that it is extremely probable that John's disciples were angry and had every right to be angry as they watched a disciple of their master surpass him in John's lifetime. The proverb of the day 'A disciple is not above his master' (Matt. 10:24), was to be taken seriously. One did not, in the space of less than a year, launch out on a parallel movement within hailing distance of one's original teacher and then gather more disciples than he did. In such a situation, John's disciples would have ample reason to be furious. Jesus had openly defied convention and thus belittled their master under whom he should have remained subservient.

This leads us to further questions: Why was the controversy not even more severe? Why did Jesus succeed in surpassing his highly esteemed master when there is no indication that he was doing miracles at the time nor preaching more dynamically than was John?

E. Stauffer has suggested that Jesus initially gathered disciples without controversy by baptizing as a proxy for John so that the baptized were seen as John's disciples.¹⁶ This, he admits, contradicts the account of John 3, which describes those baptized in Jesus' camp as Jesus' disciples. But comparing Stauffer's and the Fourth Gospel's

¹⁴ See Goguel, *Life of Jesus*, 274, who argues that 'with Jesus' was the reading John's source; compare J. N. Sanders and B. A. Mastin, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: A. & C. Black, 1968), 133.

¹⁵ So Boismard, 'Les Traditions Johanniques . . .', 34.

¹⁶ Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (New York: Knopf, 1960), 64-66.

accounts, the latter makes more sense—Jesus' baptismal practice made disciples of Jesus, thus instigating rivalry. If we follow Stauffer's account to its logical conclusion, we would find that, once the Baptist was in prison, Jesus claimed the disciples he had gathered as his own and used them as the basis of a mighty ministry. It is difficult to believe that this would not have led to open enmity between those loyal to John and those who chose to go with Jesus. Yet we find no evidence of any such enmity after John was arrested. It is more reasonable to assume that John 3 is correct—Jesus baptized disciples for himself, and the rivalry occurred before John's arrest.

Why, then, were there not pitched battles in the Judean desert between the two groups? Why was Jesus eventually allowed to usurp John's position? It is our argument that Jesus succeeded because John himself directed his own followers to Jesus. Let us look at the evidence. We have two separate strands of tradition which, though maligned as church-created, do agree strongly that John pointed to the one who would succeed him (Mark 1:7-8 and parallels; John 1:29-34). These form a perfectly logical explanation for Jesus' success alongside the Baptist, in an era when, ordinarily, Jesus would have been seen as a rebellious upstart for doing what he did.

Finally, we have supporting evidence from the apparently contradictory explanations of the reason why Jesus moved from Judea to Galilee. Mark 1:14 and Matthew 4:12 indicate that the move was connected to news that John had been arrested (so that, presumably, Jesus for safety's sake moved to a friendlier jurisdiction). John 4:1-3, however, states that Jesus went to Galilee when he learned that the Pharisees had heard he was baptizing more disciples than was John (though, as 4:2 relates, Jesus' disciples did the baptizing). Usually there is no real attempt to reconcile these accounts, although there is little against the idea that John had by this time been arrested.¹⁷

In fact, there is a way to reconcile the two accounts. We need to consider the likelihood that, with John arrested, the Pharisees were attempting to fan the flame of controversy between John's disciples and those of Jesus by pointing out how popular Jesus, the usurper, had become. John would no longer have been present to encourage the rise of Jesus and subdue the anger of his own followers at Jesus' actions. The more obstinate of John's followers, given John's situation in prison, might welcome an excuse to fight with Jesus,

¹⁷ So Sanders and Mastin, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 138; Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 165.

who remained free to gain further ground from their master. Thus Jesus left the scene in order to prevent further controversy, not that John could no longer make peace.

We have looked at a number of indications that it was John himself who directed his followers to his disciple, Jesus. If we accept this argument, is it possible that John saw his baptism as baptism into the Messiah, that John himself stood as a proxy for Jesus until Jesus could take over the ministry? (the opposite of Stauffer's position, above).

In considering this possibility, we must look at the strong place given in the Synoptic accounts and the Fourth Gospel to Isaiah 40:3 and to eschatology when discussing the Baptist. One solid rock in studies of John the Baptist is the agreement that John viewed his baptism as a preparation so that the Jews who participated in it could avert personal disaster in the coming judgment. The tradition that John pointed to a mightier One to come is also strong.

If we concede that John recognized Jesus to be the subject of his prophecies, the Messiah (something which continues to face debate), and saw himself as preparing the way (Isaiah 40:3) so that all mankind should see the glory of God (Isaiah 40:5), there is good reason to believe that John was gathering disciples in order to turn them over to Jesus. The transition from the era of John to the era of the Messiah was a gradual one, probably because John's followers were resistant to any thought of abandoning John. But the Baptist himself, through statements like, 'He must increase and I must decrease' (John 3:30), broke the conventions of the day, paving the way for Jesus' ministry to grow and flourish.

If we accept that John consciously baptized as the proxy to the Messiah, serving under the Messiah's ethic and pointing his followers to Jesus, then John's baptism becomes Christ's baptism, producing Christ's disciples. Far from 'Christianizing' John, the Gospels present a John who was already Christianized, who saw from the beginning that his baptism was the rite of the Messiah, producing 'Christian' disciples. John's baptism was Jesus' baptism. The only distinction between the two rites was that which exists between promise and fulfilment.