

Many readers of the blog will already be familiar with my long-time friend and colleague from Duke, Joel Marcus, one of the top New Testament scholars in America (or anywhere else, for that matter). Joel and I have known each other for over thirty years — since he started teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary, soon after I finished my PhD there. He is especially well known for his massive and learned two-volume commentary on the Gospel of Mark for the Anchor Bible commentary series.

Joel has now produced a full book on John the Baptist, both as he is portrayed in our Gospels (and Josephus) but also, of even more interest, as he can be reconstructed historically. What can we actually know about him? The book is the most authoritative account ever to appear, and will be the standard study for our generation. It is called John the Baptist in History and Theology.

Joel has kindly agreed to post a summary of the book and its key findings (some of them gratifyingly controversial) for us here on the blog. He will respond to comments and questions you have, either as they appear or in a separate post — to be determined. For now, here's what he has to say:

John the Baptist is portrayed in the New Testament primarily as Jesus's forerunner and witness. He prophesies that one superior to him—the Messiah from the line of David—is about to enter the stage of history, and he recognizes Jesus as that Messiah when Jesus comes to him to be baptized and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove. John's attitude of self-abnegation in relation to Jesus is epitomized by his statement in the Gospel of John: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

My book, however, argues that this picture reflects Christian theology as much as, or more than, historical memory. It is unlikely that John saw Jesus as the Messiah on the basis of what happened at Jesus's baptism. If he had, it would be difficult to explain a tradition found later in the Gospels of Matthew (11:2-6) and Luke (7:18-23) according to which John, in prison under sentence of death, sent messengers to Jesus to ask whether or not he was the Messiah. The tradition gives the impression that this was the first time that question had occurred to John, and it does not record that he was convinced by Jesus's answer. John, then, probably did not become a believer in Jesus's messiahship, either at Jesus's baptism or subsequently.

Rather than being focused on Jesus, John saw his own ministry of preaching and baptism as the turning point in salvation history. He himself was the "main man." When people came to him at the River Jordan and received baptism at his hands, they entered into the new age of God's dominion, in which they experienced forgiveness of sins—as symbolized by the "washing" of baptism. Early Christians were uncomfortable with this memory, since it challenged the centrality of Jesus, so they disconnected forgiveness from John's baptism and connected it instead to Jesus's death and resurrection. Matthew, for example, removes the phrase "unto forgiveness of sins" from the description of John's baptism (compare Matt 3:11 with Mark 1:4) and inserts it instead into a saying of Jesus about the purpose of his death (compare Matt 26:28 with Mark 14:24).

Forgiveness of sins is not the only thing the Christian tradition took away from John and gave to Jesus. Since eschatological cleansing and forgiveness are linked to the Holy Spirit in a well-known Old Testament passage, Ezekiel 36:25-27, it is probable that John and his followers thought his baptism conveyed not only forgiveness but also the Spirit. This is one

of the more radical claims in my book, since it contradicts a saying attributed to John in the Gospels, which contrasts his baptism in water with that of “the Coming One” (= the Messiah) who will baptize in the Spirit and in fire (Matt 3:12//Luke 3:16-17).

I argue, however, that the original form of this saying was, “I baptize you in water, but he will baptize you in fire.” The saying did not, in other words, mention the Spirit explicitly, and John probably thought that his water-baptism already imparted the Spirit. John saw his ministry, then, as one of atonement, salvation, and spiritual blessing. After him there would be only a mopping-up operation—the Messiah would arrive to enact judgment, separating the wheat (those sealed by John’s baptism for salvation) from the chaff, and consuming the latter in unquenchable fire. Those scholars and theologians who have contrasted John’s proclamation of judgment with Jesus’s proclamation of grace, then, have gotten things exactly reversed, at least as far as John was concerned: in his view, *he* was the apostle of grace.

That John interpreted his ministry through Ezekiel 36 is especially likely because that passage played a prominent role in the theology of the Dead Sea Sect, the Qumran community, and John probably belonged to that sect before striking out on his own. Other scholars have noted similarities between John’s theology and that of Qumran, but they have usually refrained from saying that John was an ex-Qumranian. I argue, however, that the similarities are too close to be explained by anything other than actual influence. Both John and the Qumran group, for example, use the same Old Testament passage, Isaiah 40:3, to interpret their presence in the same area of the Judean Wilderness, and both link this passage with water rites that are central to their theology. These are unique and distinctive features of John and the Qumran group, and they point not only to a common setting in Second Temple Judaism but also to a direct connection.

Who exactly, then, did John think he was, and what was his relation to Jesus? I accept the Gospel tradition that he regarded himself as the returning Old Testament prophet Elijah, who according to 2 Kings 2 was taken up to heaven while still alive. Because Elijah had not really died, he was expected to return at the end of the age. Some scholars, however, have suspected this identification of being an invention of the early Christians, since it fits so well with Christian theology: Elijah was expected to precede the Messiah, and Jesus was the Messiah; therefore Jesus’s forerunner John must have been Elijah.

But I offer a simple and elegant proof that John *did* think of himself in Elijah terms. Elijah is described in 2 Kings 1:8 as a hairy man wearing leather shorts, while John is described in the Gospels as a man wearing leather shorts and a coat of camel’s hair (Mark 1:6//Matt 3:4). The Gospel tradition is obviously modeled on the Old Testament one, but why the difference—hairy *man* versus hairy *coat*? My answer: because John was *not* hairy, yet wanted to model himself as much as possible on Elijah. If the Gospel tradition had instead invented the description of John out of whole cloth, it would have portrayed him as a hairy man, exactly like Elijah; the “close but no cigar” description of him wearing a hairy *garment* therefore probably reflects the historical record. And if John *did* think of himself as Elijah, he may have seen his star pupil Jesus not as the Messiah but as Elisha, the successor figure who inherited a double portion of Elijah’s spirit when the latter was taken up to heaven.

In a short concluding chapter, I take up the question of the implications of my findings for Christian faith. If John’s self-estimate conflicted with the estimate of him by Jesus and the early (and later) Christians, does that invalidate the faith that has portrayed him as Jesus’s

forerunner and witness? Not necessarily, I argue, comparing this Christian revisionism to the Christians' new way of reading the Old Testament as a prophecy of and testimony to Jesus. New revelations reconfigure old ones, just as great poets (like Dante) create their own predecessors (like Dante's Virgil). And, after all, which of us really knows the truth about our own purpose in the world?



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