

John the Baptist

- I. New Testament
- II. Judaism
- III. Christianity
- IV. Islam
- V. Literature
- VI. Visual Arts
- VII. Music
- VIII. Film

I. New Testament

Ever since Hermann Samuel Reimarus, research on John the Baptist has often been a “forerunner” of historical Jesus research and shared its methodological development. Within the “third quest” John is no longer viewed as a somewhat isolated predecessor, who prepares the way for Jesus, but as a prophet of eschatological restoration in the context of Second Temple Judaism.

1. Sources. The early material on John covers a broad range of texts, text types, and perspectives (Q source, Synoptics, Acts, Fourth Gospel, Josephus, a wide spectrum of Apocrypha from Jewish Christian, gnostic and other milieus, Justin Martyr, Pseudo-Clementines). Sources from Baptist circles have been (unconvincingly) postulated, e.g., in Luke 1. The NT writings interpret the Baptist in the light

of their christological premises. Texts that are not controlled by such premises have a potentially embarrassing effect within a Christian interpretative framework (e.g., John baptizing Jesus), so that they offer favorable conditions for applying the criterion of counter-tendency. Other criteria, such as the plausibility of John’s effect on the Jesus movement, are needed to get a more representative image. However, the historical picture will remain fragmentary.

2. Baptism. Although the synoptic narratives may add dramatizing elements, John’s preaching triggered a large conversion movement drawing broader sections of the population from Jerusalem and Judaea to the Jordan (Mark 1:4–5 par.; cf. Matt 3:7/Luke 3:7; Matt 21:32; Luke 7:29–30; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.118). The main reason for this resonance was the trenchant simplicity of John’s eschatological message, which offered a theocentric alternative to the dominant religious system and reduced its soteriology to the decisive matter of God’s judgment and grace. This message found its cultic enactment in an impressive rite that was connected with his name: the “baptism of John.”

Lustrations as an extension of Levite purity rites were widespread in the Second Temple period, e.g., in the DSS community. Josephus claims to have spent some sort of apprenticeship in the desert with a lustrating eremite by the name of Bannus (*Vita* 11–12). Such “Baptists,” who often withdrew from the cultic centers and entertained dualistic concepts of holiness, developed alternatives to the official concepts of atonement, thereby relativizing or replacing the cult of animal sacrifice. Since the early Christians did not invent a new rite but continued the baptism of John under transformed expectations, the ritual practice probably remained similar. This βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν (“baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”) differed from the usual acts of purification in that the immersion was administered only once by a baptizer and in that it embodied both the conversion of Israel’s remnant towards the Torah and God’s forgiveness of sins, i.e., his sparing the penitents from the imminent judgment of wrath and making them receptive to the gift of the spirit (Mark 1:4 par.; cf. Luke 1:16–17, 77; in a Hellenized adaption, Josephus, *Ant.* 18.117; for an apocalyptic analogy, cf. *Sib. Or.* 4.159–178). The baptism was no act of initiation into an elitist in-group. Rather, the baptized individuals would return to their normal life in new obedience to the will of God.

3. Message. If John’s baptism popularized and radicalized contemporary purification rites, his message radicalized and simplified the eschatological expectations of his day. His message is (with historical reliability) attested in Q 3:7b–9, 16b–17 (cf. Mark 1:7–8 parr.). It started with what may be called a void of covenantal history, symbolized by

the rocks out of which God can produce children for Abraham. The divine wrath has nullified any religious self-sufficiency, and there is only one difference that counts: the fruit worthy of repentance. God's fiery judgment is impending like the ax that is laid to the root of the trees.

Due to Christian typology, John is often seen as the harbinger of doom in contrast to Jesus as the messenger of mercy. However, John's warnings presupposed a God-given chance of salvation and the gathering of the just. Although the judgment motif seems to dominate his prophetic announcement, John also expected the outpouring of the spirit at the end of the days and was probably keen on ethical criticism and instruction (cf. Mark 6:17–18 par. and, in Hellenized versions, Luke 3:10–14; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.117). Presumably it was the temple elite and the Sadducean party John's harsh reproaches were aimed at, whereas the marginalized Jews felt sympathy and even Pharisees shared some ground with him (Mark 2:18 parr.).

There is some controversy on the identity of the imminent figure proclaimed by John. The number of judicial agents that have been proposed includes the Messiah, the Son of Man, or some unknown mediator. However, the wording and definitely bold imagery of Q as well as the prophetic and early Jewish background refer to God himself as eschatological judge (cf., e.g., Mal 3:19–21 [4:1–3]; Luke 1:76–77).

4. Self-Conceptualization. Widely perceived as a “real prophet” (Mark 11:32 parr.; Q 7:24–26), John fulfilled what this biographical pattern in biblical and contemporary Jewish literature set down. The desert as his stage (Mark 1:2–4 parr.; Q 7:24; cf. Luke 1:80), his garment (Mark 1:6 par.), and his diet (Mark 1:6 par.; cf. Q 7:33) attracted attention for their religious symbolism, although the frugal food, notwithstanding its inspiration for later Christian ascetics, was a part of desert sustenance. This particular style of life did not only express concern for purity but also kept its distance from the dominant social system due to utter dependence on Yahweh in accordance with the biblical traditions of Israel. The prophet shared his life with disciples (e.g., Mark 2:18 parr.; Matt 14:12; John 3:25), which were to be the object of intense, if somewhat speculative, exegetical theories on literature and history of a “Baptist sect.”

Against the Jordan background (cf. 2 Kgs 2:6–14), John's dress from camel's hair, which functioned as a prophetic status symbol in general (Zech 13:4), might refer to the role model of Elijah (cf. 2 Kgs 1:8). John was, to be sure, considered “more than a prophet” (Q 7:26) in that he functioned as God's very last messenger and mediator of salvation. The overall pattern of John's self-presentation was formed by Isa 40:3 (cf. Mark 1:3 parr.; John 1:23), which served as a catchword of religious re-

newal (cf. 1QS VIII,12–14; 4Q176 frg. 1; 1QS IX,19–20). More specifically, it was probably Malachi which was formative for John's self-enactment (cf. Mark 1:2; Q 7:27). From an early stage and in different contexts John is connected with the typological figure of Elijah redivivus (Mark 9:11–13; Matt 11:14; 17:10–13; Luke 1:16–17), which might even compete with Johannine christology (John 1:21). Whereas there are no texts from the Second Temple period which regard Elijah as the forerunner of the Messiah, Malachi definitely expects him as the restorer of Israel and the forerunner of YHWH's fiery judgment (Mal 3:1–5, 23–24 [4:5–6]; cf. Sir 48:10). It is plausible to assume that John re-enacted Elijah in light of Malachi, thereby preparing Israel for God's “coming and burning day” – a role that early Christians, not without considerable effort, adapted to their messianic beliefs.

5. Biographical Fragments. John's activity falls within the time frame 26–29 CE, perhaps only into the years 28/29 (cf. Luke 3:1–2). He roamed around the fords of the lower Jordan valley, but probably extended his activity to Samaria (John 3:23; cf. 4:38). According to a folkloric tradition preserved by Mark (6:17–29 par.; cf. Luke 3:19–20) as well as the more politically oriented report by Josephus (*Ant.* 18.109–119), John was a victim of the tetrarch Herod Antipas (ruling 4 BCE–39 CE). Amid the tensions with the Nabateans, not least stirred up by Antipas's matrimonial conflicts, John's preaching was feared to be incendiary so that the tetrarch had him decapitated in the fortress of Machaerus in Perea. This death sparked expectations about John's return (cf. Mark 6:14–16). The defeat Antipas suffered from the Nabatean king Aretas IV in 36 CE was said to be God's revenge for the murder of the popular preacher (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.116, 119).

Nothing reliable is known about John's descent and formative years. According to Luke's infancy narrative (Luke 1:5–80), which visualizes the significance of Christ's “forerunner” through biblical mimesis, John was born to the family of a Judean rural priest under Herod the Elder (ruling 37–4 BCE), his parents were named Zechariah and Elizabeth, and he was a kinsman of Jesus.

6. John and Jesus. Jesus joined the penitential movement, was baptized by John (Mark 1:9–11 parr.) and never withdrew his loyalty from the “greatest among those born of women” (Q 7:28; cf. Mark 11:27–33 parr.), although hypotheses about his alleged time as a lieutenant or personal disciple of the Baptist are contestable. Jesus, to be sure, was considered as John's successor in public opinion (cf. Mark 6:14 parr.; 8:27–28 parr.; Q 7:31–35), and he recruited his disciples among John's adherents (cf. John 1:35–42). The Baptist's eschatology proves to be the background of Jesus' own activity, its particular anthropological premises, theocentric perspectives, and ethical practice. It is fair to assume that

Jesus considered his announcement of the βασιλεία to come as the core of John's quest, now brought to its destination in dramatic fulfilment and in the light of grace. It is in this light that Jesus did not continue John's severe form of a "preparatory life", namely his baptism and fasting practice (cf. Mark 2:18–22 parr.). Whereas Jesus defined himself against the background of John's movement, it is less than probable that John, for his part, ever commented on Jesus. What the NT presents as the last point of (indirect) contact, John's inquiry through his disciples (Q 7: 18–19, 22–23), appears to be the starting point of the christological reinterpretation of John, which made him an outstanding witness to the Messiah Jesus.

7. New Testament Interpretations. The Baptist movement and its charismatic founder left their mark on early Judaism/Christianity (cf., e.g., Luke 3:15; 11:1; Acts 18:24–28; 19:1–7). In the course of interpretation by early Christian writers, John is "declining" for the benefit of Jesus (cf. John 3:30). Starting independently as a prophetic predecessor in Mark, he makes first contact through his embassy in Q, acknowledges Jesus messianic position at the baptism in Matthew (3:14–15) or in his mother's womb in Luke (1:41–44), eventually to witness Christ, even with regard to his pre-existence, in John (e.g., 1:6–8, 15). For all the narrative writings of the NT, John bridges the ancient age of Israel and the new era that has dawned with Jesus (cf., e.g., Luke 16:16; Acts 1:21–22; 13:23–25; John 3:25–30; 10:40–42). Whereas the Synoptics develop the role model of Elijah as forerunner of Christ and situate him in the history of salvation (cf. Matt 11:12–14), the Fourth Gospel, probably confronted with Baptist veneration (in Syria?), treats of John in a comparative and relativizing way, thereby rendering the last prophet the first confessor. The NT presents a theological, not a historical memory of John the Baptist, but in view of his initial and inspiring impact on Jesus and the Jesus movement, even historically speaking, he marks the "beginning of the gospel."

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