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JOHN THE BAPTIST AND HIS REDACTORS: ASSESSING THE HISTORICAL CRITICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

BY

GREGORY MICHAEL FEULNER

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF
JOHN THE BAPTIST AND HIS REDACTORS:
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The figure of John the Baptist has been the center of much discussion among historical critical scholars in their reconstruction of the historical Jesus and of the early church. In the process, historical critical scholars have offered a reconstruction of John the Baptist in order to determine which features of John the Baptist recorded by the Gospel writers are historically accurate and which features are products of their own unique beliefs. The reconstruction maintains that John the Baptist was a strong independent figure who posed a threat to the early church's most basic conviction that Jesus was the preeminent Son of God, resulting in the divergent accounts seen in the Gospels which are attempts at explaining away the embarrassment John caused. The present study documents and assesses the historical critical reconstruction of John the Baptist and addresses the issue of whether or not the biblical text justifies such a reconstruction. The study finds the historical critical reconstruction to be inadequate in a number of fundamental areas. The study demonstrates further that it is not the Gospel writers but historical critical scholars who have manipulated John the Baptist to conform to their own preconceived beliefs and conviction about the person of Jesus.

Chapters 1-2 document and explain the arguments in support of the historical critical reconstruction. The first chapter functions as a brief introduction establishing the parameters of the thesis and providing an outline of the issues to be investigated. Chapter 2 explores the three major issues that historical critical scholars see as evidence that John

the Baptist was a problem for the early church. These three issues form the center of discussion for the entire study. Here the main arguments provided by historical critical scholars in support of their reconstruction are documented and explained.

Chapters 3-4 assess the historical critical reconstruction and provide an assessment and explanation for the ministry of John the Baptist from the Gospel narratives themselves. Chapter 3 assesses whether or not the historical critical reconstruction offers satisfactory reasons for seeking an alternative explanation for understanding John the Baptist in the Gospels. This is accomplished by identifying key features of the historical critical reconstruction and demonstrating how they fail to account for the totality of the evidence found in the biblical texts. Chapter 3 also provides initial discussion in support of alternative explanations to that of the historical critical reconstruction. Chapter 4 elaborates on these alternative explanations and offers an exposition of John the Baptist in the Gospel accounts. This chapter seeks to understand the Gospel accounts on their own terms, rather than viewing them through the lens provided in the historical critical approach. This chapter aims at elucidating the three features of John the Baptist's ministry that are commonly understood as problems by setting them within their appropriate contexts in the individual Gospel narratives. The chapter demonstrates that John the Baptist played an integral role in redemptive history and was important for the early church's formation and understanding of Jesus. As such, John's ministry stood not as a threat, but as a signal for the people of God's eschatological comfort and deliverance.

הנני שֹלֵח מלאכי ופנה־דרך לפני

...οὗτός ἐστιν περὶ οὗ γέγραπται

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ABBREVIATIONS

BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
BDB	Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic: Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008.
BibSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
DSD	*Dead Sea Discoveries*
DOTP	Boda, Mark J. and J. Gordon McConville. *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*. Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2012.
ESV	English Standard Version
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JGRChJ	*Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism*
JSNTS	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement*
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
TrinJ	*Trinity Journal*
TynBull	*Tyndale Bulletin*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING THE PROBLEM

Introduction and Overview

Historical critical scholars[1] have often cast doubt upon the Gospel writers' depiction of John the Baptist as a figure who was subservient to Jesus. The view is frequently maintained that the real John the Baptist is obscured in the Gospels because he is a problem for the early church. The general consensus holds that "there are as many Baptists as we have sources."[2] The scenario has been drawn in a number of ways, but the most basic entails a portrait of John the Baptist as a prominent figure whose teaching and practices presented a threat to the early church's exaltation of Jesus as the Messiah. The influence of John the Baptist was so prevalent, and his association with Jesus so undeniable, that the Gospel writers could not possibly ignore it. When they recorded their

[1] In this study, historical criticism is understood in a more narrow sense as that method of biblical interpretation which seeks to explain biblical data "in terms of natural laws" which "[exclude] the possibility of supernatural intervention" (William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and updated ed. [Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004], 52). It is that method of study which seeks to uphold J. P. Gabler's classic program for biblical studies in which "dogmatic theology" and "biblical theology" are separated in an attempt to establish the historical situation of an event (or events) without the hindrance of parochial and dogmatic interests. The term "historical criticism" is thus understood in this study as that discipline of biblical studies which seeks to explain historical events without reference to God in a closed system of cause and effect; see John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980): 133-158; Ernst Troeltsch, "On the Historical and Dogmatic Methods in Theology," trans. provided by Jack Forstman (accessed at http://faculty.tcu.edu/grant/hhit/Troeltsch, On the Historical and Dogmatic Methods.pdf) from Ernst Troeltsch, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1922): 2:728-753; see also Heikki Räisänen's discussion of J. P. Gabler's influence on subsequent research in biblical studies in idem, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 11-41.

[2] Catherine M. Murphy, *John the Baptist: Prophet of Purity for a New Age* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 2.

respective accounts on the life of Jesus, they had to manipulate John[3] to fit into their procrustean bed, altering and downplaying the features that weakened the case for Jesus' Divine Messiahship. As a result, the historical picture of John the Baptist is distorted and in his place is found a submissive and lowly John. This leaves the interpreter with divergent and contradictory accounts of John the Baptist's ministry in the Gospel narratives. John, it is claimed, is not a celebrated figure of redemptive history, but a problem for the early church.[4] The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that this long and widely-held notion regarding John the Baptist in the Gospels lacks sufficient grounding. It will be demonstrated that the portrait provided by the Gospel writers is a sufficient and satisfactory explanation for the ministry of John the Baptist and is not in conflict with the sources (Old or New Testament) or with available historical data concerning him (e.g., Josephus). The burden of proof lies on the person who proposes to demonstrate how it is that the text, or any other source of historical data, would require an alternative explanation. Then the question can be answered as to who it is that depicts John accurately, *the Gospel writers* or *their critics*?

In order to demonstrate this, a review of the major claims made by these scholars will be given. This will be followed by an analysis and examination of these claims in light of the biblical data. Following this section, a positive defense of the Gospel accounts of John's ministry will be provided. The sources used for this study will be limited to

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[3] John the Baptist is referred to throughout this study as "John the Baptist," "the Baptist," and often simply as "John." Clarification is provided where the referent might be in doubt.

[4] "Since mention of John the Baptist in the New Testament is obviously overlaid with a developing Christian insistence on Jesus' superiority, we can suppose that the issue of John himself was a problem for the early church" (Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist Within Second Temple Judaism* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1997], 5); statements of this sort abound in studies on John the Baptist.

several recent works on the subject with attention to some of the more important and significant studies over the last century. This is due to the fact that available literature on John the Baptist is vast, and it would be impossible to give sufficient attention to the issues under examination, if even half the available material received consideration.[5] Not every source will receive equal attention, but those cited will be used as they become relevant to the issue at hand. To begin this study, an introduction to the problem is provided by way of a brief overview, with a more detailed examination to follow in the next chapter.

The Baptist of History: Introducing the Problem

Over the course of the last two centuries, biblical scholars have frequently been preoccupied with the study of the historical Jesus: who he was, what he taught, and what role the New Testament writings play in revealing (and concealing) facts about him. In the process of understanding the Jesus of history, the figure of John the Baptist has received quite a bit of attention.[6] He functions as an essential figure in Jesus' ministry, yet he is said to have presented a number of problems for the early church. Utilizing the *criterion of embarrassment*, many scholars sift through different features of the Gospels in order to determine their historical reliability on the reasonable supposition that the early church would not go "out of its way to create the cause of its own embarrassment."[7]

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[5] "The bibliography on John the Baptist is enormous" (John P. Meier, "John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel," *JBL* 99/3 [1980]: 383 n. 1).

[6] "The history of John the Baptist has therefore served as the seemingly secure bedrock on which the reconstruction of the history of Jesus could proceed" (Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* [London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968], ix).

[7] John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1:169.

Thus, embarrassing features function as markers which establish to one degree or another the reliability of historical claims, the validity of such claims ranging from *possible* to *highly likely*.[8] The following aspects of John's ministry have been considered historically reliable because of the supposed embarrassment they caused for the early church. These facts are commonly identified as posing a problem for the Gospel writers: *the baptism of Jesus by John*, *the popular identification of John with Elijah*, and *John's uncertainty about Jesus' identity*. These are features, it is alleged, that could not be in the Gospels by the author's design. They must therefore have been an important part of the oral tradition or so well-attested in the first-century that they could not be left out and thus needed explanation.

This situation is a conundrum for the Gospel writers who would have "considered John's centrality at the origin of the church a threat."[9] Their only choice was to embrace the facts of John's ministry and do what they could to present it in palpable terms, favorable to their defense of Jesus as the Messiah. The situation in the Gospels, as John Meier sees it, is that "each evangelist develops a highly individual interpretation of the Baptist" so that "most often the interpretation aims at neutralizing the Baptist's independence to make him safe for Christianity."[10] What the New Testament writers do then, is not present John as he actually was, but as they would have him for their own

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[8] Meier gives five primary criteria for establishing the historicity of an event, with the caveat that "the criteria of historicity will usually produce judgments that are only more or less probable; certainty is rarely to be had" (Ibid., 1:167).

[9] Taylor, *The Immerser*, 322.

[10] Meier, "Matthew's Gospel," 383-384.

purposes. Their solution is to present John as Jesus' inferior, but even so, they apparently did not do a very careful job of it. As C. H. H. Scobie writes of John:

> We are constantly reminded of his inferiority to Jesus, but the fact that he continued his ministry after the baptism of Jesus, and the fact that when in prison he appears not yet to have decided whether Jesus was the Coming One or not suggest that he was in fact more of an independent religious figure than the New Testament allows.[11]

How is it that the New Testament writers were not able to see the glaring contradictions within their own narratives? Joan Taylor does not see this as accidental, writing,

> The New Testament is a remarkable collection of documents. Not only does it include redactions that seek to convince us of a particular understanding of history, but the men who wrote the Gospels faithfully included sayings and stories that could themselves invalidate their interpretation of history.[12]

Taylor's study argues for a perspective on John that sees him as a pious Jew, zealous for the law. John is a lot like the Pharisees of his day, living in strict accordance to the law, and not to be associated with "formative Christianity."[13] These scholars vary in their opinions on why exactly the New Testament writers came to "Christianize" John (e.g., apologetic against a Baptist sect, a necessity to conform to Jesus' own positive estimation of John), but this is secondary to the primary issue which is the claim that the John of history is different from the John depicted in the Gospels. The next section will provide an overview of three common problems identified by these scholars, leaving analysis and examination for the next chapter.

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[11] C. H. H. Scobie, *John the Baptist* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 15-16.

[12] Taylor, *The Immerser,* 321.

[13] Ibid., 317.

Problematic Accounts in the Gospels

The first of the three major problems faced by the Gospel writers regards the problem of Jesus' baptism. This is regarded by most scholars as an almost certain historical reality[14] because there is no explanation as to why such an awkward incident would otherwise be included in the Gospels. The early church, as Taylor writes, "would have left it out if they could."[15] The problem with this event is that Jesus, who is the Divine Son of God, submits to a baptism which presupposes the sinfulness of the person to which it is administered, that is, "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Mark, as it is supposed, records this event as it happened without alteration (Mark 1:9-11), leaving the embarrassing situation awkwardly hanging for the other three Gospel writers to fix. The other writers then try to explain away the obvious tension by making it into a necessity of Jesus' mission (Matthew 3:13-17), or by removing John from the scene entirely (Luke 3:21-22), or even completely removing any notion of baptism whatsoever from the event of the Spirit's descent upon Jesus (John 1:29-34). Why would the accounts be so different if Jesus' baptism was in accordance with a united plan of God? The implied answer is that the Gospel writers are embellishing the historical facts in the interest of constructing their own theologies, in accordance with their own agendas.

The second major problem the Gospel writers face is the popular identification of John as Elijah. The divergent accounts on this matter indicate an uncertainty among the writers of the Gospels as to how to deal with this problematic issue. In addition, the

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[14] E. P. Sanders lists this event as the first among "several facts about Jesus' career *and its aftermath* which can be known beyond doubt," or at least as "almost indisputable" (E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* [London: SCM Press, 1999], 11).

[15] Taylor, *The Immerser*, 268.

problem of John's identification with Elijah has two sides. If it is historically true that John was considered the eschatological prophet Elijah, then the case for Jesus' superiority to John could be significantly diminished in the eyes of the people for whom the Gospels were written. How could Jesus be superior to so great a figure as John, the eschatological prophet? This fact would have been a great issue of tension for the Gospel writers. Further, there is also a problem if the Elijianic status of John is a *theological* supposition of the New Testament writers. Since Elijah is proclaimed to be the forerunner to YHWH in Malachi 4:5-6, it precludes the possibility of him being the forerunner to the Messiah. To have John function in this way is to introduce a theological novelty which stands in contradiction to the Old Testament (and to John's own ministry). Further, the notion of Elijah as forerunner to the Messiah is without support in contemporary Jewish literature of the day and can only be regarded as a purely Christian construction.[16] In view of the twofold nature of this problem, the Gospel writers can provide no satisfactory answer to the problem of John's association with Elijah. The result is found in the differing accounts offered by the Gospel writers, yielding conflicting explanations.

The third major problem faced by the Gospel writers is seen in the account of John's uncertainty over the identity of Jesus. In Matthew 11:2-19 (par Luke 7:18-35), while John is in prison, he sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he is "the one to come" or if they should expect another. This is followed later in the passage with high praise of John offered by Jesus. The first problem this passage presents is that John, the great eschatological forerunner, expresses uncertainty about the identity of the figure his

[16] Morris M. Faierstein, "Why do the Scribes Say that Elijah Must Come First?" *JBL* 100/1 (1981): 75-86; see also Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "More About Elijah Coming First," *JBL* 104/2 (1985): 295-296.

entire ministry functions as a preparation for. There is no reason, it is argued, for Matthew or Luke to want to include this into their account. It is a problem that challenges the legitimacy of Jesus' Messiahship (and if not that, the reliability of John as a prophet of God). Whatever the case may be, the divine authority of Jesus' mission is called into question. The second problem is in Jesus' own description of John, whom he describes as "more than a prophet," adding, "among those born of women none is greater than John." Again, it is argued that high praise of this sort would not be included by Matthew or Luke by design. The incident must have been so well-known among the people or have become so much a part of the Christian tradition that they were compelled to include it in their accounts, as embarrassing as it was. The account so blatantly reveals the greatness of John, and the uncertainty surrounding the identity of Jesus, that it had to be altered to defend Jesus' Messiahship and superiority to John. Thus, again, the historical situation is not preserved in tact by the Gospel writers.[17]

In this brief overview it has been shown how the Gospel accounts are regarded by many scholars as distortions of the historical situations they reconstruct. There is also another way of explaining these apparent contradictions.[18] Some, like Walter Wink, apply a redaction critical method to their interpretation as they attempt to draw out the theological character and purpose of the narrative. He proposes that the writers should not be held to a standard as if they were attempting "to preserve accurate records" since they

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[17] However, one scholar notes that what is most striking about this passage is not the alterations made, but that the early church allowed such an embarrassing account to survive at all (Wink, *John the Baptist*, 25).

[18] While the concern of this study is directed at the historical critical reconstruction of John the Baptist *in particular*, the *broad concern* of this study is with the integrity of the Gospel accounts. In this way Wink's study becomes relevant even if it is from a redaction critical perspective.

"were not interested in scientific history, but salvation."[19] For Wink, "the Gospels themselves preclude a purely historical solution since they are concerned with John primarily from a theological point of view."[20] Wink's desire to present the Gospel writers in a more favorable light is commendable, but he still retains the same bifurcation between history and theology, as if the Gospel writers did not intend to record accounts which were simultaneously faithful to history and theology. In light of this, Wink's classic study on John the Baptist will serve to support the arguments laid out in the following chapters at some junctures, while at others, his study will be the object of criticism. The next chapter will explore the problems laid out above in further detail with an accompanying analysis of the biblical data.

[19] Ibid., x.

[20] Ibid., 111.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROBLEM OF JOHN THE BAPTIST:

A HISTORICAL CRITICAL RECONSTRUCTION

This chapter seeks to explore in further detail the problems laid out in the last chapter with an accompanying analysis of the biblical data. The last chapter offered an introduction into some of the attendant problems advanced by many scholars in accepting the historical reliability of John the Baptist's portrayal in the Gospel accounts. According to these scholars, the great flaw of the Gospel writers' creative works of redaction is that their portraits of John still retain to some degree or another his true historical image. These blemishes in their accounts lend evidence to the idea that he posed a problem for the early church. Internal inconsistencies both within the individual Gospel accounts and between the different Gospel accounts leave a trace of the historical picture which can only be pieced together by a process of reconstruction. The aim of this chapter is to examine in further detail these alleged inconsistencies through an examination of the three problems identified previously. The backdrop for understanding these problems, and why they are problems to begin with, is in understanding the theological commitments of the early church.

The Gospel writers wrote both *for* the early church and *from* the tradition of the early church which saw Jesus as the Divine Son of God, as Israel's promised Davidic Messiah in fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures. As the exalted Son of God, Jesus

could be inferior to no one. The figure of John the Baptist presented a challenge to this belief and hence to the Gospel writers' theological interests. In order to safeguard their construction of Jesus, the Gospel writers had to alter the historical portrait of John the Baptist in the process. The final accounts of these writers that have come down to the modern interpreter are in need of reconstruction in order to peel back the theological layers of early church traditions in order to find the true core of historical reality. The situation, as it is maintained by these scholars, is that the John the Baptist of history was a strong and independent prophet who saw himself as one standing at the final climax of history, proclaiming the imminent wrath of God to come, while the Baptist of the Gospel accounts was made into a subservient forerunner, who had no significance in and of himself, but only in his relation to Jesus. The problems explored below will be examined in light of this apparent challenge which John the Baptist presented to the early church's conception of Jesus. In the process not every possible issue will be examined but only those which satisfy the aim of this study: to discern whether or not an alternative explanation is needed for understanding John the Baptist as a historical figure other than what is provided in the Gospel accounts.

The Problem of Jesus' Baptism

The first problem John the Baptist presented for the early church is the problem of Jesus' baptism by John. This was problematic for two reasons. The first and most basic (as already mentioned) is that it implied a subservient relationship of Jesus to John the Baptist. Jesus went to John for Baptism, and not the other way around. The second problematic implication in this event is the implication that Jesus was in need of

repentance, being a sinner himself. Given the nature of John's baptism, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, this implication would have been unavoidable. Such an account must have been cause for great embarrassment, since the early church maintained that Jesus was the sinless Son of God. Due to this fact, the historical reliability of the event is typically not questioned.[21] The Gospel writers' solution to the problems caused by this event was to alter the scenario, making John subservient to Jesus and shifting the focus of the account from John's baptism to a theological commission of Jesus' ministry by God. The event could then be placed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry as an event inaugurating the Son of God's divinely sanctioned ministry. Thus, the account of Jesus' baptism is not an affirmation of a historical event, but a theologically motivated reconstruction. Joan Taylor's comments are representative of the opinion of many scholars when she says:

> Jesus' baptism by John has come to be understood as one of the key problems that the early Church needed to 'explain' in the Gospels. It was this problem that gave rise to the apologetic modifications of the Baptist story. No one would have invented something so painfully hard to justify.[22]

It was so obviously a problem for the early church that later groups who identified themselves as followers of Jesus attempted to rid themselves of the dilemma entirely. For example, Taylor cites the *Gospel of the Nazareans* where Jesus' mother and brothers urge him to come out to John's baptism, to which he replies: "How have I sinned, that I would

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[21] John Meier expresses the opinion that "the invention of the incident by the early church seems nigh impossible" (John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* [New York: Doubleday, 1994], 2:103).

[22] Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist Within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1997), 5.

need to be baptized by him?"[23] The remainder of this section will examine the individual Gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus and the claims made by historical critical scholars as to why these accounts give evidence for theologically motivated redactions of the historical situation.

Most scholars regard Mark as the first of the canonical Gospels and the one from which the other Gospel accounts acquire material to build upon.[24] Such is taken to be the the case, at any rate, with the account of Jesus' baptism by John since a comparison of the Gospel accounts is frequently understood as revealing a progression of development. In Mark's foundational account, "it is the theophany, and not John's baptism by itself, that reveals the truth about Jesus."[25] John's baptism is relegated to the peripheral and becomes secondary so that it only functions as the medium for the anointing of Jesus. The theophany in its earliest known form is "a Christian composition interpreting the significance of Jesus' person and mission vis-à-vis his potential rival John."[26] This early account is, therefore, not a description of Jesus' experience but the early church's attempt to counter the impression that Jesus was subordinate to John and in need of repentance. The subsequent Gospel accounts continue this pattern of creative reinterpretation.

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[23] *Gospel of the Nazareans* in *New Testament Apocrypha I: Gospels and Related Writings*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge, England: Clarke, 1991), 160, frag. 2 (Jerome, *Adv. Pelag.* III 2); see Taylor, *The Immerser*, 5.

[24] E.g., Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (New York: Abingdon, 1970), 56-63; Robert Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels: Origin and Interpretation*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001), 49-96; D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), 94-98, 103.

[25] Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:107.

[26] Ibid.

In Matthew's account (3:13-17), Jesus comes to John to be baptized by him, but John tries to prevent him, being in need of baptism himself by Jesus. He yields to Jesus' request only because Jesus assures him that such an action is necessary "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:13-15) as part of a grand plan of God. Verses 14-15 are inserted by Matthew to resolve the embarrassing dilemma, filling in what Mark's brief account left to be desired:

> But John would have prevented him, saying, "I have a need to be baptized by you and are you coming to me?" 15 But Jesus, answering him, said "Let it be so now, for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then John permitted him.[27]

Matthew draws out, apparently, what Mark conveyed in his insertion of the theophany, and he makes it clear that "Only at Jesus' bidding does John permit the baptism to proceed."[28] The true historical significance of John's baptism of repentance is thus obscured and made into a subservient instrument in service to Matthew and Mark's depiction of Jesus as the Messiah.

The Gospels of Luke and John take a considerably different route in evading the problem. Luke ignores the problem by having John imprisoned in his narrative before Jesus is baptized, and when Jesus is baptized, it is done so "when all the people" are baptized, pushing the focus of baptism further into the peripheral. "Luke uses a rather clever ploy that dodges rather than denies the embarrassing datum."[29] He "simply mentions in passing, in an almost off-handed way, that Jesus was baptized," and then, he

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[27] All translations in this study are the author's own, unless otherwise noted.

[28] Ibid., 2:102.

[29] Ibid.

"conveniently omits the name of the Baptizer."[30] In the Gospel of John, the theophany becomes the focus so much so that Jesus' baptism disappears from the account entirely (John 1:32-33). In addition (and in direct contradiction to Mark), the theophany is not even directed to Jesus but to John the Baptist. Evidently, John wants to take the tradition a step further and show that Jesus does not need to be informed of his own Sonship.[31] Collectively, what "all the traditions aim at" is "damage control, to cope with this problematic but incontrovertible fact."[32]

The Problem of Elijah

Another problem the Gospel writers faced was the problem of John's identification with Elijah. Within the broad sweep of studies on the person and ministry of John the Baptist, studies and theories on the relationship of Elijah to John are the most prevalent. The following examination narrows the focus of that relationship as it is depicted in the Gospels to two specific concerns: 1. the issue of John's identification as Malachi's Elijianic forerunner in the Synoptics, and 2. the unique challenges that the Gospels of Luke and John bring for the interpreter. The following will examine these two issues in that order.

Malachi's Elijianic Forerunner

The importance of Malachi for the role of John the Baptist has been well established. Two passages from this short book are referenced in the Synoptic Gospels in connection to the eschatological significance of the ministry of John the Baptist. The first

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.; cf. Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), 91.

[32] Taylor, *The Immerser*, 263.

passage, Malachi 3:1a, describes the beginning of God's solution to his people's unfaithfulness to the covenant. It describes a day when God will visit his people for their purification, sending a messenger first to prepare for his coming: "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me" (ESV). That messenger and his activity is described further in the second passage from Malachi in 4:5-6 ESV, which says:

> Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

In his infancy narrative, Luke alludes to both passages from Malachi in a single verse. In Luke 1:17, Gabriel proclaims to Zechariah that John will go before the Lord God to prepare for him a people and to do so "in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to the children."[33] Later, in Zechariah's prophecy, John is called "the prophet of the Most High" who will "go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (1:76). Other texts in the Synoptic Gospels explicitly identity John with Malachi's messenger of the Lord (Matthew 11:10 = Luke 7:27; cf. Mark 1:2) and with Elijah (Matthew 17:12-13 = Mark 9:13; cf. Matthew 11:14).[34] While most of these scholars agree that Matthew and Mark present John the Baptist in their accounts as Elijah *redivivus*, there is a considerable difference of opinion with regard to Luke, so that his Gospel will be given separate treatment further below.

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[33] Cf. Sir. 48:10.

[34] The messenger of YHWH in 3:1 and the Elijianic forerunner mentioned in 4:5 are the same person. What is disputed by some scholars is whether or not this was included in Malachi's original prophecy. It is beyond the concern of this study to determine whether or not Malachi's final note on Elijah is a later addition. The relevancy of the passage for this study is in the New Testament's use and understanding of Malachi in its final form, the form as it is presently.

Since the issue was initially raised by J. A. T. Robinson,[35] a number of scholars have pointed out that the expectation of an Elijah-figure who would precede the Messiah is not found in Malachi or in any other contemporary source, and thus, is a Christian innovation. In Morris Faierstein's important essay, "Why do the Scribes Say that Elijah Must Come First?" he challenges "the assumption that the concept of Elijah as forerunner of the Messiah was a well known and widely accepted Jewish idea in Jesus' day."[36] After an examination of Jewish literature written during the Second Temple Period,[37] Faierstein concludes that "almost no evidence has been preserved which indicates that the concept of Elijah as forerunner of the Messiah was widely known or accepted in the first century."[38] The most damaging result of his critique concerns the Synoptic writers' understanding of Malachi 4:5-6. The essay shows that the idea of Elijah as forerunner to the Messiah "is not found in these verses if they are read without *a priori* assumptions,"[39] arguing that these verses contain no reference "to the Messiah or any other non-divine being who may be identified with the Messiah."[40]

The critique he offers of Matthew and Mark's transfiguration account, from which the title of the article is derived, presents two glaring issues which further complicate the

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[35] J. A. T. Robinson, "Elijah, John and Jesus," *NTS* 4 (1958): 263-281; see also Joseph Fitzmyer, "The Aramaic 'Elect of God' Text from Qumran Cave 4," in Fitzmyer, *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* (London, Chapman, 1971), 137; John H. Hughes, "John the Baptist: The Forerunner of God Himself," *Novum Testamentum* 14 (1972): 191-218.

[36] Morris M. Faierstein, "Why do the Scribes Say that Elijah Must Come First?" *JBL* 100 (1981): 75; see Dale Allison's response to Faierstein, "Elijah Must Come First," *JBL* 103 (1984): 256-258, and Fitzmyer's response to Allison, "More About Elijah Coming First," *JBL* 104 (1985): 295-296.

[37] Faierstein examines literature of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, Targum, Talmud, and Midrash.

[38] Faierstein, "Elijah Must Come First," 86.

[39] Ibid., 77.

[40] Ibid.

case for understanding John's role as the Elijianic forerunner to the Messiah. First, since Malachi's eschatological forerunner was to go before YHWH himself, and not the Messiah,[41] Matthew and Mark have either misapplied Malachi 4:5-6, or, they have produced a new concept previously unknown. Second, the fact that the disciples ask Jesus the question, "Why do the scribes say Elijah must come first?" implies that Malachi's prophecy about Elijah was not understood during the time of Jesus' ministry in this way. If the passage were understood in this way, the disciples would not need to ask, "Why do the scribes say Elijah must come first?" because they could simply point to Malachi 4:5-6 and say, in effect, "We know that Elijah must come first, because Malachi 4:5-6 says as much." This gives good reason to believe that such a concept was not taught or believed by Jesus and his disciples but was a creation of the early church or later redactors.

Faierstein's article has been met with some criticism by Dale Allison Jr.,[42] but even his critique concedes the most damaging element of Faierstein's argument, namely, that Malachi's prophecy contains no such notion as a forerunner to a messianic figure. With that, it is said that the Synoptic Gospels present an irresolvable problem: either John the Baptist cannot be the Elijianic forerunner of Malachi, or, he could not have been the forerunner to Jesus the Messiah. The problem of Elijah as forerunner reveals an inconsistency with the Old Testament and the consequence of either scenario presents a contradiction within the Gospels, creating a problem for the integrity of their respective accounts.

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[41] Further, Elijah's role is seen "in relation to 'the great and terrible day of the Lord,' a phrase which implies a particular time and not a person" (ibid.).

[42] Allison, "Elijah," 256-258.

John the Baptist's Role as Elijah in Luke's Gospel

The presentation of John the Baptist in his relation to Elijah in the Gospel of Luke offers its own unique problems. For one thing, there is a great deal of discussion about the origin and function of the infancy narrative and its relation to the rest of Luke-Acts. This inevitably affects the conclusions drawn on the matter of John the Baptist and Elijah. Some see an internal inconsistency in Luke's presentation of John the Baptist between the infancy narrative and the rest of Luke-Acts. It is posited that the Baptizer of the infancy narrative is a strong and prominent figure, whereas in the rest of Luke-Acts he disappears from the scene.[43] Representative of this perspective is Hans Conzelmann, who asserts that "the analogy between the Baptist and Jesus," which is so emphasized in the infancy narrative, is "deliberately avoided in the rest of the Gospel."[44] He sees no eschatological significance for John, who belongs to the old aeon, completely severed from the time of Jesus.[45] In his view, John is not the Elijianic forerunner of Matthew and Mark, nor a forerunner to the Messiah at all. Other scholars see internal inconsistencies of a different sort, seeing traces of a Baptist source in the infancy narrative which contradict Luke's own views. Thus, proclamations like the one found in Luke 1:17 which announce the ministry of John as the forerunner Elijah, are not really representative of Luke's or the early church's theology. This is the opinion of Martin Öhler, who writes: "By no means

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[43] "In certain passages there is a direct contradiction" with features that appear in the the infancy narrative and "do not occur again in either the Gospel or in Acts" (Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* [New York: Harper & Row, 1961], 172). Still others, like Taylor, see the same redactional pattern of subordinating John in Luke's infancy narrative as in the rest of the Gospels, which "serves to ensure that John is recognized as subordinate and that he is cognizant of the fact" (*The Immerser*, 289).

[44] Conzelmann, *Luke*, 172.

[45] "John is not the precursor, for there is no such thing, but he is the last of the prophets" (ibid., 25); see ibid., 22-27.

could this [Luke 1:16-17] be a Christian creation, because it contradicts the position of John as precursor of Jesus."[46] The attestation in Luke 1:17 of John's Elijianic role is dismissed by both these positions as either historically unreliable[47] or as a remnant of the Baptist source from which it came, inconsistent with the rest of Luke's narrative.[48]

Still others, like Walter Wink, see no internal inconsistency within Luke-Acts, but rather an inconsistency between Luke and the other Gospel writers. It has regularly been pointed out that in Luke a number of references to Elijah which are found in Mark are omitted.[49] Since identifying John with Elijah is a problem in Matthew and Mark, Luke has tried to alleviate the problem by removing this identification.[50] As a result, according to Wink, Luke presents a Baptizer who is "the forerunner of the Messiah and nothing else."[51] The figure Elijah is used "purely as a basis for comparison" and not in any typological or realized sense.[52] Catherine Murphy adds to this the possible explanation

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[46] Markus Öhler, "The Expectation of Elijah and the Presence of the Kingdom of God" *JBL* 118, no. 3 (1999): 469.

[47] John Meier sees the prospect of drawing any historical conclusions from Luke's infancy narrative on John as "risky at best" (Meier, *Marginal Jew,* 2:20).

[48] Öhler, "The Expectation of Elijah," 469; cf. Charles H. H. Scobie, *John the Baptist* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 49-54; Scobie sees the phrase "in the spirit and power of Elijah" as "somewhat 'spiritualized'" in contrast to the "more literal tone of Matt. 11.14" (ibid., 126 n.2); see Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 244-250, for various theories of the source(s) behind Luke 1-2.

[49] Wink notes how Luke "deletes five of Mark's nine references to Elijah," while "he adds three of his own," none of which carries "the concept of the eschatological return of Elijah" (Wink, *John the Baptist,* 42).

[50] See ibid., who sees "a remarkable difference" between Matthew's Baptist and Luke's.

[51] Ibid., 43.

[52] Ibid., 42.

that this avoidance of presenting John as Elijah is due to the fact that it "allows Jesus alone to be compared at that level."[53]

What these views demonstrate is the inconsistency many scholars see in the Gospel accounts due to the problem John the Baptist creates. Their basic contention is simple: Luke departs from the picture offered by Matthew and Mark of John the Baptist as the Elijianic forerunner to the Messiah. The Gospel writers do not let the historical John determine the direction and content of their accounts; rather, they manipulate the data to create their own unique and creative narration of events.

John the Baptist and Elijah in the Gospel of John

Quite distinct from the Synoptics, the Gospel of John "supplies the most radical solution of all."[54] In John's account, the Baptizer's significance is reduced to that of a sign post, pointing in the direction of Jesus. The diminishment of John the Baptist in the Gospel of John is nothing more than "the culmination of a process that we can see beginning in the earliest complete Gospel, the Gospel of Mark."[55] He is not seen baptizing anyone. He does not preach a message of repentance, and he flatly denies that he is Elijah (1:21; Luke 1:17). This "sharply contradicts the earlier tradition that John was Elijah" because in John's Gospel, "the idea of a forerunner is anathema."[56] Throughout

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[53] Catherine M. Murphy, *John the Baptist: Prophet of Purity for a New Age* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 83; elsewhere, she offers the possibility that Luke omits reference to Elijah for the reason that "Elijah might be unfamiliar" to his gentile audience or that he "might have too parochial a flavor." It is also possible that Luke is "distancing himself from some of the apocalyptic traditions" since he did not want to evoke the disappointing messianic expectations leading up to and making up the first Jewish revolt (ibid., 53).

[54] Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:102.

[55] Taylor, *The Immerser*, 3.

[56] Wink, *John the Baptist*, 89.

the Gospel, it is made explicit that John's sole function is to bear witness to Jesus (1:6-8, 15, 31-32, 34; 3:26, 28; 5:33-36). John's role in the Gospel is summed up in one verse: "He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light" (1:8). In the Gospel of John, it is not enough "to state merely that Jesus is *mightier* than John," because Jesus and John must be distinguished "qualitatively."[57] Jesus "must increase" and John "must decrease" (3:30). John the Baptist was a problem for the early church, and the Gospel of John only makes explicit what the Synoptic writers implied, that John the Baptist has no value outside of his relation to Christ.

The Problem of Jesus' Identity

The final problem for the Gospel writers concerns the identity of John the Baptist's expected figure. In examining the problem, this section will give attention to what has been referred to as "the two great 'Baptist-blocks' of material" found in the Q tradition.[58] The first block concerns John's proclamation of an expected figure (Matthew 3:7-12 = Luke 3:7-9, 15-18) and the second involves Jesus' reply to John's question from prison and his ensuing assessment of John (Matthew 11:2-19 = Luke 7:18-35). In comparing the expected figure of John's preaching to the response of Jesus to John, many scholars have pointed out that a significant problem surfaces. The problem is that the figure Jesus does not fit the description of the figure John expected to come after him. There are other problems related to this issue, and they will be discussed as they become relevant.

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[57] Ibid., 88.

[58] Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:27.

The goal of examination for the first block (Matthew 3:7-12 = Luke 3:7-9, 15-18) is to describe and identify the figure for whom John's ministry prepares the way. Most historical critical scholars are undecided as to what figure John described in his preaching. The suggestions have ranged from God himself to a royal (Davidic) messiah, a priestly (Aaronic) messiah, Michael the archangel, Melchizedek, "one like a son of man," Moses, and Elijah. It may be the case that so many options have been offered because, as John Meier suggests, "it was unclear to John" himself.[59] This section cannot begin to examine the array of different options suggested nor would the aim of this study allow for it.[60] The aim here is to examine the description of the expected figure in John's preaching to the extent that it aids in furnishing an image for comparison with the description Jesus provides in his later response to John. It is asserted by many historical critical scholars that John's message and Jesus' response to John's ministry show that an insurmountable problem existed here for the early church.

In John's preaching, he refers to a figure who is to come after him, a figure "who is mightier than" himself (Matthew 3:11 = Mark 1:7 = Luke 3:16). This great figure, John says, will baptize the people with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8) and with fire (Matthew 3:11 = Luke 3:16). John's preaching identifies him (implicitly) as one who wields an axe for judgment (Matthew 3:10 = Luke 3:9). With his winnowing shovel in hand, he will clear his threshing floor, saving some and casting others into the fire (Matthew 3:12 = Luke 3:17). The expected figure is powerful and his activity is characterized by judgment and

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[59] Ibid., 2:40; cf. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 145-146 and 288-289, who sees Elijah as the most probable candidate.

[60] See Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 219-260, for a thorough analysis of each of these suggestions.

wrath. The overtones of John's description of judgment, and of a separation among the people, point to the last days described by the prophets. Some conclude from these observations that the description offered is that of YHWH's activity as proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets.[61] The judgment of God on his people and his enemies is likened in the Old Testament to the winnowing of grain (Isaiah 41:16; Jeremiah 15:7; 51:2; Daniel 2:35; Hosea 13:3) and to the burning of chaff (Isaiah 47:14; Joel 2:3-5; Malachi 4:1).[62] The prophets spoke of a day when YHWH would come, pouring out his Spirit on the people (cf. Ezek. 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29). Many who emphasize these points see a supernatural figure such as God himself in John's description.

Others emphasize different aspects of John's preaching and conclude just the opposite. The description of the expected figure as someone who is "stronger" than John has been put forth as evidence for an earthly figure. Added to this is John's reference to stooping down and untying the figure's sandals. As Dapaah writes, such a description "would have been perceived as presumptuous" and would be "an unparalleled anthropomorphism if Yahweh were the referent."[63] In like manner, Kraeling adds: "the person in question is not God, for to compare oneself with God, even in the most abject humility would have been presumptuous for any Jew in John's day."[64] C. H. H. Scobie

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[61] This should be no surprise, considering that in "both the OT and Second Temple Jewish literature the most prominent figure who was expected to act in judgment and restoration was Yahweh" (ibid., 222). Webb is not concerned so much with the fulfillment of John's prediction as with how John's proclamation "would probably have been understood by his first-century Jewish audience" (ibid., 26).

[62] Öhler observes that only Malachi combines the two images in relation to God's judgment upon Israel (Öhler, "Expectation of Elijah," 472).

[63] Daniel S. Dapaah, *The Relationship Between John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth: A Critical Study* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 2005), 73.

[64] Carl H. Kraeling, *John the Baptist* (New York: Scribner, 1951), 54.

sees support for the notion of an earthly figure in the account of John's question to Jesus from prison, saying, "if John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, 'Are you the Coming One, or are we to expect some other?' (Luke 7.19; Matt. 11.3), he can hardly have regarded the Coming One as a supernatural figure."[65] These scholars point to these aspects of John's description as evidence that John did not expect a supernatural figure such as YHWH.

While the evidence is interpreted differently from these respective viewpoints, all agree that the figure whom John describes is great. He is mightier (ἰσχυρότερος) than the prophet John, and the prospect of his coming promises to evoke fear. He comes as a judge of Israel, storing the wheat (righteous) into his barn and burning the chaff (wicked). The passage to be examined next presents an acute problem for the Gospel writers in light of this description of John's expected figure.

This account is found in the next "Baptist block" of Q in Matthew 11:2-19 and Luke 7:18-35. The account describes John's question to Jesus concerning his identity with Jesus' reply and his own assessment of John. The parallel accounts of this event in Matthew and Luke are offered by many as further support for the notion that the Gospel writers are artificially construing Jesus to be the great figure to which John's ministry pointed.[66] Matthew and Luke use the preaching ministry of John to exalt the ministry of Jesus, the Coming One, but their portrayal falls apart here in the event of John's question. The question of Jesus' identity poses a special problem for Matthew who earlier had John recognize and affirm Jesus' superior status in the account of his baptism. The account is

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[65] Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 77.

[66] "The Gospel writers wish us to believe that John really had no importance whatsoever in his own right and that his importance was entirely the result of his witnessing to the arrival of the Messiah" (Taylor, *The Immerser*, 2).

typically split into three main sections (Matthew 11:2-6 = Luke 7:18-23, Matthew 11:7-15 = Luke 7:24-30, and Matthew 11:16-19 = Luke 7:31-35) and will be dealt with to the degree that the passage is relevant to the discussion.

The account begins (Matthew 11:2-6 = Luke 7:18-23) while John is in prison on an occasion when he sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one to come or should we look for another?" The initial problem this scenario presents is immediately apparent. Why is John uncertain about the very person his ministry functioned as a preparation for? Further, Matthew's record presents its own unique problem in that John recognized Jesus at his baptism as his superior, and he would have prevented him from being baptized because of the fact. This circumstance, it is argued, reveals a bizarre contradiction on Matthew's part. Thus, Taylor concludes that Jesus' baptism as recorded by Matthew "cannot be historically accurate if the question of the Baptist is also to be considered such."[67]

To add to the problem of John's question regarding Jesus' identity, Jesus offers what many historical critical scholars have seen as a puzzling response.[68] The response by Jesus in defense of his identity and activity does not seem to match the description of John's expected figure. Far from the activity of an eschatological judge, Jesus identifies himself as a miracle worker who is engaged in the business of healing the sick and broken. In Taylor's interpretation of the Lukan account (which she holds to be the more historical of the two), "John wonders if Jesus is Elijah" when he hears about Jesus'

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[67] Ibid., 289. Such a scenario also seems to conflict with John's identification of Jesus as the "Lamb of God" in John 1:29, 36 (see fn. 211 of this thesis).

[68] Walter Wink, "Jesus' Reply to John: Matt. 11:2-6/Luke 7:18-23," *Forum* 5 (1989): 125, describes the response of Jesus as "baffling ambiguity."

deeds.[69] In Luke, "John's question seems to concern whether Jesus is the expected prophet of the last days, that is, Elijah"[70] and this caused great embarrassment for the early church since they attributed that status to John. The context of Luke's account is put forth in support for this. In the preceding account in Luke 7:11-17, Jesus raises a widow's son at Nain which resembles Elijah's raising of a widow's son in Zarephath (1 Kings 17:17-24). Additionally, Jesus' response here affirms that he has prophetic power to heal like Elijah and Elisha. Contrary to what the Gospel writers' would have their readers believe about Jesus, "there is no claim to be divine in Jesus' reply, and it is equally difficult to see him claiming to be the royal Messiah."[71] Jesus' response represents a departure from the mighty figure John proclaimed who would come for judgment and wrath (Matt. 3:11-12 = Lk. 3:16-18). Jesus, by contrast, is a prophet of restoration and forgiveness.

In the next section, Matthew 11:7-15 (par Luke 7:24-30), Jesus addresses the crowds after the disciples of John have left. Here, Jesus gives high praise to John, calling him "more than a prophet," and saying, "of those born of women none is greater than John." This is preceded by a quotation of Malachi 3:1, identifying John as the messenger of YHWH.[72] Most scholars accept this section as historical on the basis that "the exaltation

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[69] "Upon hearing news of what Jesus was doing and saying, John wonders if Jesus is Elijah. The early Church seems to have been rather embarrassed about this" (Taylor, *The Immerser*, 289). Likewise, Raymond Brown, "Three Quotations from John the Baptist in the Gospel of John," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22 (1960): 297-298, offers the suggestion that John expected Elijah; cf. J. A. T. Robinson, "Elijah, John, and Jesus," 263-281.

[70] Taylor, *The Immerser*, 289.

[71] Ibid., 290.

[72] In Matthew's account, in v.14 he adds: "and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come."

of John in these sayings is hardly consistent with the subordinate role assigned to him in most parts of the Gospel narratives."[73] In this section Jesus also ascribes a great eschatological role to John in the kingdom of God. This admission by Jesus caused "extreme discomfort" for the early church which was "seeking to circumscribe John's role and the esteem due him."[74] Seeing the problem this caused, Matthew and Luke sought to correct it by their additions in Matthew 11:6 = Luke 7:23 ("And blessed is the one who does not find in me cause for stumbling.") and Matthew 11:11b = Luke 7:28b ("but the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven [Luke: God] is greater than he"). Walter Wink sees the first corrective as a redaction made by the early church that "excluded John from the time of the kingdom's realization"[75] because he expressed doubt regarding Jesus' Messiahship.[76] With Wink, Helmut Koester sees the second phrase in Matthew 11:11b, "the smallest in the kingdom is greater than he," as a correction of later editors to obscure Jesus' high view of John.[77] The account ends (Matthew 11:16-19 = Luke 7:31-35) with Jesus rebuking "this generation" and aligning himself with John as his partner in the same mission of establishing God's eschatological kingdom. On more than one level the account as a whole shows itself to be a significant problem for the early church's claim that Jesus was the Divine Messiah. John the Baptist's uncertainty

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[73] Dapaah, *John the Baptist and Jesus*, 119.

[74] Wink, *John the Baptist*, 26; earlier, Wink also commented: "It is unlikely that the church...would have created a passage which credits John with the decisive act in the shift of the aeons, or that it would portray Jesus as merely John's successor" (ibid., 21-22).

[75] Ibid., 25.

[76] According to Wink, this verse indicates that John the Baptist "never attained faith in Jesus as the messiah" (ibid., 24).

[77] E.g., Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament,* Vol. 2: *History and Literature of Early Christianity*, 2d ed. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 78.

over Jesus' identity and the opinion Jesus had of John could not have been created by the early church since, as it is argued, these two problems were so damaging to the Gospel writers' presentation of Jesus.

Conclusion: A Historical Critical Portrait of John

The sections above have examined some of the most significant problems John the Baptist caused for the early church. While the Gospels hold some historical value for these scholars, their accounts reveal internal inconsistencies which are both logical and theological in nature. These inconsistencies have served modern scholars (as it is maintained) in exposing the theological agendas of the individual Gospel writers. Once the theological program of these writers is discerned, working with other criteria, a historical reconstruction can begin. What historical critical scholars aim to do in the study of John the Baptist is to remove the outer theological layer of the Gospel accounts in order to bring the inner historical core to the surface. Their aim is to do justice to the historical John the Baptist. But do they? Are they vindicating the historical John from a distortion caused by the Gospel writers'? Or, are historical critical scholars engaged in the same creative reconstructions as they accuse the Gospel redactors of?

The next section will explore these questions by an examination of the arguments laid out in this chapter. The question may then begin to be explored: Is an alternative explanation needed for the portrait of John the Baptist in the Gospel accounts?

CHAPTER 3

ASSESSING THE HISTORICAL CRITICAL RECONSTRUCTION

With the main arguments for a historical critical reconstruction of John the Baptist relayed in the last chapter, attention can now turn to an examination and assessment of the reconstruction offered. The aim of this chapter, then, is to assess whether or not the historical critical reconstruction offers satisfactory reasons for seeking an alternative explanation for understanding John the Baptist in the Gospels. This will first require an examination of the historical critical methodology employed in interpreting the relevant Gospel accounts. Once this has taken place, the discussion can move forward into an examination and assessment of the arguments offered in support of the historical critical reconstruction.

Assessing the Historical Critical Approach

The underlying contention of the historical critical reconstruction is that the Gospel writers are obscuring the true portrait of John the Baptist by falsely portraying him as subservient to Jesus. What the process of historical critical reconstruction aims to do then is to identify in the Gospel narratives certain features that are seen as inconsistencies (within or between Gospel accounts) or problems and then to explain why these features are there in the attempt to uncover the true historical picture. Assessing the historical critical approach is no small task. Dozens and dozens of books and articles have been written on the subject—on its history, its method, and its employment. Even a

brief discussion cannot begin to address all of the main issues involved.[78] The present chapter seeks to examine the historical critical approach in its assessment of John the Baptist as he is portrayed in the Gospels. In this section, and throughout the duration of the chapter, the appropriateness of the historical critical method for biblical studies in particular will also receive consideration. Since the historical critical method (as understood in this study) precludes the possibility of the supernatural,[79] a special problem forms when considering the nature of the biblical text, its purpose and provenance. As the section below demonstrates, the view held by the scholar on the nature of the biblical text matters a great deal in regards to the approach that is taken in the study of the text and the results the scholar comes away with.

Justification for Calling a Long-Held Approach into Question

The historical critical approach has been the dominant approach of Euroamerican scholars over the last two hundred years. The last century witnessed some of the strongest champions of the historical critical methodology as well as a number of its most adamant detractors.[80] Among its foremost detractors stands Eta Linnemann. In her provocative book, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?*, Linnemann observed

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[78] See, e.g., Barry D. Smith, "The Historical-Critical Method, Jesus Research, and the Christian Scholar," *TrinJ* 15NS (1994): 201-220; Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. Robert Yarbrough (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994); Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* trans. Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1990).

[79] In some ways this is an oversimplification. However, for this study's purposes what is in view here are not matters regarding the scholar's own personal beliefs or matters of all the philosophical complexities at play in one's understanding. What is of concern here is the historical critical methodology in practice and, as such, the historical critical scholar does not allow for a supernatural explanation to affect his or her research. See the following discussion (see also, fn. 1).

[80] This goes without mention of a needed shift in emphasis that many scholars saw in the latter half of the last century from giving attention fully to historical critical issues to understanding the text on its own terms through *narrative* study; see Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

the characteristic tendency of the historical critical approach to atomize the Bible in a way which "ends up holding pieces without recognizing the living context."[81] The historical critical approach, Linnemann argued, is best understood as an ideology rather than a methodology.[82] On the historical critical side, Hector Avalos has exemplified this ideology to which Linnemann refers in his call for reform within the *Society of Biblical Literature* when he asks its members to reconsider the whole endeavor of biblical studies. For Avalos and many other historical critical scholars an ideological posture is adopted, with an expressed understanding that "the Bible has no intrinsic value or merit. Its value is a social construct."[83] Avalos' article wants the whole area of biblical studies to be purged of the interests of "faith communities,"[84] a view which is novel by no means, but one with a long history in historical critical circles.[85] The methodological starting point of any given interpreter—whether he or she is cognizant of the fact or not—is directly shaped and informed by the beliefs that person holds regarding the nature of the biblical text. Avalos' statements reveal the necessity of treating methodology and text as mutually

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[81] Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible*, 118.

[82] Some of her conclusions are contested for being exaggerated or overstated even among conservative scholars, but this does not diminish the value of her study for the purposes here. See a review and analysis of the response to Eta Linnemann's conversion and post-conversion works in Robert Yarbrough, "Eta Linnemann: Friend or Foe of Scholarship?" *The Master's Seminary Journal* (Fall 1997): 163-189.

[83] Hector Avalos, "The Ideology of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Demise of an Academic Profession," *SBL Forum*, n.p. [cited April 2006 online: http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=520].

[84] "Whatever new knowledge is applied (e.g., new readings from the Dead Sea Scrolls), it is usually for the benefit of faith communities who read the Bible. The fact is that biblical studies is still functioning as a handmaiden to theology and faith communities rather than as a discipline relevant to those outside of faith communities (something unlike law, medicine, or even philosophy, which is also being marginalized)" (ibid.).

[85] More recently, see Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (London: SCM Press, 2000); James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

contingent concepts. Thus, the question of methodology is by no means a "neutral" one[86] and the area of biblical studies (and the methodology employed) must do justice to the object of study.[87] Whether the biblical text is of divine origin or not is of total relevance in its understanding and interpretation.

The Text and its Bearing on the Hermeneutical Methodology Employed

As argued above, the relationship of text to methodology is ultimately an issue of value placement, that is, the value the text holds in the judgment of its interpreter. In order to yield appropriate and accurate results of interpretation, the object of one's study must determine the methodology employed.[88] This can be seen in the most basic of situations drawn from everyday life: a person doing responsible interpretation when reading a collection of poetry will not employ the same method that he or she would use if reading a letter from a friend or a note from a doctor. This elementary observation regarding the methodology employed in the interpretation of a text demonstrates that correct presuppositions about a given text are foundational for doing responsible interpretation.[89] If the method of study is inappropriate to its object, correspondingly, the

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[86] *Contra* Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" *Encounter* (1960): 194-200. Bultmann answers the question "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" in the affirmative if the phrase "'without presuppositions' means 'without presupposing the results of the exegesis.' In this sense, exegesis without preuppositions [sic] is not only possible but demanded" (194).

[87] Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 24-26, 29-38; Smith, "Historical-Critical Method," 201-220; cf. Craig L. Blomberg and Stewart C. Goetz, "The Burden of Proof," *JSNT* 11 (1981): 39-63.

[88] "[T]he Bible—if what it says is true even to a small degree— is the most unusual and unique object there is" and "[w]hen a unique reality confronts us, then such unconditional respect requires that we approach it in a unique fashion" (Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 21, 22); note also Robert Guelich's analogy between Gospel studies and art: "in criticizing a work of art one must first take into consideration the medium and then apply the appropriate criteria for evaluation" ("The Gospels: Portraits of Jesus and His Ministry" *JETS* 24/2 [1981]: 117).

[89] If one reads a note from their doctor the same way a poem should be read, that person may end up in a lot of trouble.

results yielded from interpretation will also be inappropriate for providing an accurate understanding of the ideas being communicated through the text. One's posture towards the biblical text—its origin and its purpose—necessarily affects *the questions asked of the text*, *the method employed in addressing those questions*, and *the manner in which one engages the text as bearing any real authority*. For instance, if one accepts the Bible's teaching on the noetic effects of sin and the damaging effects of sin on the human faculty of reason,[90] the way in which that person understands the biblical text in relation to themselves (and the world) will be of direct consequence. Authority in matters of judgment will ultimately be ascribed to either *man's faculty of reason* or to *God's direction* as revealed in the biblical text, through the Holy Spirit.[91] The starting point of the historical critical approach, and that of a hermeneutic corresponding to the Bible's own truth claims, are in direct opposition to one another. Since the most basic aim of interpretation is to understand what is communicated, this brings to the fore the question of whether or not the historical critical approach is appropriate for biblical studies.[92]

As defined by historical critical methodology, the truth expressed in the biblical text is ultimately unknowable. The various combinations of possible scenarios are endless and there is no extrinsic authority to confirm or deny the validity of any truth claim made

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[90] This is to be understood in the sense of spiritual understanding that is internalized from the heart and which can only be revealed by God (cf. Isa. 53:1).

[91] This is what Smith describes as intrinsic vs. extrinsic authority ("Historical-Critical Method," 203-215). Obviously, due to sin and other factors (social, historical, and linguistic distance from the text), there is no such thing as a "perfect interpretation" which yields wholly consistent and satisfactory results from a human perspective.

[92] This statement must be understood within the context of the present discussion. This is not to suggest that there is no value in source, form, or redaction criticism. What is suggested is that an approach that is defined by skepticism cannot be valid when applied to a text that calls for trust in its promises and a conforming to its claim to testify to the truth.

therein. “Every rational argument can be refuted by a counterargument, assuming there is enough time to think it over.”[93] For this reason, Barry Smith has suggested that “it is questionable whether Jesus research on historical-critical principles is even a legitimate academic undertaking.”[94] He has argued that the criteria of authenticity employed by historical critical scholars limits the usefulness of their own findings by creating a detrimental grid of investigation that is too restrictive to produce substantial results.[95] At the same time, the discipline is so open to speculation and to the subjective judgment of the scholar in his or her application of the criteria of authenticity that “the historiographical process of establishing facts about Jesus...cannot be carried out.” What ends up happening “is that the researcher’s own prior religious or ideological commitments become the determining factor in transforming one possible version of the

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[93] Linnemann, *Historical Criticism*, 137.

[94] Smith, “The Historical-Critical Method,” 218.

[95] For example, the criterion of dissimilarity can only provide the scholar with information on how Jesus differed from Judaism and early Christianity. Not only is the relevant material for such an endeavor sparse, any conclusion drawn from this criterion is extremely one-sided since Jesus would have certainly shared much in common with the Judaism of his day and early Christianity. Similarly, the employment of the criterion of embarrassment can only be used with so many texts. Even with the combination of these two criteria, neither a robust nor an accurate portrait of Jesus can emerge.

'historical Jesus' into the most probable version."[96] The portrait of Jesus (or of the early church) depends entirely upon which scholar one consults.[97]

It is the contention of this study that the biblical text provides a sufficient explanation for the figure of John the Baptist whereas the historical critical reconstruction only obscures what it attempts to uncover.[98] Ultimately the issue lies in the point of departure for the scholar. The scholar can adopt the New Testament's own presuppositions or depart from the presuppositions of the New Testament in favor of some other method of interpretation.[99] The following seeks to demonstrate that adopting

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[96] Smith, "Historical-Critical Method," 219; Albert Schweitzer recognized this in his classic work, *Von Reimarus Zu Wrede* (ET *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*), as he saw the historical critical scholarship of his day as creating a 19th century German Jesus who mirrored the scholar's own agenda; see Simon J. Gathercole, "The Critical and Dogmatic Agenda of Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*," *TynBull* 51.2 (2000): 261-283. As Gathercole points out: "Schweitzer's main point—almost of the entire book—is that 'historical criticism had become, in the hands of most of those who practised it, a secret struggle to reconcile the German religious spirit with the Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth' (*Quest,* 310). Schweitzer's aim was divorce, rather than reconciliation," seeking "to restore the otherness of the Jesus of the Gospels, to distinguish sharply between Jesus's first-century Jewish context and that of nineteenth-century German theology " ("Critical and Dogmatic Agenda," 265).

[97] "Everyone seems to want to have Jesus as an advocate of his or her own views" (Smith, "Historical-Critical Method," 219); Even John Meier reveals so much when he says, "*Whose* historical Jesus would be the object of faith?…Jesus the violent revolutionary or Jesus the gay magician? Jesus the apocalyptic seer or Jesus the wisdom teacher unconcerned with eschatology?" (*Marginal Jew*, 1:198); As Dale C. Allison Jr., "How to Marginalize the Traditional Criteria of Authenticity," in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 9, has said: "our criteria have not led us into the promised land of scholarly consensus, so if they were designed to overcome subjectivity and bring order to our discipline, then they have failed: the hopelessly confusing parade of different Jesuses goes on...our criteria are not strong enough to resist our wills, which means that we tend to make them do what we want them to do."

[98] See below.

[99] See Smith, "Historical-Critical Method," 213-215. This may include, of course, a non-believing scholar who takes a sympathetic stance of interpretation, earnestly engaging the text as best possible on its own terms. Such an approach may be found through narrative criticism; see Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 1-10, 19-21.

the framework provided by the biblical authors yields a more satisfactory and informative picture than what is gained by historical critical reconstruction.[100]

Assessing the Historical Critical Reconstruction of John the Baptist

The historical critical reconstruction argues that John the Baptist was a problem for the early church because his ministry was at odds with their beliefs about Jesus. The reality of this situation demanded creative theological redactions on the part of the Gospel writers in order to manipulate the events of history so as to conform them to their theological convictions. Evidence for this, it is maintained, can be seen in comparing the different Gospel accounts since they display an inconsistent portrayal of John the Baptist. Thus, the text demands examination in resolving this issue and it is the text that will answer the question posited at the beginning of this study as to *who* the actual redactors of John the Baptist are.

The Baptism of Jesus: An Unwanted Problem?

The baptism of Jesus by John has been the subject of much discussion among historical critical scholars. Its historicity goes virtually uncontested because of its apparent awkwardness for the early church, for, how else could the early church perceive such an event? The person they held to be the sinless Son of God was submitting to a baptism of repentance administered by his alleged (and thus inferior) forerunner. The present discussion challenges the idea that this assessment best accounts for the evidence

[100] Any assessment of the historical critical approach is ultimately an assessment of Immanuel Kant's understanding of the relationship between faith and reason. In short, Kant maintained that truth could only be known through reason alone and that reason, having its limits, could never validate or be validated by faith which is beyond the capacity of reason and thus inaccessible.

and begins to explore other viable options that are provided by the text. The next chapter will elaborate and argue for the alternative options provided in this chapter.

The most basic contention of the historical critical reconstruction, that the event of Jesus' baptism threatens the early church's belief that he was the sinless Son of God, has several problems. One initial problem with this contention is that the occasion of personal sin is not a necessary explanation for why Jesus went to John for baptism.[101] An alternative explanation may be that, as the people's Redeemer, Jesus was identifying with Israel's need for repentance and was thereby confirming John's Baptism as part of the plan of God to remove her sin through himself. If Jesus saw himself as Israel's redeemer—identifying with her need of forgiveness to the point giving his life for her salvation—it is no stretch of imagination to understand this action as his way of expressing the same solidarity with the people in baptism. For instance, when Luke 3:21 records Jesus as having been baptized "with the people," this need not be taken as a way of evading the issue of Jesus' baptism (as historical critical scholars frequently maintain), but as bringing out its significance in relation to his mission: to bring his people to himself and thereby save them. But not every historical critical scholar understands personal sin as the only explanation for why Jesus would have been baptized by John. John Meier and Robert Webb have both pointed out the problematic nature of focusing on Jesus' sin when the focus is better drawn to the nature of John's baptism in the context of his ministry. Expanding on Meier's understanding, Webb writes, "Jesus was acknowledging Israel's sin and need to turn around, and he was committing himself to do

[101] Robert Webb, "Jesus' Baptism: Its Historicity and Implications," *BBR* 10.2 (2000): 300, states the obvious: "There is, in fact, no historical evidence of a particular sin for which Jesus needed to repent."

what he could to bring this about."[102] Therefore, if "personal sin" is not the only viable explanation for Jesus' going to be baptized by John, then the event need not have been an occasion of embarrassment for the early church. This is a significant chink in the armor of a reconstruction that maintains that John the Baptist was a problem for the early church because of the supposed embarrassment caused by his baptizing of Jesus. However, the issue of variation between the Gospel accounts remains, and these scholars maintain that such variation is best accounted for by the contention that John the Baptist was a problem that the Gospel writers needed to address. Does the variation between accounts reveal the problematic reception Jesus' baptism by John had for the early church?

The evidence of variation between the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism by John does not produce the results that historical critical scholars would have their readers believe. Initially, there is a problem with jumping from *the evidence of variation* to the conclusion that such variation points to *the presence of a real problem*. It could just as easily be argued that the situation of Jesus' baptism was seen by the Gospel writers as susceptible to misinterpretation if left unexplained and that the writers saw to it to explain the event in order to avoid misunderstanding. This is certainly a legitimate explanation for the variation given the importance of the event, centering on the central figure of the Gospel narratives. That being the case, such a precaution should be expected. Nevertheless, even in the the event that the baptism of Jesus presented a difficulty or challenge for the early church, no such scenario requires the explanation that the event

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[102] Webb, "Jesus' Baptism," 300; cf. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:113-114. Webb later writes: "In being baptized by John, Jesus indicated his essential agreement with John's message" (Webb, "Jesus' Baptism," 305).

was a threat or a real problem. The entire ministry of Jesus was a challenge to the beliefs of his hearers and that fact alone is not persuasive for upholding the contention that embarrassment must be the best explanation. Conclusions drawn from situations that seem to the modern interpreter to be awkward or embarrassing can be tempered by realizing that the task of the Gospel writers was not to verify the authenticity of Jesus' sayings and doings to the satisfaction of every contention that might be put forward. Ultimately, the Gospel writers are concerned to testify to the significance of Jesus' words and deeds.[103]

In light of the above discussion, the variation between the different Gospel narratives may be viewed as no more than a reflection of complementary perspectives. This point will be developed in more detail in the next chapter, but for now it is important to recognize some of the shortcomings of the historical critical reconstruction by way of a few examples. For instance, in Matthew's account he records a situation in which John the Baptist tries to prevent Jesus from being baptized by him because John recognizes his unworthiness. But Jesus insists that he be baptized by John because such a step is necessary "to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15.) Rather than understanding this situation as an embellishment by Matthew due to its embarrassment, the account lines up well with the aim of Matthew's Gospel to draw out the implications of righteousness and fulfillment in the life of Jesus. The scene recorded by Matthew between Jesus and John need not be viewed as evidence of a conflict but as an instance of clarification.[104]

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[103] This is not to say that "authenticity" was unimportant to the Gospel writers, as Luke's prologue suggests (1:1-4). See Robert H. Stein, "'Authentic' or 'Authoritative'? What is the Difference?" *JETS* 24/2 (1981): 127-130.

[104] See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973), 57.

Likewise, Luke's account emphasizes the prayer of Jesus and his being baptized with the people, two themes of central importance throughout Luke-Acts. So when he places the theophany in such a context, saying, "And when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus was baptized and was praying, heaven was opened" (3:21), the account need not be viewed as evading embarrassment but as focusing on a particularly significant feature of Jesus' baptism which serves the broader aim of Luke's Gospel to portray Jesus as standing in solidarity with the people as the Son of God. It is additionally important to note that, "John is no more separated from the baptism of Jesus than he is from the baptism of all the people!"[105] Historical critical scholars would agree that such an inference would be absurd but the example demonstrates that the text is not meant to be read in such an atomistic way. The account in John's Gospel has been seen by historical critical scholars as the full blooming of a process that began with Mark in pushing John's baptism to the peripheral since Jesus' baptism by John is never explicitly mentioned. However, John's Gospel need not be seen as *ignoring* the Synoptic accounts, but as *presupposing* them.[106] In presupposing the account of Jesus' baptism, John's Gospel is interested in exalting the transcendent significance of *the event itself* because of the heightened focus of his narrative on Jesus as the Christ.[107] Through different thematic and stylistic choices, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all provide accounts which can be seen

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[105] John Nolland, *Luke 1:1-9:20* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 159.

[106] See Richard Bauckham, "John For Readers of Mark," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 147-172.

[107] See discussion on John the Baptist in the Gospel of John further below in this and the following chapter.

as working together in forming a fuller—and complementary—portrait of the events of Christ's life.

Having seen some of the internal difficulties of adopting the historical critical reconstruction one further problem calls for comment. As observed above, the heart of the historical critical contention that Jesus' baptism by John was a problem for the early church is maintained by invoking the criterion of embarrassment, but this operative and foundational criterion is far from being free of problems.[108] Robert Webb has noted the "surprising" fact "that few have fully set out and weighed the arguments surrounding the event."[109] Even John Meier (the one exception given by Webb) assumes this foundational contention in stating that the event "would only create enormous difficulties for its inventor,"[110] never explaining why this is a necessary supposition.[111] More often than not, the application of this criterion to the baptism of Jesus is not so much argued as it is assumed in historical critical reconstructions. What is never considered in the writings of these scholars is the possibility that the event *did* happen and that the church *faithfully* recorded it, but the very fact that the Gospel writers retain these alleged

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[108] Lately, the various criteria of authenticity have been increasingly called into question as to their usefulness. See, for example, Gerd Theissen, "Historical Scepticism and the Criteria of Jesus Research," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 147-176; Allison "Criteria of Authenticity," 3-30. Allison argues for a radically new method of interpretation. Of the standard criteria he writes: "It is time to quit making excuses for them, time to move the standard criteria from the center of our discussion to the periphery. It is not that this or that criterion is problematic or needs to be fine tuned but that the whole idea of applying criteria to individual items to recover Jesus is too often unworkable and so of quite limited utility" ("Criteria of Authenticity," 9).

[109] Webb, "Jesus' Baptism," 261.

[110] Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:101.

[111] Ibid., 2:100-101 (cf. 182-183, nn. 2-3), even offers the views of Morton Enslin and Ernst Haenchen which posit that the event was a creation of the early church, thus leaving open the possibility that the event was not a cause for embarrassment if it could have theoretically been a Christian creation. See Morton Enslin, "John and Jesus," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamantliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 66 (1975): 1-18; Ernst Haenchen, *Der Weg Jesu: Eine Erklärung des Markus-Evangeliums und der kanonischen Parallalen*, 2d ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968), 58-63.

"embarrassments" is reason enough to question whether the baptism of Jesus was viewed as an embarrassment in the first place. As Dale Allison writes, "all of the supposedly embarrassing facts or words are found in the Jesus tradition itself. This means that they were not sufficiently disconcerting to be expurgated."[112] Such a state of affairs has led Joan Taylor to conclude that the early church was not uncomfortable with contradiction,[113] yet this would undercut the explanation for why there is variation in the first place, i.e., to evade the perception of conflict. Once again, it is seen that an underlying system of values is at the root of any methodology of interpretation. The foregoing discussion highlights the importance of place that should be given to considering the text and its relation to methodology. Webb's comments are representative and they reveal the acuteness of the problem: "From a methodological perspective, a theological presupposition cannot take the place of considering historical questions and their evidence."[114] What Webb and other scholars who take this stance are doing is distancing themselves from the faith advocated by the figure of their studies. But if the claims of the biblical text are authoritative and trustworthy, then they have ramifications for the real world. If Jesus is the revelation of God's truth and if the Gospels testify to that, then a "theological presupposition" *must* shape and inform all forms of methodology and interpretation. Instead of reading the accounts as theological editorials obscuring the

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[112] Allison, "Criteria of Authenticity," 6.

[113] "The New Testament is a remarkable collection of documents. Not only does it include redactions that seek to convince us of a particular understanding of history, but the men who wrote the Gospels faithfully included sayings and stories that could themselves invalidate their interpretation of history" (Joan Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist Within Second Temple Judaism* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1997], 321).

[114] Webb, "Jesus' Baptism," 299.

historical data, they can be read as bringing out the true significance of historical events.[115] It is unnecessary to draw a distinction between the theological character and historical character of these accounts unless one first rejects the claim of the text as the testimony of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit.[116]

John the Baptist and Elijah: Either/Or or Both/And?

As with the baptism of Jesus, the popular identification of John as Elijah has also felt the gaze of historical critical scholarship's scrutinizing eye. On the one hand, many scholars have seen a problem with the Gospel writers' application of the role of Malachi's Elijianic forerunner to John the Baptist. The historical critical reconstruction considered in the last chapter emphasized the notion that Malachi's Elijianic forerunner was prophesied to be the forerunner to YHWH (or to *the day of YHWH*) and not to the Messiah. A problem also lies in the portrayal of John's relationship to Elijah in a comparison between the different Gospel narratives. It is frequently argued that Matthew and Mark present John the Baptist as Elijah, while Luke and John distance themselves from this identification. The following seeks to address the above issues in that order and the attendant claims put forward in support of this reconstruction.

John the Baptist and Elijah: the Forerunner to the Messiah?

In Morris Faierstein's essay,[117] he calls for a serious reconsideration of how

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[115] Thus Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), 115, argues that "the Christian community, just for the sake of preserving intact the actual historical significance of John as they had experienced it, refused to allow the memory of John to slip uninterpreted into the past."

[116] See Smith, "Historical-Critical Method," 203-208.

[117] Morris M. Faierstein, "Why Do the Scribes Say That Elijah Must Come First?" *JBL* 100/1 (1981): 75-86.

scholars understand the role of John the Baptist in relation to Elijah. The purpose of this section is not to engage fully with Faierstein's essay since much of it is beyond the concerns of this study. What is addressed here are those issues which pertain to John the Baptist's representation by the Gospel writers (particularly Matthew and Mark) as the Elijianic forerunner to the Messiah.[118] The concern here is with the integrity of the Gospel accounts since it is the case that, if Faierstein's assessment is correct, then the Gospel writers have misapplied Malachi's prophecy about Elijah to John the Baptist. There are, however, several problems with the assessment he offers.

The driving contention of Faierstein's essay is that the concept of Elijah as forerunner to the Messiah was not a well known or widely accepted concept in Jesus' day,[119] and this contention is not without good reason. Faierstein's critique has successfully demonstrated that such a notion is—if not altogether absent—sparse in extant contemporary Jewish literature.[120] However, the notion of Elijah as the forerunner to the Messiah does not need to be a well known or widely accepted idea in Jesus' day in order for it to be relevant to the issue of whether or not the Gospel writers' application of

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[118] While the main concern of Faierstein's essay is with the disciples question to Jesus, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" and the relevant Jewish literature (or as he argues *lack thereof*), the issue is ultimately with the Gospel writers. The issue taken up regards their application of a role to John the Baptist that allegedly has no basis in the Old Testament Scriptures, of which they purport Jesus and John fulfill.

[119] "The linchpin in this evaluation of John the Baptist is the assumption that the concept of Elijah as forerunner of the Messiah was a well known and widely accepted Jewish idea in Jesus' day. The importance of John the Baptist is seen in his fulfillment of this basic component of the Jewish messianic idea in the first century CE" (ibid., 75).

[120] "This survey has shown that, contrary to the accepted scholarly consensus, almost no evidence has been preserved which indicates that the concept of Elijah as forerunner of the Messiah was widely known or accepted in the first century C.E…The only datum which this survey has found that knows of Elijah as forerunner is the *baraitha* in *b. Erubin* 43a-b, a text of the early third century C.E." (ibid., 86).

it to John the Baptist is appropriate.[121] The issue at hand concerns whether or not the Gospel writers have appropriately applied Malachi's prophecy to John the Baptist (this will be explored further below). Secondly, Faierstein argues that the concept's absence in contemporary literature is an indicator that it was an unknown concept, but this is an unsatisfactory conclusion. While the late dating of Rabbinic literature might in some measure indicate its unreliability as a source in this discussion, Blomberg reminds the interpreter, that, "[n]o convincing explanation has been given...for the post-Christian Jewish adoption of a perspective which supported the Christian interpretation of Mal. 3:1."[122] On these grounds, Faierstein dismisses eighteen Talmudic passages that argue against his position. Of these eighteen passages from the Talmud, Louis Ginzberg has stated: "Now, in no fewer than eighteen passages in the Talmud, Elijah appears as one who, in his capacity of precursor of the Messiah, will settle all doubts on matters ritual and judicial."[123] One wonders how Ginzberg can come to such a conclusion from his extensive examination of these passages where, allegedly, no impetus for such a notion can be found in the *eighteen* texts examined. Finally, all this goes without saying that the New Testament, which is "after all, one of our best sources for first-century Judaism,"[124] attests to the concept's existence in the first century. While Faierstein would call this a

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[121] Further, as Dale Allison has pointed out, no solid conclusion should come "from arguments mostly from silence" in light of the "fragmentary and select nature of the sources that have come down to us" ("Elijah," 257).

[122] Craig L. Blomberg, "Elijah, Election, and the Use of Malachi in the New Testament," *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (1987): 103; cf. Allison, "Elijah," 257.

[123] Louis Ginzberg, *An Unknown Jewish Sect* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1976), 212; cf. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Promise of the Arrival of Elijah in Malachi and the Gospels," *Grace Theological Journal* 3/2 (1982): 222-223.

[124] Allison, "Elijah," 258.

"case of circularity,"[125] the New Testament nevertheless remains a historical source which includes the concept.

More important for this discussion, then, is the issue of whether or not the New Testament's understanding of Elijah as forerunner does in fact comport with the biblical data (i.e., Malachi 4:5-6). Does the concept of Elijah as forerunner to the Messiah (as the New Testament presents it) accord with Malachi's prophecy, or, does it present the scholar with "a *novum* in the NT"? Faierstein's contention that the notion is a *novum* in the New Testament is not without problems. First, he argues that the prophet Elijah is said to come "before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" and "not a person,"[126] but these constraints are far too narrow and do not allow for what can be reasonably inferred from the context. As Darrell Bock has noted: "If Elijah is related to the eschaton as restorer and peacemaker through Malachi, then can a messianic figure be far away?"[127] But Faierstein continues, arguing that the "idea is not found in these verses [Malachi 4:5-6] if they are read without *a priori* assumptions." Faierstein is right that the notion of a messiah is not found in Malachi 4:5-6. However, these verses do not preclude the legitimacy of applying the passage to such a concept. The application of the Elijianic role of Malachi's forerunner to John the Baptist by the Gospel writers is not in conflict with

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[125] Faierstein, "Elijah," 76.

[126] Faierstein, "Elijah," 77; Faierstein makes no mention of the messenger of YHWH in 3:1, but there are a number of reasons why "Elijah" and the messenger of YHWH in 3:1 should be seen as referring to the same figure. First, the eschatological context of judgment and restoration calls for a connection between these two passages. Second, the function of the messenger and Elijah coincide and are not at odds at any point. Both are represented as preceding YHWH's coming and both are sent for the purpose of "turning" Israel. Judgment for the wicked and blessing for the righteous are given by YHWH, whose way the messenger/Elijah prepares; see Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 327-328.

[127] Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1994), 660; Kaiser, "Elijah in Malachi and the Gospels," 222-223, likewise, has found wanting such a narrow understanding which neglects other viable options.

Malachi's prophecy. Faierstein's critique overextends itself to cast doubt upon the integrity of the Gospel writers' application of Malachi, when in fact, the essay has only demonstrated that the idea of an Elijianic forerunner *does not appear in extant contemporary Jewish literature of Jesus' day* and that *no messiah is spoken of in Malachi 4:5-6*. While Faierstein's essay functions as a helpful and long overdue "pruning" of the common and longstanding misconceptions surrounding this issue, his argument does not invalidate the Gospel writers' portrayal of John the Baptist as the Elijianic forerunner to Jesus the Messiah.

John the Baptist and Elijah: the Gospel of Luke

The relationship of John the Baptist to Elijah in Luke's narrative has presented its own difficulties for scholars. Some argue that Luke is internally inconsistent in his portrayal of John the Baptist between what is found in the infancy narratives and what is found in the rest of his Gospel. Many have argued in various ways that Luke portrays John the Baptist as a strong Elijianic figure in the infancy narratives while in the rest of Luke's Gospel the notion is abandoned and even suppressed. Another reconstruction (that of a redaction critical perspective) sees conflict not within the Lukan narrative itself but between Luke's depiction of John the Baptist and Elijah and that of the other Gospels. This section will draw attention to some of the unnecessary conclusions drawn from these respective constructions following the order provided above.

The first objection posits that the relationship of John the Baptist to Elijah in Luke's infancy narrative is inconsistent with the rest of his Gospel. While Conzelmann (and others who have adopted his articulation of Luke's theology) have insisted upon

seeing a division between Luke's infancy narrative and the rest of his Gospel, the arguments in support of such an articulation have met with harsh criticism[128] with the end result that Conzelmann's views on this matter no longer hold the place they once did.[129] In support of a division between Luke 1-2 and the rest of his narrative, some scholars have pointed to a Baptist source behind the infancy narrative.[130] What is argued is that the Baptist source lying behind Luke 1-2 reveals a John the Baptist who is strong and independent before Luke (and other Gospel writers) would later cut him down to size, making him inferior and subservient to Jesus. But there are a number of issues with such a construal. First, whether or not there is a Baptist source behind Luke 1-2, and what form that source may have taken, cannot be determined with any certainty[131] and the issue of a Baptist source ultimately sheds little to no light on the matter at hand. If there is

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[128] The thrust of Conzelmann's articulation of Luke's theology is based upon a forced interpretation of Luke 16:16 of which Paul Minear has said, "Rarely has a scholar placed so much weight on so dubious an interpretation of so difficult a logion" ("Luke's Use of the Birth Stories," *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn [Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1966], 122); see also Werner Georg Kümmel, "'Das Gesetz und Die Propheten Gehen bis Johannes'—Lukas 16,16 im Zusammenhang der Heilsgeschichtlichen Theologie der Lukasschriften," *Verborum Veritas. Festschrift für Gustav Stählin zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Otto Böcher and Klaus Haacker (Wuppertal: Theologischer Verlag Brockhaus, 1970): 89-102.

[129] See Minear, "Birth Stories," 111-30; Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979), 241-43; Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 25; see also I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 46, who notes that "the theology is closely integrated with that of the rest of his work," adding that "Conzelmann's claims to the contrary...are unconvincing"; see also Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1997), 47-58, who describes the literary landscape of Luke 1-2 as intentionally preparatory in order to foster "a keen sense of anticipation" for the reader who expects the events to be fulfilled in the rest of the narrative. Luke's aim is to build his narrative and not "reveal" everything all at once; see also Joel B. Green, "The Problem of a Beginning: Israel's Scriptures in Luke 1-2," *BBR* 4 (1994): 61-86.

[130] This is believed for various reasons, many of which are outside of the confines of this study. These include issues related to a hypothetical Hebrew or Aramaic source behind the infancy narrative, several Latin manuscripts attributing the Magnificat to Elizabeth, and various stylistic differences between Luke 1-2 and the rest of Luke's narrative; see Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 244-250; Wink, *John the Baptist*, 60-72.

[131] Of the evidence for a baptist sect in the first century, J. A. T. Robinson has said: "I cannot find a shred of reliable historical evidence for them at the time" ("Elijah, John, and Jesus: An Essay in Detection," *NTS* 4 [1957-1958]: 278-79); see Marshall, *Luke*, 45-49.

a Baptist source behind Luke 1-2, then the author of the Gospel has clearly adapted it to represent his own views since it is evident that John the Baptist is by no means a weak or unimportant figure in the rest of Luke's narrative. Jesus' high estimation of John in Luke 7:24-35 attests to this, along with the attribution of authority given to John's ministry, a ministry being directly prescribed by God (20:1-8). Further, this goes without mention of the strong impression Luke gives of John the Baptist's importance in Acts (1:20-21; 10:37-38; cf. 26:20).[132] As Robert Tannehill has keenly noted:

> The importance of the birth narratives for interpreting Luke-Acts as a whole must be recognized. The possible use of sources for parts of the birth narratives does not undermine this statement, for the selection of source material for inclusion in the work is an authorial choice which may reflect the author's purposes as clearly as freely composed material.[133]

Put in this perspective, such an understanding of the infancy narrative for Luke's Gospel should cast the interpretations of these scholars into suspicion. One example will suffice. Martin Öhler has pointed to Luke 1:16-17 and stressed the fact that John the Baptist is portrayed here as the "forerunner to God" and not to the Messiah, suggesting a divergent view within the infancy narrative from the rest of Luke's Gospel.[134] However, such an understanding of Luke 1:16-17 does not allow for either the context or the broader aims of Luke's narrative to hold the weight that should be due to them in such an analysis.[135] It is preferable to suppose, given the stylistic and thematic nature of the infancy narrative,

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[132] See especially, Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 244-250, who argues that a number of themes which are prevalent throughout the infancy narrative fit in well with Luke's emphasis on the Spirit and the Old Testament's fulfillment in Acts, leading Brown to conclude that Luke 1-2 could have been written after the two volumes were composed.

[133] Tannehill, "Israel as a Tragic Story," *JBL* 104 (1985): 73.

[134] Markus Öhler, "The Expectation of Elijah and the Presence of the Kingdom of God," *JBL* 118/3 (1999): 469.

[135] Again, see the works referenced in the footnotes above.

that Luke wants to present the beginning of his Gospel in its Jewish setting, and so he delays the fullness of the identity of the figure before whom John prepares the way in order to build anticipation in his narrative.[136] Together, these points better account for the ministry of John the Baptist as it is portrayed in the Gospels than what is offered in the historical critical reconstruction.

Still, some scholars see other problems related to Luke's use of Elijah with reference to John the Baptist. Walter Wink, for example, sees a departure in Luke's presentation of Elijah from that of the other Synoptic writers, arguing that Elijah is not used in a typological way as he is in Matthew and Mark. For Luke, Elijah is used only as a "basis for comparison."[137] He further argues that Luke downplays the relationship between Elijah and John significantly by omitting a number of references to Elijah that are found in Mark, adding three references to Elijah of his own, none of which have to do with Elijah's relation to John the Baptist. Thus, Luke distances himself from the ascription of Elijianic status Matthew and Mark apply to John. However, Wink may be overshooting in his assessment. First, regarding the use of Elijah as "a basis for comparison" over and against that of a typological understanding is an unnecessary and artificial distinction. There is no indication as to why the description of John the Baptist

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[136] The Jewish setting is widely recognized. Green, *Luke*, 47, describes the transition from Luke 1:4 to 1:5 saying, "Almost without warning we depart the cultural milieu wherein Greek preface-writing would have been fully at home, and enter the world of the struggles and faithfulness of a small town priest and his wife, a peasant girl, and two devout Jerusalemites — an environment permeated by the piety of Second Temple Judaism and hope for divine intervention and deliverance. The intersection of these two worlds is of critical importance for Luke, who will show through his orderly account how the unfolding of events in this world of ancient Galilee and Judea are of universal significance." Likewise, Marshall, *Luke*, 53, notes that throughout the infancy narrative "the impression gained...is that of an author whose mind is saturated with the language of the LXX and draws on it almost unconsciously as well as making conscious use of typological patterns based on the lives of particular characters"; see also Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 242-243.

[137] Wink, *John the Baptist*, 42.

as coming "in the spirit and power of Elijah" should be read in *distinction from* or *counter to* the accord Matthew and Mark have given him. While the rest of Luke's narrative does not explicitly identify John the Baptist and Elijah as Matthew does (and as Mark strongly implies), the relationship between the two is sufficiently demonstrated as a strong link in the infancy narrative (1:17, 76, 78). The relationship is also affirmed in Jesus' quotation of Malachi 3:1 in reference to John later in Luke's Gospel (7:26-27). With such a connection in place, the omissions do not have the "distancing" effect that Wink argues for.

John the Baptist and Elijah: the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John, it has been argued, shows the clearest indication of a growing intolerance in the early church for John the Baptist. This is especially evident in the account where John the Baptist denies that he is Elijah (1:21; cf. v. 25). This is due to the alleged fact that the Gospel of John aims to diminish John the Baptist of significance (3:30), and association with a prophet like Elijah would only threaten this aim. As the discussion above shows, the historical critical reconstruction overemphasizes differences between Gospel accounts, but the question must be addressed as to whether or not these differences require an alternative explanation other than what is offered in the biblical text. For example, unlike the Synoptics, the Gospel of John speaks little of the "kingdom" and instead highlights "eternal life," but this does not mean that the Gospel of John is not interested in the kingdom of God. The focus of the Gospel of John is the Word which has taken on flesh, the Word that reveals the Father, and the Word that is "the way, the truth and the life." The historical critical approach starts with a posture of skepticism and thus

misses an important and needed distinction: a Gospel writer's choice of emphasis dictates his literary construction. For John's Gospel, everything pales in comparison to the radiance of the light Christ gives. It is unfair to isolate John the Baptist. Singling him out shows a failure on the part of the historical critical scholar to appreciate the value of the Gospel as a whole. Other examples may be provided to make this point clearer. For instance, John's Gospel contains no account of an exorcism, a feature of Jesus' ministry that plays an important role in the Synoptics, focusing instead "on acts of healing, restoration, and provision."[138] Does this omission suggest something about the author's view of *demons*, or rather, does this suggest a different *Christological emphasis* on his part? An author's choice of emphasis will influence what is included in his narrative and how an account is relayed. Such thematic and stylistic choices do not necessarily indicate the presence of contradiction or polemic. The Fourth Gospel is written in a style markedly different from the Synoptics so it should come as no surprise when certain elements are portrayed accordingly. John 1:7 enumerates John the Baptist's ultimate purpose in accordance with the Gospel writer's aims (20:30-31): "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him." Rather than obscuring the Synoptic portrait of John the Baptist, the Gospel of John emphasizes the ultimate significance of John's function, highlighting the design behind his role as forerunner: to bear witness to the Christ. This is not in conflict with the other Gospels. John's portrayal

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[138] Darrell Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002), 41.

of the Baptist only focuses and highlights what the other writers have already said regarding John the Baptist.[139]

The Identity of John's Expected Figure: Conflict or Development?

The account of John the Baptist's question from prison concerning the identity of Jesus (Matthew 11:2-6 = Luke 7:18-23) has been a hotbed of discussion among historical critical scholars.[140] Of central concern is the placement of Jesus in relation to the coming figure whom John proclaimed. Historical critical scholars have argued that the description offered by Jesus of himself in his reply to John does not accord with the description of the expected figure whom John proclaimed. Additionally, why is John the Baptist uncertain about Jesus' identity? And, why does Jesus offer such high acclamation for John the Baptist *if it is Jesus* who is the great expected figure? The contention of this reconstruction is that John the Baptist was never truly the forerunner to Jesus at all. He proclaimed the coming of a figure whose description does not match that of Jesus. These four features—John's description of the coming figure, his uncertainty about Jesus' identity, Jesus' contrasting description of himself, followed by Jesus' extraordinarily high praise of John—all work together, revealing a problem that lies underneath the surface of the text, of which the Gospel writers were working to cover up. In examining this issue of Jesus' identity these four related issues will receive examination. In the process, the two

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[139] "John the Evangelist mentioned none of this background information, even though he dwelt on the Baptist and his message more than the other evangelists and was once one of John's disciples who had himself been pointed to Christ by the Baptist (John 1:35-37). The apostle John was interested in writing about John the Baptist solely because of his role as a witness to Christ" (David J. MacLeod, "The Witness of John the Baptist to the Word," *BibSac* 160 [2003]: 309).

[140] So much discussion has this pericope generated, that this study must ignore much of it due to constraints (e.g., issues related to Q and authenticity). For an overview, see Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 278-282.

blocks of material presented in the last chapter will be examined. The first block concerns the identity of the expected figure in John's preaching ministry (Matthew 3:7-12 = Luke 3:7-9, 15-18) while in the second block the issues of John's doubt and of Jesus' identity and his relation to John the Baptist arise.

The reconstruction presented in the last chapter listed a number of features in John's description of the coming figure.[141] Scholars agree that the expected figure is a powerful eschatological figure bringing judgment and wrath for the unrepentant. It was indicated in the last chapter how John's description matches that of YHWH's activity as described by the Old Testament prophets for judgment (Joel 2:1-11; Malachi 4:1) and in his outpouring of the Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29). Other features of John's description were identified which indicate that he had an earthly figure in view. These features include John's description of the figure as "mightier" than himself (comparison being an unusual way to describe God Almighty), one whose sandals he is not worthy to untie ("an unparalleled anthropomorphism if Yahweh were the referent"),[142] and the fact that John asks Jesus from prison if he is the one to come (Would such a question be asked if John thought the figure would be YHWH?). Regardless of the figure's precise identity, all the scholars reviewed agree that the figure portrayed by John the Baptist is *mighty* and one who will *judge* Israel as part of the *eschatological* climax of history. This, it is

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[141] He is mightier than John (Matthew 3:11 = Mark 1:7 = Luke 3:16). He will baptize the people with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11 = Mark 1:8 = Luke 3:16) and with fire (Matthew 3:11 = Luke 3:16). The imagery of an axe for judgment is used by John in describing the situation of those who do not repent (Matthew 3:10 = Luke 3:9) as well as imagery of a threshing floor to describe both judgment and restoration at the hand of the figure (Matthew 3:12 = Luke 3:17).

[142] Daniel S. Dapaah, *The Relationship Between John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth: A Critical Study* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 2005), 73.

argued, poses a great problem when compared with the description of Jesus' reply to John's question from prison.

These summary features of the historical critical reconstruction of John's expected figure can be affirmed. The figure does takes on a role of judgment that belongs to YHWH in the Old Testament and John's description does also offer features which suggest an earthly figure. One initial problem with the reconstruction at this point is in what it neglects. There is no question that eschatological elements of judgment permeate John's proclamation of the expected figure, but is the figure no more than that? But before addressing this question, attention must turn to an important issue in laying the necessary foundation for the ensuing discussion: Does John the Baptist's portrayal of a coming figure rule out the coming of a messianic figure?

In an overlooked study of Richard Bauckham's particularly helpful insight is offered.[143] In his study, Bauckham argues that John the Baptist stood in a line of Jewish exegetical tradition which understood Isaiah 10:34 to speak of the coming Messiah in connection with the depiction of David's shoot in Isaiah 11:1-5.[144] The essay looks at Isaiah 10:34 and its interpretation in two texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q161 Col. 3 Frags. 8-10 and 4Q285 Frag. 5)[145] and its adaption in 2 Baruch 36-40. Together, these sources confirm that there was a messianic interpretation of Isaiah 10:34 current in some

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[143] Richard Bauckham, "The Messianic Interpretation of Isaiah 10:34 in the Dead Sea Scrolls, 2 Baruch and the Preaching of John the Baptist," *DSD* 2 (1995): 202-216.

[144] Isaiah 11:1-5 was a well established messianic passage during the Second Temple period (Craig A. Evans, "Messianic Hopes and Messianic Figures in Late Antiquity," *JGRChJ* 3 [2006]: 14); cf. Bauckham, "Messianic Interpretation," 202.

[145] The text and translation provided by Bauckham for 4Q285 is from Geza Vermes, "The Oxford Forum for Qumran Research on the Rule of War from Cave 4 (4Q285)," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 43 (1991): 88. This is numbered Frag. 7 in Michael Owen Wise, Martin G. Abegg, Jr., and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, 2005).

Jewish circles,[146] an interpretation, Bauckham argues, that was "presupposed in the preaching of John the Baptist."[147] In line with the exegetical tradition represented by 4Q161, 4Q285, and 2 Baruch 36-40, John the Baptist adopted imagery from Isaiah 10:34 (cf. 11:1-5) in his proclamation of the coming figure. Three important connections are demonstrated by Bauckham which follow from this exegetical tradition. First, in Isaiah 10:34 the figure will "cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe." This was interpreted by the Jewish texts mentioned above as describing the Messiah's activity in cutting down their enemies. In John's preaching, the axe of judgment likewise lays at the root of the trees (i.e., the unrepentant people; Matthew 3:10 = Luke 3:9;[148] and presumably the axe is wielded by the expected figure).[149] Secondly, in Isaiah 10:34, Lebanon is said to fall "by the Majestic One (אדיר)," who is understood as a messianic figure in these interpretations. In the proclamation of John, the terms used to describe the coming figure (ἰσχυρός in Matthew 3:11 = Mark 1:7 = Luke 3:16; ἔμπροσθεν in John 1:15, 30) appropriately translate the term אדיר, lending evidence to a connection.[150]

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[146] The importance of 2 Baruch 36-40 is that it "demonstrates that the messianic interpretation of Isa. 10:34 was not confined to the Qumran community, but must have been more widely known and accepted in the New Testament period" (Bauckham, "Messianic Interpretation," 210).

[147] Ibid., 210.

[148] In light of the tradition of exegesis traced in the Dead Sea Scrolls and 2 Baruch, John the Baptist also seems to have read Isa. 10:33-34 as referring to "a divine judgment executed by the Messiah...whose rule is described in Isa. 11:1-5." Unlike that tradition, the victory envisaged by John was not over Gentile kingdoms but was "a discriminatory judgment on the arrogant and unrepentant within Israel. These are the forest which the Messiah will fell with his axe and burn" (ibid., 214).

[149] Bauckham also makes a connection with the felling of trees in Isaiah 10:34 and the the mountains being made low in preparation for YHWH in Isaiah 40:3-4 (ibid., 207-209, 216).

[150] "If John, speaking in Aramaic, referred to the expected figure as אדיר מני, the Synoptic ἰσχυρότερός μου would be a natural translation, but, in the context of John's saying, which goes on to emphasize the figure's eminence rather than his power as such, the Johannine ἔμπροσθέν μου would be even more appropriate" (ibid., 214); used as a substantive, אדיר "refers to a person of powerful status in society, a prince or noble or military leader" (ibid.; cf. BDB, 12).

Thirdly, Isaiah 11:1-5 was well established at the time as a popular messianic passage, and the Jewish exegetical tradition read the passage in connection with 10:34, furnishing a messianic context for the imagery. As such, Bauckham posits that the expected figure's baptizing with the Spirit and with fire derives from exegesis of Isa. 11:4 (cf. 4 Ezra 13:9-11). He also identifies a reference to Isaiah 11:2 in John 1:33 when "John saw Jesus anointed with the Spirit of God and so knew him to be the Messiah of Isa. 11:1-5."[151] One objection to this argument might be to ask why John the Baptist does not simply identify the coming one as the Messiah. Bauckham provides the explanation that John the Baptist does not refer to the coming one with clear Messianic titles due to the fact that "such terms were so predominantly associated with the messianic role of defeating the Gentiles."[152] Thus, John the Baptist

> carefully chose and spelt out the meaning of a scriptural term for the Messiah– אדיר– which had not acquired associations from common usage, but which, as he expounded it, said what needed to be said about the figure whose coming he predicted: that he is the preeminent one whose authority surpasses all earthly rulers and judges.[153]

These features of John's preaching indicate several things: 1. they offer lexical and thematic connections to Isaiah 10:34, 2. they are confirmed by the extra-biblical readings named, and 3. they are connected with the activity of the Messiah in Isaiah 11:1-5. In light of this, the possibility that a messianic figure is the object of John's proclamation should not be ruled out. It is now time to turn to the second part of investigation which

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[151] Bauckham, "Messianic Interpretation," 216.

[152] Ibid., 214.

[153] Ibid., 215.

examines Jesus' reply to John's question from prison, asking the question: Does the *content of Jesus' response* accord with the *description of John's expected figure*?

In this second "Baptist block" of material found in Q (Matthew 11:2-18 = Luke 7:18-35), it is argued that John's question from prison presented a problem due to the obvious doubt he expressed regarding Jesus' identity. Further, this reconstruction alleges that Jesus' reply only complicates the matter since it lends support to the notion that Jesus is not John's expected figure. This is only confirmed in the following section where Jesus addresses the crowd by giving high praise to John as a great prophet. There are, however, a number of problems with the historical critical reconstruction offered at this point.

John's doubt is said to have caused problems for the early church since it indicates (at least initially) that Jesus is not the expected figure of John's preaching. What else, it is argued, could give rise to such a question? This problem only seems to worsen in light of the reply from Jesus which is followed by high praise of John. Altogether the incident seems to only bolster the notion that the historical (*real*) Baptist is being obscured in the Gospel narratives. However, the doubt of John in and of itself need not raise concerns regarding the true identity of Jesus for the early church. There is no reason why John cannot have had doubts in a moment of weakness.[154] The great prophet Elijah was afraid because of Jezebel's threat on his life even after the great miracle he saw YHWH perform at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 19:1-4). Basic human experience can testify to this. John was a great and popular prophet in Israel and subsequent to being thrown in prison he may

[154] Note Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus: Seine Sprache, Sein Ziel, Seine Selbständigkeit* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1963), 360, who understands this account as functioning as a pedagogical tool for Matthew, essentially saying, "wir alle haben gezweifelt; es gab nur Einen, der nicht zweifelte, Jesus selbst." Even in light of John the Baptist's recognition of Jesus as his superior in Matthew's baptism account, there is no need to doubt the historicity of either as Taylor has alleged (*The Immerser*, 289).

have wanted affirmation that all was going according to plan. It is also possible that the misperceptions among the people "about messiahship" and "about how God's eschatological visitation would be realized"[155] influenced John at this trying situation in his life. Further, consideration should also be given to the phrase ὁ ἐρχόμενος. If Bauckham and others[156] are correct, Matthew 3:11-12 = Luke 3:15-17 has already placed the idea of Messiahship alongside the phrase ὁ ἐρχόμενος so that here in John's question to Jesus, the phrase evokes messianic connotations.[157] Regardless, the text does not offer sufficient evidence from John's question alone for the idea that Jesus is not the expected figure. It is Jesus' reply to John's question, however, that has caused the most stir among historical critical scholars. To this issue the study now turns.

According to the historical critical reconstruction, Jesus' response in Matthew 11:4-6 = Luke 7:21-23 confirms the problem of Jesus' identity because the activity that he reports back to John does not accord with the description of John's coming figure. Jesus' reply is that of a miracle worker, not an eschatological judge, it is argued. The deeds don't point to a messianic figure but to an Elijah-figure who works miracles. What caused the early church great embarrassment, according to Joan Taylor, was that John's question indicated that he was expecting Jesus to be Elijah, a role the early church (at least Matthew and Mark) attributed to John the Baptist. So Taylor can write: "Clearly there is no claim to be divine in Jesus' reply, and it is equally difficult to see him claiming to be

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[155] Green, *Luke*, 296.

[156] Bock, *Luke*, 668-669; Green, *Luke*, 180-182, 295, n. 42; Marshall, *Luke*, 292, seems to suggest this.

[157] This is "a notion, that is strongly sanctioned in [Luke] 19:38" at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Green, *Luke*, 295 n. 42).

the royal Messiah."[158] Catherine Murphy adds, "John's prophecy of fire and brimstone is not exactly fulfilled in the cure of disease and the spread of good news."[159] Jesus, in short, is not John's expected figure. He is, by contrast, a miracle worker proclaiming restoration and renewal.

However, the reconstruction falls short on a number of levels. This is due to a failure to grasp important contextual factors surrounding both John and Jesus' ministry as well as the Old Testament passages from which their ministries are informed. This is apparent in the historical critical reconstruction's emphasis on the proclamation of John the Baptist as a message of judgment *over and against* one of salvation and restoration. Such a linear reading misunderstands John's dynamic and contextually nuanced role as forerunner. When one considers that John the Baptist is the voice of Isaiah 40:3 preparing the way for YHWH, one must consider the broader Isaianic context in which salvation always appears: after or within the context of judgment.[160] The comfort which YHWH brings, and thus the comfort for which the voice prepares, comes after repentance. John's proclamation emphasizes judgment because of where he stands in relation to YHWH's

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[158] Taylor, *The Immerser*, 290.

[159] Catherine M. Murphy, *John the Baptist: Prophet of Purity for a New Age* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 66.

[160] See John Oswalt, "Judgment and Hope: The Full-Orbed Gospel" *TrinJ* 17NS (1996): 191-202, who looks at the dynamic aspect of God's redemption in Isaiah which always includes judgment. A number of scholars have demonstrated that when a New Testament writer references the Old Testament, he is also frequently alluding to the context within which that Old Testament passage is found; see C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: the Substructure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1953); G. K. Beale, "Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? An Examination of the Presuppositions of the Apostle's Exegetical Method," *Themelios* 14 (1989): 89-96; David Seccombe, "Luke and Isaiah," in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?: Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994), 248-256.; Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books), 2000, 379-38.1

promised comfort.[161] When Jesus replies to John he alludes to three passages from Isaiah (Isaiah: 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1), all of which concern the manifestation of God's righteous rule by the presence of miracles. These three passages from Isaiah concern more than the healing of the blind, the deaf and the lame.[162] The miracles found in the passages to which Jesus makes reference all represent characterizations of God's righteous rule which comes at his eschatological visitation to his people. Such a situation must be understood in light of the allusion to Isaiah 61:1 wherein "good news is preached." This signals a clear allusion to Luke 4:18-19 where Jesus is publicly acknowledged as YHWH's anointed, endowed with the Spirit to carry out this mission of establishing his rule on the earth. The purpose in Jesus' responding in this way "is to provide testimony in support of the delineation of his mission, elaborated in language of eschatological salvation borrowed from Isaiah."[163] As Evans affirms, "these allusions to various passages from Isaiah...were understood as the works of the Messiah."[164] When Jesus cites these he is essentially saying, "The deeds I am doing are manifestations of

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[161] So, Knox Chamblin, "*Gospel and Judgment in the preaching of John the Baptist*," *TynBull* 13 (1963): 8, writes: "On the contrary, the message of John as the Synoptists present it, may rightly be called good news. The startling and offensive term of address (vipers) and the threats of doom, are means to an end, calculated to shake the Jews out of a false sense of security (Luke 3:8), and make them aware of their sin, that they might repent, and thus be ready for the advent of the Kingdom. The immediate aim of John's message is that the people, having repented, and received baptism as a sign thereof, might be forgiven of sin (Luke 3:3)."

[162] Though this physical reality is still in view (Green, *Luke*, 296).

[163] Ibid.

[164] Evans, "Messianic Hopes," 36. The scholar who wishes to maintain the position that Jesus did not think of himself as the Messiah must reckon with the fact that "[t]here is no doctrine of Jesus [in contemporary literature, canonical and non-canonical] in which Jesus is understood in non-messianic terms." Further, "[i]t would be almost impossible to explain the lack of diversity in opinion on the identity of Jesus if his messiahship did not in fact derive from the pre-Easter ministry" (36). Likewise, Rainer Riesner, "From the Messianic Teacher," in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 409, argues: "The development of a 'high' christology, even in earliest Jewish Christianity, cannot be explained solely by their faith in the resurrection of Jesus but only if aspects of his own proclamation pointed in this direction."

God's kingdom testifying to the fact that 'the Coming One' has come."[165] Further, the immediate context of each of these passages makes explicit reference in some form or another to God's judgment, invalidating the objection that Jesus' response is unconcerned with the judgment John proclaimed.[166] The difference is not a matter of contradiction but of development: Jesus' coming and fulfilling of John's proclamation is happening in a different way than John might have expected.[167] A closer consideration of the contextual factors informing John and Jesus' ministry, and of the Old Testament text from which their ministries are derived, gives preference to the view that Jesus was responding in the affirmative to John's question, "Are you the one to come?"

In the next section, when Jesus addresses the crowd (Matthew 11:7-15 = Luke 7:24-30) he gives high praise to John the Baptist. This has been cited as evidence for a historically strong figure in the person of John the Baptist who is obscured in the Gospels because he would have posed a threat. But this great praise accorded to John is only a problem if one agrees with the historical critical reconstruction of the Gospel writers, namely, that they are operating in a concerted effort to suppress John. Such a contention, however, still remains to be demonstrated. Jesus' acclamation of John offers no difficulty for the Gospel writers since John *is* the great eschatological forerunner to the Messiah in

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[165] For this reason, Matthew prefaces the exchange with "Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ…" (Matt. 11:2a); see John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2005), 450, on the relationship between deeds and identity. The response also accords with John's ethical teaching found in Luke 3:10-14, something John would have surely recognized. The "coming one" is thus a paradigm for right living.

[166] Additionally, it might be said that the way in which Christ closes his response to John's disciples indicates as much. When he says, "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (Matthew 11:6 = Luke 7:23), there is a correlative implication which is to say: "Cursed is he who is offended by me" because of the implied judgment that would be upon him.

[167] This concerns the aims of the next chapter and will be taken up there.

fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1 (cf. 4:5-6). John the Baptist is mentioned at the beginning of every Gospel narrative. The baptism of Jesus forms the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and it stands at the center of Mark's introduction to "the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1-15; see Acts 10:37-38). The Apostles saw this moment as definitional to their own mission in carrying out the plan of God as his witnesses on earth (Acts 1:21-22; 10:37). Contrary to the historical critical reconstruction, the biblical text indicates that the Gospel writers celebrated the figure of John the Baptist as one who was vitally significant to the theology and mission of the early church in carrying out the plan of God.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the historical critical reconstruction does not provide sufficient reason for seeking an alternative explanation outside of what the Gospel accounts offer. Rather than demonstrating an insufficiency on the part of the Gospel narratives to provide a consistent and coherent portrait of John the Baptist, the historical critical reconstruction reveals the hand of its own redactors in reconstructing the Baptist. The next chapter will expand upon the alternative explanations offered in this chapter and will demonstrate how John the Baptist's ministry was an integral part of the Gospel narratives, one which the early church celebrated and embraced.

CHAPTER 4

JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE GOSPELS

The foregoing chapters have documented and examined the historical critical reconstruction of John the Baptist which maintains that John the Baptist was a problem for the early church due to his perceived superiority to Jesus.[168] Under closer scrutiny, it was demonstrated that the Gospel narratives by no means require an alternative explanation outside of what is offered in them. Yet the question still remains: If the features of John the Baptist's ministry examined in this study were not problems for the early church, then what role did they play in the Gospel narratives? The present chapter aims to understand the Gospel accounts on their own terms, rather than viewing them through the lens provided in the historical critical approach. This chapter aims, then, to elucidate these features which are so often understood as problems by setting them within their appropriate contexts in the individual Gospel narratives. The corresponding concern of this chapter is not only to see how these areas function within their respective narratives, but to understand how they reflect the nature of Jesus and John's relationship. The results will demonstrate that for the Gospel writers, John the Baptist played an integral part in redemptive history. John's ministry stood, not as a threat, but as a signal of God's eschatological comfort and deliverance of his people.

[168] See pp. 5-8 for a brief summary of the alleged problems that John the Baptist's ministry posed for the early church.

The following discussion will focus primarily on the baptism of Jesus, since the other two areas of interest intersect and frequently build upon the theological concepts and ideas found therein. Thus, the bulk of attention in this chapter will be given to the account of Jesus' baptism by John.

The Baptism of Jesus

The account of Jesus' baptism by John functions in the Gospel narrative(s) to reveal Jesus as the promised Messiah[169] and, in so doing, to confirm the message of John the Baptist. The individual settings provided by the Gospel writers will be examined below followed by an examination of the three common features found in the theophany account: *the opening of the heavens*, *the descent of the Spirit*, and *the voice from heaven*. These features of the theophany evoke Old Testament passages and themes which function as interpretive keys for understanding Jesus' baptism, within its various settings, for the Gospel narratives. Historical critical scholars have emphasized the variation between the individual Gospel accounts in this regard so it is important not to overlook these differences. To be sure, the following seeks not to evade the implications these differences may bear, nor even to grudgingly acknowledge them, but to embrace them in all their diversity. Doing so trusts that such a reading will furnish a deeper and fuller understanding of God's redemption of his people through the person and work of his Son,

[169] The term "Messiah" is used in this chapter to describe a figure who is central to God's plan of redemption in the Old Testament. While the term "Messiah" does not take on such a sense in the Prophets (or anywhere in the Old Testament—with the possible exception of Daniel 9:25 and 26), the idea and concept is found throughout. See D. G. Firth, "Messiah" in *DOTP*, 537-544.

as proclaimed in the fourfold Gospel.[170] The texts under discussion here are Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, and Luke 3:21-22, and will be provided here for reference:[171]

Matthew 3:13-17	Mark 1:9-11	Luke 3:21-22
Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John in order to be baptized by him. 14 But John would have prevented him, saying, "I have a need to be baptized by you and are you coming to me?" 15 But Jesus, answering him, said "Let it be so now, for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then John permitted him. 16 And when Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up from the water and, behold! The heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him 17 and, behold! A voice from heaving was saying: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."	Now it happened in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. 10 And immediately when he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."	And it happened when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus was baptized and was praying, [that] heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, like a dove. 22 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.

The historical critical reconstruction maintains that the variation between these accounts reveals a clear desire on the early church's part to subjugate John to Jesus and to thereby avoid the embarrassing implication of the event. However, it will be demonstrated that the Gospel writers carry such distinctive characteristics in their respective accounts on the baptism of Jesus because of the emphasis they wish to place

[170] On the harmony of the fourfold Gospel, see Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005) 50-56; Darrell Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002), 23-43; see also Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?" in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 9-48, who emphasizes the universal character of the Gospels in their proclamation of a unified message for all.

[171] As indicated in chapter 1, all translations are the authors own.

on concerns central to their narratives.[172] Thus, the writers are not reacting to an embarrassment caused by this event, but are engaged in bringing out the event's significance in accordance with the aims of their individual—but complementary—narratives. So in Matthew's account, when John tries to prevent Jesus from being baptized by him, he is bringing to the fore John's recognition of Jesus to establish (together with Jesus' response) the significance of his mission in accordance with Old Testament prophecy. John the Baptist says "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (3:14), but Jesus insists because his baptism by John is necessary to God's plan of redemption, it is necessary in order "to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). These themes of fulfillment and righteousness are instrumental in Matthew's narrative in displaying the fulfillment of the promised restoration that comes through the Messiah. Jesus' words show that "[t]hrough repentance and baptism people would once again be set on the path of righteousness" through the Messiah.[173]

Mark's account is characteristically brief but pregnant with significance. Indeed, the baptism event "functions as the cornerstone of Mark's Christological understanding" as it marks "the inauguration of God's eschatological kingdom."[174] Jesus' baptism is set

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[172] Each of the Synoptic Gospels display an almost identical narrative setting for the baptism of Jesus. Both Matthew and Mark locate the baptism of Jesus right after the preaching ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-12 = Mark 1:4-8) and right before the temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11 = Mark 1:12-23). Luke's account of Jesus' baptism also follows the preaching ministry of John the Baptist (3:1-17), but this is only after John is arrested and put in prison by Herod (Luke 3:18-20). His narrative is also followed by the account of Jesus' temptation (Luke 4:1-13), but a genealogy of Jesus is placed in between (3:23-38).

[173] John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2005), 154.

[174] James R. Edwards, "The Baptism of Jesus According to the Gospel of Mark," *JETS* 34/1 (1991): 43; see also Robert A. Guelich, "'The Beginning of the Gospel': Mark 1:1-15," *Biblical Research* 27 (1982): 5-15; Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books), 2000, 102-118.

within the context of John's eschatological proclamation in fulfillment of his ministry as the voice of Isaiah 40:3 and the messenger of Malachi 3:1/Exodus 23:20.[175] Differing from the portrayals given by Matthew and Mark, Luke sets the baptism in the past and gives a report "of what happened while Jesus was praying after baptism" so that "[t]he successfully completed work of John is looked back upon in terms of the baptism of *all* the people and also of Jesus."[176] Luke emphasizes Jesus' solidarity with the people (3:21; cf. 1:68-69; 2:10, 32), the reality of the Spirit's descent (3:22; cf. 1:35; 3:16) and the truth of the divine statement that reveals him as the Son of God (3:22; cf. 1:35; 3:38; 4:3, 9).[177] While in John's Gospel the actual event of baptism is not explicitly stated, it would be wrong to say that his Gospel ignores the fact. John's narrative, rather, assumes the baptism as a past event which has already taken place and provides a testimony from the Baptist's point of view detailing how it is that the One he proclaimed was revealed to

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[175] Both referents are possible and both have significant implications for Mark's introduction. The context of each of these passages is concerned with YHWH and his covenant with his people. There may be good reason to believe that Malachi 3:1 is the main referent here since John the Baptist is identified in some way or another with Malachi's messenger in all three Synoptic Gospel accounts (Matthew 11:10, 14; 17:10-13; Mark 9:11-13; Luke 1:17, 76; 7:27) and since there is evidence that Malachi 3:1 was originally influenced by Isaiah 40:3, the focal point of Mark's compound citation (1:3). The eschatological overtones conveyed by this citation concern God's ultimate purposes being realized in his people brought about by his own hand. In both the Exodus and Malachi passages, the task of the messenger is to bring the people into a position where they can receive blessings from YHWH. In Malachi, this is elaborated in more depth given the prospect of judgment for the disobedient (3:5; 4:1-3); see Klyne Snodgrass, "Streams of Tradition Emerging from Isaiah 40:1-5 and Their Adaption in the New Testament," *JSNT* 8 (1980): 25, who argues for an influence of Isaiah 40:3 on Malachi 3:1: "In view of the fact that the Piel of פנה does not appear with דרך outside Malachi 3:1 and the three texts mentioned in Isaiah (40:3, 57:14; and 62:10) and in view of the common theme of the appearance of the Lord, there is a good possibility that Malachi 3:1 was influenced by Isaiah 40:3." This may further be supported by the LXX's rendering of Isaiah 40:2 with its insertion of ἱερεῖς as a description of the addressees, a possible influence of Malachi 2:7 if the messenger of YHWH (3:1) was seen in connection with the priest (ibid., 26); see also Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 328; C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament: The Minor Prophets*, Vol. 10 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 655.

[176] John Nolland, *Luke 1:1-9:20* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 160, who continues, saying, "John has indeed made ready for the Lord a People prepared (Luke 1:17; 7:29)" (ibid.).

[177] Ibid., 1:161, 165.

him.[178] All four Gospels present the scenario of Jesus' baptism in complementary ways, displaying the dynamic greatness of his person. What remains for further exploration are the all important contents of the theophany, to which this study now turns.

In all, there are three features provided by the Synoptic writers which make up the theophany at Jesus' baptism. The first is a description of the heavens being opened. As with all the features, this one is found in all three Synoptic Gospels, but Mark's articulation of the event stands out, differing in two significant ways from Matthew and Luke. Mark 1:10a-b reads, "And immediately when he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open." First, Mark's account differs in that he describes the heavens as being "*torn* open" as opposed to simply describing them as being "opened" as Matthew and Luke do. Mark makes use of the term σχίζω, indicating a possible allusion here to Isaiah 64:1-2 ESV, which reads:

> "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence—2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!"

The verb σχίζω would appropriately render the verb קרע of the MT (Isaiah 64:1 [MT 63:19c]). The LXX uses the verb ἀνοίγω in Isaiah 64:1 which probably accounts for why Matthew and Luke make use of this verb in their accounts. The verb σχίζω is significant because of its association with cataclysmic events, as here, and in Israel's history (see Exodus 14:21; Isaiah 48:21; Zechariah 14:4). The verb appears one other time in Mark's Gospel at the end when the veil in the temple is torn (15:38) and Jesus is revealed as the

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[178] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 151-152.

Son of God (15:39).[179] A second peculiarity to Mark's account is that he includes the opening of the heavens as part of Jesus' experience, stating, "And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open" (1:10). Matthew and Luke report the event as a passive occurrence, lacking the personal dynamic found in Mark. This may simply be do to Mark's emphasis on Jesus' vigor and personal involvement in the event.[180] What this feature of the heavens being opened signifies for all of the Synoptic writers is the fact that God in heaven is addressing someone on earth (cf. Ezekiel 1:1).[181] The possible allusion to Isaiah 64:1 (cf. Isaiah 63:11, 14) in its context could also point to the deliverance of God's people after a period of waiting and expectation.[182] The opening of the heavens is the first step in revealing the identity and mission of Jesus. The next feature of the account specifies in what terms God's servant will enact deliverance on earth.

After the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends upon Jesus. Like the first feature, the descent of the Spirit also finds variation between the Synoptic accounts. Mark 1:10b-c describes the event, saying, "he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him." The Spirit himself is described differently by each of

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[179] Edwards, "The Baptism of Jesus," 45, who also sees allusion here to *T. Levi* 18 and *T. Jud.* 24, which uses the same verb and alludes to the same themes of the heavens being opened and the descent of the Spirit.

[180] Ibid., 44. It is difficult to locate a more specific explanation outside of this general and vague observation. The elusiveness of the feature's precise significance is testified to by the dearth of discussion in commentaries on this point.

[181] The opening of the heavens is what Nolland calls "an apocalyptic revelation motif" (*Luke*, 160).

[182] "The significance is that after a period of apparent inactivity God himself comes down to act in power" (I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978], 152); Edwards has observed: "In Jesus, God was present in the world in an unparalleled and consummate manner" (Edwards, "The Baptism of Jesus," 45).

the Synoptic writers. Mark simply describes the Spirit as τὸ πνεῦμα, while Matthew has [τὸ] πνεῦμα [τοῦ] θεοῦ, with Luke providing τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον.[183] The context in each of these accounts makes it plain that God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is in view.[184] The Spirit is further described in each account as "like a dove". Mark describes the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus as being "like a dove" (ὡς περιστερὰν), with no further qualification. Matthew's account adds the description that the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove "coming/resting" on him (ἐρχόμενον ἐπ' αὐτόν). Luke adds a most descriptive phrase "in bodily form like a dove" (σωματικῷ εἴδει ὡς περιστερὰν) to τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον in his description of the Spirit's descent. Various Old Testament passages have been suggested as background for the dove imagery used here (e.g., Genesis 8:8, 12; Psalm 55:6; 68:13; 74:19; Hosea 11:11), but the consensus of most scholars is that the reason for its use by the Gospel writers is unknown.[185] Many times in the Old Testament the Spirit comes upon persons to enable and empower them for a certain task (e.g., Exodus 31:3; 35:31; Numbers 24:2; Judges 3:10; 6:34; 13:25; 1 Samuel 10:6, 10; 19:20, 23), but for Jesus the significance of the event finds reference in the imparted Spirit given by YHWH to the Davidic Messiah (Isaiah 11:1) and to YHWH's servant "who will bring forth justice to the

[183] For Luke, πνεῦμα alone is usually reserved for an evil spirit (e.g., Luke 9:39), unless it serves as a referent to the Holy Spirit already mentioned in a given passage (Nolland, *Luke*, 161, 206).

[184] This is borne out from the present discussion and the discussion below on the voice from heaven.

[185] See discussion in Marshall, *Luke*, 152-154.

nations" (Isaiah 42:1 ESV; cf. 61:1).[186] This role is especially emphasized in Luke's account where Isaiah 61:1-2 is quoted in Jesus' address to the Jews in the synagogue at Capernaum. Here the reference is applied to himself and to his mission in fulfillment of the task of YHWH's anointed Servant (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Acts 10:38). For all the Synoptics, Jesus' reception of the Spirit here is his anointing by YHWH which in turn reveals his commission to bring about God's eschatological salvation for his people in accordance with the Servant's task in Isaiah.[187] The next feature further identifies Jesus' identity in relation to God and in explication of his mission.

The third and final feature of the theophany is the voice coming from heaven after Jesus' reception of the Spirit. The portrayal of the voice in the Synoptic Gospels is essentially in agreement, following Mark 1:11 the text says, "And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."[188] The phrase σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22) and its equivalent in Matthew (cf. 3:17) evokes the royal sonship motif found in Psalm 2:7 (LXX).[189] Here, David's promised son

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[186] This event is a confirmation of Jesus' role as Messiah, not a novel revelation. Jesus' messianic consciousness was tied to his relationship to God as the Divine Son and, thus, "it is intolerable to imagine that *that* began only at his baptism on hearing the divine Voice" (G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973], 56); cf. *Pss. Sol.* 17:37; 18:7; *1 Enoch* 49:3; 62:2; on the significance of Messianic expectations in the Second Temple Period and the difficulty of seeing Jesus' Messiahship as a post-easter creation, see Craig A. Evans, "Messianic Hopes and Messianic Figures in Late Antiquity," *JGRChJ* 3 (2006): 9-40, and Richard Bauckham, "The Messianic Interpretation of Isa. 10:34 in the Dead Sea Scrolls, 2 Baruch and the Preaching of John the Baptist," *DSD* 2 (1995): 202-216.

[187] Nolland importantly points out that Jesus' reception of the Spirit at his baptism is *not* a paradigm for baptism in the Spirit. Such an activity is performed *by* Jesus and not done *to* him (*Luke*, 161, 165).

[188] Both Mark and Luke personalize the voice from heaven, having it address Jesus in the second person ("*You are* my beloved Son; with *you* I am well pleased," Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22), while Matthew records the voice from heaven as making a statement in the third person ("*This is* my beloved Son, with *whom* I am well pleased," Matthew 3:17).

[189] Note the use of Psalm 2 alongside Isaiah 42:1-4 in *Pss. Sol.* 17:21-24 and the interpretation of the son of David in 2 Samuel 7 (with Amos 9:11) as the "fallen branch of David, whom he [YHWH] shall raise up to deliver Israel" in 4QFlor, Col. 3.10-13 (Quotation from Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* [New York: Harper One, 1996, 2005]).

(2 Samuel 7:14; cf. Psalm 89:26, 27)[190] is described as having victory over his enemies and over the nations of the earth. He is also described earlier in the passage as YHWH's anointed (2:2, מִשִׁיחַ). The presence of a link to Isaiah 42:1 (cf. 61:1-2), which was seen in the earlier motif of the Spirit, is strengthened here in the use of the verb εὐδοκέω which describes the Divine pleasure that the servant of Isaiah 42:1-4 gives to YHWH.[191] This address from heaven explicitly reveals Jesus' unique relationship to God as his Son providing the basis for his role as the Messiah.[192]

The overarching significance of the theophany at the baptism event offers a depiction of Jesus as the Son of God who stands in solidarity with all humanity.[193] The one through whom God in heaven acts receives the Spirit that will be poured out on the people after his mission is accomplished (Acts 2:33; cf. 1:5, 8; 2:1-4) in fulfillment of John's proclamation (Matthew 3:11 = Mark 1:8 = Luke 3:16). In accordance with God's plan to restore the people in righteousness (Matthew 3:15), Jesus is baptized with them (Luke 3:21) as YHWH's anointed Servant (cf. Isaiah 53:4-6, 10-12) who stands *with* and *for* Israel as her representative, fulfilling Israel's and humanity's responsibility which the sons of Adam had failed to do.[194] Jesus is the truest expression of Israel because he is "the

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[190] In an ultimate (eschatological) sense and for the purposes of this study, the individual of Psalm 2 is taken here as the promised Davidic King (2 Samuel 7:14) regardless of the historical context of this Psalm which may have had only David in view.

[191] Although, the verb is not found in the LXX at Isaiah 42:1; Others have suggested the influence of Genesis 22:2 here (Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981] 264 n. 68) as well as Exodus 4:22-23 (P. G. Bretscher, "Exodus 4:22-23 and the Voice from Heaven," *JBL* 87 [1968]: 301-312). See discussion in Edwards, "The Baptism of Jesus," 53-55.

[192] Edwards, "The Baptism of Jesus," 54; Nolland, *Luke*, 163-164.

[193] See Green, *Luke*, 1:184-187; C. D. "Jimmy" Agan III, *The Imitation of Christ in the Gospel of Luke: Growing in Christlike Love for God and Neighbor* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2014), 25-26.

[194] Agan, *Imitation of Christ*, 25-26; of the intimate and dynamic link provided by the Spirit, Edwards argues that "the Spirit designates him as the new Israel, binding him to God's people" (Edwards, "The Baptism of Jesus," 48).

final, climactic expression of all God ideally intended through...the law, the temple cultus, the commissions of prophets, judges, priests, and kings."[195] Here in his baptism, Jesus is revealed to the people as God's Messiah, inaugurating the eschatological program of bringing forth the kingdom on earth. The role performed by John the Baptist as the voice crying out in the wilderness signals the dawning of this eschatological age.

John the Forerunner

John's role as forerunner functions in the Gospel narratives to furnish an eschatological framework within which the baptism and ministry of Jesus is to be understood. Mark 1:1-3 and Luke 1:16-17 furnish an appropriate entry into the conversation and are provided here for reference:[196]

Mark 1:1-3	**Luke 1:16-17**
The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Messiah, the Son of God, 2 as it is written in Isaiah the Prophet: "Behold! I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way. 3 A voice cries in the wilderness: 'make ready the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'"	And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient in the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

As Jesus stood in solidarity with the people at his baptism, John's role was to make ready that people. Thus, his role as forerunner is articulated by the Gospel writers as one

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[195] G. K. Beale, "Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? An Examination of the Presuppositions of the Apostle's Exegetical Method," *Themelios* 14 (1989): 92; see also G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011), 651-654.

[196] Guelich, "The Beginning of the Gospel," 5-8 and others (Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000], 55-57) have argued persuasively for understanding Mark 1:1 and 1:2-3 as forming a complex title to Mark's introduction (1:1-15) based on corresponding thematic elements within the introduction (e.g., parallels between John and Jesus' ministry that are mutually connected to themes within their respective narratives and to 1:1-3) as well as strong lexical features indicating a relationship between 1:1 and 1:2-3, one that should not be divided (e.g., the use of καθὼς γέγραπται in comparable literature).

primarily concerned with preparation.[197] This preparatory role, cast in the terms of Isaiah's and Malachi's eschatological vision, encompasses the twofold idea of preparation *for YHWH* (e.g., Luke 1:76) and of a preparation *of the people* (e.g., Luke 1:17). The combination of both aspects is most clearly articulated in Malachi's prophecy. Malachi 3:1 (cited in Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27; cf. 1:17, 76) gives the promise of a future messenger who will be sent by YHWH to go before him in preparation for his coming. This visitation of YHWH for which the messenger prepares concerns the people—their refinement (3:2-4) and their judgment (3:5). Malachi 3:16-18 describes the ultimate goal of YHWH's visitation which is to restore his people to their intended design (cf. Exodus 19:5-6). Malachi 3:17-18 ESV states:

> "They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. 18 Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

This is followed by a proclamation of the great and awesome day of YHWH where the wicked are punished and the righteous are rewarded. YHWH's messenger from 3:1 is implicitly identified as the eschatological Elijah[198] who prepares the way for YHWH by calling the people to repentance (cf. Malachi 4:5-6). In this way, John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus who "begins his ministry within an ideological framework marked by this eschatological orientation."[199] John's forerunning is, in the words of

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[197] The verbs ἑτοιμάζω and κατασκευάζω are used; see Luke 1:17 which makes use of both verbs in reference to the people in the phrase ἑτοιμάσαι κυρίῳ λαὸν κατεσκευασμένον.

[198] Cf. Luke 1:17, 76, 78.

[199] Robert L. Webb, "Jesus' Baptism: Its Historicity and Implications," *BBR* 10/2 (2000): 309.

Geerhardus Vos, "a fore-running of the entire Old Testament" which is perfected and made complete in Jesus, the Coming One.[200]

Of central importance for the Gospel writers is the quotation taken from Isaiah 40:3 which is found in all four Gospels (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23).[201] In reversing the thrust of chapters 1-39, which were characterized by judgment on faithless Israel,[202] Isaiah 40 assured the people that YHWH would remain faithful to his people even through their exile and that he would keep his covenant with them. On this basis, the promise found in Isaiah 40 is that YHWH himself will come and deliver his people from their sins. The wilderness setting of the reference is important in that it provides for the Gospel writers a connection to the setting of John the Baptist while also relating the current state of Israel, recalling the captivity of the people of Israel whom Isaiah addressed.[203] This is further emphasized if Exodus 23:20 is in view as well in Mark 1:2b or is behind the Malachi 3:1 quotation. For Israel, the wilderness evoked

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[200] "John's fore-running of Jesus was to all intents a fore-running of the entire Old Testament with reference to the Christ...the real substance of the Old Testament was recapitulated in John" (Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* [Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1975], 315).

[201] Luke extends the quotation to v.5 (Luke 3:4-6) to emphasize that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." See David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2000), 37, who argues that the quotation in Luke is "a hermeneutical lens without which the entire Lukan program cannot be properly understood." For Pao, "[t]he prominent themes in Isaiah 40-55 become the organizing principles for the second volume of the Lukan writings" (ibid.). In the Gospel of John, the quotation is found on the lips of John the Baptist as he identifies himself as the voice in the wilderness (John 1:23).

[202] John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 9; see discussion on "faith" in Isaiah in J. A. Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1993) 18-23.

[203] The audience and setting of Isaiah 40-55 has been the center of much debate. It seems most likely that Isaiah is writing with a future audience in mind who will find themselves in exile in Babylon. See John N. Oswalt, "Who Were the Addressees of Isaiah 40-66?" *BibSac* 169/673 (2012): 33-47.

associations of both punishment and hope.[204] The wilderness was the place where Israel received the Law from Moses (Exodus 19:1-25), where YHWH led his people by a cloud of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21-22), and where the people remained for forty years because of disobedience before they could enter the promised land (Numbers 14:33-34). The wilderness setting is an appropriate setting for describing God's future deliverance since it corresponds to his deliverance of the people when they were in bondage in Egypt. Thus, the prophets look forward to a new exodus when God will bring ultimate deliverance for his people from their bondage (cf. Isaiah 11:16; Hosea 2:14-15; Micah 7:15).[205]

The Identity of Jesus

The historical critical reconstruction has treated the issue of Jesus' identity as problematic because it was said that the figure of John's proclamation did not match the identity implicit in Jesus' response to John's question from prison. However, it will be shown that the occasion furnishes an opportunity for just the opposite. John's question from prison, in fact, "provides opportunity for Jesus to vindicate John's ministry and

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[204] On the symbolic significance of wilderness imagery for John the Baptist, see Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 360-366; note also the importance of the wilderness in Josephus' accounts of popular prophetic movements contemporaneous with the life of Jesus (*Ant.* 18.85-87; 20.97-98; 20.188; *War* 2.258-260 [*Ant.* 20.167-168]; 2.261-263 [*Ant.* 20.169-172]).

[205] See Francis Foulkes, "The Acts of God: A Study of the Basis of Typology in the Old Testament" in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?: Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994), 354-356; William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002), 115-117; Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus*, 134-136, passim; idem., "Exodus Imagery," in eds. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, 205-214; Pao, *Isaianic New Exodus*, 10-17, passim; Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 360-366.

show its relationship to the kingdom."[206] As John's role provides the eschatological framework within which Jesus' baptism is to be interpreted, Jesus' reply to John from prison confirms his mission as expressed at his baptism as the realization of John's eschatological message. The pericope under consideration (Matthew 11:2-6 = Luke 7:18-23) reads:

Matthew 11:2-6	**Luke 7:18-23**
Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent messengers by way of his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" 4 And answering, Jesus said to them, "Go tell John the things that you hear and see: 5 the blind receive sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. 6 And blessed is the one who does not find in me cause for stumbling."	Now the disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, 19 sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" 20 And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another? '" 21 In that hour he had healed many of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and to many of the blind he gave sight. 22 And, answering, he said to them, "Go tell John the things that you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. 23 And blessed is the one who does not find in me cause for stumbling."

When John inquires from prison after Jesus' identity he uses the phrase ὁ ἐρχόμενος, invoking the content of his proclamation (Matthew 3:11 = Mark 1:7 = Luke 3:16), and implying that he expected Jesus to fulfill this role. John has heard of the deeds of the Christ (Matthew 11:2) and now Jesus invites his disciples to report back to him what they have heard *and seen* (Matthew 11:4; cf. Isaiah 48:6-8).[207] Jesus' reply to John's question from prison brings the focus of discussion onto his identity. His instruction to John's

[206] J. B. DeYoung, "The Function of Malachi 3.1 in Matthew 11.10: Kingdom Reality as the Hermeneutic of Jesus," in eds. Craig A. Evans and William Richard Stegner, *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 68.

[207] There may be an allusion here to Isaiah 48:6-8 which contrasts the present era of fulfillment in redemptive history with the past when the people merely *heard* about God's deeds as opposed to the time when they would actually *see* God working; cf. Luke's version which reverses the order found in Matthew ("seen and heard" 7:22).

disciples to go and tell John what they have seen and heard indicates that an understanding of his deeds would be sufficient for providing an explanation of his identity.[208] How could Jesus expect that his response would be understood in this way? The answer can be found in the last two words of Jesus' string of quotations from Isaiah, namely, that πτωχοὶ εὐαγγελίζονται ("the poor have good news preached to them"). This is a reference to Isaiah 61:1, the passage discussed earlier which describes an individual anointed by YHWH and empowered by the Spirit to proclaim YHWH's deliverance of his people and his rule on earth. The fulfillment of this passage confirms Jesus' mission as revealed at his baptism wherein a related passage was invoked, Isaiah 42:1, which describes YHWH's Spirit-empowered servant who would "bring forth justice to the nations." These two passages are connected by their common description of the individual's activity and in the fact that both passages describe the individual as being endowed with YHWH's Spirit to perform this task.[209] They are also linked to Isaiah 11:2 which describes a future ideal king from David's line, of whom it is also said, "the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him." The testimony of these passages further confirm the identity of Jesus as Israel's deliverer, the Messiah. Further, the individual of Isaiah 61:1 may be a royal figure given the use of the verb משׁח and the description of the Spirit being

[208] Jesus' response should be understood as something that would bring confirmation for John the Baptist (of a fact he already knew) rather than a choice he would potentially reject on the basis of the event's perceived incredulity. See the following discussion.

[209] Isaiah 42:1 "I have put my Spirit upon him"; 61:1 "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me."

upon him as the Davidic King of 11:1-2 (cf. 1 Samuel 10:1, 6; 16:13; 2 Samuel 23:l-2; Psalm 2).[210]

By describing his activity through allusion to several passages in Isaiah, Jesus informs John through his disciples that the Isaianic vision of restoration has arrived with him. The context of these Isaianic references, and Jesus' final word of warning to John not to stumble upon him (Matthew 11:6 = Luke 7:23), remind the audience in general—and John in particular—of the negative consequences incurred from rejecting his ministry. In this way, Jesus fulfills the eschatological requirements of John's expected figure and also elaborates and expands the expectations which John initiated among the people.[211]

Conclusion

Altogether, it has been shown how these three alleged "problems" (the baptism of Jesus, the identification of John the Baptist with Elijah, the identity of Jesus) were in actuality features of the Gospel writers narratives that contributed to a fuller expression of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All three work together to reveal the significance of Christ's coming. The *baptism of Jesus* provided initial validation of John's message by identifying Jesus as that One whom John proclaimed, at the same time revealing the identity and mission of Jesus as the Messiah. *John's role as forerunner* provided the

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[210] See Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "The Christological Fulfillment of Isaiah's Servant Songs," *BibSac* 163 (2006): 401-404, who in addition to these reasons provides further discussion which argues for an understanding of this song as one describing a royal figure.

[211] Note also Jesus' positive assessment of John, seen explicitly here in Matthew 11:7-15 = Luke 7:24-30 but also in the authority he ascribed to John's ministry as being from God elsewhere (Matthew 21:23-27 = Mark 11:27-33 = Luke 20:1-8); cf. Webb, "Jesus' Baptism," 307. Additionally, the construal provided in this study allows John the Baptist's early designation of Jesus as the "Lamb of God" noted twice in John's Gospel (1:29, 36) to stand without conflict. For a helpful summary of the discussion regarding John's identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God, see Christopher W. Skinner, "Another Look at 'the Lamb of God,'" *BibSac* 161 (2004): 89-104.

eschatological framework within which Jesus' ministry was to be understood. Thus, his baptism can be viewed in terms of fulfillment, rather than an opportunity for repentance as was the case for any other Israelite. *Jesus' identity* as revealed at his baptism is confirmed in his response to John's inquiry from prison and is best understood within the eschatological framework that John the Baptist's ministry provides. Thus, John the Baptist's ministry clarifies the Gospel message by connecting God's Old Testament promises with their New Testament fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

This study has shown then, that rather than the text revealing a problem created by John the Baptist, the historical critical approach and its underlying presuppositions generate the idea that an alternative explanation is needed. The historical critical approach examined in this study aims to reveal the true historical portrait of John the Baptist, but in the end it fails to comport with all the relevant data. In the process of attempting to uncover the historical John the Baptist, the historical critical reconstruction has buried him under the rubble of a fragmented and manipulated text, recast into the image of *its own* modern redactors. That John the Baptist was a problem for the early church is not sufficiently demonstrated from the biblical text. Far from being a problem for the early church's beliefs about Jesus, John's ministry was instrumental in preparing the way for the Messiah from the early stages of his ministry and beyond.

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