

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICAL AND ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN STUDIES

“A STUDENT IS NOT ABOVE HIS TEACHER:” AN EXAMINATION OF THE
POSSIBLE DISCIPLE-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JOHN THE BAPTIST AND
JESUS OF NAZARETH

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Summer 2011

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in History and Classical and Ancient Mediterranean Studies
with honors in Classical and Ancient Mediterranean Studies

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Abstract

The idea that Jesus of Nazareth once began his ministry under the guidance of John the Baptist is a theory well known among scholars of the historical Jesus but virtually unknown to the general populace, despite the fact that it may be the key to understanding the historical Jesus. Ancient religious leaders can often be interpreted properly by examining their similarities and differences with their teachers. Yet, because Jesus of Nazareth is seen by Christians as the Son of God, many wrongly assume that he required no teacher and that he never changed his mind with regards to his view of the kingdom of God.

A major focus of this thesis is not only to provide evidence for the discipleship of Jesus by John but also examine how and why Jesus eventually decided to diverge from his teacher and form his own group of disciples. As such, I have agreed with much of the evidence put forth by scholars in the past, particularly Gerd Thiessen, in proving the disciple-teacher relationship. But at the same time I have attempted to take their arguments even further to see how Jesus consciously altered or kept certain aspects of the Baptist's worldview after his baptism and possible discipleship. In other words, while previous authors have often simply attempted to authenticate the discipleship of Jesus by John, in the second part of the thesis, I will essentially take that fact as granted and move on from there.

Careful examination will reveal that Jesus began his career as a disciple of John and accordingly underwent his baptism ritual, which was an expression of conversionary repentance and mediation of divine forgiveness based on Yahweh's metaphorical ablutions in the Old Testament. This makes it possible that Jesus was initially attracted to John's offer of forgiveness because he felt he was burdened by guilt and under God's wrath should he return imminently. Later, Jesus' ability to perform miracles, together with the failure of John's predicted apocalypse

to come about, led him to forge his own eschatology while still holding to some of John's basic framework of the coming kingdom.

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Introduction

That Jesus of Nazareth and John the Baptist are inextricably linked is a fact known to anyone with even the slightest Christian background. Yet, the relationship that inevitably comes to mind is one in which the latter is merely a stepping stone in the career of the former. That Jesus could have once called John ‘rabbi’ would seem foolish to some, sacrilegious to others. It is the position of this thesis that there is enough evidence to prove such a notion is within the realm of probability and is perhaps the key to understanding the historical Jesus.

This idea is, however, far from new. As early as 1840, scholar David F. Strauss wrote, “Jesus, attracted by the fame of the Baptist, put himself under the tuition of that preacher, and that having remained some time among his followers, and been initiated into his ideas of the approaching messianic kingdom, he...carried on, under certain modifications, the same work...”¹ Various scholars of the historical Jesus have elaborated or modified Strauss’ theory, the 1960s especially saw a particularly large amount of books and articles dedicated to the possibility of a teacher-disciple relationship between Jesus and John.² Relying primarily on the criterion of embarrassment, particularly in the Gospel of John, many of these authors came to the conclusion that the four evangelists purposely covered up evidence or edited stories to avoid the embarrassing conclusion that Jesus had once been a member of John’s group of disciples. Their motives were also possibly driven by the presence of a group of John’s followers may have competed with the early Christians for followers at the time the gospels were composed. To this day, their conclusions have remained accepted by many historical Jesus scholars. E.P. Sanders’

¹ Strauss (1840), 233.

² See especially; John A. T. Robinson, ‘Elijah, John and Jesus’, in *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 39ff.; W. R. Farmer, ‘John the Baptist’, *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 959; C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 272-275; Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 38, 55.

classic work, *Jesus and Judaism*, still considered valid today, is clearly indebted to these works when he writes, “The reason for regarding Jesus as having been closely connected with John, perhaps even dependent on him at the outset, has often been given: The Gospels and Acts strive to put John in a self-assigned subordinate role to Jesus; and the effort is so pronounced that it leads one to suppose the opposite...”³

A major focus of this thesis is not only to provide evidence for the discipleship of Jesus by John but also examine how and why Jesus eventually decided to diverge from his teacher and form his own group of disciples. As such, I have agreed with much of the evidence put forth by the aforementioned authors, with a few notable exceptions, in proving the disciple-teacher relationship. But at the same time I have attempted to take their arguments even further to see how Jesus consciously altered or kept certain aspects of the Baptist’s worldview after his baptism and possible discipleship. In other words, while previous authors have often simply attempted to authenticate the discipleship of Jesus by John, in the second part of the thesis, I will essentially take that fact as granted and move on from there.

Noted historical Jesus scholar Gerd Theissen has already begun this approach, writing, “...one can say on the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus that Jesus owes to his teacher basic features of his preaching and his understanding of himself.”⁴ This current work is heavily indebted to his research but ultimately draws a picture of Jesus that does not stray quite as far from John, even later in his career: the key disagreement lying in John’s original understanding of the coming kingdom.

Therefore, by the end of this thesis it is my goal to illustrate that Jesus began his career as a disciple of John, accordingly underwent his baptism ritual, which was an expression of

³ Sanders (1985), 91.

⁴ Theissen (1996), 212.

conversionary repentance and mediation of divine forgiveness based on Yahweh's metaphorical ablutions in the Old Testament. This makes it possible that Jesus was initially attracted to John's offer of forgiveness because he felt he was burdened by guilt and under God's wrath should he return imminently. Later, Jesus' ability to perform miracles, together with the failure of John's predicted apocalypse to come about, led him to forge his own eschatology while still holding to some of John's basic framework of the coming kingdom.

I

The Baptism of Jesus

1.1. Popular and Scholarly Perceptions on the Event

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matt 3:13-17)

The story of Jesus’ baptism is well known. John appears in the wilderness declaring the coming wrath of God and many go to him convinced he is a prophet. Jesus too appears and John baptizes him after initially making it clear that Jesus is in fact the one who should be baptizing him. But several things regarding the story are perhaps unknown to the average reader or church member. First, the story is not found in all four canonical gospels and there are significant differences between each account. Second, few ever wonder about the apparent contradiction that occurs when the sinless son of God, indeed, God incarnate, goes to be baptized. I personally have heard answers ranging from, “He did it as an example for the church today,” to, “He had to be cleansed as all Jewish sin offerings were before he went to the cross.” Unfortunately these answers are inadequate because they place post-Easter theology onto the event, thereby tearing it out of its historical context.

Some scholars also misinterpret the event. Unsatisfied with any Jewish understanding of the rite, Morton Smith surmises that the event is best explained as a magical ritual. Other scholars ignore the passage. N.T. Wright's well known work on Jesus, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, contains barely a few sentences discussing John's baptism and completely ignores the fact that Jesus was also baptized and what this might mean. Its omission from an author who is respected as a leader of the "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus is unexpected. There appears to be no scholarly consensus on what the baptism meant to Jesus and why he went to John in the first place, despite the fact that the Third Quest for the historical Jesus is in part characterized by its increased examination of Jesus' *actions*.⁵

Many scholars are unwilling to go beyond what the gospels themselves declare. For instance Everett Ferguson merely writes, "The event of the baptism is associated in the Synoptic Gospels with Jesus' recognition and acceptance of a special relationship with his God and Father that marked the beginning of his messianic ministry."⁶ John Dominic Crossan in *The Historical Jesus* spends considerable time proving that the gospels have altered their portrayal of the event to relegate John but he is silent as to what originally might have drawn Jesus to the Jordan River.⁷ Theissen goes a bit farther and examines the possibility that the baptism served as a prophetic call for Jesus, spurring him to proclaim the coming kingdom of God (Matt. 4:17).⁸ However, it seems more valuable to consider first what the baptism ordinarily intended and here it seems unlikely that anyone else, including John, thought of the ritual's results in Theissen's terms. That is not to say that Jesus did not reinterpret the event in light of his mystical vision recorded in the gospels, in fact, it seems likely that he did. Yet, before we examine the unique

⁵ Webb (1991), 22.

⁶ Ferguson (2009), 100.

⁷ Crossan (1992), 235.

⁸ Theissen (1996), 211.

case of Jesus, we must determine what *John* originally intended the ritual to mean and what the majority of his followers expected when they arrived near the Jordan.

1.2. Is the Baptism of Jesus Historically Accurate?

As there is no doubt that many of the stories and miracles reported in the four canonical gospels and elsewhere are products not of actual historical events but the early church's imagination, it is first necessary to be absolutely certain that Jesus was in fact baptized, otherwise a discussion on John's ritual is irrelevant.

The baptism of Jesus is unlikely to be a mere invention of the early church because the story passes several criteria used by scholars of the historical Jesus to prove it is authentic. First, the baptism account does well when examined under the criterion of embarrassment or dissimilarity. This criterion is quite simple. If a saying or deed of Jesus found in the Gospels "goes against the grain" of the early church's agenda, then it is likely not fictional. Generally, events that pass this test of credibility manifest themselves as something that was theologically embarrassing for the early church. And in fact, the baptism of Jesus is frequently used as a prime example for demonstrating the use of the criterion of embarrassment.⁹

There are three main reasons the baptism account would have been embarrassing for the early Christian community, therefore making it more likely to be authentic. The first reason is the early church's strong emphasis on the sinless nature of Jesus. This important doctrine appears very early in Christian literature and is best seen in the letter of Hebrews written sometime between 60 and 100 CE, which is also the period of time nearly all scholars agree the four Gospels were written.¹⁰ The anonymous author of this letter describes Jesus as being, "as we are,

⁹Ehrman (2009), 154.

¹⁰Kittredge (2007), 369.

yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). This point is easily found also in the Gospel of John, which contains a very high Christology. Jesus is blatantly equal to God himself, “I and the Father are one”, for any first-century Jew, Jewish Christian, or Gentile Christian to assert that God the father was anything less than sinless is quite ridiculous. And since both Mark and Luke report that John’s baptism was, “of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”, this story is likely to be true since it would have been embarrassing to admit that the sinless son of God underwent a ritual meant to cleanse one of sin.

The second reason the baptism account is likely to be credible under this criterion lies in the simple fact that Jesus is being baptized by John. Indeed, there is evidence even in the Gospel of Matthew that the author was aware that this was embarrassing when it is reported that, “John would have prevented him, saying, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt 3:14). Here, the implication is clear, the spiritually superior individual was meant to baptize the lesser individual. Even though Matthew makes the addition that it was necessary, “to fulfill all righteousness” (3:15), the embarrassing idea that Jesus was submitting to John’s authority remains likely. The fact that Matthew was embarrassed by the story is also made apparent by the fact that Matthew omits the description of John’s baptism as being “of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” which is included in Mark and Luke (Mk. 1:4, Lk. 3:3). Instead Matthew simply states that those baptized were, “confessing their sins”. It seems Matthew could not deny that John’s baptism was in some way related to repentance but his conscious removal of the aforementioned phrase found in Luke and Mark is likely due to the negative connotations it would have placed on later Christology. Many scholars agree. John Dominic Crossan describes Matthew’s interpretation as, “theological damage control.”¹¹ And Gerd Theissen writes of

¹¹ Crossan (1992), 232.

Jesus' response to John in 3:15, "This makes it clear that he receives baptism as a just man, not as a sinner," and describing it as an "apologetic motif."¹²

Further evidence that the early Christians were embarrassed by this is seen in Luke and John. When read side by side with Mark and Matthew, one notices that Luke never even states who Jesus was baptized by, perhaps in an attempt to avoid portraying John as being greater than Jesus. There is evidence that will be examined below that suggests Jesus and John's disciples may have held some animosity towards one another. Luke's account may reflect this.

John noticeably omits the entire baptism account altogether although he appears to be aware of it when John the Baptist states, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, it remained on him" (Jn 1:32). There may be more than one reason John chose to exclude the baptism account, which will be examined further on, but it is sufficient to note for now that one reason may have been that John was also uncomfortable placing John in a more prominent position than Jesus in this ritual. The fact that John included the reference to the descending of the spirit at all is surprising and may suggest that the story of Jesus' baptism was so well known that he was unable to omit it entirely.

By the time Gospel of the Nazarenes was written, sometime before 200 CE, we find a complete denial that Jesus was baptized at all, rather than just a mere omission of the story. In fragment two Jesus himself declares, "Wherein have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless what I have said is ignorance." Thus, as time passes and the church's notion of Jesus' divine nature becomes loftier, there is a corresponding need to increasingly deny Jesus' baptism by John, beginning with an apologetic reinterpretation and ending with a blatant denial that it ever happened.

¹² Theissen (1996), 208-209.

The third and more controversial reason the baptism account may have been embarrassing to the Evangelists is that the ritual itself may have been dangerously similar to ancient rituals used by magicians to obtain a companion spirit or “daimon”. Morton Smith has demonstrated quite well that the baptism account has some similarities to a ritual described in the ancient Greek magical papyri.¹³ As Smith states, “...The story of the coming of the spirit is surprising because the event it describes is just the sort of thing that was thought to happen to a magician. Essentially, it admits the charge that Jesus had a spirit... Luke and Matthew identified the spirit as “holy” and “of God”- surely to refute the charge of magic.”¹⁴

The evidence that the baptism itself was a magical ritual is lacking as we shall examine below, for several reasons. However, even if the Gospel writers were certain in their own convictions that the baptism was in no way a form of magic, it is still quite possible they would have been embarrassed by the similarities. As noted earlier, John omits the entire baptism from his gospel; a decision which Smith believes may have been brought about by his caution in using material that could be labeled as “magical” by opponents of Christianity. This is very likely to be true when one also considers that John includes no exorcism accounts in his Gospel, despite the fact that almost all scholars of the historical Jesus acknowledge that he was, at the very least, an exorcist. Both the exclusion of the baptism account and the exorcism stories can be attributed to the fact that ancient magicians were known for their ability to perform exorcisms and their similar rituals invoking a helping spirit.

¹³ Smith (1978), 129-132.

¹⁴ Ibid 127

1.3. The Meaning of John's Baptism

The greatest problem for reconstructing the original meaning behind the baptism is the lack of source material on John the Baptist. Besides the four canonical Gospels, we have a small amount of material from Josephus and a small passage from the Gospel of Thomas that is of little value since it is almost verbatim to Matthew 11:11-12. To make our task more difficult, Josephus' description of John's preaching, as well as the meaning of his baptism, directly contradicts the description found in the Gospels.

The passage in Josephus is written in the greater context of describing a war between Herod the tetrarch and Aretas, the king of Arabia. It reads:

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: For Herod killed him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only] but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness (*Ant.*18:116-118).¹⁵

Even a quick glance at this passage presents an obvious problem for reconstructing the significance of John's baptism and also how it relates to his preaching. Whereas Mark and Luke report that John's baptism was "of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," Josephus reports that it was simply for the "purification of the body". The difference is stark and cannot be attributed to simple semantics. Josephus even acknowledges the view of the baptism described in the Gospels and he explicitly refutes it by saying it was, "not in order to the putting away of some sins."

¹⁵ Translation from Whiston, William. *The New Complete Works of Josephus*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999.

However, when one carefully examines and weighs the biases and intentions of Josephus, Mark, and Luke, it appears that Josephus has purposely altered his information about John the Baptist. The fundamental difference between the Christian accounts and Josephus lies in the overall presentation of John's message. The Christian sources describe John as a type of oracular prophet, proclaiming the imminent judgment of God and the need to confess one's sins, be baptized and then "bear fruits of repentance" in order to be saved. Josephus seems to have toned down the "fire and brimstone" aspect of John's preaching and emphasizes his high standards for good ethical behavior: "righteousness towards one another" and "piety towards God". But this simplified account of John's preaching must be rejected for three reasons.

First, Josephus is notorious for removing any hints of eschatology from his works. This is perhaps most evident in the description of the Essenes found in his *Jewish Antiquities* and *The Jewish War*. Because of an abundance of written material found at Qumran that most likely belongs to this group, scholars are quite certain about many of their beliefs. One of this group's most defining features is their belief that they were living in the end times when God would restore Israel. Like John in the Gospels, they believed their community was the one to, "prepare the way of Lord, [and] make his paths straight".¹⁶ Various commentaries found from the community make it clear that the Essenes believed many prophetic texts about the end times applied directly to their present community.¹⁷ Yet, Josephus sees their most defining trait as their purity and devotion to one another. The oaths taken to join the group include swearing, "that he will exercise piety towards God, and then that he will observe justice towards men" (*War* 8:139). Apocalypticism and a belief in the imminent end time are virtually gone, although a small hint that Josephus was aware of it is seen when he states, "There are also those among them who

¹⁶ 1 QS 8

¹⁷ C.f. esp. *Halakhic Letter* C20-22

undertake to foretell things to come, by use of the holy books...and being perpetually conversant in the discourses of the prophets” (*War* 8:159).

The account of the Essenes is directly applicable to our assessment of Josephus’ reliability when reporting about John the Baptist. The two oaths made by Essenes are particularly telling because they are virtually the same requirements that John makes of his followers, according to Josephus. Thus, we have two cases where eschatological emphasis is glossed into a simple devotion to piety and ethics. Most scholars acknowledge a set of biases in Josephus that can shed light on why these two are portrayed as such. As E.P Sanders states, “Josephus... has too many axes to grind. One is that Jews, except for a fanatical fringe, were loyal to Rome when monotheism and its corollaries were not in question”.¹⁸ This explains Josephus’ avoidance of portraying popular Jewish movements like the Essenes and John’s group as eschatological. Jewish eschatology of the time often included some acknowledgment that cosmic evil forces were in power that would be overthrown when Yahweh returned to Israel.¹⁹ Such forces implicitly included the Romans. It seems obvious that Josephus omitted these aspects of John’s preaching in a larger attempt to hide the fact that many Jews longed for the overturning of Roman authority. Thus Gerd Theissen seems to be correct in his assessment of the dangers of trusting Josephus over the Gospels regarding John when he states, “Since Josephus also tends elsewhere to keep quiet about the eschatological features of Judaism which were suspect in the eyes of the Romans, there is a suspicion that he is deliberately suppressing such traditions.”²⁰ And John’s baptism is in fact directly connected to eschatology, explaining Josephus’ refutation of the Gospel’s explanation. The need to have one’s sins forgiven is *because* God’s judgment is imminent.

¹⁸Sanders (1985), 216.

¹⁹ Cf. esp. TestDan 5:10-13, 1QM VI, 2 Cor. 4, Jn. 12:31, 2 Thess. 2:7-8

²⁰Theissen (1998), 200.

The second reason Josephus's explanation of the baptism as being for the cleansing of the body only must be rejected is because Josephus' overall description of John's preaching and practices does not adequately explain his execution by King Herod. If Josephus' account is the entire story about John's preaching one must ask an obvious question; why then, did Herod feel the need to execute John? What was so threatening about a man that simply told people to exercise piety to God and respect all men? In fact, there is really no explanation why large crowds of people would be attracted to this message in the first place. Piety towards God and respect toward one's neighbors are not unique ideas, they are commands found in the Torah (Deut 6:5, Lev 18:19)! And there is nothing inherently dangerous to a political ruler like Herod about a man who held people to high ethical standards. Although it is possible that John was mistaken for a more dangerous false-messiah, or insurrectionist; such movements were common in first-century Palestine.

1.4. The Gospels vs. Josephus on John's Baptism

The gospels' explanation of John's preaching and practices make far more sense of this situation. First, John's promise that people could be forgiven sins without the usual expensive route taken through the Jerusalem Temple and his promise that God's return was imminent explains why large crowds were drawn to John. This is a far more likely scenario than the one described in Josephus. Second, the gospels also report that John's movement was located in the wilderness, a place often associated with the new exodus, messianic pretenders, and politically dangerous false prophets. Josephus himself reports that several prophets like Theudas and the Egyptian were killed by the Romans after they went into the wilderness (*Ant.* 20.97-99, 20.169-172). It makes sense that the connection between eschatology and the wilderness, if in fact

present in John's preaching, would have been seen by Herod as enough of a threat to have him killed.

Finally, the third reason that the Gospel accounts are more likely to preserve historically accurate information about the meaning of John's baptism is attributed to the criterion of embarrassment. We have seen earlier that the reporting of Luke and Mark that John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins is likely to be true since it was embarrassing for early Christians to admit that the sinless son of God may have needed to undergo a ritual to cleanse him of sin. But this criterion not only proves the entire account to be true, it also helps prove that Josephus' explanation of the meaning of John's baptism is incorrect. Josephus writes that prior to an individual actually being baptized, "the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness" (*Ant.* 18:117). In other words, it appears that for Josephus, the baptism was merely an outward symbolic act of what had already occurred inwardly, the purification of the soul through righteousness, which probably refers to meeting John's standards of piety towards God and respect for one another as mentioned above.

If this was really all that John's baptism stood for, it is extremely odd that none of the gospel writers report this. Pretend for a moment that you are an early Christian writer with a firm desire to convey to readers that Jesus was the Son of God, or perhaps even God incarnate, depending on how developed your theology may be. If Josephus' explanation is accurate, why would you ever find it more appealing to write that John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins? Josephus' explanation would have been far easier to conform to the early Christian agenda. If the baptism was only used after a person had proved himself to be pious toward God and his neighbor, then why not simply say that Jesus underwent the baptism to show this outwardly? No omissions would be required and the idea is not embarrassing. Of course Jesus could be baptized,

as the sinless son of God, his soul was more “pure” than anyone else’s. The fact that the Gospel writers instead wrote about the ritual as being for the forgiveness of sins is good evidence that they simply had no choice but to report it. Jesus’ baptism was too well known to be ignored and so was the meaning of John’s ritual, they had to resort to other means to explain away this embarrassing fact: either by omitting it or giving an ambiguous explanation like Matthew does.

1.5. Was John’s Baptism a magical ritual?

Other scholars have rejected this view. While it has not appeared to attract a large following, Morton Smith’s portrayal of Jesus as an ancient magician, in *Jesus the Magician*, accordingly places the baptism ritual in the context of the magical rituals found in the Ancient Greek magical papyri; a set of texts from the 2nd c. BC to the 5th c. A.D. which contain various magical spells, rituals, formulae and incantations. Thus the baptism takes on an entirely new function not found in either the Gospels or Josephus. Smith describes the ritual as one of many described in the magical papyri to obtain a spirit as a companion and assistant, often to perform miracles. This hypothesis is not simply conjecture and at first glance, it appears there may be similarities between the baptism account and these “invocation rituals”. The following lines from some of these rituals found in the Greek magical papyri will suffice to show this:

“While you are reciting the spell, the following sign will occur: A hawk flying down will stop in front of you and striking its wings together in the middle, will drop a long stone and at once fly back, going up into heaven” (PGM . 54ff)

“Open to me heaven!... Let me see the bark of Phre descending and ascending...” (*The Leyden Papyrus*, Col. X)

“Lord of Life... come into my mind and my vitals for all the time of my life and accomplish all the desires of my soul” (PGM XIII. 784ff.)

Smith believes that there is no adequate explanation for the mystical happenings at Jesus’ baptism unless it is likened to a magical ritual, “No Old Testament prophets had birds roost on them. Rabbinic literature contains nothing closely similar”.²¹

But while it is certainly at least possible that Jesus thought of himself as a kind of magician, the evidence that John’s baptism itself was meant as a type of “spirit-invocation” ritual is simply quite lacking. If Jesus was a magician and the baptism was really a magical ritual to obtain a companion spirit, then what did that make John and his followers? Were they a group of magicians living in the wilderness? Perhaps, but there is frankly no evidence whatsoever for this idea. If Jesus underwent this ritual on his own or with another group, then it is more likely it fits Smith’s idea. However, the fact that Jesus was baptized by John, probably in the presence of his other followers, is rooted in the firmest historical truth. Jesus may have interpreted the baptism in a way similar to the results described in the magical papyri but this is again, merely speculation.

For Smith’s theory to work it must be proven that John the Baptist was also some kind of magician. As noted, this is impossible to ever examine due to a lack of source evidence. Also, there is another concrete reason this theory can be difficult to believe in addition to a simple lack of sources. As noted above, Josephus was intent on convincing his readers that most Jews were loyal to the Romans and that a few extremist Jews could be blamed for the Jewish War. As such he particularly looks down on false messiahs and false prophets who fueled the desire for rebellion against Rome. One example of Josephus’ distaste for false prophets is found in *War* 13:259: “these were such men as deceived and deluded the people under pretense of divine inspiration And these prevailed with multitude to act like madmen, and went before them into the

²¹ Smith (1978), 128.

wilderness, as pretending that God would there show them signs of liberty”. If John the Baptist and his followers were really magicians, he would have had no problem denouncing them as deceivers as well. Magicians were common in the Greco-Roman world, and while some, like the magi, were revered, most were looked down upon. Proof of this comes from the fact that opponents of early Christianity attempted to damage Jesus’ reputation by calling him a magician.²² Fritz Graf, a noted scholar of ancient magic, attributed this to society’s fear of magicians as endangering the status quo,²³ a charge that could certainly apply to both Jesus and John. If John was in fact a magician who led people into the wilderness, a potentially dangerous act which Josephus elsewhere criticizes, it seems likely Josephus would have had no problem denouncing John as a *goes*, or fraud. Yet, John’s portrayal in Josephus is surprisingly positive, thus showing the connection between John’s baptism (and therefore Jesus’) and magic is not plausible.

1.6. The Image of the Spirit as a Dove

Although his argument is ultimately difficult to uphold, Smith’s comment above, “No Old Testament prophets had birds roost on them. Rabbinic literature contains nothing closely similar,” still brings up an important question. What do we make of the dove that descends upon Jesus after arising from the Jordan’s waters? Smith is correct that the addition of a bird in the account is puzzling and has no parallel in the prophetic calls of the Old Testament. Scholars have debated extensively on the image of the spirit as a dove, proposing many theories. Many of them are quite creative but all seem to fall short: from an adoption from oriental myth, an image of the

²² Smith (1978), 119.

²³ Graf (1999), 64.

“winged psyche”, to a questionable reference from the Odes of Solomon.²⁴ However, no theory has garnished considerable support and the issue remains at large.

It is perhaps senseless for me to propose another theory when the debate seems hopelessly muddled, however, a few points should be made about the previous theories put forth. First, only a thoroughly Judeo-Christian understanding of the dove imagery can be accepted. As noted above, the early Christians were quite embarrassed by the baptism of Jesus. We have seen that Matthew, Luke, and John all took editorial measures to ensure later Christian understanding about Jesus’ identity was protected, even to the point of omitting the story altogether, as is the case in the Gospel of John. If the spirit-dove imagery lay in anything potentially dangerous to the early church’s agenda, it surely would have been edited out by at least one of the evangelists. Yet, even the Gospel of John which was particularly concerned with the danger the baptism account might pose, still includes the spirit-dove image. Thus, theories that the spirit-dove image comes from an “embarrassing” source like ritual magic, the winged psyche, or oriental images of hero adoption, must be firmly rejected. If Luke, for example, was willing to edit Mark’s version of the account to have Jesus baptize himself, surely he would have also removed the dove if its meaning was problematic. Thus, if we are to truly discover what reference the spirit-dove imagery invokes we must look in more “canonical” sources, ones that would not endanger the four evangelists’ understanding of Jesus, as the previously mentioned parallels would have done.

One theory that has been put forth is that the dove represents Israel. While it meets my above criteria, this theory falls short in two main ways. First, the proof text used for this theory is usually Hosea 7:11, “Ephraim is like a dove, easily deceived and senseless--now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria.” While the text does at least indicate a connection between Israel

²⁴ For a survey of the scholarly literature on the spirit-dove imagery see endnotes in Gero, Stephen. “The Spirit as a Dove at the Baptism of Jesus.” *Novum Testamentum*. January 1976.

(Ephraim) and the dove, the entire context of chapter 7 is a polemic against the northern nations' wickedness. For instance verse 17 is quite characteristic of the surrounding text, it reads, "Woe to them, for they have strayed from me! Destruction to them, for they have rebelled against me! I would redeem them, but they speak lies against me." Here the dove is conceived of as possessing negative qualities that are also characteristic of Ephraim. Would the Evangelists really allow the inclusion of the dove in their account of Jesus' baptism if it was understood in this context? Comparing Jesus with a creature that is, "easily deceived and senseless", hardly fits with the early church's agenda. Even if the dove was meant to resemble Israel without negative connotations, its equation here with the Holy Spirit makes little sense.

A bit more convincing, but ultimately unsatisfying is the theory that the spirit-dove imagery derives from Noah's dove²⁵, sent out after the flood to see if the water had subsided. This image is used in conjunction with the image of the "Spirit of God" hovering over the waters at creation. First of all, it is unclear how there is even a connection between the dove in Genesis 8 and the hovering Spirit of God in Genesis 1. The Spirit is never even identified as a bird, and the notion that "birdlike" motion is conveyed by the Hebrew verb, רָחַף, in the piel form, is based on extremely lacking evidence. The only other occurrence of this verb occurs in Deuteronomy 32:11, "Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that hovers (יִרְחַף), over its young...". Even if we concede this point, how can the spirit-dove imagery in the gospels draw from both Genesis 1:2 and 8:8-12? Noah's exploratory dove is never equated with God's spirit. The proponents of this theory cannot have it both ways. The dove in the gospels is either a simple connection with the Spirit of God, or Noah's dove, which would imply a, "new creation' typology underlying the baptism narrative."²⁶ Regarding the latter, there is little indication that any form of baptism was

²⁵ Cf. Clarke (2003), 39.

²⁶ France (2007), 122.

connected with the flood narrative and a new creation until the writing of 1 Peter, which is undoubtedly written quite later than the gospels. Equating the dove with the Spirit of God is more promising but since it is never identified as a bird, this idea must remain in the realm of speculation.

In summary, R.T. France may have the last word on this issue stating, "...there is no reason to assume that the species of bird here is significant, any more than it was in the imagery of Gen 1:2; the dove is simply a familiar bird, whose swooping flight formed an appropriate way of visualizing the descent of the Spirit."²⁷ I would only add that it may be important to consider the one other instance the dove appears in the gospels, Matthew 10:16: "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Since the dove is associated with innocence, perhaps it is just meant to highlight the upright character of Jesus. That Jesus was to be seen as innocent is at least a major theme for Luke (and less explicitly the other three Evangelists), who notably edits the words of the centurion at the crucifixion to say, "Certainly, this man was innocent!" (Lk. 24:37), instead of, "Certainly this man was the son of God!" (Mk. 15:39

1.7. The Purpose of Ritual Ablutions in the Ancient Mediterranean

Thus while Smith's identification of the baptism as a magical ritual istenuous, one can hardly blame him for examining a more "Greco-Roman" understanding of John's rite of baptism. That is because in the world of first-century Jewish Palestine (and perhaps also the pagan Roman world), many aspects of John's particular rite of baptism are without parallel.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 122.

Yet, at the same time it would be foolish to view John's baptism as wholly unique in all its aspects. It is worth to examining any underlying connections and similarities John's rite had with other Jewish and Greco-Roman practices.

One of the most important aspects of John's baptism is its location. The role of the natural world in John's movement is hard to ignore. He is identified as, "the voice, of one crying out *in the wilderness*" (Mk 1:3, *emph. mine*). And his baptism took place in the Jordan River, under the open skies. The connection between nature and the divine was well established long before John ever existed and is therefore not surprising. In his book *Religion in the Roman Empire*, James Rives emphasizes the importance of nature in people's religious lives stating, "We must remember that the vast majority of people in the Roman Empire lived in much closer association with nature than most people in modern industrialized societies and that forests, springs, rivers, and caves...would have loomed much larger in their experience of the world...the natural world then, would have for many people have been shot through with the presence of the divine."²⁸

While it is often dangerous to apply generalizations about Roman religious experience to the Judean tradition, a connection between nature and the divine is prominent in the Hebrew Bible. One of the Israelite god's primary means of identification is as the creator, and as such Jews also seemed to stress the function of the natural world as means to know god. Psalm 19 famously reads, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (19:1). The apostle Paul, writing hundreds of years later similarly declares in his discourse on divine judgment, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature,

²⁸Rives (2007), 92.

invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom 1:19-20).

Of particular interest to the present study is the important reverence placed on bodies of water. The divinity, or at least the sense of divinity, of water seems to have also been a widespread phenomenon in the ancient Mediterranean world. The famous Greek poet Hesiod writing sometime around 700 BC advises, “Never cross the sweet-flowing water of ever-rolling rivers afoot until you have prayed, gazing into the soft flood, and washed your hands in the clear, lovely water. Whoever crosses a river with hands unwashed of wickedness, the gods are angry with him and bring trouble upon him afterwards” (737-741). The Roman philosopher Seneca, (1 BC-65 AD) a contemporary of John, writes in his *Epistles* concerning the presence of the divine in water, “We worship the sources of mighty rivers; we erect altars at places where great streams burst suddenly from hidden sources; we adore springs of hot water as divine, and consecrate certain pools because of their dark waters or their immeasurable depth” (41.3). Rives notes many other examples ranging from sacred springs to the worship of river deities.²⁹

Besides serving as a sacred element, infused with divinity, water also functioned commonly in the ancient Mediterranean as a means of spiritual cleansing. This practice is well attested in both the Greco-Roman and Jewish tradition, from texts as early as the Pentateuch right up to the first century AD. The reasons for this practice are not hard to surmise. Since water was the primary means of cleansing one’s physical body, it also came to be seen as capable of cleansing one’s spiritual body.

The Old Testament, particularly the Torah, is loaded with examples of water being used to render a person clean from unclean. These were not states of physical dirtiness but were rather based on one’s contact with the impure. So for example, anyone coming into contact with a

²⁹Rives (2007), 72, 75.

corpse (Lev 11:24), a leper (Lev 13:45-46), or a menstruating woman (Lev 15:19) would be rendered unclean until a certain set of procedures was followed. This often consisted of washing oneself and one's clothes and waiting a prescribed period of time. Uncleanness was not limited to people, even objects that came into contact with something unclean needed to be washed to restore its cleanliness. So a bout of uncleanness could typically be cleared up by having the unclean person wash himself, his clothes, and anything he touched in the meantime. Anyone who touched that person or an object made unclean by him must undergo the same purifications.

Leviticus 15 provides a typical example:

When any man has a discharge from his member, his discharge makes him ceremonially unclean...everything on which he sits shall be unclean... All who sit on anything on which the one with the discharge has sat shall wash their clothes, bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. (2,4,6)

Besides being an obvious annoyance for anyone in such a ritually impure state, being unclean also rendered individuals such as priests unable to perform their duties. Leviticus 22 for example instructs, "Direct Aaron and his sons to deal carefully with the sacred donations of the people of Israel...whatever his uncleanness may be- the person who touches any such (referring to corpses etc.) shall be unclean until evening and shall not eat of the sacred donations unless he has washed his body in water" (2,5-6). It is important to note that in this case an ablution is required for the priest to return to his duties.

While a brief survey of ablutions in the Old Testament cannot simply gloss over these examples, it is clear that by the time of John and Jesus, ritual ablutions began to take on new roles. First, we must remember that the Judeans continued to follow the practices outlined in the Torah regarding cleanliness, and some like the Pharisees took this even further, maintaining the degree of purity through the observance of their oral laws that was only paralleled by temple priests. If John's baptism derived solely from the types of conditions discussed above, he hardly

would have attracted the attention, wanted and unwanted, that he did. Second, our sources indicate that John's primary concern was not uncleanness caused by physical contagion (touching a corpse for example) but the kind caused by *moral* contagion, hence his criticism of Herod for taking his brother's wife and his ethical instructions in Luke 3. As Robert L. Webb states regarding the Old Testament's ablutions, "when the state of uncleanness was caused by moral contagion, the responses varied, but actual ablutions were not prescribed in such cases..."³⁰ Thus, at some point in the development of ritual immersions, the significance of the act must have changed. After all I have just defended the New Testament's claim that John's baptism was, "of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The instructions in the Old Testament do not make provision for a baptismal theology as complex as this statement.

Of more interest and relevance to our present study are instances in the Old Testament when an ablution is metaphorically used to represent a cleansing from sin. Webb distinguishes between two types of these metaphorical ablutions: present and future/eschatological.³¹ Since John's baptism clearly had an eschatological purpose, the second category is worth examining in some detail. The renewal of Israel and the redemption of the Jewish people began to be seen as a mass cleansing, particularly in some of the prophetic works. Contrary to the ablutions prescribed in the Torah, these mass ablutions could only be performed by Yahweh himself. The description of this mass cleansing often even uses symbolism and terminology that is strikingly similar to John's description of eschatological events. A few examples will reveal this:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; from all your uncleanness and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.(Ezekiel 36:25-26)

³⁰ Webb (1991), 107.

³¹ Ibid 104-105

Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, once the LORD has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstreams of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. (Isaiah 4:3-4)

One other example may be crucial for understanding the function of the “stronger one”, whom John announces will come after him to baptize people with the Holy Spirit. Isaiah 52.15, part of one of the “Servant Songs” reads, “so he shall sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him...”. Webb neglects to give the passage much attention simply stating, “In Isaiah 52.15 Yahweh’s servant performed the ablution, which may have been understood eschatologically.”³² As we shall see later, the identity of John’s “stronger one” is generally understood to be either Yahweh himself or a restoration figure sent by God. This verse at least provides evidence of an intermediary figure besides God himself performing a mass ablution of eschatological importance, much like John’s figure is said to “baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire” at the end time. However, the identity of the famous suffering servant in Isaiah makes this inconclusive. In addition there are translation debates as to precise meaning of the Hebrew verb for “sprinkle” (נזף).

Returning to the Greco-Roman world, we also see many examples of ritual ablutions. Like many Judeans, the Greeks and Romans frequently used ablutions to cleanse themselves before participating in cultic rites. The practice of purifying oneself with an ablution before entering a temple is quite common and is attested throughout the Mediterranean. In his book, *Baptism in the Early Church*, scholar Everett Ferguson gives numerous examples of texts and inscriptions found in a diverse geographic area.³³ Temple rules requiring entrants to their sanctuary to bathe are usually quite similar. Unfortunately, they are also very vague, a few will suffice to show their general characteristics: In Pergamum, the temple of Athena’s rules state,

³² Webb (1991), 105.

³³ Ferguson (2009), 25-37.

“Whoever wishes to visit the temple of the goddess... must complete the required lustrations.³⁴ At Lindos, another ritual requires, “You are purified on the same day by a lustral sprinkling and anointing with oil.”³⁵

The practice is even found in Roman epic literature. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the pious hero Aeneas states, “It were a sin to handle sacred things until I have washed myself in a running stream.” This example is of some marginal interest to our present task of understanding John’s baptism because his baptism also took place in running water, the currents of the Jordan River.

The ancient mystery cults also used ritual ablutions as a means of purification before certain rituals. The oldest and most well-known mystery cult, the Eleusinian mysteries, which took place in Athens until the end of the fourth century A.D., included a procession to the Illisos River, where each candidate for initiation bathed both himself/herself and a pig that was to be sacrificed. Initiation into the cult of Dionysus also included a bath for purification.³⁶ Perhaps the most famous account of preliminary washing comes from Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*, which is an invaluable source for reconstructing ancient mystery initiations. The character Lucius, who seeks initiation into the cult of Isis undergoes several lustrations, the first of which does not occur in the context of initiation. Interestingly, Lucius’ first encounter with the goddess Isis in book 11 occurs after plunging himself seven times into the sea. While the ensuing mystical vision of the goddess is not something usually expected after a lustration, any attempts to liken this episode to the baptism of Jesus should be avoided. While both experienced a mystical vision after an immersion, Lucius’ does not occur immediately after rising from the water as in Jesus’ case. The episode is merely another case of the Greco-Roman use of water for purification since even

³⁴ Qtd in Ferguson (2009), 25-26.

³⁵ Qtd in Ferguson (2009), 26.

³⁶ Ferguson (2009), 30.

Lucius says the reason for his lustration was that he was, "...moved by a great affection to purify myself" (11.1).

Lucius' other immersion, this time immediately prior to his initiation, is also quite unexceptionable and differs little from the examples already cited in Greco-Roman immersions. He states, "After delivering me to the usual bath, Mithras invoked the pardon of the gods, and sprinkling water over me, he cleansed me most purely" (11.23). In summary, while it has tempted scholars in the past to look for parallels between John's baptism (and therefore Christian baptism) and mystery cult lustrations, this view must firmly be rejected. Everett Ferguson sums up what has now become the scholarly consensus on this issue stating, "There was a significant difference in the use of water for purification in the Mysteries and its use in Christianity. The washing in the Mysteries was a preliminary preparation for the initiation; in Christianity it was the center of initiation into the church."³⁷ Ferguson's statement is just as easily applied to John's baptism since it is most certainly the closest parallel and antecedent for Christian baptism.

Two other examples of ancient ritual ablutions that hit "closer to home" are Jewish proselyte baptism and cleansings among the Qumran community. We will examine proselyte baptism first since most modern scholars no longer recognize it as a legitimate antecedent for Johannine or Christian baptism, though writings arguing both positions were once prolific.³⁸ The consensus today is that Jewish proselyte baptism cannot be dated before 70 CE, making it quite irrelevant to our current discussion.

³⁷ Ferguson(2009), 29.

³⁸ The standard "champion" for an early date for Jewish proselyte baptism and thus a possible connection with John's baptism is found in Jeremias, Joachim. *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*. Trans. D. Cairns. London: SCM, 1960. 24-37. For the "champion" of a later date, see Smith, D. "Jewish Proselyte Baptism and the Baptism of John." *ResQ25*(1982): 13-32.

Ablutions among the Qumran community cannot be so easily dismissed, especially because many scholars have pointed out similarities between John and the Essenes.³⁹ The Dead Sea Scrolls contain numerous references to purity and cleansing but surprisingly few within the direct context of bathing. Most refer to ritual baths that cleansed from physical contagion much like the ablutions from the Torah discussed earlier. But we have already noted that John's baptism goes far beyond a mere purification from "accidental" uncleanness. Of more interest are the examples in the Qumran literature that speak of cleansing from moral contagion since this is something these ablutions may have shared with John's baptism. Such a passage may be found in 1QS 3.4-9 which refers to a candidate of the community that changed his mind and never became a true member:⁴⁰

He will not be made guiltless by atonement and he will not be purified in waters for purification; he shall not sanctify himself in seas or rivers nor will he be purified in all the waters of cleansing. Unclean, unclean shall he be all the days of his rejection of the precepts of God with its refusal to discipline himself in the community of his counsel. For in a spirit of true counsel about the ways of man will all his iniquities find atonement, that he may look upon the light of life; and in a holy spirit of being united with his truth he will be purified from all his iniquities, and in a spirit of uprightness and humility his sin will be atoned. In subjection of his soul to all the ordinances of God his flesh will be purified in being sprinkled with waters for purification and by sanctification in waters of purity.

Some similarities with John's baptism can be gleaned from this passage. As Robert Webb states concerning this passage, "...prior to entering the community, the candidate (as well as everyone outside the community) is a non-Israelite, evil, defiled, and backslidden."⁴¹ Like John, it seems the Qumran community viewed the majority of Israel as subject to God's wrath. The only difference being that observance of the community's precepts (which included ritual immersions) rather than a single baptism was the solution to this problem. There is also a close

³⁹ Cf. Brownlee, W.H. "John the Baptist in the New Light of Ancient Scrolls. Interpretation IX. 1955. 71-90. Geysler A.S. "The Youth of John the Baptist: A Deduction from the Break in the parallel account of the Lucan infancy story." Novum Testamentum 1. 1956. 70-75

⁴⁰ Webb (1991), 143.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 143.

connection with atonement and purification. Like John, it seems the Qumran community viewed an immersion effective only if it was accompanied by righteousness. However, while this passage seems to be the closest thus far to John's baptism it still shows a key difference because of its emphasis on the community's rules and way of life. As far as we know, John did not require those who underwent his baptism to remain in a closed community with him. Becoming "right" in God's eyes from an Essene perspective involved much more than John's amazingly simple ritual of baptism.

1.8. Metaphorical Ablutions in the Hebrew Bible as the Source for John's Baptism

We have thus seen that ritual ablutions were a common aspect of ancient Mediterranean religion. However, they all lack the distinct eschatological undertones that John's baptism undoubtedly had. They differ from his in several respects. Most of these rituals were simply for purification before performing a ritual act or entering a sacred area. While they appear to be a fundamental aspect of Greek and Roman cult practice, they were somewhat routine and lacked the deep meaning that John placed on the ablution alone. For John the immersion was not just one step in a series of cultic acts to interact with the divine, it was perhaps *the* act. It was a "one shot deal", those who had been baptized by him now sided with God, when the end times came, they would be free from the, "coming wrath". Both Josephus and the Gospels indicate that the only other requirement to make John's baptism effective was to, "produce fruit in keeping with repentance". As Josephus states he, "commanded the Jews to exercise virtue...and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him (*Ant.* 18.117).

If a first-century Israelite were to truly believe in the efficacy of John's baptism it must have had a powerful impact on his religious beliefs and therefore also, his everyday life. His self-

identify among everyone around him would have been fundamentally altered. Yahweh's apocalyptic return was imminent, carrying with it the destruction of not only the Romans, but even fellow Jews, God's chosen people. As John had said, "Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham (Matt. 3:9). But those baptized were part of the true Israel, the remnant that would be spared. There was an equal emphasis on being free from punishment and being bestowed a reward in the coming kingdom. The promise John's baptism bestowed upon such a person is not unlike the one Jesus promised his adherents. As a fellow apocalypticist, he promised similarly to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt 19:28). This possible link between Jesus and John will be examined more closely in chapter 3.

But for now we must inquire as to how John's baptism took on such an elevated meaning, bestowing spiritual effects on those immersed that went far beyond anything we have seen in either the Old Testament or Greco-Roman purificatory ablutions. Of all the examples we just looked at, the only description of immersions that seems to match the eschatological meaning of John's baptism is the metaphorical baptisms like Ezekiel 36:25-26 and Isaiah 4:3-4, which speak of Yahweh's mass cleansing of Israel at the end time.

It is entirely possible that the uniqueness of John's baptism lay in the fact that he used the metaphorical passages in prophetic literature about a mass cleansing at the end time and actually implemented it in a more literal form. In other words, John consciously applied the meaning behind the eschatological passages about cleansing as he implemented his baptism.

Scholars generally agree on four functions for John's baptism: the expression of conversionary repentance, the mediation of divine forgiveness, purification ritual from moral uncleanness, and the foreshadowing of an expected eschatological figure.⁴² Many scholars also include initiation into the "true Israel" and a protest against the temple establishment but these possible functions have garnered less of a consensus than the other four. My claim that the baptism's meaning derives from the metaphorical eschatological ablution references in texts like Isaiah 4:3-4, fits in quite well with these consensuses.

Conversionary repentance, according to Webb, refers to a "...turn from sin and turn to God with a total reorientation of their relationship with God characterized by obedience and trust."⁴³ Indeed, this is one of the major aspects of God's eschatological cleansing especially according to Ezekiel 36 which states that after the cleansing God will, "give you a new heart and a new spirit." "New Heart" imagery is connected with conversionary repentance in the Old Testament. According to Jeremiah the human heart is, "deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jer 17:9). As such, the ability to truly repent, never to turn from God again, is a gift bestowed by him alone in the Old Testament. It is often expressed with the cleansing of one's heart or in this case, the actual receiving of a new heart. For example in Psalm 51, the cleansing of the author's heart ensures not only his own repentance but even a desire to bring others to do the same; "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me... Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you" (10, 13). Thus, if John's baptism derives from turning these Old Testament cleansing practices into an actual ritual, it is no surprise that conversionary repentance is a major aspect of it. However, since the giving of a new and perfect heart was given by God alone, we can assume John relegated that role to the

⁴² Ferguson (2009), 93.

⁴³ Webb (1991), 186.

baptism of “the stronger one”. This is not to say that John did not see God’s hand in the role of his baptism, but the giving a new heart, one that could no longer turn from God, was only to come at the end of days. Until then, even the righteous were liable to turn from God. John’s baptism was a commitment to avoid sin until the end came and God would complete the transformation.

The next aspect, the mediation of divine forgiveness, is more complex. That is because it is never made clear which aspect of John’s ministry actually brought about divine forgiveness. The New Testament makes it clear that repentance and baptism were required for the forgiveness of sins. However, Webb rightly asks, “...is the forgiveness of sins to be understood as the goal of the repentance or of the baptism?”⁴⁴ Josephus explicitly rejects that the baptism itself forgives sins since he states it was, “not for seeking the pardon of certain sins but for purification of the body” (*Ant.* 18.117). But we have already noted there are problems with trusting Josephus on this matter. The New Testament is also of little help in answering this question, John merely performed, “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”, (Mk 1:4) with no indication as to which was responsible for the forgiveness. Webb notes, citing Hosea 14:1-2 as an example, that in the Old Testament, repentance is the only thing required for divine forgiveness. He thus concludes that the forgiveness of sins is more closely related to the repentance rather than the baptism. However, he also believes that baptism and repentance are “inextricably linked to each other.”⁴⁵ Webb is correct in not taking the baptism completely out of the picture of forgiveness since even in the Old Testament passages on repentance there are two main events. For example, in his cited passage, Hosea 14:1-2, there is a step taken by man and a step taken by

⁴⁴ Webb (1991), 190.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 191.

God. “And let him return to Yahweh, and he will have mercy on him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon their sins.”

It would be odd for John’s ministry to take God’s essential role out of the picture and Webb rightly believes this is where the baptism itself comes into play. John’s baptism also expresses this dual man-God relationship in mediating forgiveness. The man plays his part by repenting and confessing his sins and John himself takes on the role of God who then confers the status of being forgiven on that person. Webb writes, “the explanation may be derived...due to the fact that it was not self-baptism but rather performed by John upon the person being baptized...In other words, being baptized by John symbolized being forgiven by God, and the act of baptism provided the person with the assurance that he/she indeed had been forgiven. But... the baptism did more than *symbolize* the forgiveness, in some way it *mediated* the forgiveness.”⁴⁶

At first glance, it may seem like this conclusion renders my theory about the derivation of John’s baptism from metaphorical ablution passages as incorrect, since it seems like only God is responsible for mediating divine forgiveness in those passages, taking the role of man out of the picture. However, while the emphasis in these passages is certainly on God’s actions, we must remember that God’s cleansing of certain people was not random but was conferred upon certain individuals only. The passage from Isaiah speaks of a remnant left in Jerusalem and both passages presuppose that others are being excluded from this cleansing. Therefore, even in these eschatological passages there is still a “human aspect” present. For instance, the people who are eventually cleansed by God in Isaiah 4 are referred to as, “Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem” (4:3). These “remnants” are not left there by pure chance, they are left behind from a great purging of God in the previous chapter that targeted the unrighteous, particularly the wealthy who were oppressing the poor. Isaiah 3:10-11 makes it clear that the ones who escape

⁴⁶ Webb (1991), 191.

God's wrath (and who are to be cleansed later) were separated on behalf of the "fruit of their labors": "Tell the innocent how fortunate they are, for they shall eat the fruit of their labors. Woe to the guilty! How unfortunate they are, for what their hands have done shall be done to them." Thus, both John's baptism and the eschatological baptism by God required some kind of turning from sin, whether in the form of repentance (in John's baptism) or the mere avoidance of falling in with the wicked (as in Isaiah 3 and 4).

That brings us to John's baptism serving as purification from moral uncleanness. This is perhaps the aspect of John's baptism that would be most puzzling if not understood as deriving from the metaphorical cleansing passages such as Ezekiel 36:25-26 and Isaiah 4:3-4. This is because the idea that a cleansing via water could cure from moral as well as physical uncleanness is an idea unique to these passages. We have already seen that other ablution references in literature usually served as cleansing from physical contagion, not moral contagion. Like John's baptism the cleansing described in the aforementioned Old Testament passages goes above and beyond the usual function of immersions by offering a cleansing from moral sin. For example Ezekiel 36:25 speaks of this ablution cleansing people from the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is clearly a moral sin according to Exodus 20:4-5 because it cannot be atoned for by a simple washing. In fact, the passage appears to link the sin of idolatry with divine punishment all the way to one's great grandparents (see second half of 20:5).

The implication in Isaiah 4 is similar, stating that those cleansed, "will be called holy", implying that those who are not cleansed were guilty of far more than mere physical uncleanness. We will see later that this particular aspect of John's baptism stood in direct opposition of the traditional methods of sin forgiveness in the Second Temple period.

Lastly, can my hypothesis that these eschatological passages served as the basis for John's baptism make any sense of the final main aspect of John's baptism, the foreshadowing of an expected eschatological figure? Much of this depends on the identity of John's expected figure, an issue we will examine in more detail later. If John's expected figure was none other than Yahweh himself, than this fits nicely with my conjecture. John's baptism was a shadow of the one to come; the baptism of the "stronger one" may actually have been derived from Isaiah 4:3-4, since both use fire imagery to describe the figure's baptism. This is an appealing conclusion since this passage also highlights the juxtaposition of judgment and restoration that is also present in the ministry of John's expected figure. But if John's figure is some kind of intermediary figure (i.e. the son of man, Michael/Melchizedek etc.) that would require John to have made a large alteration to the original meaning of these passages since the LORD himself is clearly the mediator of cleansing. However, at least one passage Isaiah 52.15, refers to a servant of Yahweh performing the ablution. And it seems reasonable that if John believed in a servant of Yahweh who ushered in the end time, that he would have had no serious theological qualms with transferring this task from Yahweh to his servant. It would still be Yahweh's will at work, albeit through an intermediary.

II

“He Must Become Greater”: Jesus as Disciple and Heir of John the Baptist

2.1. John’s Role in the Gospels

Now that it has been shown that John indeed preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and what this meant, we can begin to examine why Jesus felt it necessary to undergo his ritual. As noted at the beginning of this thesis, I will try to set forth the case that Jesus underwent the baptism as any follower of John would have and that it is at least possible that Jesus felt attracted to the baptism because he regarded himself as a sinful individual.

Scholars are very keen to point out the efforts of the Evangelists to relegate John to a subordinate status to Jesus and they are right in noting that their desire to elevate Jesus above John may stem from the fact that their ministries were in some way connected. I will examine some of their ideas further below. But it is possible to take their conclusions even further and conclude that Jesus may have began his career as a disciple of John. Certainly, the gospels’ preoccupation with making sure John is inferior to Jesus shows in some way that the early Christians were embarrassed by Jesus’ relationship to him. If John’s connection to Jesus was embarrassing, why did the Gospel writers not simply omit any information about this? Is

John's role in the gospels really so crucial that the Evangelists would rather go to great lengths to relegate John rather than omit him? A survey of John's role in the Gospels will show that John's role is quite minimal, indicating perhaps that John was included in the gospels because knowledge of his connection with Jesus was too well known to edit out.

In Mark, the earliest Gospel, John is essentially, "an Elijah incognito".⁴⁷ Like Jesus, he proclaims the coming kingdom of God and is then killed by a reluctant government authority. Matthew also has John as an eschatological prophet who also announces the coming of a "stronger one" who will be superior to John because he baptizes with the spirit, not water. Luke has John acknowledge Jesus' superiority as early as when he is still in his mother's womb. He also has John play the role, like in Matthew, of one who prepares the way of the Lord. But John is arrested before Jesus begins his ministry perhaps as John Meier asserts, "to forestall any rivalry between John and Jesus".⁴⁸ And finally the Gospel of John completely removes any eschatological emphases from John and makes his sole purpose to highlight the coming of Jesus. This is best seen in John 1:31, where John's baptism is no longer for the forgiveness of sins, "but in order that he might be revealed to Israel, for this I came baptizing with water."

While each gospel has its own creative way of shaping him and there may be slight discrepancies like whether or not John was Elijah, there is a line of continuity throughout all four. John's role can be summarized as simply to announce the coming of the "stronger one", who is Jesus, and to prepare for his arrival through baptism. At least Matthew and Mark place him in the role of Elijah, who was said to be the last prophet based on Malachi 3:23-24. None of this information seems absolutely crucial to report. Would the gospels' portrayal of Jesus really be lacking without John's role?

⁴⁷ Meier (1980), 384.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

One possible explanation for the inclusion of John in the gospels is because he is necessary to fulfill the role of the reborn Elijah who announces the coming of Christ in the Gospels. The expectation of the return of Elijah before the end times is based on Malachi 4:5, which reads, “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.” This theory could potentially make sense if one could prove that the tradition of Elijah coming in advance of the messiah was prevalent in Jesus’ day. However, scholars appear to agree that the idea of a forerunner for the messiah was not in fact well known in Jesus’ day. While the idea of Elijah someday returning is found in Malachi and several extra-biblical sources, prominent scholars like Richard Horsley maintain that, “The very idea that Elijah would return at the end of time as a forerunner of the Messiah was apparently not yet current at the time of John’s career.”⁴⁹ The fact that only two of the four gospels report this tradition is further evidence that a reborn Elijah was not necessary to prove Jesus’ legitimacy as messiah.

That leaves only the role of John as the announcer of the “stronger one”. There is no adequate explanation as to why it needed to be reported that John admitted Jesus was the “stronger one” unless Jesus was initially under John’s authority as a disciple. The need to declare Jesus as someone special from God did not need to be specifically announced by John. Luke, for instance, also has similar praises of Jesus’ role coming from Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna. All of these problems are resolved, however, when it is understood that Jesus was once a disciple of John. It is known from passages within the New Testament that followers of John existed after his death. And while the sources are limited, Luke’s Acts alone suggests that John’s disciples existed in a wide geographic range at the same time the early Christians began proselytizing.

⁴⁹Horsley (1985), 149.

Paul's fellow Christian missionary, Apollos, was said to have, "known only the baptism of John," before arriving in Ephesus from Alexandria (Acts 18:24-25). Further on, in Acts 19:1-7, Paul himself encounters a group of John's disciples in Ephesus, thus we know of two cities, located on opposite sides of the Mediterranean, in which people were at least familiar with John the Baptist.

The Evangelists may have attempted to place John under Jesus because his disciples were still active and perhaps even reminding people that Jesus was originally a follower of John once the Christian movement gained momentum. Or, it is possible that traditions about Jesus and John were well known enough in some geographic areas that it would have been simply too obvious to remove any connections between the two altogether.

2.2. Jesus, Heir of the Baptist

As the Christological and theological claims about Jesus continued to grow, the gospel tradition accordingly relegates John's role more and more, with one major exception that will be examined below. John goes from the "incognito Elijah", to the announcer of the "stronger one", to one who came only for the purpose of bearing witness to Jesus. When searched, an abundance of material is found relegating John to an inferior position in comparison to Jesus:

"He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light" (John 1:7).

"To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.'... That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:27-28, 30).

"But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry" (Matt 3:11).

"But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt 3:14).

“When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'”... Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard... Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me” (Lk 7:20,22,23)

As E.P. Sanders states, summarizing the belief of many scholars, “The Gospels and Acts strive to put John in a self-assigned subordinate role to Jesus, and the effort is so pronounced that it leads one to suppose that the opposite is the case, that Jesus began as a follower of John the Baptist”.⁵⁰ This type of reversal approach is valuable but there are hints within the gospels themselves that seem to indicate Jesus’ initial submission to John as his disciple. The first is found in Mark 11:27-33 and its corresponding passages in Luke 20:1-8 and Matthew 21:23-27:

One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him. "Tell us by what authority you are doing these things," they said. "Who gave you this authority?" He replied, "I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John's baptism—was it from heaven, or from men?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet." So they answered, "We don't know where it was from." Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

It is difficult to know exactly what Jesus meant by this but the question at hand is one over authority. The scenario is said to have happened after the cleansing of the Temple, which explains why the scribes were eager to challenge his authority. Based on the fact that Jesus was baptized by John, we can assume Jesus’ answer was, yes, John’s baptism was from heaven. Otherwise the scribes fear of Jesus saying, “Why didn’t you believe him?” makes little sense. Why appeal to John’s authority if his own was not somehow connected? Edward Schillbeeckz takes this connection a step further, believing, “Jesus sees an essential correspondence between the baptism of John and his own ministry. As prophets both have full authority... in a sense, Jesus

⁵⁰Sanders (1985), 91.

treads in the footsteps of the Baptist”.⁵¹ Thus, the story is quite modest and free of later attempts to relegate John below Jesus. But it seems that Schillbeekz is staring in the face of an obvious conclusion that he fails to make. He later states that Jesus’ baptism, “is Jesus’ first appearance as a prophet: a symbolic-prophetic action or a prophecy in action, through which he intimates that Israel as a whole does indeed require a change of heart and must return once more to God, as the Baptist demands”.⁵² As he notes, this interpretation, “goes a great deal further than what John himself intended with his baptism.”⁵³ It is quite apparent that Jesus experienced a far more empowering and mystical experience at his baptism. It is difficult to know if this would have been considered unusual or not, but his interpretation of this event as prophetic certainly would have been.

Thus, in light of Schillbeekz’ stake in the baptism, a new interpretation of Mark 11:23-27 is needed. Jesus is not referring to John’s baptism as a sign of his authority but his own baptism *by* John. This could reflect a very primitive tradition in which Jesus may have at one point appealed to his baptism as a source of authority as a prophet. The fact that Jesus elsewhere refers to his miracles when his authority is questioned (Lk 7:22, Lk 11:20), could be further evidence for this. Perhaps Jesus was essentially saying that as a follower of John, who had divine authority, or maybe even as his heir after his death, he had the right to symbolically act out the destruction of the Temple.

The idea that Jesus could have been a sort of “heir” to John may seem quite controversial at first. But there is another hint of it found in two verses. The first, Mark 6:14 reads, “Some were saying, ‘John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.’”. This idea appears again in Mark 8:27-28 when the disciples tell Jesus that

⁵¹Schillbeekz (1974), 134-135.

⁵²Ibid, 138.

⁵³ Ibid

some people think he is John the Baptist, even though he is already dead at that point in the narrative. Morton Smith, using his extensive knowledge of ancient folk religion and magic believes that this charge represents one of, “a thicket of stories about ways to get spirits as servants...one familiar form is that in which a ghost, ‘the demon of a dead man’, is evoked as Jesus was thought to have evoked the Baptist”.⁵⁴ Thus John’s association with Jesus continues after his death. This makes perfect sense and is excellent proof that Jesus may have been seen as an heir to John. Just as John was thought to be Elijah, perhaps Jesus was thought to have been Elisha who received a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit after he succeeded him. In any case, the accusation against Jesus makes little sense unless he was in some way connected with John.

The second set of hints that Jesus was initially a disciple of John comes from the Gospel of John. This is odd, as E.P. Sanders notes because, “The Christian need to relegate John to a subordinate place is seen most clearly in the Fourth Gospel”.⁵⁵ However, some of the easiest and most obvious connections to tie Jesus and John the Baptist appear here. First, Jesus’ two earliest disciples are said to be disciples of John (1:35). The gospel does not report Jesus’ baptism by John but instead has John declare Jesus to be “the lamb of God.” This happens when, “John saw Jesus coming toward him,” and another time when John, “saw Jesus passing by” (1:29, 36). Did Jesus just happen to be walking near the Jordan River when John saw him, or did he randomly decide to search there for disciples? Probably not. It is more likely that Jesus was already a follower of John who at some point decided to branch out and start his own ministry, with his own followers.

John also reports that Jesus was baptizing with his disciples (3:22-23). It almost seems that whoever edited the Gospel of John forgot to omit this embarrassing detail because later it

⁵⁴ Smith (1978), 128.

⁵⁵ Sanders (1985), 91.

states, “The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples” (4:1-2). This editorial seam seems to indicate that a later editor of John found the fact that Jesus was baptizing embarrassing. John never reports that John’s baptism is for the forgiveness of sins. One reason for this could be that he wanted readers to know that reconciliation to God came from Jesus alone: “No one comes to the father except through me” (14:6). If Jesus used to baptize, it suggests that he was doubting his own ability to reconcile others to God (assuming his readers knew of the Synoptic take on baptism). It also suggests that Jesus and his followers did not break from John’s group completely at first. Based on the fact that Jesus’ group was made up of John’s disciples it may have looked as though he had simply chosen to continue his master’s mission but in a different geographic region.

2.3. Jesus Christ, Sinner?

At this point it has been shown that John’s baptism was in fact meant to be of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and that Jesus was initially a follower of John the Baptist. However, the thesis of this paper was also that Jesus was baptized *because* he was a follower of John and also that he may have initially come to John because he felt exceedingly sinful. The connection has not yet been made that Jesus was baptized since all of John’s followers would have done so. There is admittedly, no evidence to suggest that John required his followers to submit to his baptism. But the connection is not far-fetched in the slightest. In both Josephus and the Synoptic Gospels, John is called, John the Baptist, or John the Baptizer. The link between John’s activity and baptism was therefore so great that it earned him this title. There is no feasible way that someone known as “the baptizer” would surround himself with followers who were not baptized

themselves. This is further bolstered by the fact that John likely viewed anyone who had not been baptized, and then “bore fruits of repentance,” as still under God’s imminent judgment, such people did not make good followers.

To at least speculate that Jesus was attracted to John because he felt exceedingly sinful and in need of forgiveness, it is necessary to ask, what kind of person would have been attracted to John’s message of the availability of forgiveness of sins? Luke lists specifically only tax collectors and soldiers. It makes sense that these two professions are given; tax collectors were known to be corrupt and sinful and soldiers as well, because they may have abused the common people and stolen from them. More generally we can infer that to be attracted to a baptism for the forgiveness of sins implies that anyone who came to John would have been burdened by guilt.

These people *must* have truly felt guilty because they were desperate enough to risk their lives. There are numerous cases in first-century Palestine of false prophets and their followers being slain by the Roman governors (cf. *Ant.* 20:97-99, 20:169-171). The wilderness was associated with the new exodus and in some cases the Romans saw their very presence there as a sign of sedition against the state. It was seen as an attempt to usher in a new age for Israel, free of Roman rule. Based on these facts, I think it at least a reasonable speculation that Jesus was considerably burdened by some kind of guilt prior to his baptism to the point that he risked his own death to reach John. It is at least possible that the feeling of being pardoned after John’s baptism or sometime later in his career led Jesus to feel as though he was a “son of God”, as the account reports, a term that often simply referred to a righteous and godly man in this context.⁵⁶

⁵⁶Vermes (1973), 200.

III

“Everyone Who is Fully Trained Will be Like his Teacher:” Later Similarities and Differences Between the Lives of Jesus and John

3.1. Asceticism

If Jesus was in fact a disciple of John, we would expect to see more evidence connecting the two than a few suggestive passages that somehow slipped under the Evangelists’ general attempt to relegate John to a position below Jesus. Besides the likelihood that they once both baptized, are there similarities in their oracular message or general appearance?

To examine the similarities and differences between Jesus and John and how they may have played out as Jesus began his own separate career we will examine four aspects of John and Jesus’ life and preaching: asceticism (or the lack thereof), eschatological timetable, the nature of the coming kingdom, and how one was made right with God in light of this.

One of the most important aspects of John’s movement that is given little elaboration in the gospels is its geographic location. John is said to be in the wilderness or the desert. The

Gospel of John more specifically mentions Bethany and Aenon. Some scholars have tried to link John with the Essenes because of this but while there are some similarities like their use of ablution(s) and rejection of the priesthood, this is merely conjecture. However, that is not to say that there was no significance to his location. On the one hand, the desert and asceticism are ideal partners and there is little doubt John practiced some form of asceticism. John was said to have lived off locusts and wild honey (Mk 1:6), and his disciples were also said to have fasted frequently, in fact, they are the ones who ask Jesus in Matthew, why his disciples do not fast (Matt 9:14).

But more importantly, the wilderness was a symbol of the new exodus. As Horsley states, “it was in the wilderness that God had shown signs and wonders of redemption in earlier times.”⁵⁷ It seems likely that John chose this location to symbolically represent that coming to him was taking the first step to participate in the new exodus. There is no reason to doubt the gospels regarding this information and Josephus’ report that John was brought to the fortress Machaerus for his execution is consistent with a location east of the Jordan River.⁵⁸

If Jesus was indeed a disciple of John we would expect Jesus to either live an ascetic lifestyle as well or at least provide an explanation as accounting for its rejection. Such an explanation seems to be provided, at least in part in Mark 2:18-22 and its corresponding reproductions in Matthew 9:14-17 and Luke 5:33-39:

Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting and people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

⁵⁷Horsley (1985), 162.

⁵⁸Theissan (1998), 200.

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.

Before we jump to the conclusion that Jesus staunchly rejected any ascetic practices either for himself or his disciples, it should be noted that in just the last chapter, Jesus was in the wilderness, fasting for 40 days and 40 nights. Also, this particular question is regarding Jesus' followers, not Jesus himself, though I do not think it rash to assume Jesus led by example, especially in light of another Q saying found in Matthew 11:19/Luke 7:34: "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon; the son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'"

In fact, it seems that although the original question was why Jesus' disciples did not fast, in light of this last saying it seems that it also extended to Jesus himself. The connection between being a glutton and a friend of tax collectors is first hinted at in Mark 2. Immediately prior to being asked this question, Jesus was eating with Levi, and was asked why he ate with tax collectors and sinners. Because Jesus amalgamates the different insults later in the narrative, it seems highly likely that the question also pertained to him.

Unfortunately, this passage does not provide a clear explanation as to why Jesus did not practice asceticism. The real issue, as N.T. Wright illustrates was not, "simply an ascetic discipline, part of the general practice of piety. It had to do with Israel's present condition: she was still in exile."⁵⁹

As we will see below, a fundamental difference between John and Jesus was that Jesus believed God had postponed the coming judgment and that this was a sign of his mercy and kindness. The image of a wedding is therefore quite appropriate to contrast Jesus' ministry with

⁵⁹ Wright (1996), 433.

John's. Jesus' center role as the bridegroom also highlights his role in particular for the coming kingdom. The second part of the passage is clear evidence of a break between Jesus and John. As R.T. France states, "Placed here in Mark's gospel, they apply to the newness of Jesus' radical message of the kingdom of God, and its incompatibility with the existing forms of religion and society..."⁶⁰ Thus, if John's asceticism was intended to prepare himself and his followers for God's kingdom, like Paul urges his readers to do in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, then Jesus' rejection of the practice makes perfect sense. Jesus, we shall see below, believed the kingdom of God was already semi-present through his ministry. Thus, some ascetic practices could be abandoned since the kingdom had already partially arrived. The other ascetic commands of Jesus, such as the command to hate one's father and mother in favor of Jesus, makes sense if participation in the kingdom revolved around Jesus' special role in its breaking in.

3.2. The Coming Kingdom, How Imminent?

There is no doubt that for both John and Jesus, a major concern was the coming kingdom of God. But as we shall see the two differed as to how and when the kingdom would come. Unfortunately, we have little material to reconstruct John's eschatological preaching, as noted earlier, one of our main sources for reconstructing John's message, Josephus, has removed eschatological aspects of John's ministry in an attempt to make it more appealing to his Greco-Roman readers. However, we are provided with a brief glimpse of John's preaching about the coming kingdom in Matthew 3/Luke 3:

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce

⁶⁰ France (2002), 140-141.

fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matt

Like Jesus, John also declares that the kingdom of heaven is near, both saw their lifetime as the crucial point in history when God would return. The need for mass repentance was nothing new to Jewish history but as R.T. France states, “there is now a new note of urgency, of a ‘now’ or ‘never’ opportunity.”⁶¹ John elaborates on this with an agricultural metaphor stating, “the axe is already at the root of the trees.” Thus, for John, judgment is imminent and the only means of escaping it was through his baptism, proven effective through good works.

It would seem that at one point early in his ministry, Jesus thought the same. Matthew has him declare verbatim, “repent for the kingdom of heaven is near,” and the odd historical kernel about Jesus baptizing in John 3:22-23 also makes this seem quite likely. But at some point, both Jesus and John came to doubt the validity of their message. Perhaps, it only took the mere passing of time before they realized John was incorrect, the kingdom had not come, at least not in the way John had envisioned it. Mere observance would have led to this conclusion. The wicked still reigned and the good still suffered.

Moreover, John was now in prison, and unlike Jesus, whose worldview was prepared for suffering and uncertainty, albeit perhaps because his mentor had already been forced down this path, John’s preaching seemed to indicate that the suffering of God’s people was about to be over. When the ruling elite arrived at his baptismal site in the wilderness he could declare with certainty that, “already the axe was laid at the root of the tree,” soon the “brood of vipers” would be swept up with the chaff and burned in the fires of God’s judgment (cf. Matt. 3).

⁶¹ France (2007), 141.

When John was imprisoned he must have begun to doubt the validity of the imminence of the kingdom. Luke 7:18-23 and its parallel, Matthew 11:1-6 may offer us a window into John's thoughts at this time, while also revealing much about John's later relationship to his former disciple.

John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'" At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

While a traditional Christian interpretation of this passage would merely assert that John was having doubts about his otherwise solid conviction that Jesus himself was the "coming one", any indication in the gospels that John ever viewed Jesus as more than a man is suspect. Matthew claims that John said, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? (Matt. 3:15). However, as noted above, this verse is most likely an apologetic addition by Matthew due to the embarrassing fact that the sinless son of God was undergoing a ritual meant to cleanse one of sin. The Gospel of John is rife with bold statements about Jesus through the preaching of John, but the polemic against John in this gospel is far too strong to allow any of these grandiose statements historical reliability.

This passage, on the other hand, while it contains the extremely polemical statement, "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me," is quite modest. The fact that John is even allowed to ask, "or should we expect someone else?," is so unlike anything else John says about Jesus in the gospels that it is almost certainly true. GerdTheissen describes the

passage as, “the only text in which he (John) speaks about Jesus that can lay claim to a historical nucleus.”⁶²

What does this remarkable passage tell us about John and Jesus? It indicates first, that John doubted the very core of his message. Jesus was quite unlike the fiery bringer of judgment that John had predicted. Certainly, John’s eschatological figure was not devoid of the “good” aspects of God’s coming rule on earth, he was after all also going to gather, “his wheat into the barn,” that is God’s elect, the true Israel. However, John’s message was clearly more focused on the wrath to come, rather than God’s mercy. Jesus, on the other hand, placed more emphasis on God’s mercy. By responding to John’s question by pointing out his miracles Jesus broadens the question to be not only about his role in the coming kingdom but the nature of the kingdom itself. As John P. Meier states, “the accent is now on what a loving, merciful God is already doing to save Israel through the ministry of Jesus...the good news is that for all who accept Jesus’ message, the day of the Lord turns out to be a day of light, not of darkness...”⁶³

Whereas John began to doubt his message, Jesus’ miracles led to a fundamental difference in how he dealt with the failure of John’s imminent kingdom to play out. As Theissen states, “Any moment in the world which continues to exist is now interpreted as an expression of the grace of God. God delays his judgment in order to give people a chance to repent.”⁶⁴

This is best demonstrated by Jesus’ parable of the weeds which reads:

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ““An enemy did this,’ he replied.“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ““No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds,

⁶²Theissen (1998) 205.

⁶³ Meier (2001), 134.

⁶⁴Theissen (1998), 210.

you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.””

The similarities with John’s preaching in Matthew 3 cannot be ignored. Jesus borrows several images from John’s preaching: the wheat, and barn are exactly the same and even the image of a seed growing invokes John’s command to, “bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” It is perhaps too rash to assume Jesus is directly invoking John’s preaching since agricultural imagery has a long history in the Jewish prophetic tradition. Regardless, this passage shows a divergence from John’s eschatology. GerdTheissen rightly points out that the key difference here is chronological.⁶⁵ John declared that the axe was already at the root of the trees; baptism was a last chance to escape the coming wrath. But here the harvest is delayed, “Let both grow together until the harvest.” It appears that Jesus also came to doubt the validity of John’s message of imminent judgment; in its place he believed there was a period of delay.

This claim is bolstered by a later text in the New Testament which gives us an important look into another apocalypticist’s mindset when faced with uncertainty about the imminent coming kingdom. The letter of 2 Peter describes in detail a situation not unlike Jesus’ in which God (in this case the resurrected Jesus) had failed to establish his kingdom when expected. The author describes how some “scoffers”, perhaps former members of his church were asking, “Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:4). It seems that many Christians at this time were beginning to doubt the imminent return of Christ, as his the last of his followers began to die. This was problematic as Jesus had declared to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God (Matt 16:28/Lk

⁶⁵Theissan (1998), 210.

9:27). How did they respond? For at least the author of 2 Peter, the answer was relatively simple. If the end did not arrive before the death of Christ's apostles, surely they had simply misunderstood. Alluding to Psalm 90:4, the author reminds his readers that, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Pet. 3:8). But even more relevant to our present study of Jesus is that the author also attributed the delay of the parousia to God's mercy and kindness. He writes that God, "is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance... Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation (2 Pet. 3:9, 15). This passage provides contextual credibility for the notion that Jesus would have interpreted a delayed apocalypse as an indication of God's mercy.

3.3. Future or Semi-Present Kingdom?

Another division that is often cited between John and Jesus is that they disagreed on the extent to which the kingdom was already in their ministries. Much has been written about Jesus' view of the coming kingdom, even a passing glance at this scholarship reveals that for many, Jesus came to understand that the kingdom was semi-present, whereas John believed it was imminent but not yet actually present.

Jesus' view of the kingdom is often seen as a juxtaposition between its present reality and its future arrival. At first glance, this may not seem unique, and to some degree it is not. N.T. Wright has illustrated quite well in *Jesus and the Victory of God* that a kingdom of God that was semi-present and yet also in the future was not unheard of near the time of Jesus. He writes, "In Jesus' own time, Judas the Galilean might well have told his followers that, by joining his movement, they were part of the new, and final, reconstitution of Israel, even though there was still the little matter of throwing off the Roman yoke to be settled. Bar-Kochba... behaved

towards his followers as though he were already king. But this ‘inaugurated eschatology’, too, remained in need of a final victory...’’⁶⁶ However, we shall see that the way Jesus envisaged the semi-present aspect of the kingdom radically separated him from his contemporaries including John the Baptist.

Many scholars firmly support the idea that Jesus preached a semi-present and future kingdom. In the words of GerdTheissen, “Whereas the existence of a future eschatology in Jesus can be disputed only if one quite violently denies Jesus clearly future sayings, the authenticity of sayings about the present is undisputed.”⁶⁷ Scholars generally point to a few crucial passages when examining the present reality of Jesus’ kingdom. Luke 16:16 reads, “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.” Here, John is given a crucial role in God’s timeline, he is the first to be a part of the present kingdom. While the sayings parallel in Matthew 11:12 differs, reading, “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it,” the very idea that a person can seize or force his way into the kingdom is proof that it must have already partially manifested itself in Jesus’ time.

Another saying of Jesus which emphasizes the kingdom’s present reality is Luke 17:20-21, “Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.” I do not believe it rash to assume that Jesus is also referring to himself when he states that the kingdom is, “in your midst”, or “within your grasp” as some translators have rendered it. That is not to say

⁶⁶Wright (1989), 467-468.

⁶⁷Theissan (1998), 256.

that Jesus equated himself with the kingdom but it affirms that Jesus believed he was the crucial pivot in the history of God's plan. His unique role in the present and future kingdom is also clear in passages such as Mark 8:38, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." Whereas this last passage emphasizes Jesus' special role in the future kingdom, we also see that the reality of the present kingdom also hinges on Jesus' special role in God's plan.

This is evident in what is perhaps the most oft cited passage supporting Jesus' belief in the present kingdom, Matthew 12:2/Luke 11:20, "If I cast demons out by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God is upon you." Here, Jesus uses the authority of his miracles to affirm the present reality of the kingdom. Elsewhere in Matthew 11:5/Luke 7:22, Jesus also uses his miracles as proof of his divine authority.

Here lies a stark break in thought about the coming kingdom from John the Baptist. John believed that Yahweh himself would bring about the judgment and restoration of Israel. He offered baptism to escape from this imminent judgment but to say that John believed his ministry actually ushered in the kingdom would be taking his views beyond what little evidence we have. Such a role belonged solely to the "stronger one".

There are problems, however, with the above argument. First, the view that Jesus believed in a semi-present kingdom centered around his ministry and miracles has come under attack. In his work, *Jesus and Judaism*, E.P. Sanders raises many concerns with the above proof texts, commonly used to establish Jesus' belief in the semi-present kingdom.⁶⁸ Regarding Luke 11:20/Matthew 12:2, "If I cast demons out by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God is upon you," Sanders raises several solid objections. He is right to point out that far too much

⁶⁸Sanders (1985), 133-141.

emphasis is placed on the Greek verb *ephthasen*. Sanders states that even if the use of the Greek verb is accepted as capturing the essence of what Jesus said, its meaning is far from clear. He writes, “If, however, we must decide its precise meaning, we shall discover that it frequently means ‘came’ in the sense of ‘the coming was determined’, not ‘the coming was accomplished’.” When the author of the Testament of Abraham wrote that the ‘cup of death’ came (*ephthasen*) to Abraham (T. Ab. A 1.3), the patriarch still had more than nineteen chapters to live.”⁶⁹

Secondly, Sanders believes that the connection between casting out demons and the arrival of the kingdom is one not firmly rooted in Jewish tradition. He can point to only one clear text, Testament of Levi 18, which clearly connects the idea that the messiah would demonstrate his overcoming of the demonic realm with exorcisms. Thus he states, “One suspects that the true source of scholarly belief in this supposed Jewish eschatological view is Matthew 12:28- considered in isolation from 12:27...the entire argument...depends more on circular reasoning than on anything else.”⁷⁰

Lastly, Sanders voices what I consider the most effective argument against the traditional interpretation of this verse. He believes that other sayings of Jesus regarding exorcism contradict his statement in Matthew 12:28. For example, Mark 9:38-41 reads:

““Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.”

Here there is little implication that Jesus viewed his exorcisms as unique. If Matthew 12:28 is to be viewed as evidence for the semi-present kingdom then one must ask how Jesus would approve of exorcists, did they too, prove the semi-presence of the kingdom? Even the preceding

⁶⁹*Ibid.* 134.

⁷⁰*Ibid.* 135.

verse to Matthew 12:28, which reads, “And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges,” simply indicates that Jesus was pointing out that his exorcisms must be non-Satanic if the exorcists of his critics were doing the same. Thus, Sanders concludes, “...Jesus attached the same significance to his own exorcisms and those of others.”⁷¹ Such a view makes it difficult to conclude that the difference between John and Jesus’ view of the coming kingdom was simply one of semi-presence versus imminence.

Another potential problem with this view is John’s ethical preaching. Josephus states that John, “was a good man and had urged the Jews to exert themselves to virtue, both as to justice toward one another and reverence towards God” (*Ant.* 18.117). One could dismiss this as being an attempt by Josephus to turn an eschatological prophet into a moral teacher to avoid embarrassment to his Greco-Roman audience. However, the inclusion of several ethical commands by John in Luke, as well as his insistence that people, “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt 3:8) make this unlikely. Luke 3:11-14, a text from Luke’s L source, special material found only in Luke, reads:

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

John’s concern with ethics is slightly puzzling and could pose another problem to the view that John and Jesus’ difference about the coming kingdom was simply one of semi-presence versus imminence. Gerd Theissen, for example, writes, “In the face of the threat of an immediate end, baptism was an eschatological sacrament, i.e. a symbolic action which God

⁷¹Sanders (1985), 135.

accepted instead of actions for which there was not enough time. But if time had been gained for repentance, there was also time to prove repentance by good deeds. So Jesus did not baptize.”⁷²

However, if Theissen is correct than we must ask a key question, why, if there was no time left, does John still insist on people proving their repentance and making their baptism effective through good deeds? In other words, what do we make of Luke 3: 11-14? I am tempted to undermine the entire theory that John believed there was no time for good deeds in the face of the coming judgment on the grounds that his ethical preaching suggests otherwise. The fundamental question here, in John’s wording, was how long was there until the Coming One actually picked up the axe that was laid at the root of the tree? Jewish apocalypticists are notoriously vague with their eschatological timelines. After all, Jesus himself supposedly declared, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mk 13:32).

Thus, however, tempting it may be, the uncertainty about just how imminent John’s declared judgment was allows for a degree of ethical concern without calling into question his view that the end would come swiftly with little time to prove righteousness to God through good works. One could state simply that although baptism did offer a “free pass” in the threat of judgment, John was keen to remind his adherents that this free pass could be lost, even in the sparse time period left before the Coming One’s return. The apostle Paul, who also believed in imminent judgment, made it very clear that although the end may come, “like a thief in the night” his followers were to, “Live in peace with each other... help the weak, be patient with everyone... always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else (1 Thess. 5:2, 13, 14, 15). A pardon from judgment was not a pass to sin, as he famously declares in Romans

⁷²Theissen (1998), 210.

6:1, “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!” There is a tension during this time between an eschatological pardon, whether it be through John’s baptism or faith in Christ, and the need to remain morally pure. The former is still dependent on the latter. Thus, it is not a contradiction for John to urge people to continue to live morally upright lives, even though he believed the imminence of judgment required something more.

Sanders’ arguments remain more problematic but despite potentially robbing us of several key proof texts used to establish Jesus’ belief a semi-present kingdom, the view cannot be overthrown completely. As noted earlier, N.T. Wright has shown that a semi-present kingdom is presupposed among other Jewish messianic and restoration figures. Sanders himself acknowledges this stating, “To refer again to Trautmann’s statement that nowhere else in Judaism, except in the Gospels, do we find that God’s kingdom ‘breaks through’ in a human deed, we must say not only that our knowledge is severely limited, but also that the Jewish ‘sign prophets’ thought precisely that.”⁷³ Despite admitting that a miraculous event could be interpreted by Jesus’ contemporaries as a sign of the present kingdom, he merely goes on to write, “The fact that Theudas and the Egyptian thought they could produce mighty signs... indicates that they attributed considerable importance to their own roles in the divine scheme.”⁷⁴ It is helpful at this point to reproduce Josephus’ accounts of Theudas and the Egyptian since their interpretation will become crucial to the present argument:

It came to pass, while Fadus was procurator of Judea, that a certain charlatan, whose name was Theudas, persuaded a great part of the people to take their effects with them, and follow him to the river Jordan; for he told them he was a prophet, and that he would, by his own command, divide the river, and afford them an easy passage over it. Many were deluded by his words.

About this time, someone came out of Egypt to Jerusalem, claiming to be a prophet. He advised the crowd to go along with him to the Mount of Olives, as it was called, which lay over against the city, and at the distance of a kilometer. He added that he would show them from hence how

⁷³Sanders (1985), 138.

⁷⁴*Ibid.* 138.

the walls of Jerusalem would fall down at his command, and he promised them that he would procure them an entrance into the city through those collapsed walls.

Unfortunately, these passages are very vague. Although the saying of Jesus more directly connect his miracles and exorcisms to the present reality of the kingdom, such a connection is not beyond the reach of these sign prophets. Would their actions have succeeded, they surely would have interpreted their act as having ushered in the kingdom. Horsley states of Theudas, “Theudas, parting the waters of the Jordan as the new Joshua, can be seen as leading a reverse conquest, a retreat into the wilderness in order to be purified and prepare the way of the Lord. Or Theudas can be seen as leading a new exodus: parting the waters of the Jordan, as Moses had the Red Sea, thus liberating the people from the bondage imposed on them (in their own land!) by the Romans.”⁷⁵ If Theudas had actually succeeded, it is not a far stretch to imagine that he would have seen the kingdom “breaking in” through this miraculous deed. If Bar Kochba’s mere *claim* that he was the messiah was enough to induce his followers to believe they were living in the time of the kingdom⁷⁶, would Theudas’ miracle not have incited the same but to an even greater degree? His action would have been proof that God’s redemptive work was already underway. Yet, at the same time, just as Joshua’s crossing of the Jordan still required the removal of the Canaanites to fully establish the Israelite nation, so also Theudas’ miraculous deed still merely pointed ahead to God’s full restoration, the Romans would still have yet to be conquered, to name just one unfulfilled expectation.

The Egyptian’s action would have produced a similar effect. As Horsley notes⁷⁷, the inspiration for this act is undoubtedly Joshua’s conquest of Jericho recorded in Joshua 6:15-20,

⁷⁵Horsley (1985), 166.

⁷⁶Wright (1989), 468. Wright points out that Kochba’s minting of coins labeling the years from ‘1’ indicates he and his followers, “behaved as though he were already king.”

⁷⁷Horsley (1985), 169.

which describes how Joshua conquered the city when its walls miraculously fell down after marching around them seven times and then yelling and blowing a trumpet. As such, the Egyptian would have been seen as a new Joshua, beginning the re-conquest of the Promised Land from the Romans. Again, we see the beginning of God's kingdom made manifest through a miraculous deed. Thus, as Sanders stated, we do indeed have at least two examples where a human deed serves as the means for ushering in the kingdom.

How does this relate to the possibility that Jesus believed in a semi-present kingdom? Sanders rightly asks, criticizing scholars who declared that Jesus' semi-present kingdom is something wholly unique in ancient Palestine, "How can one argue historically that a certain attitude or conception is unique? A sober estimate in accord with the normal canons of the writing of history can go no farther than 'otherwise unattested'."⁷⁸ The examples of Theudas and the Egyptian allow us to transform the historical *leap* of faith involved when claiming the authenticity of Jesus' semi-present kingdom into a mere *hop*. The presence of others who likely interpreted their miraculous deeds as signs of the kingdom's presence or beginning allow Jesus' belief in a semi-present kingdom to pass the criterion of contextual credibility. But just barely. Jesus' particular assumption that exorcisms (Matt 12:28) and healings (Matt. 11:5) are a sign that the kingdom of God is already present remains quite unique. Yet, while Sanders' is correct in stating that exorcism itself is only cited outside the Gospels once as a sign of the messiah's overcoming the demonic world, the expectation of a general victory over Satan is well attested at the coming of the kingdom in sources roughly contemporary to Jesus' time.⁷⁹

Is it not a logical step to assume that if some Jews of Jesus' time expected the overthrow of Satan, then the overpowering of his minions through exorcism was a sign of his defeat and

⁷⁸Sanders (1985), 138.

⁷⁹Theissen (1998), 258. Theissen cites Testament of Dan 5.10ff; 1 QM VI, 6, *AssMos.* 10.1ff)

thus also of the presence of the kingdom? That Jesus saw Satan as already defeated is perhaps most evident in the temptation narrative but since it is highly stylized we will look elsewhere. When the 72 disciples return from their mission of healing and exorcism they report to Jesus that, “even the demons submit to us in your name” (Lk 10:17), Jesus replies, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven, I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.” (18-19). It is unclear when Jesus’ vision of Satan occurs chronologically but the implication is clear enough, Satan’s downfall is accompanied by the overthrowing of his demons. While this passage occurs only in L, the idea that Satan is already overthrown before Jesus’ death is unlikely to be a later invention by the early church. As Theissen points out, “Primitive Christianity later associated the overcoming of Satan with the cross and resurrection (cf. John 12:31; 16:11; Rev. 12.5ff).”⁸⁰ I would add that other Christian texts such as 1 Peter 5:8 seem to view Satan as “still at large”. The image of him prowling as a lion is further evidence for the authenticity of Luke 10:18; it hardly suggests a conquered foe.

Thus, the semi-present reality of Jesus’ kingdom may be considered as “unique” due to its particular emphasis on the overthrow of Satan and his demons. But the idea is unlikely to be an invention of the early church and is only slightly different from the connection prophets like Theudas and the Egyptian would likely have made between their miraculous deed and the presence of the kingdom.

Returning to John, Theissen has argued that a fundamental difference between Jesus and John was their views about the coming kingdom. He writes, “For John, the end of the world is imminent: the axe has already been laid to the roots. Jesus shares this imminent eschatology, but already looks back on a decisive point which has begun with John. There is a present

⁸⁰ibid, 258.

eschatology in his writings as well as the future eschatology.”⁸¹ This statement seems correct, however, it seems possible that Theissen and other scholars have avoided or too easily dismissed the possibility that John also viewed the kingdom as semi-present as well as future. As N.T. Wright states, “...the fact that the full revelation or dawning of the kingdom remains in the future does not negate, but actually rather demands, that something be already acknowledged as present...”⁸² In light of Wright’s statement, we should expect some aspect of John’s ministry to indicate the presence of the kingdom well before the arrival of the Coming One. We have just seen that one clear indication that Jesus’ notion of the kingdom was ‘semi-present’ is his belief that Satan had been defeated, an event that was closely connected with the arrival of God’s kingdom in several contemporary texts. Jesus transformed what was ordinarily an event confined to the future coming of God’s kingdom and made it into a present reality through his special role as divinely appointed exorcist and miracle worker.

Thus, if it can be shown that John also transformed an eschatological act into a present reality, there may be good grounds for asserting that John’s view of the kingdom was not entirely relegated to the future but instead, “broke through” with his ministry. One possible suggestion is made by Webb, who speculates that, “The use of the present tense of the verb ἔρχομαι to describe the coming of the expected figure, rather than using the future tense, suggests that the figure may already be ‘traveling’ and that his arrival is imminent.”⁸³ But we would be running into the same problem that E.P. Sanders already referred to regarding Matthew 12:28. His assertion that, “It would, in fact, be impossible for us to know the precise wording of anything said by Jesus...,”⁸⁴ could just as easily be applied to John.

⁸¹Theissen (1998), 209.

⁸²Wright (1989), 471.

⁸³ Webb (1991), 301.

⁸⁴Sanders (1985), 140.

The connection between John's baptism and the eschatological baptisms described earlier in chapter one is much more promising. The key Old Testament passages are reproduced below for the reader's convenience:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; from all your uncleanness and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:25-26)

Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, once the LORD has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstreams of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. (Isaiah 4:3-4)

Based on these passages, there is substantial evidence to conclude that John's ministry also included a semi-present aspect. Just as Jesus took the defeat of Satan, an event reserved for the future eschaton, and declared it to be a present reality, John transforms an eschatological act, the cleansing of sin with water, into a present reality through the rite of baptism. By claiming that his baptism cleansed a person from moral as well as physical contagion, John was taking a role that was reserved for Yahweh at the eschaton and making it semi-present. Baptism separated Israel into the unrepentant who would receive punishment and the repentant who would receive restoration. Thus, baptism had also already begun to form the divisions that would occur with the coming kingdom, when the chaff would be separated from the wheat. Yet, at the same time, John still looked to the future as Jesus did. His baptism may have marked off those destined for restoration but he still awaited the Coming One who would actually gather the elect and punish the unrepentant.

The above conclusion was by no means a major aspect of John's self-understanding. Yet, it cannot be denied that John's ministry did more than just symbolize the greater ministry of the Coming One, it actually began to produce effects that were originally reserved for the end times.

While Jesus seems to have taken this semi-presence of the kingdom to a much more explicit degree than John, the distinction between John's imminence and Jesus' semi-presence declared by Theissen is not as clear cut as he would suggest. If John's baptism is to be interpreted as anything more than a symbolic prophetic act, we must allow for a degree of semi-presence in John's ministry.

3.4. The One Who is to Come

Another important facet of both John and Jesus' preaching is the expectation of a restoration figure. John spoke of a mysterious figure devoid of any real specific titles simply known as the "coming one" (ἐρχόμενος) or "the stronger one" (ισχυρότερος). While later Christian interpretation believes this figure to be Jesus (John 1:30-31), Matthew 11:2-6, one of our only passages that seems to record historically accurate information about John's opinion of Jesus (see below), makes it clear John did not consider Jesus to be this figure. The debate instead focuses on whether John's figure was Yahweh himself or an intermediary figure. Those who argue that the Coming One was an intermediary figure rely heavily on the language of John's preaching to prove the figure could not be Yahweh. They claim that as a good Jew, John would not have dared to compare himself to God, even if only to affirm His superiority. Also, the references to the figure wearing sandals create an inappropriate image for God himself. And, "the periscope about John's question to Jesus, 'Are you the one to come...?', (Matt. 11.2ff) presupposes an intermediary figure who is active on earth."⁸⁵

Those who argue that the figure is none other than Yahweh himself also put forward several positive points to support their claim. Theissen has summarized them in the following way:

⁸⁵Theissen (1998), 202.

-God is already implied as judge in Matt. 3.7-10 Q. In Matt. 3.12 Q the possessive pronoun ('his threshing floor,' 'his wheat'; Luke 'his barns') can only refer to God. ὁ ἰσχυρότερος (the stronger one) is a divine name which is frequent in the LXX, and what the stronger one does is traditionally God's work. Isa 27.12ff.; Jer. 13.24; 15.7; Mal. 3.19.

-The baptism by fire by the stronger one, which is sometimes the only feature to be regarded as original, must refer back to the fiery judgment to be performed in 3.10 (by God).

-The eschatological baptism with holy spirit- if it is regarded as original and not a Christian addition- has models in the Old Testament and in contemporary Jewish literature only in God's eschatological action (Ezek. 36.25-27; Joel 3.1-5; Jub. 1.23; 1QS IV, 21).⁸⁶

In addition, John H. Hughes has criticized the sandal argument citing that metaphorical language about God's sandals appears in Psalm 60:8 and 108:9, "Moab is my washbasin, upon Edom I toss my sandal; over Philistia I shout in triumph." He also finds fault with the argument that John would not have compared himself to God stating, "It is entirely possible that John would have made a humble comparison, or rather contrast, between himself and God in order to reinforce the substantial difference between his own water baptism and God's baptism with holy spirit and fire."⁸⁷ What are we to make of these arguments since both sides make compelling points?

Theissen himself remains open to both possibilities. But fortunately, J.P. Meier makes several observations about John's preaching that seem to tip the scales in favor of John preaching about some kind of intermediary figure.⁸⁸

Despite Hughes' protest, Meier seems correct in stating that if John's figure was God, the need to point out that He was stronger than John is puzzling. But the real nail in the coffin for Hughes and the others comes from a surprisingly simple observation. "For John to use 'the one stronger than I' as a veiled name for the God he has directly and plainly referred to just a few

⁸⁶ Ibid, 201.

⁸⁷ Hughes (1972), 196.

⁸⁸ Meier (2001), 33-34.

verses ago (at least in the Q material in Matt. 3:9 par.) seems downright silly.”⁸⁹ Meier’s argument appears to be gradually gaining momentum as the final word on this issue. Even scholars who ultimately disagree with him are forced to address his previous point. Ernst Haenchen, for example, is forced to conclude that the “than I” is an interpolation.⁹⁰ However, since this passage is free from later church theology, such as the blatant equalization of Jesus with this figure, Haenchen’s claim seems unlikely.

Unfortunately, while it may at last seem that scholars are coming to a consensus that John declared the coming of an intermediary figure, the exact identification of this figure remains elusive. Contemporary Jewish restoration passages at this time refer to the priestly messiah, the royal messiah, the archangel Michael, Melchizedek, and the son of Man.⁹¹ Fortunately, it is not imperative to our present discussion to determine the exact identity of John’s expected figure. It is enough to say for now that he preached about a figure that was not God himself, such a conclusion opens up the possibility that Jesus spoke of a similar figure or perhaps even envisaged himself as taking on a similar role.

That Jesus spoke of a figure that would come in the future to restore and judge, known as the “Son of Man”, is accepted by many scholars.⁹² This enigmatic figure is responsible for carrying out several of the same roles as John’s Coming One. Like the Coming One who will be, “gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire,” (Matt. 3:12) the Son of Man will, “send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of

⁸⁹ Ibid 34.

⁹⁰ Ibid..

⁹¹ For a discussion of these figures see Webb (1991), 254-258, 284-288.

⁹² Cf. Theissen (1998), 541-556.

their Father” (Matt 13:41-43). The similarities are striking, both figures are responsible for punishing the evil and gathering up the righteous, albeit the Son Of Man uses the angels to do the actual separation.

Like John, Jesus also saw his ministry as specially connected to this coming figure, stating, “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels (Mark 8:38).

3.5. Methods of Entry into the Kingdom

This particular saying reflects the fundamental difference between Jesus and John. We will now examine a question that logically flows out of our discussion on John and Jesus’ eschatology. We have looked at how John and Jesus envisaged the kingdom’s coming but have not yet discussed in depth who would be included in that kingdom and how. Without applying modern notions of Christian salvation, the question is how did someone “get saved”? It appears that John believed that baptism was the determining factor in saving a person from God’s wrath but Jesus indicates that it was obedience to him and his teaching.

We have already seen that John’s message of repentance and baptism was particularly attractive to social classes that considered themselves exceedingly sinful, like tax collectors and soldiers. Jesus’ offer of salvation also showed a similar appeal to sinners and social outcasts. Like John, who declared that the Pharisees and Sadducees presumption of righteousness was false, Jesus also believed that it was only those who realized their need for forgiveness that would be included in the coming kingdom. This is evident in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

A similar sentiment is expressed in Luke 5:31-32, when questioned why he associates with sinners, Jesus states, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” The parables of the merciless creditor and the prodigal son also reveal, “God’s unconditional readiness to forgive” (Matt. 18:23-35, Lk. 15:11-32).⁹³ The prodigal son has but to return to his father and he is not only forgiven but rewarded, the king’s servants have but to ask and they receive an extension to pay off their debts. Thus, unlike John, it would appear that Jesus only required a repentant heart for salvation. But Jesus does share with John the need to make one’s repentance effective through good deeds. It is perhaps proper to summarize their difference as ritual repentance versus ethical repentance.

We have already noted above that the parable of the weeds reveals that Jesus believed there was a delay before John’s announced judgment would come, allowing people time to prove their repentance through good deeds, rather than baptism. Contrary to Pauline Christianity, it does not appear that Jesus ever promised entrance in the coming kingdom through a belief in his death or resurrection. In fact our earliest gospel, Mark, gives a view that is quite contrary to this view. Mark 10:17-22 reveals this quite clearly and is likely authentic since its view of salvation is contrary to the early church’s view belief that salvation came through the atonement of Christ at the cross, it reads:

⁹³ Theissen (1998), 272.

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’” “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

The fact that the rich man’s question is regarding eternal life rather than entrance into the coming kingdom should give us pause but Jesus’ comment on the encounter in the next verse, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!,” makes it clear that the two are synonymous here. The passage seems to indicate that Jesus held a view not unlike the Jews of his time with which he is often contrasted; justification came from obedience to the Torah. But Jesus also requires the man to follow him and here lies the uniqueness of Jesus’ message of inclusion into the kingdom. Jesus believed that fellowship with him was required to be given entrance into the kingdom. Recent scholarship agrees that Jesus’ eating with sinners particularly reveals this.⁹⁴ Since Jesus spoke of the coming kingdom in terms of a banquet (Matt. 8:11, Lk 14.15-23), his dining with sinners is a symbolic guarantee that they would be included. Traditional repentance involved a confession of sin followed by a sacrifice that was overseen by the priesthood (cf. Lev. 6:1-6, Num. 5:5-10). We find no indication that Jesus believed a person had to follow this traditional route to be forgiven and therefore gain entry into the coming kingdom. As E.P. Sanders’ states, “...the novelty of Jesus’ message was that the wicked who heeded him would be included in the kingdom even though they did not repent as it was universally understood- that is even though they did not make restitution, sacrifice, and turn to obedience to the law.”⁹⁵ That is not to say that Jesus did not make ethical demands on his followers but like John it seems that the main

⁹⁴ Cf. Sanders (1985), 208.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 207.

transformation from sinner to future kingdom-dweller occurred independent of them; the call to live a moral life was expected after forgiveness but was not required to gain it. Both John and Jesus offered a means of forgiveness that circumnavigated the methods of traditional repentance centered on the temple cult in Jerusalem.

Summary and Conclusion

Thus, the following picture emerges regarding the relationship between Jesus and John. John appeared in the wilderness, as the Gospels report, proclaiming the imminent judgment of God and the necessity to repent, be baptized and bear fruits of repentance. Jesus, perhaps burdened by some sense of guilt, became convinced that he too, needed to be baptized by John to avoid the coming judgment. Such was the appeal of John's message and perhaps also the fact that Jesus felt righteous in God's eyes after the baptism, that he stayed with John as one of his disciples and became versed in John's form of apocalypticism. However, at some point Jesus decided to split with John and he began forming his own group that continued baptizing at first. When the restoration and judgment that John spoke of did not arrive imminently and John had been arrested, Jesus began to seriously doubt some elements of John's preaching. He came to believe that God had postponed the end in order to allow more people to repent, highlighting his kindness and mercy. In addition, Jesus' unique ability to perform miracles and exorcisms also forced him to grapple with his self-realization. He came to acknowledge that they were a sign that evil had already been conquered and that he played a pivotal role in the coming kingdom, declaring that fellowship and obedience to him, not baptism would guarantee a right standing with God, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (Mk 8:38).

What are the implications of this emerging picture? First, this scenario presents a problem to modern day Christians who hold a high Christological view of Jesus. That Jesus was once a disciple of John is perhaps not terribly damaging and I assume that since the gospels have reinterpreted John as simply being an announcer of Jesus' coming they would have no problem

with him beginning his career under his wing. But the fact that Jesus began his career like John's and then changed his mind poses a serious theological problem. Already by the time Luke wrote his gospel, editorial changes had been made to remove any uncertainty or doubt from Jesus' mind about his mission, for example his altering of Jesus' final words from "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) into, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk. 23:46). If Jesus was once a follower of John who felt some kind of call to proclaim a new message, he begins to look more like a prophet than God himself. Surely if God was born into this world as Jesus, he would not have changed his mind about such issues as how one entered his own kingdom! If my thesis proves correct, it would merely serve as another voice among many in the field of historical Jesus research that slowly undermines the divinity of Christ (though this is by no means my intent).

As for the scholarly community, this thesis is by no means unique and has been accepted by notable names like E.P. Sanders, Geird Theissen, and J.P. Meier. However, I have yet to see an in depth discussion of how this disciple-teacher relationship plays out later in Jesus' life except in Theissen's *The Historical Jesus*, and even there I have not always accepted his analysis, most notably his clear distinction between John's imminent kingdom and Jesus' semi-present one.

Frustratingly, there is perhaps too little evidence about John to ever prove without a doubt that Jesus was his disciple but there are simply too many connections between the two figures and far too many editorial changes to John's portrayal to dismiss their attention as simply a product of John's contemporary popularity. The debate is worth continuing; if we can discover Jesus' teacher we are significantly closer to understanding this enigmatic figure. In the words of

the man himself, “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master” (Matt. 10:24).

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