CHAPTER TWO

SPECULATION ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST

Luke 3.15 f. / John 1.19, 27

The earliest similarity between passages in the two gospels occurs in connection with the material they offer on John the Baptist. Luke recounts (3.15 f.) that the crowd wondered if John were the Christ, and John by way of answer spoke of the mightier one coming after him, the thongs of whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. The fourth gospel narrates (1.19 f.) that the Jews sent priests and Levites to John to ask him who he was, whereupon he answered that he wasn’t the Christ, and seven verses later referred to one coming after him whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. Moreover, in Acts (13.25) Paul, in the course of a speech in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, refers to John’s having said “I am not he whom you take me to be; but lo after me comes one whose sandals I am not worthy to untie”. There are no verbal similarities between Luke and John here except as regards the statement about the shoes of the coming one; that, however, is found in the identical form in Mark and very likely also in Q (cf. Lk. 3.7-9, 16b-17 and Mt. 3.7-12), so does not constitute a special Lucan-Johannine element. What does constitute such an element is the connection of this statement with mention of speculation by the Jews as to who John was. In Luke’s case the notice about such speculation, and therefore the connection between it and John’s subsequent declaration, originated with the evangelist.¹ Luke in 3.7-9, 16 f. utilized a block of Q material, into which he inserted 3.10-14 (drawn by him from oral tradition); the resulting unevenness between the insertion and John’s statement about the coming one he removed by means of an introduction to the latter which he composed (v. 15);² moreover, he employed

² Rengstorf, Das Evangelium des Lukas, ad loc., attributes 3.15 to a running Palestinian source which, following Schlatter, op. cit., pp. 463-476,
the same combination of speculation and disclaimer elsewhere, in Acts 13. 25.

As for the fourth evangelist, though he knew Luke's gospel, the differences between him and Luke at this point are too great to postulate his dependence on Luke; further, the theme of the Baptist's witness to Jesus, of which his rejection of messianic pretentions forms a part, plays too important a rôle in John¹ for one to be justified in seeing John as deriving the latter from a source; rather v. 19 was composed by him to provide a setting in which the Baptist, in the following verses, could define his position. ²

It is possible that he mentioned Levites as among the questioners sent by the Jews because of their authority as regards matters of purification, which were here involved because of the question about baptism (v. 25); ³ at any event "priests and Levites" was a stock phrase coming readily to mind. ⁴ That is not to say that there was no speculation on the part of the Jews as to who John was, and specifically whether he was the messiah. Quite the contrary—historical fact lies at the root of the tradition which Luke and John, acting independently of one another, here bring. But this tradition had not already been written down. The evangelists, finding it as part of the oral tradition, and unconnected with the Baptist's statement about the mightier one following him, in joining it to the latter wrote it down for the first time. ⁵ As to where the two

---

¹ Indeed Oscar Cullmann, in "L'opposition contre le Temple de Jerusalem motif commune de la theologie johannique et du monde amiant," a paper read in September 1958 at the meeting of the Society of New Testament Studies in Strasbourg, maintains, partly on the basis of the evangelist's interest in the Baptist and in limiting his position to one of witness to Christ, that the fourth evangelist was an ex-disciple of the Baptist.

² So Kraeling, John the Baptist, p. 180, Barrett, op. cit., ad loc., Dibelius, op. cit., p. 102, Bultmann, Das Evangelium des Johannes, ad loc.

³ So Bultmann, op. cit., ad loc.

⁴ Cf. its use in the latter portions of the Old Testament, e.g. I Kings 8. 4, Ezra 1. 5, 2. 70, 3. 8, 1 Chron 28. 21, 2 Chron. 5. 5, 8. 15, 11. 13, 13. 9 f., 23. 4.

⁵ It is not possible here to compare the whole body of material which Luke brings on the Baptist with that John brings, for that belongs in the domain of a comparison of their theologies, which is beyond the scope of the