ECHOES FROM THE WILDERNESS:
THE HISTORICAL JOHN THE BAPTIST*

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The prime mover of the Jesus movement was the baptizer John. Jesus himself ascribed the initiative in the drama to him and contemporary observers shared this view.¹ Thus, the Baptist is, in the strict sense of the word, ἀρχὴ τοῦ Εὐαγγελίου. The cultural memory of the early Christians is surprisingly convergent at this point: Q, the synoptics, and the Fourth Gospel place the Baptist at the narrative pole position; Acts raises John’s baptism to the state of an official starting point of the apostolic era (1:22, cf. 10:37), and in Christian self-understanding John becomes a principal character on all the stages between birth (Luke 1; Prot. Jas. 22–24) and death (Mark 6:17–29), pre-existence (Pistis Sophia 1:7) and descent (Gos. Nic. 18:2) of Christ.

Looking for the historical John the Baptist, therefore, we engage in the archaeology of Christianity. Archaeological facts lie on firm ground and many a Jesus researcher hears the spade crunching when it strikes historical stone. But however hard archaeological facts may be, without documentary evidence they are less than clear-cut. The documentary evidence we have on John the Baptist is to a great extent part of the Christian drama script. In order to understand the first layer we have to set aside this drama without giving up those fragmentary structures that may guide our excavation.

Archaeology does not uncover characters, but problematic finds. Starting from an outline of modes and methods of Baptist research I shall inspect the site with its most intriguing problems, trying to trace who he was that moved on the first layer.

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1. Baptist Research: Modes and Methods

1.1. A Short History of Research

What Reimarus says on the relationship between the “cousins” John and Jesus may be applied to the respective fields of research: Consanguineous as they were, they knew and supported each other, they began just at the same time and showed the same language and purpose. As a matter of fact, Baptist research often served as a forerunner of the Jesus quest and prepared its tortuous paths.

In the very beginning of Leben-Jesu-Forschung, H. S. Reimarus (1694–1768) considered John the proton pseudos of Christianity for it was in seditious machinations that he prepared the public way for the Messiah Jesus, who, in due return, introduced him as (his!) prophet to the people. The early novel-like Lives of Jesus (C. F. Bahrdt, K. H. Venturini)—books so weirdly undead because their reanimated corpses reappear again and again in the guise of bestsellers—saw John under the influence and instruction of the mysterious order of the Essenes, which explained whatever had appeared unexplainable before. David Friedrich Strauß’s (1808–1874) recourse to the category of myth was an important step forward in historical insight. Excluding the Fourth Gospel from his reconstruction and making use of Josephus’s account, he saw John in his own right, not coloured in “mythical light.” As far as Jesus’ relationship to John is concerned, Strauß laid the foundation of what still dominates exegetical minds: Jesus was baptized by John, lived perhaps as his disciple in his narrower circle for some time, and

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