John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel

Clare K. Rothschild

1 Introduction

This paper analyzes the depiction of John the Baptist (hereafter: JB) in the Gospel of John. Scholars such as Wilhelm Baldensperger and Raymond Brown have inferred several dialectical engagements between John's Gospel and late...
first- and early second-century followers of the Baptist. Since all four NT Gospels feature JB at the beginning of Jesus's ministry, it seems reasonable to infer that JB was accepted as a favorable, possibly even flattering, association for Jesus. The evangelists would not be expected to include, let alone begin their works with, a figure who dulled, checked, or stifled the subsequent narration of Jesus. That said, the association with JB has certain undeniably negative implications. In Matthew and Mark, for example, JB's ministry is prior to Jesus's ministry and JB baptizes Jesus, indicating Jesus's inferior position as JB's student. In Luke, JB is Jesus's older cousin. Gospel portraits of JB are, thus, inherently contradictory. To be sure, JB's statements in all four Gospels explicitly qualify his life and ministry as inferior to Jesus's. Based on the observable contradictions, however, these claims only heighten suspicions of special pleading. The expectation of an appearance of Elijah prior to the Messiah is not sufficient to explain why JB is not simply left out of the Gospel narratives. Was JB's endorsement of Jesus unavoidable, otherwise compelling, or both? If Markan Priority is trustworthy, should the earliest evangelist bear the burden for JB's inclusion, later evangelists simply doing their best with what they were given? Returning to Raymond Brown's proposal, what internal or external circumstances—ostensibly vital to each of the different evangelists—might have compelled the first or all of the Gospel writers to begin with JB?

Not all of the possible questions concerning JB's NT portraits will be attempted in the scope of this paper. Rather, the present discussion addresses how Baptist traditions serve the agenda of the Fourth Gospel (hereafter: 4G) exclusively. The essay first presents the Johannine portrait of JB, emphasizing where it is similar to and different from the Synoptic portraits, after which it tests the hypothesis that JB's portrait in the 4G deliberately duplicates, omits, supplements, adapts, and corrects Synoptic Baptist traditions in order to

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3 Elizabeth is referred to as Mary’s συγγενίς “kinswoman” in Luke 1:36.

4 Since the four Gospels, each in different ways, feature numerous reversals (e.g., reversal of the superiority of prior to latter), it is possible to ask whether JB's self-deprecating remarks are not in fact meant to be interpreted as competing with Jesus for inferiority (i.e., false humility).