“De Baptista nil nisi bonum”
John the Baptist as a Paradigm for Mission

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Abstract
This paper considers how John the Baptist may function as a model of mission. The preaching, behaviour and praxis of Jesus and the Baptist are compared, and the results show that there are significant similarities between all three aspects of their depictions across the Gospel traditions. The major difference arises in the subordination of the Baptist to Jesus. The commonalities between the two are further seen in the praxis of the disciples of Jesus. This in turn suggests that the Baptist and the disciples share a common task: to proclaim the repentance which is effected by Jesus alone. A final section suggests how their proclamation of Jesus might be translated into the author’s contemporary context.

Keywords
John the Baptist, Christology, Mission, Eschatology, Discipleship

Introduction
In the Gospel according to St. Mark, the death of John the Baptist is recorded in chapter 6, immediately following remarks about the mission of the Twelve (Mark 6:7–13). His death is thus placed in the context of the mission of the disciples, and perhaps even serves as a warning to them (Moloney 2002: 128). But, we might ask, a warning of what? The quick answer: their mission like the Baptist’s may lead them to death. A longer answer reveals wider

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characteristics of his work and mission than his immediate antagonism of Herodias which may be relevant to Christians in their work and mission. Indeed, the Matthean version pointedly makes the Baptist a parallel figure to Jesus, whilst stressing his unworthiness and inferiority (Meier 1980: 386–7, 389–90, 398, 400–1 and 404). With that there comes a warning that they may share the Baptist’s fate, and a chance that the reasons they might share his fate may also be held in common. Thus we need to address two issues: the parallels between Jesus and the Baptist, and the reasons for stressing the inferiority of the Baptist. Before addressing these, we need however, to consider further the ways in which the narratives suggest that the two men are linked.

The Fate of the Baptist: Immediate Causes

The account in Mark 6 gives an immediate reason for the Baptist’s death. He has offended Herodias, and more specifically, criticised her marriage to Herod when she had previously been married to his brother Philip. The tale that follows reveals that the Baptist has received a degree of protection from Herod himself, but this eventually is not enough to protect him from Herodias. The Baptist is eventually killed because Herod acquiesces to Herodias’ demands mediated by Salome. There is an irony here: Herod, according to the conventions of shame and honour of his society, is portrayed as an object of ridicule by the way in which the two women manipulate him. Strictly they should not be involved in the political realm, and should not influence the king as they do (cf. Neyrey 1998: 30–2, 87–8, 176–77, 212–14). The Baptist is not subject to the same ridicule because the honour system would, for him, see the status of the women embedded in the status of Herod (Malina 2002: 6). Matthew’s account of the story retains the key details given by Mark, but Luke does not go into the reasons for the Baptist’s death, preferring to concentrate on the confusion caused by the early mission of the church, thinking it to be some reappearance of the Baptist. We might refer to the Baptist redivivus (van Ek 2008: 271), in the manner in which Nero was considered to have returned from the grave (Bauckham 1993: 406–31), noting that the returned character is variously reported as the Baptist, Elijah or a prophet (Luke 9:7–9). The politics give an immediate reason for his death, but others may be found in the way that the evangelists have ordered their work.
The Baptist’s Death in Narrative Context

It is worth noting that Luke retains the order of Mark, placing this activity of the supposed returnee after the Mission of the Twelve (Luke 9:1–6). Thus in both Mark and Luke there would appear to be sufficient grounds for suggesting that the characteristics of the Baptist’s mission and that of the Twelve are close enough for them to be indentified with each other. This allows us to see some value in looking at the Baptist as a paradigm for Christian mission. To the question of whether the mission of the Twelve shares characteristics with the mission of Jesus himself, we answer that the dominant features of their work are, in both accounts, activities already practised by Jesus.

Let us consider those same activities of Jesus which Mark and Luke describe before this point and compare them with the Mission of the Twelve. Mark has the disciples preach repentance, cast out demons and heal the sick (6:13), which may be compared to Jesus’ activities (Mark 1:21–28; 29–34; 40–5, 2:1–12; 14–17, 3:1–6; 22, 5:1–20; 21–43). Two qualifications should be made. First, in Mark 1:14–17 the evangelist does not use the word “repent”, this is found in the Lukan version of the account: there appears to be an overlap between “forgiving sins” and “repentance”. Second, the charge that Jesus cast out demons by Beelzebul in Mark 3:22 implies that he had been witnessed performing such actions. Luke uses his own vocabulary: the disciples share the good news and cure diseases (9:6). Again, Jesus has already been portrayed as engaging in these selfsame activities (Luke 4:16–21; 38–41; 43–4, 5:12–14; 17–26; 30–2, 6:6–10; 18; 7:1–10;11–17;36–50, 8:1–2; 26–39; 40–56). In both gospel accounts, the continuity between what Jesus does and what the disciples are sent to do is surely beyond dispute.

Matthew does not place the death of the Baptist beside the Mission of the Twelve, but appears to offer a different link between the Baptist and Jesus: rejection (Meier 1980: 398). In his account, the death of the Baptist is not preceded by the Mission of the Twelve, but by the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (Matthew 13:54–58). This pericope precedes the Mission of the Twelve in Mark (6:1–6): it is possible that Mark has both themes in mind. Both the Baptist and Jesus are rejected and become examples of a phenomenon which Matthew further anticipates with a series of parables and explanation of their use (13:1–53). Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth ostensibly takes place despite the recognition of his wisdom (Matthew 13:54). The parables, although geographically separated from the story of his rejection (i.e., he does not preach them in his hometown, cf. Matthew 13:54), no doubt represent or
exemplify his wisdom. The narrative trail in Matthew’s Gospel suggests that both Jesus and the Baptist are rejected in spite of their wisdom: the Baptist’s death anticipates the death of Jesus, inasmuch as the reason for their deaths is their rejection.

The Lukan account further makes the Baptist’s death a foreshadowing of that of Jesus by drawing Herod into the account of both men’s deaths (Luke 9:9; 22:6–12); for the historicity of Jesus before Herod, see Fitzmyer 1985: 1478–80). Thus, in Luke, there is an explicit parallel between the two deaths, in which Herod is viewed as involved in both. Guaranteed, the details are different, particularly in regard to the roles of women: Salome and Herodias influence Herod to kill the Baptist, whereas the death of Jesus is purely in the hands of men. Yet, just as the Baptist’s death makes Herod an object of ridicule controlled by the women (above), the accounts of Pilate portray him as a theoretically powerful man who is really weaker than he appears. Whilst it is always possible that the Lukan account is diminishing the role of Pilate in Jesus’ death for apologetic purposes (Fitzmyer 1985: 1474; Marshall 1978, 852), the accidental effect is to show him as not completely in control, but influenced by Herod, the chief priests and the crowds (Luke 23:5, 6–12, 16, 22–4), and eventually unable to free Jesus, but condemning him to death. In both stories, the lack of power exercised by those holding authority stands in stark contrast to the political weakness, but power in terms of status and honour, held by their victims. The final significance of Herod and his part in the Baptist’s death reaches its climax with the placing of the Baptist’s body in a tomb (Mark 6:29 – mnēmeion- lit. “a place of memory”), which foreshadows the empty tomb at the end of the gospel (Mark 16:5) and the resurrection of John the Baptist in Jesus Christ” (Van Ek 2008: 273).

Thus the final stages of the gospel narrative see the Baptist subsumed into Jesus. But the Lukan story does not finish there: consider Acts 12. Herod appears again in the narrative: he initiates a persecution of the church (12:1), killing James (12:2) and putting Peter in prison (12:3). Unlike the story of the Baptist where imprisonment ends in death (Luke 3:20; 9:7), Peter’s captivity ends in freedom. Not only that, but the story of deliverance is followed immediately by the account of Herod’s death (Acts 12:20–24), ostensibly on the grounds that he had not given glory to God. The story has come full circle. The persecutor has become the victim, and the victim, through Jesus, the victor.

So far we may note that shared activities and rejection may link the practice of the Baptist with that of the Twelve, and, by extension, that of Jesus. A detailed examination will reveal more links. Four in particular spring to mind: birth narratives, preaching, behaviour and healing.
Birth Stories

Strictly speaking, the extended parallel between the births of Jesus and the Baptist is found only in Luke, particularly in Chapter 1. We do not need to rehearse the structural parallels at length, save to say that both the announcement (1:5–56) and the birth (1:57–2:52) narratives share deep similarities, particularly in the announcements (Fitzmyer 1985: 314–5). The parallelism is not equal: Jesus always comes off slightly better (Fitzmyer 1985: 315).

John’s gospel, without using narratives, makes a similar point in the Prologue. The Baptist is primarily depicted as a witness, but not the light (1:6–9, 15). He is sent from God (John 1:6), but unlike Jesus is neither “with God” nor “God” (theios – 1:1). The prologue further may deny claims that the Baptist, as the first to be seen to exercise a ministry, was the superior (Brown 1988:35).

These accounts, in different ways, set the scene for the fuller depictions that follow. The Baptist is never slandered, and is always an object of respect. He is greater than a prophet even if he is not of the Kingdom. Both men are credited as agents of salvation whose origins stem from God himself (Fitzmyer 1985: 315). Right from the beginning, we are drawn to parallels, but also differences.

Preaching

When we compare the preaching of the Baptist and Jesus we find an immediate similarity in those to whom they both preach. In John, the Baptist and Jesus both engage with Galilean fisherman: this much is implied by John 1:35–42 which describes Andrew going from the company of the Baptist to that of Jesus and encouraging Peter to follow him. Two collections of chreiai (Hock & O’Neil 1986; Sanders & Davies 1989:146–8) or apophthegmata (Bultmann 1963:60) illustrate the preaching of the Baptist (Luke 3:7–14; Matthew 3:7–12). The Lukan selection shows common ground between Jesus and the Baptist which differs from Pharisaic and Essene practice, in which the sectarians appear rather to withdraw from the company of people like soldiers and tax-collectors, rather than preach to them (O’Collins 2008: 26). The Matthean account shows him in conflict with the Pharisees and Sadducees (placed together in an unlikely combination): these will also oppose Jesus (Meier 1980: 390). Not only are the hearers similar in character, but so is the advice given, particularly if we consider Jesus’ parables in relation to the Baptist’s chreiai. The Baptist’s advice to tax-collectors is mirrored by the
parable of the “Shrewd Manager” (Luke 16:1–12 – see Ukpong 1996 for this title for the parable) and the example of Zaccheus (Luke 19:1–10). In fact, the parallelism is even stronger than that, manifesting itself in the same words and phrases being placed on the lips of the Baptist and Jesus: “brood of vipers” (Matt 3:7; 12:24; 23:33), and “every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt 3:10; 7:9 – see Meier 1980: 390).

Both preach a message which demands a change in behaviour – a sociopolitical as well as eschatological transformation – and both preach it to those who need to reform their behaviour.

When the Baptist is condemned to death, it is (in Luke) as a result of his preaching against those who hold power and authority – a feature echoed by the Matthean account which sees him preach against the Sadducees and Pharisees. There is a parallel here to the fate of Jesus whose antagonism of the powers that be, however precisely defined, similarly leads to death. There is an additional warning. Both Jesus and the Baptist appear to have had support from a sizeable proportion of the populace: their fate sends a dual warning that such popularity is not able to protect the prophet from the powerful. The followers of Jesus should take note.

However, it may be argued that there are significant differences in the content of their preaching. Thus John F. Baggett suggests there is a great contrast, seen particularly in the content of the message (the Baptist’s gloom, vs. Jesus’ hope), timing (the Baptist’s futurist eschatology in contrast to Jesus’ realised version), generosity (on the part of Jesus as opposed to the Baptist’s stress on punishment and wrath) and lifestyle (the Baptist’s asceticism and Jesus’ joie de vivre – 2008: 63–8). Such an analysis would deny a precise similarity of the Baptist and Jesus were it not open to criticism on a number of points. First, we may query whether Jesus’ message is as distinct from the Baptist’s as Baggett claims. After all, the language used by Jesus in his parables of the Kingdom does not shy away from descriptions of wrath, judgment or even apocalyptic gloom. Jesus’ preaching is not without its apocalyptic elements, and it must not automatically be assumed that such statements are held literally rather than being literary or rhetorical tropes. Note that, according to Matthew, “weeping and grinding of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30) is a favoured term used by Jesus, and may signify any of self-reproach, rage, fear or anger (Hagner 1993: 206). Note that Hagner does not raise the possibility that this phrase may be a mark of Matthean redaction given that it does not occur in parallel passages in the other gospels. This need not affect the argument here: if it is a Matthean phrase on the lips of Jesus, it may well be a Matthean phrase on the lips of the Baptist, too. The phrase may also be a
“hyperbole” or “prophetic threat” which does not describe a literal damnation, but rather a “prospect demanding repentance” (Davies & Allison 1991: 31). A further example occurs in Matthew 13:30 where the weeds of the parable are to be burned in fire. Again, this is not taken literally as Jesus’ preferred opinion: it is a literary motif, frequently used in Judaism and further elaborated using apocalyptic conventions (13:36–43), or even predominantly an editorial redaction by Matthew (Hagner 1993: 384, 392–5). Whichever of these positions we consider viable, there is no doubt these statements are not taken simply at face value. If we exercise caution in seeing such statements function literally on the lips of Jesus, a similar care may be needed in interpreting them on the lips of the Baptist, not least because the portrayals of both personalities are circumscribed by the interpretive plots of the evangelists and a shared editorial hand.

The crude distinction of timing does not do justice to the real consideration that Jesus’ teaching includes both realised and futurist elements—a fact admitted by Baggett’s own distinction of the arrival of the Kingdom and the Day of the Lord in Jesus’ teaching (2008: 67–8, 305–6; cf. Davies & Allison 1991: 426–7). It remains possible that the two events are not distinct, but may be understood as parts of a process (the coming of the Kingdom) which occurs in phases. “Now… but not yet…” is one way of explaining the phenomenon: both realised and futurist texts are found (Fitzmyer 1985:231–5). That these events may include a “split timing” is a possibility, as evidenced by Paul’s description of Christ as the first fruit of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:20). The same passage also suggests that the Day of the Lord and the Kingdom are linked, for the end time is when the Kingdom is handed over to God the Father (1 Cor 15:24). In this schema, the Kingdom is brought into the present, but still maintains a futurist element for its fulfillment (Conzelmann 1975: 270). In any case, the notion that the Kingdom has come fully must be resisted. This much is apparent from the brutal criticism of such thinking in 1 Cor 4:8:

There are deluded people who think that the Kingdom has come already, who believe that they are full and rich and reigning; Paul wishes they were right, for then he would be reigning too, and his troubles would be over (1 Cor 4:8; cf. 2 Tim 2:18). These people held exactly the same view of the Kingdom as did everyone else at the time; they differed only in their perception of the state of the world. (O’Neill 1993: 135)

Reflections like this raise major questions about Baggett’s understanding of when the Kingdom comes and its significance for distinguishing the preaching of Jesus and the Baptist.
Yet this strong eschatological flavour may also be considered a point of difference. In the Matthean account the healing activity of Jesus and his disciples puzzles the Baptist to the point that he sends his disciples to clarify Jesus’ identity. The question is raised because the works of Jesus do not square with the Baptist’s messianic expectations: a judge with a winnowing-fork surrounded by fire (Matthew 3:11–12). Jesus’ answer is that the Baptist should not, like the rest of Israel, abandon hope in him because he presents a novel Messiahship, removed from popular hopes and expectations (Meier 1980: 392–30).

**Behaviour**

At first sight, the idea that Jesus and the Baptist live similar lifestyles seems odd. The descriptions of the Baptist focus on his clothing (camel’s hair) and diet (locusts). At no point is Jesus described as sharing either this diet or dress (Mark 1:6; Matthew 2:4; cf. Matthew 11:18; Luke 7:33). On the contrary, Jesus appears more of a hedonist, upbraided for his eating and drinking (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). Are the Baptist’s asceticism and Jesus’ love of the good things in life necessarily signs of difference? We must first of all remember the contemporary reckoning of Jesus as the Baptist *redivivus* (Luke 9:7) which suggests that contemporary critics may have made this less of a distinction. We may venture a number of reasons for this. Firstly, it is possible that descriptions of Jesus as a glutton and a drunkard may not be historical, but rather examples of conventional literary tropes used in polemic: accusations of love of luxury and drunkenness are common criticisms of rival philosophies or schools in both Jewish and Greek literature (Johnson 1989: 431–2, 436, 440).

A classic example is Epicurus, from whom we get our “epicurean”, often wrongly presented as a hedonist. Diogenes Laertius records a summary of the “slanders” made against Epicurus of profligacy, licentiousness and immoderate language (*DL* X.3–8). In fact, Epicurus viewed attachments to luxury as source of pain or disorder, and counselled the value of an ascetic lifestyle. Diogenes Laertius also records a letter of Epicurus asking one of his friends for a gift of some cheese ‘so that I may eat in style when I wish’ (*DL* X.11).

Here we must raise the possibility that the pictures of both Jesus and the Baptist may either be historically accurate, literary creations, or stylised portraits. However, even “fictional” creations would give us a glimpse of the views of those engaged with the text either as writer or reader and their function as pieces of narrative. If there is an historical basis (either in actual event or the
construction of “fictional” theological portraits), we may note that, even then, divergent behaviours may stem from shared common assumptions (Barton 1983: 94–6). This may seem unclear, but we can see an example of how such dualism results in different behaviours. Some dualists became ascetics, others libertarian, but both found common ground in their view that the spiritual alone was good, and that the material was of little if any importance or value (Perrin & Duling 1982: 13). Both the asceticism of the Baptist and the joie de vivre of Jesus might be different expressions of shared assumptions about food and/or its value, and thus of purity. It is possible that both in some ways challenge conventional views of purity: the NT accounts of the Baptist’s diet (Mark 1:2–8; Matt. 3:1–6) do not address whether his consumption of locusts conforms to kashrut (laws of purity) in which there were questions about how locusts might be consumed (Kelhoffer 2004: 304–6, 308–10, 314). In conclusion, Baggett’s objections do not seem adequate to separate Jesus and the Baptist to the extent that he does.

Ed P. Sanders, by a different route, reached a similar conclusion:

The Gospels emphasize differences between John the Baptist and Jesus. They are presented as in some ways polar opposites. John was an ascetic (predicted in advance, Luke 1.15; cf Mark 1.6 and parr.; Matt. 11.18//Luke 7.33), and his mission was to separate the wheat from the chaff (Matt 3.12// Luke 3.17). He and his disciples fasted, while Jesus and his disciples did not (Mark 2.18f. and parr.). Jesus was known as ‘a wine-bibber and a glutton’ (Matt. 11.19 and parr.), and his mission was to include sinners (ibid.). While it is possible that these contrasts have been schematized, there is no particular argument to be brought against any of them, and they probably point to remembered differences between the two men who stood in close agreement on the main task. (Sanders 1985: 92)

Even if there are differences in details, these may be overstated and there is strong evidence to argue there are overlaps here as in the preaching of Jesus and the Baptist with their invitations to the marginalised, criticism of other sectarians usually considered righteous, strong eschatological flavour, and demands for changes in behaviour and lifestyle.

Healing

Healing does not appear immediately to be shared between the two groups. Nowhere is the Baptist presented as a healer, but he expects these things to happen (cf. Luke 7:22): John 10:41 makes clear that the Baptist and his followers did not perform miracles, and that these were not necessary activities to
be performed by religious leaders (O’Collins 2008: 77). Neither Jesus nor the disciples are presented primarily as baptisers, although this action is credited to them (John 3:22; 4:1–2). To the charge that Jesus did not baptise, two possible answers might be made: one a rereading of John 4:2 (O’Neill 1992: no pagination- based on the Syriac translation; see also Pryor 1997), the other that Jesus may forgive sins directly without recourse to the mediating ritual of baptism (see below). Thus, the ritual is an optional extra for him. The pickings for a connection between the actions of the Baptist and Jesus appear slight if focus is restricted to the actions and activities themselves. Yet there is common ground between the act of healing and the ritual of baptism, but to find this we need to compare not the actions themselves, but their significance. When this shift is made there is an immediate and obvious link which finds expression in the concept of “forgiveness of sins”.

The substance of repentance is shared by the Baptist and Jesus. What they share is described as “teshubah- repentance”: a Semitic understanding which demands a complete turning away from sin rather than some kind of regret (Crossley 2004: 139–41). This kind of repentance is visible in a number of traditions associated with the Baptist: Matthew 3:8–10 and Luke 3:8–9, which some would categorise as Q tradition, talk of bearing fruits worthy of repentance, and the Lukan tradition addresses financial exploitation (Luke 3:10–14– cf. Crossley 2004: 139–40). As we have seen above, the shared vocabulary links both men’s teaching and preaching about repentance (Matthew 3:10; 7:9). In the case of Jesus, “teshubah-repentance” is further seen in a number of passages: thus, Luke 13:1–9 (the Galileans, tower at Siloam, and parable of the fruitless tree), Matthew 7:15–20 (the fruitless tree), Mark 10:17–22 (the rich man called to sell all his possessions) and Luke 15 (particularly the return of the prodigal son). Sanders (1993: 234) has famously queried whether the parable of the Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:10–4; Luke 15: 3–7) is not more about the love of God than repentance. However, there is no need to choose whether the parable is about one or the other: they are not exclusive (Crossley 2004: 141, n.8). Thus we can identify a common background and content to “repentence” in the portrayals of the Baptist and Jesus.

The Baptist baptises as a call for repentance (Mark 1:4; Matthew 3:2; Luke 3:3) – and Jesus heals as a mark of his authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:1–12; Matthew 9:2–8; Luke 5:17–26). The disciples are called to heal and cure through their relationship to Jesus, and also to proclaim repentance (Matthew 10: 5–15; Mark 6:6–13; Luke 9:1–6). It does not seem unreasonable that these include repentance in at least some traditions, given Mark 6:12 and its inclusion of repentance, and the theme of judgment in Matthew 10:15. All
the traditions appear to expect some kind of ethical change as a sign of the good news being properly received. So, we find common ground: forgiveness of sins proclaimed by ritual (baptism) or by miracle. We might go further, and suggest that this is not just an ethical difference, but an eschatological one. Both believe in the importance of changes in behaviour, and neither advocates a purely futuristic eschatology removed from the cares and concerns of this world. Their eschatological outlooks share utopian (futurist), locative (realised) and ethical elements (cf. Perkins 1985: 59–60). To that extent, again, we note portrayals which would differentiate violently between the Baptist and Jesus are not well-founded on the evidence provided by the evangelists.

Not only this but both share a common determination and drive: their preaching of repentance is governed by a desire to preach what is right, to the point that both will be alienated and killed for their preaching. Yet, the Baptist at no point expresses any ulterior motive or hope, say, life after death or resurrection, which implies he will benefit from the path he treads. Similarly, Jesus, too, if he is not to be made an unwitting pawn in a chain of events which will ultimately lead to his death or constrained by a necessary series of events, exercises the choice of proclaiming the values of the Kingdom for no gain. Here we must note that many theories of the Atonement diminish Jesus’ role and choices, and imply that God is somehow constrained by necessity, so that Jesus has to die. These must raise the question: what kind of God is so enchained by necessity (cf. Brondos 2006: 7–9), and can such a God really remain God?

Secondly, we might ask what God might really gain from the events of the Passion: is it really possible to talk of God “gaining” anything from the whole process? Neither the Baptist (by his fate) nor Jesus (by nature) gains anything, or works from self-interest.

Yet there remains a qualitative difference—between Jesus as the Chosen One, and the Baptist and the disciples on the other hand as his followers:

Jesus’ practice set him off from John the Baptist… In his own name Jesus forgave sins against God, without prescribing baptism through which sinners could express repentance and seek for forgiveness from God. Jesus himself claimed, there and then to mediate such forgiveness of sin. (O’Collins 2008: 26. See also Meier 1980: 388–9)

The disciples, on the other hand, follow the pattern of the Baptist, proclaiming the forgiveness of sins which has been achieved through Jesus’ actions: Luke makes this a dominical imperative in the Commission which concludes his gospel (24:47). The essential difference is one of timing: where the
Baptist points forward, the disciples (and the church) point backwards and this indicates a further shared feature—Jewish eschatological expectation (Sanders 1985: 91).

Here, the Baptist may provide a further paradigm for the disciples. He is often described as pointing to Jesus, proclaiming or revealing him. However, caution is needed. While this is a major theme in the Johannine portrayal of the Baptist (e.g. Pryor 1997), we should not, strictly speaking, refer to “the Baptist” in the Johannine account: John never gives him this title, has him deny himself that he is Elijah (1:21), and portrays him solely as one who points to the Christ. Even the “baptism” of Jesus is primarily a revelatory episode: John does not connect the baptismal practice of John (the Baptist) with the remission of sins and does not mention the baptism of Jesus himself (Meier 1980: 385–6). The heavenly revelation of Jesus which occurs in John 1:32 at best implies a possible baptism, but does not mention it explicitly. Further the heavenly voice of John 12:28 is in no way connected to baptism.

Additionally, we must be careful not to make overly bold claims for the Baptist as one who points to Jesus based on the Synoptic traditions. In Mark, anonymity is the order: the Baptist is an “Elijah incognito” who never reveals Jesus as the Messiah (Meier 1980: 384). In Luke, verses 3:21–22 the identity of Jesus’ baptiser remains hidden and is not clearly connected to John the Baptist. Indeed, according to the flow of the narrative, the Baptist has already been arrested (3:20 – see Fitzmyer 1981: 476–7). Caution may be needed against assuming too readily that Jesus is baptised by the Baptist, even if this remains the predominant interpretation: “No significant voices are raised today against the historicity of Jesus’ baptism by John” (Marshall 1978: 150). The revealer of Jesus’ identity is not the Baptist, but the voice from heaven (3:22 – see further, Marshall 1978: 154).

Summary of the Parallel Stories

A comparison of the preaching, behaviour and praxis of Jesus and the Baptist suggests a number of points in common. Both proclaim a “teshubah—repentance” which demands a change in lifestyle. Both preach to the marginalised and challenge the righteous. Both talk of the end times, and differences in tone may not be as severe as some commentators have claimed, but rather result from the conventions of such preaching. That such differences are superficial is suggested by the idea that Jesus can be described as the Baptist redivivus: this implies a strong shared identity and degree of continuity. Their
behaviour, though superficially contradictory, is part of this identification. The major difference between them is their praxis: what the Baptist does by ritual, Jesus does by miracle. Jesus’ disciples perform both. All do so as a proclamation of the forgiveness of sins. The different actions reveal the varying roles all take. Jesus proclaims by ritual because he is the one who brings forgiveness; the Baptist’s rituals can only proclaim it, not deliver it. The actions of the disciples are a fusion of the two because they are not the agents, but proclaimers of a new order, given a specific mandate by the one who has the power to deliver forgiveness, to proclaim that same forgiveness in his name. The gospels and Acts describe them proclaiming this repentance by both miracle and ritual.

Whilst our study suggests that the similarities between Jesus and the Baptist are drawn from the gospel narratives, it is worth noting that they may originate with Jesus himself. Rowland raises this possibility with his suggestion that Luke 7:32 which describes both Jesus and the Baptist as children of wisdom is more likely to originate with Jesus than the Early Church, which would have been more likely to stress the difference between the two (2002: 132). Let us consider why this might have happened.

“Baptist’s” vs. “Christians”

On the basis of texts like Acts 18:24–19:7, it is easy to suggest why there might be a desire to make the Baptist appear subordinate to Jesus. The passage has been used as the basis for a hypothesis that there were disciples of the Baptist who placed their allegiance to him rather than Jesus: “It is generally thought that they were followers of John the Baptist who had maintained their identity but circulated in the Greek world.” (Brown 1988: lxvii–lxx). Indeed, the existence of such sectarians is a recurring point of discussion in consideration of the setting of John’s Gospel from the 18th century onwards (Ashton 1993:10; for the modern debate see, among others, Brodie 1993:12–14; Brown 1988: lxvii–lxx; McGrath 2001: 203–04). Advocates of such a view need to posit phenomena such as “mirror-reading” to support the existence of a group which would be prepared to proclaim the Baptist as “Messiah” or “Light” (McGrath 2001: 203). However a note of caution needs to be sounded, as, in Acts 18–19, they are described as only having received the baptism of John, and that need not imply the existence of a full-blown group of followers. Further, can such a group really be described as in competition with Jesus’ disciples? They do not resist, but readily agree, to the “fuller” baptismal theology of Paul, and
are baptised very quickly with no argument (Brodie 1993: 13–4, cf. Brown 1988, lxviii). This does not speak of a serious rivalry.

Accounts of the Baptist being exalted over Jesus are not found in the NT texts but in the third century Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions 1:60, and care needs to be taken not to retroject the claims of later groups back into the time period of the NT (Brown 1988: lxviii). That said, as Thomas L. Brodie notes, the Pseudo-Clementine writings shows that there might have been a theology of some kind under development (1993: 14). James McGrath would identify some kind of conflict as providing an origin for handling of such material in John, but is not to be drawn further on the details (2001:204).

Even if we cannot posit the definite existence of groups who were followers of the Baptist, we can pursue Brodie’s theological (as opposed to sociological) approach, and suggest the following.

The Baptist was obviously important and influential: we note records of his appearance not just in the gospels, but also in Josephus Antiquities 18.5.2., where he is described as virtuous, preaching righteousness and baptism, and put to death on the grounds that his movement has the potential to cause a rebellion. It would appear that the followers of Jesus might view the Baptist’s legacy or reputation as potential rivals and adopt a strategy in which the pre-eminence of Jesus is stressed. We note that this strategy always “accentuates the positive” and shows the superiority of Jesus: there is no place for polemic against the Baptist, perhaps because of Jesus’ own views (above). The evangelists practise what they preach in regard to the Baptist, and avoid criticism of him because of his popularity. To all intents and purposes, their recounting of the Baptist and his virtues more than echoes the answers given by the Jerusalem leadership (Mark 11:27–33; Matthew 21:23–27; Luke 20:1–8). We might neatly summarise their handling of the Baptist by a paraphrase of Chilon’s famous phrase: “about the Baptist, nothing unless it is good” (cf. DL I.70).

Their strategy ultimately has two different movements: the identification of Jesus as the Baptist redivivus and the resulting shift in emphasis that life belongs to Jesus, not the Baptist. Thus, the most influential feature in the portrayal of the two is in the redivivus motif in which Jesus effectively consumes the Baptist who has foreshadowed so much of his business.

Together with this comes a drawing of the similarities between the two men, but always with a subtle loading of emphasis in favour of Jesus. This can be seen in both the Johannine and Matthean accounts. Both portray him as more important than the Baptist. In John, it is always Jesus who is the focus of activity, and in Matthew, the Baptist is always subordinate to Jesus (Meier 1980: 390–1). Indeed, the Baptist is portrayed as admitting as much (Pryor
This subordination is not restricted to the gospels; it is found also in the interaction between the rituals associated with both. Thus in Acts 18:25 and 19:1–6 the “baptism of John” is obviously viewed as subordinate to the “baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus” (González 2001: 218–20; Haenchen 1982: 553, 555). Like the Baptist, the disciples are also depicted as subordinate to Jesus, and adopt models of service rather than hierarchy. This theme is reiterated in his teaching: dying to self (John 12:24–26), and not seeking hierarchical leadership or spiritual authority after the example of this world and other religious and political leaders (e.g., Mark 10:35–45; Matthew 20:20–8; Luke 24:24–27). Service provides a pattern of ministry which echoes the Baptist’s subordination to Jesus.

Application

At the beginning of this essay, there is a reference to an essay in de Wit and West’s African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue. This collection of essays contrasts the different trajectories and tendencies in European and African Biblical scholarship. A major divergence is the place given to application, appropriation or actualisation (the terms are synonymous) in the interpretive process. The case for including application is made by a number of contributors to that volume, but also is, I think, apparent in ancient ways of reading Scripture which include the practice known as ‘correspondence in history’, that is, the idea that the act of interpretation is not complete until the readers have applied the texts to their own situations (Snodgrass 1994: 37–8). This is a part of reading as old as our Scriptures themselves. Obeng neatly makes the same case with his remarks that Revelation has not been read fully in Africa until African theologians apply the text to the situations in which they so often find themselves confronting “the marks of ‘the beast’” (1997: 19). It is thus valid, I hold, to include some reflection on the implications of the above research to my own situation and circumstances, that is Newcastle, NSW, in the first part of the 21st century CE. Those who disagree with such a methodology may feel free to stop reading at this point.

This comparison of the Baptist and Jesus leads to the following points for consideration in my current context:

Even if it is doubtful that the Johannine parable are the ipsissima verba of Jesus, we may note that there are overlaps with parables in Synoptic tradition (Brown 1988: 471) and metaphors common in contemporary Judaism (Schnackenburg 1980: 383). It may thus be sympathetic to Jesus’ views.
That our practice must be Christocentric: it is always Christ and his forgiveness which must be proclaimed. To proclaim self or church or denomination at the expense of Christ is contrary to these examples. It would privilege the subordinate over the superior, and contradict the portrayals of both the Baptist and the disciples.

That we must be careful not to fit Christ to the prevailing expectations of our own time, but constantly proclaim him on his own terms. This echoes the struggle that the Baptist and others have in recognising in Jesus a Messiah who is in stark contrast to what is expected.

That different traditions might explore the idea that the miracles of one and the rituals of the other are essentially means to the same end. It would surely be an improvement if we were to respect both sets of practice as genuine rather than trumpeting only the supremacy of our own preferred praxis. This follows on from the significance shared by miracle and ritual in the gospels in proclaiming the forgiveness of sins.

That claims to be made for Christ may be made by affirming the value of beliefs and values held by others, rather than by criticising them as inadequate. We may note that this accentuation of the positive is also found in the style of apologists like Minucius Felix in his Octavius, and is most famously expressed in Acts 17.

That we should be in the business of proclaiming forgiveness to those who are excluded and marginalised, and those who consider themselves righteous. This is based on the variety of correspondents who engage with the Baptist.

“forgiveness of sins” may be problematic in a post-modern world in which “sin” is weakened currency, and in which “teshubah- repentance” is not known in such terms. It is possible that we might better talk about “forgiveness from sin” as “breaking addictions”, following the line advanced by the late Gerald May in his Addiction & Grace.

That such proclamation needs to be bold in the face of those who hold power and influence (which includes, in the Biblical accounts, Herod and his household, those on the margins who hold political or economic clout and religious leaders or sectarians). It may involve personal risk.

That our preaching must not arise from self-interest, but from a genuine concern that we proclaim God and his Kingdom because they are intrinsically valuable in themselves, not because we stand to gain, either through material or spiritual gain.

That our proclamation of repentance must always demand change of lifestyle and behaviour: regret is not enough. Further such changes are not limited to the private sphere, but are deeply social and political.
These last points coalesce in the writing of Klaus Nürnberger who reminds us that forgiveness is to be offered to all, and is followed (not anticipated) by changes in lifestyle which means rejecting what is unacceptable, being transformed [perhaps through conflicting encounters and dialogue], and allowing ourselves to be enriched and corrected (Nürnberger 2007: 241–2). To place the change before the invitation is ultimately to create a proclamation which puts ourselves and our own abilities, not Christ, at the centre of the proclamation of forgiveness. To do this would fly in the face of what the Baptist proclaims and Jesus practises.

References Cited

« De Baptista nil nisi bonum » – Jean-Baptiste comme paradigme de la mission
Cet article examine comment Jean Baptiste peut opérer comme modèle de la mission. Il compare la prédication, le comportement et la pratique de Jésus et de Jean Baptiste et le résultat montre qu’il y a de profondes ressemblances dans ces trois aspects tels qu’ils sont rapportés par les traditions évangéliques. La différence principale réside dans la subordination de Jean par rapport à Jésus. On étudie ensuite les ressemblances entre les deux dans la pratique des disciples de Jésus. Il en ressort que le bapiste et les disciples partagent une tâche commune : proclamer le pardon qui est effectué par Jésus seul. Une dernière section indique comment leur proclamation de Jésus pourrait être traduite dans le contexte contemporain de l’auteur.

“De Baptista nil nisi bonum” – Juan el Bautista como paradigma para la misión
El trabajo muestra cómo Juan el Bautista puede presentarse como modelo de misión. Se realiza una comparación entre la predicación, la conducta y la praxis de Jesús con las de Juan el Bautista; los resultados demuestran que hay similitudes significativas en estos tres aspectos que se describen en la tradición de los evangelios. La mayor diferencia surge en la subordinación de Juan el Bautista a Jesús. Los puntos en común se encuentran en la praxis de los discípulos de Jesús. Esto sugiere que Juan el Bautista y los discípulos comparten una tarea en común: proclamar el arrepentimiento que sólo Jesús otorga. La última sección sugiere cómo la proclamación de Jesús de parte de los discípulos puede ser interpretada en el contexto contemporáneo del autor.

„De Baptista nil nisi bonum“ – Johannes der Täufer als Paradigma für Mission