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Walter Wink

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CHAPTER I

JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE
GOSPEL OF MARK

It will be our task in the chapters that follow to discover the significance of John the Baptist for the writers of the Gospels and Acts. Such an investigation assumes that the individual Evangelist has left his mark upon the material he has edited, and that by analyzing the redactor's treatment and placing of the material we can decipher his theological and religious presuppositions. This form of inquiry has been labeled *Redaktionsgeschichte* ('the history of redaction', or 'redaction-criticism'). In regarding the Evangelist seriously, 'redaction-criticism' does not repudiate the principles of form criticism but rather *extends* them to the study of the Gospel form itself.¹ We begin therefore with the creator of the Gospel form—Mark.

A. THE INTRODUCTION (Mark 1: 1–15)

Mark's opening thrust is amazingly compressed. It covers the period from John's appearance to the beginning of Jesus' ministry in such a way that the whole complex of events is a single movement, the beginning of the Gospel. Marxsen² rightly insists that the entire Gospel of Mark is to be understood from the end backward; it is the resurrection which has made meaningful the passion, it is the passion which has given new significance to the healings, exorcisms and parables, it is the ministry which points to Jesus' baptism as its source. Likewise every detail in the introductory narrative points backward. Jesus' baptism (1: 9–11) points back to John's prophecy of the messiah's coming and the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1: 4–8), and John's coming points back to the Old Testament prophecies which anticipated the future salvation (1: 2–3). Therefore

¹ W. Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus* (1956), p. 11. E. Haenchen prefers to call this approach *Kompositionsgeschichte* ('the history of composition') (*Der Weg Jesu: Eine Erklärung des Markus-Evangeliums und der kanonischen Parallelen*, 1966, p. 24).

² *Ibid.* pp. 17–19.

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Mark 1: 1 stands not only as an introduction to the subject but even more as a summary of its entire content: in all these events—Old Testament prophecies, John’s mission, the baptism of Jesus—we see the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Thus Mark makes it clear from the outset that the Baptist traditions are entirely subservient to the Jesus traditions. John has no significance in himself, for all the statements about him are in reality Christological ones.¹ When Mark begins to tell us who John is he does so in terms of a composite quotation from Mal. 3: 1; Exod. 23: 20 and Isa. 40: 3, passages which evoke the image of the forerunner Elijah (Mal. 4: 5).² Mark tells us almost nothing of John’s preaching or activity. Instead he mentions John’s diet and clothing (1: 6). Why such unimportant details? Because they build progressively to a confirmation of John’s role

¹ Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus*, p. 19. Mark is no more concerned with pure historicity in his presentation of John than is the Fourth Evangelist (Ernst Lohmeyer, ‘Zur evangelischen Überlieferung von Johannes der Täufer’, *JBL*, LI, 1932, 302 f.), though he is more restrained.

² J. A. T. Robinson (‘Elijah, John and Jesus: An Essay in Detection’, *NTS*, IV, 1957–8, 267; republished in *Twelve New Testament Studies*, 1962, p. 34) argues that Mark 1: 2 has been interpolated into Mark under the influence of Matt. 11: 10 and Luke 7: 27. It is clear from an examination of the parallels that Mark 1: 2 is far closer in form to its synoptic sisters than to either Mal. 3: 1 or Exod. 23: 20. Note that (a) neither Matthew nor Luke employs the Malachi citation in the baptism account even though they use the Isa. 40: 3 citation which follows; it is possible that their copies of Mark lacked the reference to Malachi; (b) Mark had introduced the quotations by ‘as it is written in *Isaiah* the prophet’; had there been any question as to the pedigree of his quotation he could have quite truthfully said merely ‘as it is written’.

On the other hand, Mark is extremely lax about Scripture citations (e.g. 1: 11; 9: 12). If he received this scriptural conglomerate already fused in this manner he may well have thought the whole thing came from Isaiah. The fact that his form is close to that of Matt. 11: 10 par. suggests that all three Evangelists received the passage through the mediation of Christian ‘testimony’ collections, for the Matthean form must also be accounted for. The Old Testament passages are so similar that confusion is not surprising; Adolf Schlatter even suggests that Mal. 3: 1 itself is based on Isa. 40: 3 (*Johannes der Täufer*, 1956 [1880], p. 17)! Debarim Rabbah connects the messenger of Malachi with the prediction in Isa. 40: 4 (cf. E. A. Abbott, *From Letter to Spirit*, 1903, p. 211 n. 4); apparently others felt free to combine these quite similar prophecies (cf. also Exodus Rabbah 23: 20). The most decisive arguments in favor of the text as it stands, however, are that Mark 1: 2 fits into Mark’s conception and purpose perfectly, and that there is absolutely no textual evidence that a copy of Mark ever existed without v. 2.

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as forerunner. His clothing is like that of the prophet Elijah (II Kings 1: 8; Zech. 13: 4),¹ his diet that of the strict Nazarites of old. 'All' the people hear him and repent. The perceptive reader cannot miss Mark's point: John is the prophet of the end-time, the eschatological messenger of Malachi; yes, he is Elijah who is to 'come first to restore *all* things' (Mark 9: 11). The allusion is to Mal. 4: 5 f., which states that Elijah will come just before the end to 'restore [LXX—ἀποκαταστήσει] the hearts of the fathers to their children', etc. In Judaism this restoration came to be conceived of as a mass repentance on the part of all Israel.² If 'all' have now repented at the word of John, is he not Elijah who is to come?³

Mark's purpose is therefore clarified on the basis of 9: 11. John is 'the *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ' because

¹ C. K. Barrett (*The Gospel According to St John*, 1960, p. 144) prefers as the original reading of Mark 1: 6 the variant in D and the Italian family of MSS, which omit 'and had a leather girdle around his waist'. Barrett's reasoning is that this addition identifies John with Elijah and is therefore secondary. But the text of D is notoriously corrupt in Mark 1, and allusions to Elijah are already present elsewhere in Mark 1: 1–8.

² One can virtually speak of a Jewish 'doctrine' of the necessity for a final repentance. 'If you [plural] keep the Law, expect Elijah (Mal. 3: 24)' (Sifre Deut. 41). 'Israel will fulfil the great repentance when Elijah of blessed memory comes, as it is said (Mal. 3: 24)' (Pirque R. Eliezer 43 [25a]). These references rest on early traditions. (Cf. Strack–Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum NT*, 1928, I, 598; C. Montefiore, 'Rabbinic Conceptions of Repentance', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, xvi, 1903–4, 209–57; G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, 1932, I, 520 ff.)

³ Mark possibly has in mind the same 'scribal' conception of Elijah (9: 11) as Trypho in Justin's *Dial. cum Trypho* 8, 4 (cf. 49, 1): 'The Christ—if he has indeed been born and exists anywhere—is unknown and does not even know himself, and has no power, until Elias comes to anoint him and make him known to all.' The Mekilta on Exod. 16: 33 reflects a view parallel to that of Trypho in which Elijah is to restore three things: the jar of manna, the flask of water of lustration, and the flask of anointing oil (G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, II, 359 f.).

The idea of an unknown Messiah was certainly current in various forms in the first century. It is presupposed by the question John is said to have asked from prison (Matt. 11: 2/Luke 7: 19), and is openly stated in John 7: 27 ('when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from'). And in Acts 10: 38 the baptism of Jesus is described as an anointing with the Holy Spirit.

With some of these conceptions in mind Mark may have reduced the description of John in 1: 1–8 to but a hint of his identity as Elijah. Then in 1: 9–11 John anoints Jesus, who is hitherto unknown and perhaps even unaware of his calling.

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Elijah must ‘come *first* to restore all things’. Therefore not what he says or does matters so much as what he *is*. The very fact of his appearance is an eschatological event of the first magnitude, and can only mean one thing: the end is at hand. Thus Mark reduces John’s message to but two sentences, both of which *anticipate* something to come. The statement is unmistakably clear: John is the forerunner of the messiah (1: 7), and his baptism a preparation for the messianic baptism to come (1: 8).¹

Just as Jesus’ advent is marked by the citation of Isa. 42: 1 (Mark 1: 11), so the advent of John is explained by Scripture. From the point of view of transition 1: 4 is tied to 1: 3 by means of the identical phrase ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ in both verses. Marxsen goes to great pains to prove that this phrase was not in the tradition which Mark received and that he added it to conform John to the image required by Isa. 40: 3.² The point of objection upon which Marxsen fastens is that ‘Jordan’ and ‘wilderness’ are incompatible. Luke certainly feels this to be true, for he separates the two areas; John leaves the wilderness and goes to the Jordan region after his call (Luke 3: 2 f.), just as Jesus later ‘returned from the Jordan’ and entered the wilderness to be tempted (4: 1). But Luke knows nothing about the Jordan region. He assumes, as have many scholars since, that river valleys are fertile and therefore cannot be designated ‘wilderness’ or ‘desert’. The Jordan valley, however, is an exception. R. W. Funk has demonstrated conclusively that the lower Jordan valley was called ‘desert’ in both the Old and New Testament periods, ἔρημος being used in the latter for both מדבר and ערבה (cf. Isa. 40: 3, where the two Hebrew terms are used synonymously).³ In Matt. 11: 7 Jesus asks concerning

¹ Mark retains no trace of John’s preaching of judgement. Even the reference to baptism ‘in fire’ is lacking from 1: 8. John’s message is viewed completely from the point of view of the redemption experienced in Jesus Christ; the judgement now awaits the *parousia* (Mark 13: 27).

² Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus*, pp. 20–2, 26–9, following K. L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesus* (1919), pp. 18 ff. The suggestion was put forward earlier by W. Brandt, *Die jüdischen Baptismen* (1910), p. 71. Cf. also R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, translated by John Marsh (1963), p. 246, who, however, concedes that 1: 4 and 6 ‘are not editorial in character’ and probably already lay in the pre-Markan tradition.

³ ‘The Wilderness’, *JBL*, LXXVIII (1959), 205–14; cf. also C. C. McCown, ‘The Scene of John’s Ministry’, *JBL*, LIX (1940), 113–31; W. H. Brownlee,

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John, 'What did you go out *into the wilderness* to behold? A reed shaken by the wind?' Reeds (κόλαμοι) grow only along river banks. Or again, in John 11: 54 the town Ephraim is said to be 'near the wilderness'. Ephraim was probably four miles north-east of Bethel on the site of the modern village ert-Ṭaiyibeh, on the crest of the western slopes of the Jordan River cleft ten miles north-west of Jericho. The 'wilderness' and the Jordan region are identical.

It would be more accurate to say, then, that Mark *preserved* the wilderness tradition which he found in his sources because it suited his theological purpose, or better, that his theological purpose was itself *created* by this element in the tradition. Because John *was* 'in the wilderness' the Isaiah citation becomes relevant. In at least this case the historical tradition has determined the course which the scriptural proof-from-prophecy has taken, and not the reverse.

Just as John provides the *Vorgeschichte* for Jesus, so also there is a *Vorgeschichte* behind John: the Old Testament. This is apparently the meaning of 1: 2–3. The 'beginning' is not just the point of departure for Mark's Gospel but even more the earliest point back to which present facts can be traced in order to display their meaning.¹ The events clustered around the beginning thus stand under the formula 'as it is written', a phrase common to almost all *kerygmatic* recitals in the New Testament. With a single citation the whole Old Testament is called to bear witness to the Gospel which has at last broken into the world. The entire Gospel of Mark is thereby an extended *kerygma*. Resurrection, death, suffering, ministry all lead back to the forerunner, and through John even the Old Testament prophecies become a part of the 'beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ'.

James M. Robinson notes that while the 'beginning of the gospel' is announced in *v.* 1, the 'preaching of the gospel' is mentioned only in *vv.* 14–15, when John is already in prison. It is further remarkable that the good news is introduced (*v.* 2) by a prophecy of what *will* happen: κατασκευάσει, whereas the

'John the Baptist', in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. K. Stendahl (1957), p. 34; and in regard to Luke's geographical references, Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St Luke*, tr. by G. Buswell (1960), pp. 18 f.

¹ Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus*, pp. 24 f.

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good news as summarized on Jesus' lips consists of an announcement of what *has* happened: πεπλήρωται, ἤγγικεν. Robinson concludes that the shift of tenses indicates that 'the times have shifted, the kingdom is now near because it has moved from a vague distance to a near position'.¹ This shift, be it noted, is not between the time of John and that of Jesus, but between the time of prophecy (Old Testament) and that of fulfilment (John the Baptist). It is with John that the gospel 'begins'.²

Yet at the same time John does not fully belong to the time of fulfilment, for his message as recorded by Mark is entirely prophetic. John is distinguished from the time of the Old Testament in terms of fulfilment (1: 2 ff.) but from that of Jesus in terms of anticipation (1: 7 f.). The messenger of victory is not the victor. The deliberate manner in which Mark has distinguished John's ministry both from previous Judaism (1: 1 ff.) and from the ministry of Jesus (1: 14 ff.) indicates that he is working with a clear conception of John's significance. Yet Mark has not invented this distinction; it is so pervasive in our sources that we must conclude that it was already of some theological importance to the early church.³ The distinction of John from Judaism is attested to in Acts 1: 22; Matt. 11: 7–10 (Q); Luke 1; 3: 1 f.; Matt. 3: 2; Ign. Smyr. 1: 1; etc.; the distinction of the ministry of John from that of Jesus is evident in Acts 10: 37 and Luke 3: 1–20, which take their lead from Mark, and in Mark 2: 18 f.; Matt. 11: 2–6, 11 b (Q); 3: 14 f. Both motifs appear side by side in Acts 13: 24 f.; 19: 3 f.; and Matt. 11: 11. This dual distinction stands in its simplest form in Mark. By setting John's ministry apart from both the period of the Old Testament and the ministry of Jesus, Mark reveals John's function. He is the prophesied (1: 2 f.) preparer of Jesus' way (1: 9–13).⁴ Yet, despite the distinction of their functions, all

¹ *The Problem of History in Mark* (1957), pp. 23 f.

² Robinson observes that the good news begins to happen (*v.* 4, John preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins) before it begins to be proclaimed as such (1: 14 f.). This fact indicates that the content of the gospel is not 'some abstract, non-historical truth which, by being eternal, has no beginning save the beginning equal to its discovery or proclamation'; rather the gospel consists of a total event which can begin to happen even before it is proclaimed to have begun (*ibid.*).

³ *Ibid.* p. 22.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 22 f.

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three—Old Testament, John and Jesus—participate in the event called by Mark ‘the beginning of the gospel’.

What then does Mark mean by the term ‘gospel’? Marxsen has shown that the term ‘gospel’ is not common to the synoptic traditions but has been introduced by Mark.¹ In Mark 8: 35 and 10: 29 Mark uses the phrase ‘for my sake and for the gospel’. In both contexts Mark is speaking to the situation of the persecuted Roman church;² he who suffers for the gospel also suffers for Christ. Apparently Mark distinguishes between Jesus and the gospel here, yet in 1: 1 the gospel *is* Jesus Christ. Marxsen concludes from this that Jesus is both the content and the bringer of the gospel, that the gospel does not simply preach *about* Jesus but rather it preaches Jesus; that is, not Jesus’ teachings but Jesus himself as Son of God is preached, and in such a way that Jesus himself is made present. Thus Marxsen can say that Jesus is God’s good news.³ But Marxsen fails to account adequately for the distinction implied by ‘for my sake and for the gospel’ and for the fact that both John and the Old Testament prophecies are gathered up into the gospel in 1: 1 ff. If, as Marxsen himself has shown, ‘gospel’ in 1: 1 summarizes Mark’s whole message, then the gospel must be given a comprehensive definition. It is *the whole of God’s saving activity as seen from the point of view of its fulfilment in the event of Jesus Christ*.⁴ Behind the ministries of Jesus, John, even the Old Testament, lies the saving purpose of God.

Yet Mark scarcely does justice to Israel’s rich heritage of prophecy by his brief citation in 1: 2 f. He makes no attempt to relate this good news to the history of Israel. Instead the Old Testament is simply gathered into the present act of salvation

¹ *Der Evangelist Markus*, pp. 77–83. This is especially true at 1: 1 and 1: 14 f. At 8: 35, 10: 29 and 13: 9 f. Mark has added a reference to ‘the gospel’ where his source had only ‘for my sake’. Mark 14: 9 is problematic but the word ‘gospel’ here also is likely to be Mark’s doing. Apparently Matthew finds εὐαγγέλιον only in Mark, never in his sources. Luke uses the verb but never the noun. Mark probably adapted the term from early Christian preaching as the key word to describe that preaching.

² This is clearest in 8: 34, where Mark has ‘*the multitude with his disciples*’, i.e. the obligation to take up one’s cross is applicable to all Christians, not just church leaders.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 85–9.

⁴ Thus Jesus preaches the gospel of *God* (1: 14). Cf. the way in which event and person are related by John Knox in *Jesus, Lord and Christ* (1958), pp. 193–276. The ‘event of Jesus Christ’ here includes John.

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by the slightest reference, but a reference which makes abundantly clear the meaning of these present acts. For Mark is completely preoccupied with Jesus and with the future. His view is prospective rather than retrospective.¹ Therefore he can begin *in medias res* without an account of either the birth or the preparation of Jesus. He is content to say merely that into a world which knew no good news the good news of Jesus Christ has now come.

Mark does have a view of history, however. T. A. Burkill finds four periods in the historical realization of God's plan of salvation:

- (1) The period of preparation—until John's removal to prison.
- (2) The period of Jesus' ministry on earth, characterized by suffering and obscurity.
- (3) The period after the resurrection, in which the gospel of the Christ is openly proclaimed.
- (4) The period of eschatological fulfilment, gloriously inaugurated by the Son of man at his still-awaited parousia.²

This schematism admittedly is oversimplified, yet it is basically correct. The openness of the first period indicates its provisional character. Later Evangelists were to fix its limits more precisely. It should be noted, however, that it is Jesus Christ who gives unity and meaning to the entire scheme. These periods are not epochs of world history; they are rather but episodes in the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world. There are only two real epochs, B.C. and A.D.³

B. THE IMPRISONMENT AND DEATH OF THE BAPTIST

(Mark 1: 14; 6: 14–29)

'Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God' (1: 14). According to Marxsen, an impression of successiveness has been deliberately created here by Mark where none existed before. Why else would he interject the report of John's arrest at 1: 14 and yet delay the account of

¹ T. A. Burkill, 'St Mark's Philosophy of History', *NTS*, III, 2 (1956–7), 145.

² *Ibid.* pp. 142 f.

³ Cf. Cullmann's discussion, *Christ and Time*, tr. by F. Filson (1950), pp. 17 ff. Mark's view of history falls short of a developed *Heilsgeschichte* since it fails to deal seriously with the epoch 'B.C.'

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his death till 6: 14 ff.? Since παραδοθῆναι ('to be delivered up, arrested') is used in 1: 14 in the absolute sense, just as elsewhere it is used by Mark only of Jesus, Marxsen thinks Mark is creating a parallelism between the two men. Historically, John's arrest belongs later; theologically it belongs here as a foretaste of the passion, just as chapters 1–13 contain foretastes of the cross. The complex dealing with the Baptist is thereby separated and set before the complex concerning Jesus. Mark 1: 14 is thus, in Schmidt's phrase, an 'unchronologische Chronologie' set in a 'heilsgeschichtliche Schematismus'.¹

Here again Marxsen errs by mistaking the manner in which Mark goes about constructing theology. The work of Vincent Taylor,² W. L. Knox³ and M. Albertz⁴ has demonstrated how restrained Mark is with his sources, sometimes including whole blocks without substantial change (e.g. 2: 1–3: 6). Mark makes his point in the way that he *uses* his material as much as in the way that he changes it. Therefore the point is not unimportant: does Mark 'invent' the impression of successiveness, or does he find it already in the tradition? Does he have a prior conception of successiveness which he forces upon the traditions, or is Mark's view itself formed by the traditions?

Mark 6: 14 shows conclusively that the activities of Jesus and John were both chronologically and spatially separated. Jesus is taken for John the Baptist raised from the dead. Those who expressed this opinion could not have seen the two of them working together, or known of Jesus' baptism by John or even of a period of Jesus' discipleship under John. So long as John was baptizing and preaching, at least a part of the people must not have noticed Jesus. This does not exclude the possibility that Jesus was at first more or less a disciple of John; it means only that the public activity which brought him to the notice of the populace could only have begun after John was removed from the scene, i.e. arrested (1: 14). The people have an impression of successiveness, not contemporaneousness.⁵

¹ Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus*, pp. 22–4.

² *The Gospel According to St Mark* (1952).

³ *The Sources of the Synoptic Gospels*, vol. 1 (1953).

⁴ *Die synoptischen Streitgespräche* (1921).

⁵ Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, tr. by S. C. Guthrie and C. A. M. Hall (1959), pp. 31 f. Cf. also A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 373; and Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*,

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John is dead. Jesus appears, and his behavior so strikingly resembles John's that people leap to the conclusion that he is John risen from the dead. The belief expressed here is not that John has been resurrected (ἀνάστασις) but that he has been physically resuscitated (ἐγήγερται—6: 14): raised from the grave, not brought back from heaven (as, i.e., Elijah, who never died).¹ We find here not a confession of faith in God's vindication of John by his resurrection, but rather a crude popular superstition, a reaction of hope, fear, or, in Herod's case, guilt. This superstition presupposes, however, that Jesus was unknown to the opponents of John until after John's death.²

The fact that this successiveness is historical does not mean that Mark 1: 14 or 6: 17 ff. are strictly chronological. But it does mean that Mark is doing his best to reconstruct the chronological relationship between Jesus and John which the tradition implies. John's role as forerunner can be emphasized by Mark in 1: 14 precisely because he actually did 'run before', and had been imprisoned before Jesus' public ministry began.

What is really significant is not the chronology implied by a passage like 6: 14–29, but the fact that this rambling, unedifying account of John's death is included at all.³ After telescoping

p. 302 n. 1: '... the conclusion follows, that in contrast to the presentation in John, the ministry of Jesus did not begin until after the death of John the Baptist.'

¹ So Cullmann, *Christology*, p. 33, following E. Lichtenstein, 'Die älteste christliche Glaubensformel', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, LXIII (1950), 26 ff.

² Matt. 11: 2–6 rests on the memory that Jesus' public ministry burgeoned only after John was in prison—why else would Jesus need to tell John what he has done? Acts 13: 24 f. makes it clear that Jesus only began to call his disciples shortly before John's arrest: 'and as John was finishing his course...' And in Mark 8: 28 Jesus is again taken as the resuscitated John, an opinion which could only arise if Jesus was comparatively unknown during John's ministry.

On the other hand, John 3: 22 ff. may indicate that there was a period during which Jesus baptized contemporaneously with John (cf. C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, 1963, pp. 285–301). If this was the case, however, the period of their joint activity was so brief (John 4: 1–3) that even in the Fourth Gospel the impression of successiveness prevails (cf. John 1: 15, 30; 10: 40 ff.).

³ Note how drastically Matthew and Luke condense it. W. L. Knox, *The Sources of the Synoptic Gospels*, 1, 50, demonstrates the popular character of 6: 17–29. He calls it, following Rawlinson, a 'bazaar rumour', and