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Walter Wink

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# JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE GOSPEL TRADITION

BY

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*Assistant Professor*

*Union Theological Seminary*

*New York*



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## PREFACE

This study is a considerably modified version of my doctoral dissertation, *John the Baptist and the Gospel*, written under the New Testament Faculty at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. The serious student of the matters at hand is referred to that earlier work for a thorough treatment of the 'quest for the historical John' as it has developed from Reimarus to the present day, and for a detailed examination of John's relationship to the Community of Qumran. All of this material I have omitted for the sake of brevity.

My special thanks are extended to Dr W. D. Davies, Dr J. Louis Martyn, Dr John Knox, Dr James Muilenburg and Dr Cyril C. Richardson for their assistance to me in the course of my research; and to Dr William C. Robinson, Jr., of Perkins School of Theology, for his many helpful suggestions. To my wife, without whose encouragement and assistance this work could never have proceeded, this book is affectionately dedicated.

W. W.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AJT</i>	<i>American Journal of Theology</i>
<i>ATR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift (Neue Folge)</i>
<i>ET</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>GCS</i>	<i>Die griechisch-christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Migne, Patrologia Graeca</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Migne, Patrologia Latina</i>
<i>RGG</i>	<i>Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i>
<i>RQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>TWNT</i>	<i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament</i>
<i>ZNTW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZThK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

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## INTRODUCTION

For the past century and a half, the primary preoccupation of New Testament research has been the quest for the historical Jesus. In this quest John the Baptist has attracted considerable attention, for while there are no reliable non-Christian witnesses to the life of Jesus, there is valuable mention of John the Baptist in the writings of Josephus. The history of John the Baptist has therefore served as the seemingly secure bedrock on which the reconstruction of the history of Jesus could proceed. To be sure, the source-material which deals with John is exceedingly sketchy, but it has been considered sufficient to serve as the basis for volume after volume of 'Lives of John'. All of this research has culminated in a rather broad consensus among scholars today on the main issues of the life of John the Baptist, and even those points which still remain problematical have been brought to within the range of but a few possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough discussion of the historical problems the reader is referred to the leading monographs on John the Baptist. The work of Martin Dibelius, *Die urchristliche Überlieferung von Johannes dem Täufer* [henceforth *Johannes der Täufer*] (1911), provides an indispensable form-critical prolegomenon to any study of John. Building on this pioneering analysis are the three most prominent monographs: Maurice Goguel's *Au seuil de l'évangile Jean-Baptiste* [henceforth *Jean-Baptiste*] (1928); Ernst Lohmeyer's *Das Urchristentum I. Johannes der Täufer* [henceforth *Johannes der Täufer*] (1932); and above all, Carl H. Kraeling's *John the Baptist* (1951). More recently we have the works of Jean Steinmann, *John the Baptist and the Desert Tradition*, tr. by Michael Boyes (1958); Charles H. H. Scobie, *John the Baptist* (1964); David Flusser, *Johannes der Täufer* (1964); and Roland Schütz, *Johannes der Täufer (Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments, Band 50)* (1967).

Also of major importance are the relevant sections of David Friedrich Strauss' *Life of Jesus* (tr. by George Eliot from the 4th German ed. of 1840); Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (tr. by W. Montgomery from the first German ed. of 1906); Gunther Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth*, tr. by I. and F. McLuskey (1960), pp. 44–52; Philipp Vielhauer's 'Johannes der Täufer', *RGG*<sup>3</sup> (1959), III, 803–7; and, for a divergent view, William R. Farmer's 'John the Baptist', *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962), II, 955–62. For other references see notes and bibliography.



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Except for these points, this corner, at least, of the quest for the historical Jesus would seem to have been secured.

In other sectors, however, the Jesus-quest was faring badly. The attempt to establish the historicity of the Gospel accounts was constantly foundering on the relative unconcern of the Gospels for historicity as such. The Evangelists were not interested in scientific history, but salvation. They wrote, not to preserve accurate records, but to create and to edify believers. Indeed, when the individual units of the Gospel tradition were analyzed according to the history of their transmission (form criticism), it became clear that scarcely a word of the Gospels is uncolored by the faith of the church. In the face of these discoveries it became problematic whether a quest for the historical Jesus was possible at all.

Yet, ironically, while the quest for the historical Jesus had its messengers of defeat, the quest for the historical John had none. The very success of the John-quest led to its fixation on the level of historicity. Every monograph on John which has thus far appeared has dealt with him from the point of view of historical biography. Scholars have consistently regarded the early church's *theological* preoccupation with John as simply so much pious legend, as mythological or devotional husk to be stripped off in the search for the bare kernels of historical fact. And it is not our contention that historical facts cannot be established concerning the life of John. What we do argue, however, is that when the bare facts about John are known, they nevertheless fail to answer the very questions about him which we *must* have answered in order to make sense of the New Testament record. Why is John the Baptist accorded such a prominent place in the Gospel tradition? Why, for that matter, is he mentioned at all? Why did Jesus lavish on John words of such high praise that the church would later find them a source of profound embarrassment? And why, in spite of this, did the church include John in the Christian proclamation, and assert what they could have left unsaid: that John marked the turning point in the history of salvation?

These are the questions the historian wishes to have answered, yet it is precisely these questions which have largely been

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neglected.<sup>1</sup> Such questions should make it clear to one at all familiar with the subject that the Gospels are no more concerned about the 'history' of John than they are about the 'history' of Jesus. John, too, is regarded by the Evangelists primarily from a theological point of view. Scholars have succeeded rather well in isolating the historical facts about John, they have evaluated his stature as a man and his influence upon Jesus, but they have not explained why the church made him the first preacher of the 'good news' (Mark 1: 1–4 par.; Luke 3: 18; cf. 1: 19); or why, at extreme risk to the uniqueness of Jesus, the shapers of the earliest traditions drew John up into the Christian *kerygma* (Acts 10: 37; 13: 24; and of course the Gospels themselves), and declared that it was with *his* coming that the Gospel could be said to 'begin' (Mark 1: 1; Luke 1: 5 ff.; 3: 1 ff.; 16: 16; Matt. 3: 2; 11: 12 f.; John 1: 6, 19 ff.).

What is the source of the church's intense interest in John? The reason which scholars have generally advanced is that the early church found itself in continuing competition with John's disciples, and that as an evangelistic stratagem the church absorbed John into the Gospel message, making John a witness against his own disciples to the messiahship of Jesus. This hypothesis will be given careful consideration in the study which follows, for it has never been seriously tested. But even if, as we shall see, the church did on occasion find itself polemically engaged with John's disciples, is it valid to generalize from these localized instances and interpret the entire body of tradition about John as polemically inspired? Has the church adopted John in order to use him against his own disciples, or could it use him against his disciples (as occasion demanded) because he was already a part of the Gospel message? And how shall we explain the quite exalted religious value attached to John in passages which betray no polemical or apologetical tendencies whatever?

If the methodological impasse in the study of John the Baptist has resulted from the failure to take seriously the original

<sup>1</sup> Cf. for instance the revealing comment by Charles H. H. Scobie, *op. cit.* p. 11: 'What this book attempts to do is precisely what the Gospels do not do: to investigate the life of John for its own sake.'

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intention of the creators of the Gospel accounts, then the logical procedure would be to examine the manner in which each Evangelist has used the traditions about John in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. For it would appear that the real significance of John—even his proper historical significance, in so far as it can be measured by his impact on others—can best be discovered by asking the question concerning John in the same way that it was asked by the early church: what is the role of John the Baptist in God's redemptive purpose? That is to say, what is the role of John the Baptist in the Gospels and Acts?