

JESUS

The Mission

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To my father, Lee Schenck, who passed away
while I was finishing this book.
If I ever wanted to know what Jesus would do,
all I needed to do was watch my dad.

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1

BAPTISM BY JOHN

AT THE JORDAN RIVER

We don't know the exact year. Luke 3:1 says it was the fifteenth year of the Roman emperor Tiberius, around the year A.D. 29. John "the baptizer" started baptizing people in the river Jordan just a few miles east of Jerusalem. Dating things in the ancient world is complicated, so this is not a slam dunk.

Tiberius was the second Roman emperor (A.D. 14–37), after Augustus (31 B.C.–A.D. 14). You may remember that Augustus was emperor when Jesus was born. Perhaps you've heard the verse at Christmas, "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken" (Luke 2:1). Our best guess is that Jesus was born sometime around 6–4 B.C. because Matthew 2 says Herod (the Great) was still king, and Herod the Great died in 4 B.C.

That means Jesus would have been about thirty, maybe a little older, when he showed up at the Jordan River to be baptized by John (Luke 3:23; see John 8:57). It is a little irritating not to know these things for certain, but that's just the way it is with the evidence we have. What was John doing out there in the middle of nowhere, baptizing? Jesus presumably came all the way from Galilee to see him, to participate. It's about a three-day journey. Jesus must have agreed with most or all of what John was saying to go through and be baptized by him.

The Gospels tell us that John the Baptist was “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). The Jewish historian Josephus presented John's message in more general terms. John was urging the crowds to become more virtuous: “Herod [Antipas] killed John who was called the Baptist, even though he was a good man and was merely calling the Jews to join him in baptism, provided that they were developing in virtue and being just to one another and acting right toward God. Only in this case did John think God would accept this baptism. Their souls needed already to be purified by justice before baptism would cleanse their bodies—it was not something that would otherwise forgive their sins.”¹

It's hard for us to get into the heads of John or the crowds. We've heard so much in church and other places. What would we have thought if we had been in those crowds who came to see John and maybe get baptized? I think we would have heard something distinctly political, both in John's message and in the symbolic action of baptism. It is no coincidence that a new Herod, Herod Antipas, arrested John and eventually beheaded him. He was no fool.

For example, where was John baptizing? He was baptizing on the east side of the Jordan River, right around the place where Joshua had led Israel to occupy the land.² In the light of the rest of John's message, it was all too easy to see that John was preparing Israel for its restoration as a free kingdom.

The goal of repentance was to get the hearts of the people of Israel ready for the return of God's kingdom on earth, which those coming to John would invariably have understood to be a restored political kingdom of Israel. It is again no coincidence that the Gospels remember John in the light of Old Testament passages like Isaiah 40:1–3. While New Testament authors do not always read the Old Testament in context, the context of Isaiah fits John's message: "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him'" (Mark 1:3, quoting Isa. 40:3).

The original context of Isaiah 40 was the return of Israel from captivity in Babylon. Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem and taken many Israelites back as slaves. But in 538 B.C., a new conquering king—Cyrus, king of Persia (see Isa. 45:1)—let go those Jews who wanted to return. Isaiah 40 originally was about making a straight line through the desert home to Jerusalem from Babylon. Flatten the hills, lift up the valleys, and straighten out any crooked roads because we're going home!³

So if we were there with John by the Jordan, I think we would have heard similar overtones in what he was doing. In a sense, Israel was still in exile.⁴ The Romans were in control. These texts in Isaiah point toward Israel regaining its kingdom and being restored (see Acts 1:6).

John probably also criticized the current leadership of Jerusalem. His message of repentance was a message of hope for those who would join him in repentance. But it was a message



THE ESSENES

There were three main Jewish groups at the time of Jesus: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. The Sadducees were upper-class, priestly families who generally were in the leadership of the temple and Israel. The Pharisees were popular, legal experts in Jerusalem who were greatly admired by many Jewish people for their piety and knowledge of God.

The Essenes probably arose in the second century before Christ. They believed that the temple was not being run properly and were stricter than the Pharisees in how they observed the Jewish law. Some, though not all of them, actually removed themselves from the rest of society and formed their own community on the northwest side of the Dead Sea, not far from where John the Baptist baptized. Many were celibate, and being a member meant giving all possessions to the community.

The Essenes were more “apocalyptic” than the other Jewish groups. They believed God was going to come quickly from heaven to judge the Romans and the rest of Israel. Angels and demons played a significant role in their understanding of the world, and they emphasized hell more than other groups. Most experts believe that the New Testament actually alludes to stories in some of the writings the Essenes considered to be Scripture (for example, 1 Pet. 3:20–21; 2 Pet. 2:4; and Jude 6, 14–15).

of judgment for everyone else, including the current leaders in Jerusalem and people like Herod Antipas. For them it was a message of impending doom.

John was baptizing people, dipping Jews in the river Jordan to symbolize the washing of their sins. I would have heard the message: We Jews need to prepare ourselves for what is coming. We need to clean ourselves to be ready or else we'll be swept up in the judgment along with everyone else.

Such ritual washings were a normal part of Jewish life. There were *miqvaot*, baptismal pools, all around Jerusalem. There were some at the temple, for example. You purified yourself before offering sacrifices. A Jewish group that lived down by the Dead Sea had a *miqveh* at each entrance to their camp. They belonged to a Jewish group called the "Essenes." You walked down one side unclean and came up the other clean. If I had seen John as an onlooker, I probably would have pegged him to be an Essene.

One key difference about John's baptism was that his dipping wasn't something you did every once in a while when you needed to become clean again. His baptism wasn't something you did each year or each month. This was a preparation for a one-time event, the coming judgment of God on the world. It was a one-time preparation for the coming restoration of Israel, God's coming kingdom.

Part of that message was also the arrival of a new king, a new "Son of David" to resume ruling Israel just like the kings of old. This "anointed one" or Messiah ("Christ" in Greek) would be an intimate part of the restored kingdom. Now, it may take a little doing to get into the heads of the people alongside the Jordan and what they were expecting in a messiah, because not everyone was.

First, the people by the river were not expecting the Messiah to be divine in the way we use that word. True, there were Old Testament texts that referred to kings like Solomon as the Son of God (2 Sam. 7:14) and other texts that used exalted language of the kings of Judah on various occasions (see Ps. 2:7; 45:6–7; 89:27; 110:1). But no one took these verses to mean that the king was literally a god or that the Messiah would be a god. They took it poetically.

It was perhaps the Essenes who first started expecting God to anoint some special people in the process of restoring Israel. Some of their key documents looked forward to *two* “messiahs,” two anointed ones. One would be the new king of Israel; the other would be the new priest of Israel. But the group called the Sadducees wasn’t looking for a new king. For them, Israel had done just fine with the high priest basically in charge for five hundred years. They controlled the temple, and kings only served to diminish their existing power.⁵

As for the rest of Israel, from time to time revolutionaries would crop up, probably with hopes of turning out to be the new “anointed one” of Israel. Acts mentions some of them—Judas the Galilean, Theudas (Acts 5:36–37), and someone we know only as “the Egyptian” (21:38). A book called Psalms of Solomon, especially chapter 17, strongly hopes for a messiah to come and destroy the Romans.⁶ But we can’t say how prevalent the expectation of a messiah was at the time John baptized. Obviously, he believed a king was coming.

It is important to recognize that the Jews at the time of Jesus largely didn’t read the verses of prophecy the way we often do in church and Sunday school. The New Testament authors, by and large, read the Old Testament “spiritually” rather than for

what the words originally meant. It was only after the fact that Christians saw most of these Old Testament verses the way we do now. It was not obvious to all the people of that time that the Old Testament taught that a messiah was coming. It certainly was not obvious to them that he would come in the way we now believe Jesus did.

We know what happened to John the Baptist. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, arrested and then beheaded him. Rulers don't take nicely to those who announce that another king is coming who is going to replace their kingdom with a better one! In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are sometimes called the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus did not start proclaiming the kingdom until John was arrested.

But the impact of John the Baptist seems to have continued for decades after he died. For example, there were some people who were still following his teaching at Ephesus in Acts 18–19. The first is Apollos in Acts 18:24–28, some twenty-five years later. He was instructed in the “way of the Lord” and proclaimed the coming of Jesus, but was only aware of the baptism of John. Apparently, John the Baptist must have proclaimed “the way of the Lord.” It is interesting that both Isaiah 40 and Malachi 3 use the word *way*. These are the passages the Gospels refer to in relation to John's prophetic ministry. So it is not a stretch to say that John must have proclaimed quite literally “the way of the Lord” as one of his key messages.

Followers of the Way were thus individuals who believed John's message—whether they believed in Jesus or not. Apollos could have been a follower of the Way and known little about Jesus. What he knew was John the baptizer's prediction that the “anointed one,” the Messiah, was coming. The Gospels also

remember this message as part of what John proclaimed: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals” (Mark 1:7 NRSV).

Acts 19:1–7 reinforces this interpretation. Paul found certain “disciples” at Ephesus. These individuals knew only the baptism of John. They did not seem to know much of anything about Jesus. When Acts calls them “disciples,” it must not mean followers of Jesus but followers of the Way, followers of the movement started by John the Baptist.

For Acts, receiving the Spirit is the big distinction between the two movements. The Jesus movement was part of the Baptist movement. Both were followers of the Way. But the Jesus movement believed Jesus was the Messiah John predicted, and it involved the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ followers received the Holy Spirit. At some point, John’s baptism became distinguished from baptism “in the name of Jesus,” so much so that Paul had the followers of the Baptist get re-baptized so they would receive the Holy Spirit in Acts 19.

The gospel of John indirectly supports this interpretation. One of the intriguing features of the gospel of John is the extent to which it downplays John the Baptist in relation to Jesus. John never actually mentioned John the Baptist baptizing Jesus. John’s presentation implies that the Baptist’s mission was basically over once Jesus arrived (see 1:36–37; 3:30). Only John’s gospel tells of Jesus’ followers baptizing at the same time as the Baptist. Finally, in contrast to Matthew 11:14, the gospel of John denies that John the Baptist is Elijah (John 1:21).

Why would the gospel of John downplay John the Baptist so much more than the other Gospels? A possible answer is that, as

we see in Acts 18–19, there were followers of John the Baptist at Ephesus who not only did *not follow* Jesus, but who *opposed* the Jesus movement, who opposed the idea that Jesus was the Messiah. John and Acts are thus written in such a way as to make it clear that Jesus is the one John predicted.⁷

So not only did John proclaim the coming judgment of God and the potential restoration of political Israel, but he was one of those Jews who also predicted the coming of a king to rule Israel in this coming kingdom, the Messiah.⁸ In preparation, he called Israel to repent and to wash themselves in the Jordan, symbolizing the washing and forgiveness of their sins.

What a massive movement he must have started! We do not know much about it apart from those of his followers who went on to believe Jesus was the Messiah John was predicting. But at the time, his movement must have paralleled that of Jesus and may have been even bigger. Some in this movement of the Way may have known little about Jesus at all. It must not have been clear at the time that John endorsed Jesus as the one he predicted.

In fact, we can read passages like Matthew 11:2–6 as the Baptist having had some uncertainty. John was in prison but sent some of his followers to ask Jesus if he was the one. The things he was doing made him a prime candidate. But John must not have been entirely certain.⁹ Perhaps John was expecting Jesus to be more “political” and “military” than he was.

What is clear is that all four gospels see Jesus’ ministry in continuity with that of the Baptist. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus was baptized by John, which indicates that Jesus at least mostly endorsed John’s message. As many Jesus scholars have argued, this fact has enormous implications for how we understand Jesus’ own mission and message.¹⁰ We must understand Jesus’

words not as wise sayings a philosopher might offer, but as words spoken against this historical background.

REFLECTIONS ON JOHN

Probably the thing that strikes me most about John the Baptist is how much differently things must have seemed to him than they seem to us. Our understanding of John as the “opening act” before Jesus arrived is crystal clear. John was also clear that the Messiah would follow him, but John probably wasn’t expecting the Messiah to be crucified.

John probably was looking for the almost immediate restoration of Israel as a political kingdom with its own king. Even after Jesus rose from the dead, his followers were still expecting this sort of kingdom (Acts 1:6). Some of the New Testament may still look to such a kingdom of Israel after Christ returns (see Rom. 11:26). While a nation of Israel was restored in 1948, it is not a kingdom that affirms Jesus as Messiah, which, from a New Testament perspective, would be an essential part of a truly restored Israel.

Later Christians took John’s message and made it universal, which may be what God wants us to do as well. For example, John’s message was only directed at Jews. It is doubtful the thought ever occurred to him that a Gentile might be baptized. We now see his message of baptism played out in Christian baptism, where, rather than prepare for the restoration of Israel, we act out our inclusion into God’s eternal kingdom.

For the moment, this kingdom is not a political but a spiritual kingdom. We live in two kingdoms: the kingdom of our God and the kingdom of this world. Our loyalty is solidly to the first, and

we choose it over the second when the two are in irresolvable conflict. But we also live in the second kingdom and we “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Mark 12:17).

The situation with baptism is slightly different for us than it was with John. When the movement started, no one was baptized. He called all Israel to baptism, even those trying to keep the covenant. After all, he was looking to the repentance of a whole people, even more than mere individuals. This is one reason we can participate in confessions of sin in church even when we have not intentionally done wrong all week; it is a corporate confession of the church as a whole.

Now we have children born into families of faith. Many Christian traditions baptize children born into Christian homes, to claim them for Christ from the beginning. They baptize them even though they believe the children will have to make it their own later in life. Others focus on the individual and want the child to wait until he or she can understand at least a little of what baptism signifies.

When we look at how different our situation is than John’s, it is a bit sobering to wonder how much of what we think *we* have figured out might be a little off on the details or out of perspective. Certainly we believe that something unique was happening at the time of Jesus, a new revelation that will never come again. Someone might also point out that we now have the New Testament, which transcends the misunderstandings of any one early Christian.

But if we’re honest with each other, Christians probably disagree more with each other today over what the Bible means than the early Jesus followers disagreed with each other. It calls for a certain humility. And it calls us back to first principles.

Jesus would both express and model the two basic principles of Christian life, to which all our specific beliefs must submit. These are the twin principles of completely surrendering to God's will and of concretely loving all others and treating them as we would want others to treat us.

JESUS AT THE JORDAN

What did Jesus choose to know when he was on earth? I personally believe Jesus “played it by the rules” of humanity while he was on earth. We as Christians believe Jesus existed before he came to earth and was born of a virgin named Mary.

Further, one of the central creeds of Christianity says that Jesus was “eternally begotten of the Father, begotten, not made.”¹¹ For the first four hundred years or so after Jesus, Christians wrestled with exactly what the divine aspect of Jesus was. They finally concluded that Jesus was fully God, just like God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. One God exists in three distinct persons, one of whom is Christ.

If that belief doesn't twist your brain into a pretzel, they also concluded that he was fully human as well—100 percent divine *and* 100 percent human. How can someone be both fully human *and* fully divine? Christians believe Jesus remains fully human even now in heaven.

However, while he was on earth, Jesus seemed to have limited his power and knowledge in certain ways. First, he significantly limited his location. As far as we know, Jesus was never in two locations at once while on earth. By contrast, God the Father and the Holy Spirit are always present everywhere. But Jesus mostly walked.

Second, Jesus seems to have limited his power while on earth. Mark 6:5–6 says of Jesus in Nazareth that “he could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.” Now Mark does not say whether Jesus could have forced miracles on them anyway. It simply indicates that the rules Jesus followed depended on the faith of those he healed. It indicates that Jesus at least did not function with omnipotence—all power—while he was on earth.

In fact, when the Devil tempted Jesus in the desert, one of the temptations was to give him authority over everything he could see from a high mountain (see Matt. 4:8–9). The implication is that Jesus did not choose to have this authority at that time. The Devil at that time continued to rule in the earthly realm. Jesus refused to bow down to him (4:10), and the end result in Matthew is that all authority was given to Jesus by God after he rose from the dead (28:18).

Finally, Jesus limited his knowledge while he was on earth. The clearest statement of this comes when Jesus was talking about the precise timing of his own return to earth. He said in Mark 13:32, “About that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*, but only the Father” (emphasis added). This is a clear statement that while Jesus was on earth, he did not know everything. We might say as Christians that although he could have known everything because he was God, he chose not to know everything as a man.

But this raises an interesting question: When did Jesus know he was the Messiah? When did he know he was God? For example, what did Jesus know when he was two years old? Was he precocious, in human terms? Did he ever make mental

mistakes when counting fish? Did he ever forget to meet up with his mother at an agreed time?

If he was truly human, did he ever make mental mistakes, simply based on the finitude of the human mind? If so, does it say something about what needs to be atoned for or, rather, what doesn't need to be atoned for? If Jesus made mental mistakes, then they must not be sins, and if they are not sins, would they need atonement?

Did the infant Jesus know he was Messiah? My hunch is that he didn't. My hunch is that as a fully human person he passed through the developmental stages any human passes through. When did he realize he was Messiah? Could it have actually been at his baptism? Could Jesus even have realized it when he heard God's voice from heaven, saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11)?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. In what ways did people at the time think differently about John the Baptist and the Messiah than the ways you think about them, particularly if you have grown up going to church?

2. In what ways would you say John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus as Messiah?

3. Do you think you have Christianity all figured out? What are some blind spots you might have in what God is up to?

4. What do you think it means to say that Jesus was fully human? Do you think he made any mental mistakes?