

John's Baptism as a Symbolic Enactment of the Return from Exile

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Abstract

John's baptism continues to be the subject of much discussion among biblical scholars. Attempts to trace its origin to Essene ritual washings or proselyte baptism have proven unconvincing, as are recent arguments against the traditional site on the lower reaches of the river Jordan. It is likely that John's baptism was his own invention and that he intended it to be a symbolic depiction of the return from exile, which was by no means viewed as complete in the first century CE. The baptism itself involved crossing the river Jordan from east to west, not just being immersed in it .

1. Introduction

The title of Mark's Gospel, which I take with most scholars to be the first of the four canonical Gospels,¹ prepares the reader for a work focused squarely on Jesus (Mark 1:1), but it begins with the sudden appearance of John the Baptist on the stage of salvation history (Mark 1:2-11). A comparison with the other Gospels highlights Mark's narrow interest in John's ministry of baptism generally and Jesus's baptism by John in particular.² Yet even Mark does not clearly articulate

1. While Marcan priority is the majority opinion, other accounts of Synoptic origins cannot be discounted out of hand. Both the so-called 'Griesbach Hypothesis', which holds to Matthean priority, and theories that stress the initially independent oral transmission of the Synoptic Gospels have many adherents. For a thorough discussion of the issue see Carl R. Holladay, *Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2017), 43–82.

2. Matthew and Luke are more interested in the Baptist's moral exhortation and calls to repentance (Matt 3:7-12; Luke 3:7-17) while John emphasises his repeated attempts to direct attention to Jesus (1:29-34; 3:22-30).

what he believes John's baptism was intended to signify. Shedding light on that enigma will be the focus of this article. I will argue two major points that stand (or fall) independently of each other but which are interwoven in the Gospel accounts. First, John's baptism (as portrayed by Mark and followed by Matthew and Luke) had the character of a symbolic enactment of the long-yearned-for return from exile.³ Second, John's baptism consisted not merely of immersion in the Jordan, but rather of crossing it from east to west and thus entering the promised land just like Israel did following the exodus. Before making that case, I will address two topics that have engendered much discussion in modern scholarship and impinge upon my interpretation: first, the origin of John's baptism, and second, the location of John's baptismal ministry.

2. The Origin of John's Baptism

The origin of John's baptism has long been the subject of vigorous debate. This reflects the fact that the two most popular explanations run up against seemingly intractable shortcomings. Especially in the decades since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls near Qumran in the middle of the twentieth century, some scholars have postulated that John was a member of the Essene community there,⁴ or at least an adherent of its teachings. They stress the fact that, as the discovery of numerous *mikvaot* there reveals, ritual washings played an important role in the life of the community, and they view John's baptism as an adaptation of those washings.⁵ Still, despite some similarities in their views (see below), it is

3. The concept of 'ongoing exile' is most closely associated with the writings of N. T. Wright. For a critical but generally positive assessment see Joel White, 'N. T. Wright's Narrative Approach' in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul: A Critical Examination of the Pauline Theology of N. T. Wright*, ed. Christoph Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt, and Michael F. Bird, WUNT 2/413 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 193–195. To my mind, two widespread convictions in early Judaism make it virtually certain that something like this paradigm must have been operative in Jesus's day. First, Daniel extended the time of exile from 70 to 490 years (Dan 9:24–27). Second, the northern tribes had not yet returned from exile in line with clear prophetic expectations (on which, see below).

4. That the Qumran community were Essenes is the dominant hypothesis in contemporary scholarship. Cf. Robert A. Kugler, 'Dead Sea Scrolls', in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 520–524.

5. Cf. e.g. Joachim Gnllka, 'Die essenischen Tauchbäder und die Johannestaufe', *RevQ* 3 (1961): 205–207; Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (i–ix)*, AB 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1981), 459–460.

far from certain that John had any ties to the Qumran community.⁶ Even if he did, his baptism stands in stark contrast to their purification rituals, which individual members performed over and over. All available evidence indicates that those who submitted to John's baptism did so only once.⁷

Jewish proselyte baptism, the other popular alternative explanation,⁸ exhibits this one-off character, but proponents of the theory that John's baptism is a later adaptation of that practice have not been able to prove definitively that it was practised in the first century CE, much less prior to the Baptist's ministry in the first third of the century. It is even possible, as Dieter Sanger argues,⁹ that the dependence, if there is any to speak of, runs in the other direction, such that Jewish proselyte baptism is a later adaptation of John's novel practice.¹⁰

These factors combine to lead many scholars to the conclusion that John's baptism is his own invention, even if it exhibits some loose parallels to other early Jewish water rites.¹¹ The intriguing pericope in Mark 11:27-33 and parallels, in which Jesus asks the chief priests, scribes, and elders about the origins of John's baptism, seems to underscore its novelty. Perhaps this is also reflected in

6. Cf. Joan E. Taylor, 'John the Baptist', in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 819-821.

7. Cf. Lars Hartman, 'Baptism', *ABD* 1:585, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261875-0752>.

8. Cf. e.g. E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, Century Bible (London: Nelson, 1966), 86-87; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 108-109.

9. Cf. Dieter Sanger, "'Ist er heraufgestiegen, gilt er in jeder Hinsicht als ein Israelit" (bYev 47b): Das Proselytentauchbad im Fruhjudentum', in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, ed. David Hellholm et al., BZNW 176 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 291-334, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110247534.291>.

10. John J. Collins (cf. 'Sibylline Oracles: A New Translation and Introduction', in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1: *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 388, n. e2) sees evidence of the Baptist's influence on later Jewish proselyte baptism in the Fourth Sibylline Oracle, which may have been written as early as the late third century BCE, but which underwent redaction by Jews in the late first century CE (cf. Collins, *OTP* I: 381-382). A *terminus a quo* is established by the reference to the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. In a section toward the end reminiscent of the preaching of John, the redactor admonishes those living in the last times to change their way and repent, conspicuously by washing their bodies in the 'perennial rivers' (Sib. Or. 4:161-165). Like John's baptism, this washing seems to constitute a one-time event rather than a programme of daily ritual washings.

11. Cf. e.g. William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 49; Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 112; Mark Strauss, *Mark*, ZECNT 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 64; Joel Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, Studies on Personalities of the New Testament (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018), 78-80.

the curiously worded trope that John ‘publicly announced a baptism’ (κηρύσσω + βαπτίσμα), which seems to have become the standard early Christian way of describing its introduction (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 10:37; 13:24). Meier’s conclusion that ‘the precise nature of John’s baptism stems from John’s own eschatological vision and message’ therefore seems entirely warranted.¹² If this is correct, it implies that we must try to determine the meaning of John’s baptism with reference to the clues that the Gospels lay out for us rather than by constructing (purely conjectural) traditio-historical explanations against the background of early Judaism.

One thing that is sufficiently clear from the biblical record is that, in contrast to developments in later reception history, the earliest believers in Jesus did not identify John’s baptism with Christian baptism. John himself stresses the difference between his baptism and the one that the coming Messiah will perform: John’s is ‘with water’, but the Messiah’s will be ‘with the Holy Spirit’ (Mark 1:8 parr.). Thus, it should come as no surprise that John’s baptism is nowhere depicted in the New Testament as a pre-Easter version of later Christian baptism, nor does Christ’s baptism by John serve as an exemplar of Christian baptism that believers are enjoined to follow.¹³ In Acts especially, Luke goes out of his way to stress the discontinuity between John’s baptism and Christian baptism,¹⁴ twice reiterating John’s emphasis on their distinctiveness, once on Jesus’s lips (Acts 1:6) and once on Peter’s (11:16). Indeed, in one intriguing passage (19:1-7), Luke recounts Paul’s curious encounter with disciples of the Baptist in Ephesus who had, it seems, been baptised by John over twenty years previously.¹⁵ As far as Paul is concerned, that is not ‘close enough’. He demands that they be baptised in the name of Jesus. Only then do they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

12. Cf. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. II: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 52.

13. Cf. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 105.

14. This is not to deny the conspicuous continuity between the *ministries* of John the Baptist and Jesus. In fact, according to John the Evangelist, Jesus was initially involved in John’s baptismal movement for a brief time (John 3:25-26). The NT clearly views their ministries as two successive parts of one momentous eschatological event. Cf. esp. Clint Burnet, ‘Eschatological Prophet of Restoration: Luke’s Theological Portrait of John the Baptist in Luke 3:1-6’, *Neot* 47 (2013): 1-24. We will see, however, that their respective baptisms probably symbolised different concepts and varied in mode accordingly.

15. So also Paul R. Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, WUNT 166 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 128-129.

3. The Location of John's Baptismal Ministry

The Synoptic Gospels offer only general information about the location of John's baptismal ministry, but they are united in stressing its connection to the river Jordan. Matthew (3:13) and Mark (1:9) state explicitly that Jesus was baptised in the Jordan. Luke does not specifically mention the location of Jesus's baptism, but he does say that John went through 'all the region of the Jordan' (Luke 3:3: ἦλθεν εἰς πᾶσαν τὴν περίχωρον τοῦ Ἰορδάνου) preaching a baptism of repentance. John the Evangelist gives more precise information, noting that the site where John performed his baptismal rite was 'beyond the Jordan' (πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου; John 1:28; 3:26; 10:40) at a place called 'Bethany' and further that it was located near a village called 'Aenon near Salim' (John 3:23).

The traditional site for John's baptismal ministry in general and Jesus's baptism by John in particular is some five miles north of the point where the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea, roughly at the level of Jericho. The testimony of the early church on this point is consistent and strong. In the middle of the third century CE, Origen (*Comm. Jo.* VI.24) stated that the site is 180 stadia (or roughly 32 kilometres) from Jerusalem, which accords with the traditional location.¹⁶ A century later, this same location was corroborated by the Pilgrim of Bordeaux in his account of a journey to the Holy Land in 333 CE.¹⁷ Finally, the earliest extant map of Palestine, the Madaba Mosaic from the sixth century CE (see Figure 1), locates 'Aenon, which is now called Sapsaphas' (ΑΙΝΩΝ ΕΝΘΑ ΝΥΝ Ο ΣΑΠΣΑΦΑΣ) on the east bank of Jordan River.¹⁸ It is directly across from 'Bethabara', which the map identifies as the home of John the Baptist (ΒΕΘΑΒΑΡΑ ΤΟ ΤΩ ΑΓΙΩ ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ ΤΩ ΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΑΤΟΣ).

16. Cf. Bargil Pixner, *Wege des Messias und Stätten der Urkirche*, Studien zur Biblischen Archäologie und Zeitgeschichte 2 (Giessen: Brunnen, 1991), 170.

17. Cf. Aubrey Stewart, *Itinerary from Bordeaux to Jerusalem: 'The Bordeaux Pilgrim' (333 A.D.)*, Palestinian Pilgrims' Text Society (London: Adelfi, 1887), 26.

18. There is evidence for a town of this name elsewhere in the region, and this other Aenon has occasionally been deemed the correct site. Eusebius placed it six miles south of Scythopolis, the capital of the Decapolis (*Onom.* 40.1). Albright believed it was near Shechem in Samaria (cf. William F. Albright, 'Recent Discoveries in Palestine and the Gospel of St. John', in *Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: University Press, 1956), 153–155). It is noteworthy that the Madaba Mosaic confirms the existence of this more northerly Aenon while at the same time distinguishing it from the traditional baptismal site (cf. Jerry Pattengale, 'Aenon', *ABD* 1, 87).



Figure 1: The locations of Aenon and Bethabara according to the Madaba Mosaic. (Detail from image by Jean Housen. CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons.¹⁹)

Despite the strength of early tradition concerning the site of the Baptist's ministry, some scholars have questioned it in recent years. They have done so for two reasons.

3.1 The Lack of Evidence for 'Bethany' (John 1:28) At or Near the Traditional Site

As we saw above, Origen confirms the traditional site of John's baptismal ministry, but he notes that he knows of no town in that region called 'Bethany', though there was one called 'Bethabara'. Still, he admits that the 'Bethany' reading is preserved in 'nearly all' the manuscripts of John available in his day. Origen's judgement is confirmed by modern textual criticism: though the variant $\beta\eta\theta\alpha\beta\alpha\rho\alpha$ does not lack early attestation (Epiphanius of Salamis: 376; Majuscule T: fifth century),²⁰ it is clearly a secondary reading, and it may well have arisen due to Origen's

19. Full image: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11775950>.

20. Cf. Rainer Riesner, *Bethanien jenseits des Jordan: Topographie und Theologie im Johannes-Evangelium* (Giessen: Brunnen, 2002), 14.

influence. The best manuscripts read βηθανία.²¹ In any case, Origen's ignorance of any site named 'Bethany' on the lower reaches of the Jordan does not rule out the possibility that John knew of a local tradition inaccessible to Origen a century and a half later. Still, this incongruence has made many scholars sceptical of the traditional location.

3.2 Geographical and Temporal Constraints of the Narrative in John's Gospel

The main reason that many scholars prefer a more northerly location has to do with the fact that it squares better, in their minds, with the geographical and temporal constraints of John the Evangelist's narrative where it refers to the site of John the Baptist's baptismal ministry. Two texts are thought to be especially problematic in this regard, and it is necessary to discuss them in some detail below.

3.2.1 *John 1:19-51*

In John 1:28 the Evangelist places John the Baptist in 'Bethany beyond the Jordan', and in John 1:29 Jesus comes to him there. (The text does not explicitly state that John is still in that location, but it is strongly implied.) In what follows, there is an oblique reference to Jesus's baptism (John 1:32-34), but that does not necessitate taking this as the point in the narrative at which Jesus's baptism occurs, as some readings of the text do.²² It seems rather to be a reminiscence on the Baptist's part of an event that lay in the past, with the forty-day wilderness temptation of Jesus (which the Evangelist does not mention) presumably occurring in between. John 1:35 resumes the narrative, describing Jesus's encounter with two of John's disciples 'on the next day' (τῆ ἐπαύριον). One of them is Andrew, the brother of Peter, who henceforth follows Jesus (John 1:40). The account of Peter's call follows immediately in 1:41-42. This is hard to harmonise with the Synoptics (which place the call of both Andrew and Peter at the Sea of Galilee; cf. Mark

21. Pace Jeremy M. Hutton, "Bethany Beyond the Jordan" in *Text, Tradition, and Historical Geography*, *Biblica* 89 (2008): 311-312, who maintains that 'reading βηθανία in John 1:28 as a historically accurate piece of information is problematic on a number of levels'. The problems he identifies, however, presume first that the verse is an 'addition by the gospel writer that rearranges the account he received from ... the Signs Source' and second 'some slim reconstructable textual support for the preservation of a tradition concerning the existence of a settlement named בית עברה located on or near the Jordan'. Thus, the alternative Hutton offers is at least as tenuous as the problem he thinks it can solve.

22. Cf. e.g. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 148.

1:16-18 and parallels) if immediate temporal succession is implied. That, however, is not demanded by the text, and the most coherent reading is one that takes these verses as a parenthesis referring to Peter's earlier call in this description of Jesus's later encounter with Andrew.

The real bone of contention is in the next verse. John 1:43 reads 'On the next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee, and he found Philip. Jesus said to him "Follow me"' (τῆ ἑπαύριον ἠθέλησεν ἐξελθεῖν εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν καὶ εὗρίσκει Φίλιππον καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀκολούθει μοι). The narrative assumes that Jesus is still in 'Bethany beyond the Jordan', and critics contend, quite rightly, that it would have been impossible for Jesus to make the trip from the traditional baptismal site to Galilee in one day. They therefore conclude that the actual site must have been within a day's journey of Galilee.²³

3.2.2 *John 10:40-11:44*

If the problem in the first chapter of John seems to be that there is too little time to make the trip from the traditional baptismal site to Galilee, the opposite problem confronts us here: the journey from the traditional site to Bethany by Jerusalem takes much too long. We read in John 10:40 that after a confrontation with Jews in the Temple during Hanukkah, Jesus 'went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been previously baptising and he remained there' (καὶ ἀπῆλθεν πάλιν πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου εἰς τὸν τόπον ὅπου ἦν Ἰωάννης τὸ πρῶτον βαπτίζων καὶ ἔμεινεν ἐκεῖ). John then relates the story of Lazarus of Bethany. When Lazarus falls ill, his sisters send word to Jesus (John 11:4), and Jesus 'remained in the place where he was two days longer' (John 11:6: ἔμεινεν ἐν ᾧ ἦν τόπῳ δύο ἡμέρας) before departing for Bethany, by which time Lazarus had died (John 11:14). When Jesus finally arrives, Lazarus has been dead for four days (John 11:38). According to critics, the narrative implies that Jesus did not depart until Lazarus died.²⁴ If that is the case, then the narrative assumes that it took Jesus and his disciples four days to get from the traditional baptismal site to Bethany by Jerusalem, a journey that could have been accomplished in a day and under normal conditions certainly would not have taken more than two days.

3.3 An Alternative Proposal: Bethany = Batanea

For the reasons outlined above, some scholars have searched for alternatives. A location farther north on the Jordan near Scythopolis was first proposed in the

23. Cf. e.g. Benjamin A. Foreman, 'Locating the Baptism of Jesus (John 1:19-2:1)', in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*, ed. B. J. Beitzel (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 71-73.

24. Hutton, "Bethany Beyond the Jordan", 72.

late nineteenth century,²⁵ but it was William Brownlee who first suggested that Bethany is to be identified with the region of Batanea (the name derives from the Old Testament Bashan) to the east of the Sea of Galilee,²⁶ and this proposal has become popular in recent years.²⁷ However, Batanea is a very large region, and any proposal concerning the location of John's baptismal ministry demands greater specificity. Bargil Pixner²⁸ and Rainer Riesner²⁹ both sought to strengthen the thesis of a northern Bethany by narrowing down the location to a site on the lower reaches of the river Yarmuk to the west of Gadara and south of the Sea of Galilee. They offer a plethora of thoroughly researched topographical, orthographical, and textual evidence in support of this thesis, and it has found a following among scholars.³⁰

3.4 Problems with the Modern Proposal

Despite the detailed arguments mustered in defence of a northern location, it is problematic for several reasons. First, it seems unlikely that in the first century CE Batanea would have been thought to include the area to the west of Gadara. Instead, contemporary sources confirm that the region extending from the Jordan valley immediately south of the Sea of Galilee to Gadara would have been thought of as belonging to the Decapolis or perhaps Syria, but not Batanea.³¹ The map of 'Palestine in the 15th year of Tiberius' reign' that Riesner himself includes in his book makes this clear.³² His interpretation depends on extending the conceptual boundaries of Roman-era Batanea toward the south west to include those of Old Testament Bashan, which did in fact reach to the Jordan. Still, it seems unlikely

25. Cf. Claude R. Conder, 'The Site of Bethabara', *PEQ* (1875), 72–74; Claude R. Conder, 'Bethany Beyond Jordan', *PEQ* (1877), 184–187, <https://doi.org/10.1179/peq.1877.9.4.184>.

26. Cf. William H. Brownlee, 'Whence the Gospel According to John?', in *John and Qumran*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (London: Chapman, 1972), 167–174.

27. Cf. e.g. Carson, *John*, 146–147.

28. Cf. Pixner, *Wege*, 169–179.

29. Cf. Riesner, *Bethanien*, 122–128. Cf. Rainer Riesner, 'Bethany Beyond the Jordan (John 1:28): Topography, Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel', *TynBul* 38 (1987): 29–63, <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30556>; Rainer Riesner, 'Bethany Beyond the Jordan', *ABD* 1, 703–705. It should be noted that Riesner has recently modified, or at least clarified, his position: he now accepts that the traditional site is, in fact, 'die Haupt-Taufstelle des Johannes', though he continues to maintain that Jesus was not baptised there but at the northern site he and Pixner identify as Bethany. Cf. *Messias Jesus: Seine Geschichte, seine Botschaft und ihre Überlieferung* (Giessen: Brunnen, 2019), 108–109.

30. Cf. Foreman, 'Locating', 71–73.

31. Cf. Roy E. Ciampa, 'Decapolis', *Dictionary of the New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 266–268.

32. Riesner, *Bethanien*, 11.

that John the Evangelist would have equated the two, especially if he is to be identified with John the son of Zebedee, who would have known the region well.

Second, evidence for $\beta\eta\theta\alpha\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ as an ancient orthographic variant for Batanea has yet to be found. To be sure, several different spellings are attested, some very close to $\beta\eta\theta\alpha\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$, and several Aramaic variations would have lent themselves to transliteration as $\beta\eta\theta\alpha\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$, so that it is within the realm of reasonable conjecture that this could have been a contemporaneous rendering.³³ Still, the fact remains that this variant is not independently attested for Batanea.

Finally, both Mark (1:9) and Matthew (3:6) are explicit about the fact that Jesus was baptised in the Jordan. This is hard to square with a proposed location on the lower reaches of the Yarmuk.

3.5 Another Look at John 1:19-51 and 10:40-11:44

Given the problems associated with a northern location for Bethany, it is worth paying closer attention to the allegedly problematic Johannine texts to see whether they really demand it. There are, in fact, completely coherent alternate ways of reading these texts that pose no difficulties for the assumption that the traditional baptismal site is, in fact, the correct one.

3.5.1 *John 1:19-51*

As we saw, critics of the traditional site think this text demands a journey from the baptismal site to Galilee of one day, which was clearly impossible in the New Testament era. This critical reading rests, however, on two unproven assumptions about the account. The first of these is that the phrase ‘the next day’ in John 1:29,35,43 is meant to be taken literally rather than being simply a stylistic feature of John’s narrative. As Riesner himself points out, it is possible that John may be consciously constructing a symbolically laden seven-day week stretching from 1:19 through 2:11.³⁴

The second assumption is that the events of John 1:43b-51 occur on the same day as those described in John 1:43a, i.e. that there is no temporal break in the narrative between Jesus going to Galilee and finding Philip. It is possible, however, that John simply compresses the actual course of events to make for better narrative flow, rather than saying explicitly ‘On the next day, Jesus decided to go to Galilee, and once he arrived and got himself situated, he sought out Philip.’³⁵ Alternatively, it is possible to read the events of John 1:43b-51 as taking

33. Cf. Carson, *John*, 147.

34. Riesner, *Bethanien*, 73-74.

35. John clearly compresses a narrative in this way in at least one other passage. In relating Jesus’s Bread of Life discourse, which takes place in Capernaum, he places Jesus on

place not in Galilee but at the baptismal site. John 1:43a does not actually say that Jesus went to Galilee and met Philip there; it states only: a. that Jesus wanted to go to Galilee and b. he found Philip. Andrew, who was also from Bethsaida (John 1:44), was at the baptismal site when Jesus called him, and the text implies that he was a disciple of John (John 1:35-40). It is entirely possible that Philip was with him there. Read this way, the text would mean that Jesus asked Andrew, Philip, Nathaniel, and perhaps Peter, who were with John's disciples at the baptismal site, to accompany him on his journey to Cana, where they arrived three days later (after what would have been a strenuous but feasible trek).

3.5.2 *John 10:40–11:44*

The view that this text demands a journey from the baptismal site to Bethany by Jerusalem of three or four days (much too long, it will be recalled) also rests on the unproven assumption that the narrative places Jesus in Bethany beyond Jordan at the beginning of John 11. Though John 10 ends with Jesus there, there is no compelling reason to assume that the account of Lazarus picks up at that point. There is no time indicator as in John 1, and in fact the new account begins with a very general introductory phrase 'now a certain man was ill' (John 11:1: ἦν δέ τις ἀσθενῶν). In other words, the narratives are not explicitly tied together, and there is no indication that they follow temporally one on the heels of the other. We simply do not know where Jesus was when he started out for Bethany by Jerusalem.

We conclude that upon closer examination, the temporal and geographical data in the relevant Johannine texts pose no compelling reasons for questioning the traditional baptismal site.

4. The Meaning of John's Baptism

We have seen that John's baptism was his own innovation and that the traditional site is probably the place where he performed his rite. There is certainly no evidence in the New Testament that John ever baptised anywhere other than in the river Jordan.³⁶ This simple observation is often neglected in commentary on the baptismal texts, but it is what makes John's baptism unique among early Jewish and New Testament water rituals, and any proposal regarding the meaning

the shore of the Sea of Galilee at the beginning of the narrative (John 6:22-25), but by the end of the narrative, Jesus has moved to the synagogue (John 6:59). The point at which this takes place is not recounted.

36. Cf. Josef Ernst, 'Wo Johannes taufte', in *Antikes Judentum und Frühes Christentum*, ed. Bernd Kollmann et al., BZNW 97 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 362–363.

of John's baptism must satisfactorily account for it. One theory that deserves more consideration is that John's baptism was intended to represent a symbolic enactment of the return from exile and that it consisted not merely of immersion in the Jordan but of crossing it from east to west. This theory, I believe, most adequately accounts for its intriguing features.

I am not the first to propose such a reading. Colin Brown did so in a 1997 article in the *Bulletin for Biblical Research*.³⁷ He maintains that 'John was organizing a symbolic exodus from Jerusalem and Judea as a preliminary to recrossing the Jordan as a penitent, consecrated Israel in order to reclaim the land in a quasi-reenactment of the return from the Babylonian exile' and further that 'baptism was effected by heeding John's call to leave the land and follow him in penitence into the Jordan and return as consecrated members of a renewed Israel'.³⁸

Although Brown initially put forward the thesis that John's baptism involved crossing the Jordan, he does not offer much in the way of evidence to support it. In what follows, I will try to remedy that situation. Also, it should be noted that my understanding of the symbolic import of John's baptism differs from Brown's in two important ways. First, I disagree that it represents a symbolic re-enactment of the return from the Babylonian exile (i.e. an event in the past). Rather, I think it anticipates the still unfulfilled return of all the tribes to the land. By crossing the Jordan into Israel, John's disciples identify with the Old Testament prophetic expectation that the exiled tribes would return from captivity in Assyria (and to a lesser extent Babylon, that return having already at least been partially fulfilled) after being gathered by the Messiah and led back into the land that God had promised to restore to his people (cf. Isa 11:11-16; 35:8-10; 49:5-6; 63:17; Ezek 48:30-35). This expectation engendered a palpable and widespread longing for its fulfilment in the Second Temple period (cf. Sir 36:10-13; 48:10; Pss. Sol. 17:26-31; T. Benj. 9:2; T. Naph. 5:8; 4 Ezra 13:39-47; 2 Bar. 78:1-7; 1QM II, 2-3; III, 12-13), including among the followers of Jesus (cf. Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30; Acts 26:7; Jas 1:1). As we will see, John's baptism fits well within this paradigm.

From this it follows, second, that I do not share Brown's conviction that leaving the land before returning has symbolic significance for John (an allusion, in his view, to the Elijah-Elisha narratives). The Gospels contain no evidence of John 'organizing a symbolic exodus' in Jerusalem and Judea; in fact, they never place him there. Rather, crossing the Jordan from west to east seems to have been a simple necessity to get people who lived on the west bank to the right

37. Cf. Colin Brown, 'What Was John the Baptist Doing?', *BBR* 7 (1997), 37-50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26422318>.

38. Brown, 'What Was John the Baptist Doing?', 45.

starting point, so that they could enter the promised land from east to west, as the returning exiles would have been conceived as doing.³⁹

5. Evidence for the Proposal

The biblical evidence that John understood his baptism as an anticipatory symbolic enactment of the return of all the tribes of Israel from exile is of two different kinds, which can be grouped under following categories: the typology of John's baptism and the trajectory of John's baptism.

5.1 The Typology of John's Baptism

Although Mark's discussion of John's baptismal ministry is brief (Mark 1:1-11), it is full of explicit and implicit references to Old Testament texts that provide a matrix for interpreting it. Even before he mentions John's name, in fact, the evangelist is at pains to situate his ministry within the context of a 'return from exile' paradigm.⁴⁰ He does so by combining in *gezerah shawah* fashion a blended quotation from Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1 with Isaiah 40:3:

Mark 1:2: ἰδοὺ ἀποστέλλω τὸν
ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου ὃς
κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδὸν σου

Mark 1:3: *φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ*
ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου εὐθείας
ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ.

Exod 23:20: καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἀποστέλλω τὸν
ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου

Mal 3:1: ἰδοὺ ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου καὶ
ἐπιβλέσεται ὁδὸν

Isa 40:3: *φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ἐτοιμάσατε*
τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους τοῦ
θεοῦ.

Mark, it seems, wants us to know that whatever John is up to, it should be read against the Old Testament expectation that God would once again bring his people out of exile and back into the land. Just as after the first exodus God appointed a messenger to go before the people and prepare the way for them back to the land of promise (Exod 23:20), he will do so again ahead of an even greater exodus and return in the future (Mal 3:1).

39. It is also hard to imagine that John would have demanded of his followers from Galilee (among them Andrew, Simon Peter's brother; cf. John 1:35-40), who tended to travel south along the east bank of the Jordan in order to avoid Samaria (except during the festivals when there was generally, but not always, safety in numbers; cf. Josephus, *Ant* 20.118), that they first cross the river from west to east so that they could exit and enter the promised land before traversing the river a fourth time on their journey home.

40. Cf. e.g. Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, WUNT 88 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), esp. 53-90.

Mark's reference to Isaiah 40:3 is particularly intriguing in this context for two reasons. First, Matthew and Luke quote only the Isaiah text in their introductions to John and his ministry (Matt 3:1-3; Luke 3:1-6), thereby highlighting its importance for the Synoptic tradition. Second, as is well known, the Essene community in Qumran refers to the same text when explaining why they removed themselves from Jerusalem – 'the dwelling of the men of sin' – and settled where they did – very near the place of John's baptismal ministry. They wanted to 'prepare a highway in the Arabah for God' (1QS VIII, 13-14). As we noted above, it is unlikely that John was closely associated with the Qumran community, but clearly both he and they felt that this general location was an ideal place to await the coming Messiah. Interestingly, they were not the only ones who thought that way. Josephus recounts how during the reign of Fadus, the first procurator of Judea (44–46 CE), a man named Theudas assembled a following at the River Jordan, claiming that he, like Joshua, would stop its flow and lead the people across it, presumably with the intention of establishing a Messianic kingdom (*Ant.* 20:97-98).

Only after situating John's ministry within this auspicious paradigm does Mark tell us what John's ministry entails: he is 'proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1:4: κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν). The eschatological import of this formulation is easily lost on modern readers, but it would have been quite salient to the Jewish believers in Mark's audience. As N. T. Wright has pointed out, 'repentance' in first-century Judaism was not only something individuals were called to do; it was more fully what the prophets required of Israel as a nation enduring exile due to their rebellion against God.⁴¹

To be sure, in the LXX, the Greek verb μετανοέω generally carries a nuance of personal regret, an aspect of John's baptism that Mark does not neglect (cf. Mark 1:5). That emphasis does not stand alone, however; rather, it is subsumed into the grand narrative of God's redemptive and restorative work on behalf of his people, as the Old Testament references in Mark 1:2-3 make clear. That this nuanced conception of repentance was operative in Jesus's day is confirmed by the Hexapla recensions of the LXX. They offer strong evidence that already by the first century BCE μετανοέω had become 'the preferred equivalent of ἐπιστρέφομαι',⁴² which normally translated the Hebrew **וָשׁוּב**, a term with rich connotations of both a turning back to God and a return from exile. The term

41. Cf. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 248–250.

42. J. Behm, 'μετανοέω, μετάνοια', *TDNT* 4: 990.

μετανοία would thus have evoked the Old Testament prophetic conviction that if the people of Israel would 'turn' from their wicked ways, God would allow them to 'return' from exile to the land (2 Chr 6:37-38; 30:9).

Within this context, 'forgiveness of sins' would have been understood not only as God's gift to individuals, but ultimately as an eschatological hope with strong conceptual links to the promise that he would make a new covenant with his people and forgive their unfaithfulness to the Sinai covenant (Jer 31:31-34).⁴³ For the prophets, that hope went hand in hand with the expectation that all the tribes of Israel would someday return from exile (Jer 33:7-8; Ezek 36:24-28).⁴⁴

Be that as it may, Mark certainly seems intent upon placing Jesus's baptism by John within a 'return from exile' paradigm. This becomes apparent when we note the strong intertextual links between Mark's account in Mark 1:9-11 and Isaianic second exodus motifs. These are highlighted in the following diagram.

Mark 1:9-10 (NRSV)

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan.

¹⁰ And just as he was **coming up out of the water**, he saw the heavens torn apart and **the Spirit descending** like a dove on him.

Isa 63:11-12; 64:1a (NRSV)

¹¹ Then they remembered the days of old, of Moses his servant. Where is **the one who brought them up out of the sea** with the shepherds of his flock? Where is the one who put within them **his holy spirit**, ¹² who caused his glorious arm to march at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name ... ¹ O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ...

Three thematic correspondences between these two texts are quite conspicuous: first, the opening of the heavens, second, the rising up out of the waters, and third, the descent of the Spirit. Others have seen these,⁴⁵ but the Isaianic context that Mark evokes has not always received the attention it deserves as a resource for interpreting John's baptism. In Isaiah 63:7-64:12, the prophet is portrayed as looking ahead to the future exile of Israel and transporting himself into that context. From that perspective, he wistfully yearns for the end of exile and longs

43. Cf. Joel White, 'Der eine Bund hinter den Bündern im Alten und Neuen Testament: Die Treue Gottes in heilsgeschichtlicher Vielfalt', in *Kernthemen neutestamentlicher Theologie*, ed. A. Baum and R. van Houwelingen (Giessen: Brunnen, 2022), 48-49.

44. For a thorough analysis of the link between the forgiveness of sins and the end of exile in the OT prophetic literature, cf. Wright, *Jesus*, 268-272.

45. Cf. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 107.

for a new Moses,⁴⁶ or perhaps a new Joshua,⁴⁷ to lead the people through the waters that separate them from the land of promise. Mark could hardly have done a better job of casting Jesus in this role.

A further point of correspondence is the identification of Jesus by the divine voice with the Isaianic Servant of Isaiah 42:1:

Isa 42:1 MT	Isa 42:1 LXX	Mark 1:11
<p>הֵן עַבְדִּי אֲתִמְדָּבֹו בְּחִירִי רְצֹתָהּ נִפְשִׁי</p>	<p>Ἰακωβὸς ὁ παῖς μου, ἀντιλήμψομαι αὐτοῦ, Ἰσραηλ ὁ ἐκλεκτός μου, προσεδέξατο αὐτὸν ἡ ψυχὴ μου</p>	<p>σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου, ὁ ἀγαπητός ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα</p>
	<p>Isa 42:1 as quoted in Matt 12:18 ἰδοὺ ὁ παῖς μου ὃν ἠρέτισα, ὁ ἀγαπητός μου εἰς ὃν <u>εὐδόκησεν</u> ἡ ψυχὴ μου</p>	

As the table above illustrates, the quotation of Isaiah 42:1 in Mark 1:11 (and the other synoptic accounts, cf. Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22) follows the MT closely. The LXX departs from this reading significantly, but Matthew is at pains to bring the text back into conformity with the Hebrew text when he quotes the passage in full.⁴⁸ It is in any case clear that within the context of the Servant Song, Isaiah portrays the Servant as God's chosen instrument to bring his people out of exile (Isa 42:7), leading them through the waters (Isa 42:15; 43:2,16; 44:27) back to the promised land. Mark, it seems, goes out of his way to highlight these 'return from exile' motifs in his depiction of Jesus's baptism by John.⁴⁹

5.2 The Trajectory of John's Baptism

The traditions concerning the location of John's baptismal ministry that are reflected in the Madaba Mosaic (see above) present the careful reader with an enigma that has seldom received the attention it deserves. For if the Baptist lived on the west bank of the Jordan, as the map suggests, it means that he regularly

46. So also J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 118–119.

47. Cf. Mark J. Keown, *Jesus in a World of Colliding Empires: Mark's Jesus from the Perspective of Power and Expectations*, vol. 1: *Introduction and Mark 1:1–8:29* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 147–150.

48. Cf. Craig Blomberg, 'Matthew', in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 43.

49. One of the felicitous side effects of this understanding of Jesus's baptism is that it minimises the problem that arises if it is viewed as a proto-Christian baptism for the remission of sins. Jesus is clearly identifying with his people in the baptism of John, but within a 'return from exile' paradigm, he is primarily taking up his Messianic role of leading the people out of exile.

crossed it with large crowds from Judea and Jerusalem in tow to baptise them 'beyond the Jordan' (John 1:28; 3:26; 10:40) – that is, on the east bank of the river.⁵⁰ If the baptism of John was accomplished simply by immersion in the Jordan, it is strange that he should have gone to the trouble of compelling the crowds to cross over to the far side, be baptised there, and then go back across the river after it was all over. That seems like a great deal of effort to no apparent purpose. Why did John not simply baptise his followers on the west bank?

The most compelling answer to that question, and the one I am putting forward here, is that John's baptism consisted in crossing the Jordan from east to west. Jews who submitted to the rite symbolically enacted the return from exile and entry into the land of promise. On this reading, those baptised would not only have been expressing personal remorse for their sins; they would also have been consciously identifying themselves in the closest possible terms with the grand narrative of the OT prophets, in whose tradition John stood – God's gathering of his people and returning them to the land. That narrative encompassed, as Isaiah intuited in the passage alluded to by the Synoptic Gospels when describing Jesus's baptism (see above), both the past exodus and the return from exile, which had begun with the return of the southern tribes from Babylon but was far from complete in the minds of Jews in Jesus's day. John was announcing the culmination of that narrative. He was not 'preparing a way for the Lord' in some abstract sense; he was preparing God's people for the coming of the Messiah, who he expected would soon return with the still exiled tribes to establish his kingdom in Jerusalem.

If this thesis is correct, it may explain one curious feature of Mark's account: the fact that, according to Mark 1:9, Jesus was baptised 'into the Jordan' (εἰς τὸν Ἰορδάνην) rather than, as one would expect and as Matthew puts it in Matthew 3:6, 'in the Jordan' (ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνη ποταμῷ).⁵¹ The preposition εἰς carries the notion of forward motion, as opposed to ἐν, which is purely locative in force. If commentators mention this anomaly at all, they usually attribute it to the fact that in Hellenistic Greek εἰς often displaces ἐν.⁵²

While I have no cause to question the grammarians on this point generally, my own analysis of the 212 occurrences of εἰς in Mark did not reveal any indisputable

50. Of course, we cannot be sure that the map preserves an accurate historical reminiscence, but even if it does not, the way this early tradition conceptualises the juxtaposition of the baptismal site and the dwelling of John on opposite sides of the river demands some explanation.

51. This grammatical anomaly is noted by Brown, 'John', 45, n. 27.

52. Cf. BDF §205.

instances of such displacement. In fact, except for the idiomatic expressions εἰς ὄδον (Mark 6:8; 10:17) and εἰς τί (with the meaning ‘why’ in Mark 14:4; 15:34), every instance implies, and almost all demand, motion.⁵³ On the other hand, Mark is well aware of the distinction between the prepositions and even uses ἐν in 1:5 when he wants to state at what location people were being baptised by John (cf. Matthew’s identical usage in Matt 3:6). When, however, on the one occasion he describes the actual baptism of an individual by John, he chooses εἰς. Though the data are admittedly sparse, they allow for the possibility that Mark was consciously implying that John’s baptism entailed movement into the Jordan river.

Modern readers miss these clues because they simply assume that the meaning and mode of John’s baptism are roughly equivalent to Christian baptism. Baptismal rituals and religious art through the centuries have instilled in readers of the Gospels the presumption that Jesus’s baptism by John involved immersion (or even sprinkling), but not crossing a body of water. We should not, however, discount the evidence that early Christians could and did conceive of baptism in that latter fashion. Paul, for instance, views Israel’s crossing of the Red Sea as a baptism into Moses (1 Cor 10:1-2), and Origen speaks of those ‘who through the sacrament of baptism have parted the waters of the Jordan’ (*Hom. Jos.* 4:1). The ‘immersion’ paradigm is not *a priori* more likely than the ‘crossing’ one.

6. Conclusion

It is my hope that the analysis offered in this paper will allow us to answer Colin Brown’s 1997 question, ‘What was John the Baptist doing?’, with some confidence. He was announcing the imminent end of Israel’s exile and awaiting the Messiah who would lead God’s people over the Jordan and into the promised land. He encouraged faithful Israelites to cross the Jordan in a symbolic act that anticipated this next great salvific event, and thus to prepare themselves for it. Perhaps only John knew it, but the Messiah was already among them, ready to take up his role at the head of the throng.

53. Some texts are admittedly ambiguous. Mark 5:14 reads ἔφυγον καὶ ἀπήγγειλαν εἰς τὴν πόλιν καὶ εἰς τοὺς ἀγρούς; here the use of εἰς could be due to the attraction of φεύγω. In several Marcan texts a form of the verb ἔρχομαι seems to be elided before εἰς. So in 10:10 (cf. 1:29; 3:27), 13:3 (cf. 1:35), 13:10 (cf. 1:39), and 13:16 (note the double use of εἰς in that verse).

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