

Why Didn't John the Baptist Commit Himself to Jesus as a Disciple?

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Abstract

In the Synoptic Gospels a significant interval seems to exist between the time John the Baptist was arrested, his hermeneutic suspicion about Jesus' messiahship, and his killing. John's Gospel notes how two of John's disciples join Jesus as his disciples and yet how after this both John and Jesus continued functioning with their respective communities of disciples and, indeed, if you follow one redaction, with their respective baptisms. There is no biblical evidence indicating that John the Baptist ever became a disciple of Jesus, even though it seems he had plenty of time to do so. In fact, to this day, a community of disciples of John the Baptist still exists in the Middle East. A more critical reading of Luke and, especially, Matthew points to the possibility that John's "pre-understanding" vis-à-vis the Messiah kept him from making the leap of faith to become a disciple of Jesus.

In the "Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," the Pontifical Biblical Commission (q.v.) discusses "pre-understanding." This notion refers to ways we approach a biblical text with certain mindsets that cannot find verification in the text itself. This presents a "danger," according to the PBC. It notes that in "Catholic exegesis, the risk is that of attributing to biblical texts a meaning which they do not contain but which is the product of a later development within the tradition. The exegete must beware of such a danger" (§513).

Aware that this "pre-understanding" may color our own "received" notions about John the Baptist, his story as well as that of his disciples, yet building on 25 points raised in the four Gospel accounts, I have concluded that nothing in the scriptures shows either that John "followed" Jesus as a disciple or that any but two of his disciples ever became Jesus' disciples. This leads one to question John's real effectiveness vis-à-vis being the "Precursor" as well as his ability (or willingness?) to influence others to follow Jesus. This leads us to probe the "why?" of this article's title.

A Compilation of What the Various Texts Tell Us about John the Baptist

First, let us create a kind of history of what the four Gospels tell us about John the Baptist, especially in terms of his disciples and those of Jesus.

He was the son of Zechariah (Luke 1:40ff; 3:2) and Elizabeth, a relative of Mary, the Mother of Jesus (Luke 1:36).

He was chosen by God (John 1:6–8) to be the Precursor of Jesus and to give testimony to him (John 1:19ff). This is confirmed by his unique conception, his quickening in the womb of his Mother at her encounter with Mary as well as the circumstances and the name given him at his birth (Luke 1:36–80).

As an adult he had withdrawn from the wider society, establishing his base in "the wilderness" of Judea (Mark 1:4; Matt 3:1, 11:7; Luke 3:2, 4; 7:24), "across the Jordan" (Mark 1:5, 6; Matt 3:5–6; Luke 3:3; John 1:28, 3:26, 10:40).

He saw himself as a voice crying in the wilderness via his message of conversion in the spirit of Isaiah (Matt 3:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23).

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Commitment to his way demanded repentance (Matt 3:2) for the forgiveness of sins via baptism (Mark 3:4; Luke 3:3; see Mark 11:30–32; Matt 21:25–32; Luke 20:4–6). Among those who believed in John were tax collectors and prostitutes; this belief in John led to their repentance (Matt 21:32). Following John also involved a social transformation of the baptized vis-à-vis those victimized by societal patterns (Luke 3: 10–14).

John's baptism involved a way of life that was rigorous. It set the baptized apart from "the world," including radical approaches to eating, drinking and clothing (Mark 1:6, 12:18–20; Matt 3:4, 9:14–17; Luke 5:33–39).

In the Fourth Gospel, John's baptism with water was meant to reveal Jesus to Israel (John 1:31); yet for Jesus the baptism of John was to "fulfill all justice" (Matt 3:15; see 21:32) or "what was proclaimed by the law and the prophets" (Matt 11:13; Luke 7:16).

Those coming to John for baptism included "the multitudes" (Luke 3:7) as well as "many of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt 3:7), although Luke says that the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for them by rejecting John's baptism (Luke 7:30). Each grouping was called a "brood of vipers" (Matt 3:7; Luke 3:7).

John made it clear that his baptism (Luke 7:29) was preparatory for the greater one of Jesus, which would follow him. This later baptism would not be with water for repentance, but with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8; Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 3:33) and with fire (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16).

In John's Gospel, the Baptist called Jesus "the Lord" (John 1:23), "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, see John 1:36), "the Son of God" (John 1:34). In comparison to Jesus, John acknowledged his limitations (John 1:20–23, 26–27, 30–31; 3:27–30).

Jesus came to Judea to be baptized by John, i.e., to become a disciple of John (Mark 1:9–11; Matt 3:13, 15–17; Luke 3:21–22), despite John's protest that Jesus should baptize him, i.e. that he should become a disciple of Jesus (Matt 3:14). However, when Jesus began his ministry (at least in John's Gospel), John did not make the commitment to follow Jesus, nor to receive Jesus' baptism.

The Fourth Gospel makes it clear that, for sure, at least two disciples of John the Baptist became followers of Jesus (John 1:35–40). At least one of them indicated that, in Jesus, they had "found the Messiah" (John 1:41).

In John's Gospel the Baptist continued to baptize disciples despite the fact that Jesus was creating a community of disciples (whether or not this was with baptism). In an earlier redaction, both forms of discipleship were evidenced

in the respective baptisms of John and Jesus (John 3: 22–23, 26; 4:1), but in different places (John 3:22–23). All this took place before John's imprisonment (John 3:24). Jesus interpreted his own message ("testimony") as "greater than John's" (John 5:36).

A later redaction in the Fourth Gospel says that Jesus himself was not baptizing; rather his disciples were baptizing (4:2), but in whose name were they baptizing, and to what did their baptism refer? While this is never explained, these passages make it clear that, despite his encounter with Jesus and, unlike at least two of his disciples who joined Jesus (one of whom confessed Jesus to be "the Messiah"), John continued with his own baptism and, therefore his own community of disciples despite Jesus' signs. Although "many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing" (John 2:23), there is no record that these "signs" were able to convince John. Instead he continued his former pattern of preaching penance and making disciples (John 3:22ff). These disciples exist to this day, especially in Iraq. Since the Second Iraqi War, many have fled to Syria.

Jesus followed the pattern of John in teaching his disciples how to pray (Luke 11:1–4; see Matt 6:9–15).

Fasting was a way John's disciples were differentiated from those of Jesus, who did not fast (Mark 2:18–22; Matt 9:14–17; Luke 5: 33–39).

John challenged King Herod regarding his marriage to Herodias, the wife of his brother (Mark 6:18; Matt 3:4; Luke 3: 19), as well as "for all the evil things that Herod had done" (Luke 3:19).

John's challenge to Herod led to his imprisonment (Mark 6:17; Matt 4:3; Luke 3:20; see Mark 1:14; Matt 4:12; Luke 3:20). Once imprisoned, it seems he never was freed (see Matt 11:2; Luke 7:18).

In Mark and Matthew, after Jesus' temptation, when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, Jesus "withdrew." There is no record of Jesus protesting John's arrest. After this (at least in Mark and Matthew) Jesus calls his own disciples (Mark 1:14–20; Matt 4: 12–22).

It seems the majority of John's disciples stayed with John rather than become disciples of Jesus. They remained faithful to him even when he was in prison (Matt 12:2; Luke 7:19).

According to Matthew (who has not used the word for "Messiah" of Jesus since 1:1, 16, 17, 18 and 2:4), the imprisoned John seems to have generated a crisis of faith as to whether Jesus actually was the Messiah his "pre-understanding" had envisioned (Matt 12: 2; see Luke 7:18, 20).

After the Jesus of Matthew responded to John's disciples about his (messianic) identity, Jesus offered his own interpre-

tation of John the Baptist. He saw in John the spirit/power of Elijah (Matt 11:14; see Luke 1:17). He noted, even before John's execution, that, among those born of woman none was greater than John (Matt 11:11a; Luke 7:28a) "yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Matt 11:11b; Luke 7:28b).

Despite the evangelists' portrayal of Jesus making it clear, from Isaiah, that he was doing the works of the Messiah (Matt 12:3–6; Luke 7:19–23), no biblical evidence indicates that John became a disciple of Jesus.

Having earlier professed faith in Jesus, John was executed (Mark 6:17–28; Matt 14: 5–11; see Mark 6:14; Matt 14:2; Luke 9:7–9). However, the last we hear about him in prison is that he had a crisis of faith vis-à-vis Jesus and his supposed messianic functioning.

Upon John's execution, his disciples took away his body (Mark 6:29; Matt 14:12).

Much has been written about the origin and interpretations of the "enigmatic verse" about the "least" one [i.e., a disciple] in the kingdom of God" being "greater than" John the Baptist (Matt 11:11b; Luke 7:28b; Viviano, 42–47). Given its unique placement in Matthew and Luke, it would be considered arising from the Q Source. Recognizing this, Warren Carter offers a summary of some of the main meanings (Carter). However, I have found reasons to offer another meaning. This brings me to the second part of this article.

Despite Not Becoming a Disciple, Why Was John Considered Great as Well as Least?

Traditionally the meaning of the passage about "the least in the kingdom" being the "greatest" vis-à-vis John the Baptist has been argued from a "pre-understanding" that considered a disciple of Jesus greater than anyone, including John, because of such a person's baptism in the Risen Christ. Yet Matthew has Jesus make this statement before the resurrection, when it portrays Jesus calling his followers the "least ones" (Matt 25:40, 45; see Mark 9:42; Matt 10:42, 18:6, 10, 14; Luke 17:2). I believe this meaning of the "least" stands in contrast to Viviano's grounding of the text in Daniel 4:14 and 4:17 [Viviano: 47–54].

Furthermore, in John's Gospel, despite the fact that an earlier redaction refers to Jesus' own baptizing (John 3:22, 26; 4:1) with a later version rejecting that statement (John 4:2), one can rightly ask: why, even before the resurrection, did not John (who had professed his need to decrease [see John 3:30]) become one of the "least" ones, i.e., a disciple of Jesus or, at the least, instruct his disciples to join the two

that had become disciples of Jesus? Why did he, no matter which version of the Gospels we read, continue with his own community of disciples?

I can only conclude that, despite his earlier theoretical conviction that Jesus was "the one who was to come" and was, indeed "the Son of God" (whatever the precise sense that expression had at that time), Jesus' unorthodox deeds (i.e., the "works he was performing" (Matt 11:2; Luke 7:19) had created for John a crisis of faith. Here I follow Juan Luis Segundo's "hermeneutic circle," as explained in his *Liberation of Theology* (Segundo). It begins with a jarring experience that leads to ideological suspicion; for John it seems to have begun with his own imprisonment (Matt 11:2; see Luke 7:18). Here the Baptist seems to have moved to Segundo's second step of calling into question everything, including one's theological presuppositions (here it would be his pre-understanding regarding the expected behavior of the Messiah).

From the jarring experience to the existential questioning, it never becomes clear whether John was able to take the third step of truly questioning whether his own "prevailing interpretation of the Bible has not taken important pieces of data into account;" much less commit himself to Jesus' understanding of the deeper implication of his preaching and actions. Had he done so, this might have led to the fourth and final step in the hermeneutic circle: a "new way of interpreting" the scriptures about Jesus. He would have changed his own thinking and embraced that interpretation as found in Matthew and Luke. Despite the Matthean and Lukan interpretation of Jesus' actions as messianic in the spirit of Isaiah (Matt 11:3–6; Luke 20–23), whether John the Baptist actually accepted this understanding, much less acted on it in a way that would lead him to the belief of a disciple (i.e., to become one of the "least" in the kingdom of heaven/God) is never resolved. Indeed, had such a conversion occurred, it is likely we would know. Instead we have silence.

While such a question can be raised legitimately (at least by scholars, if not by those "who might be scandalized" [possibly evidencing their own unwillingness to enter Segundo's hermeneutic circle]), it cannot be denied that we have no scriptural record of John the Baptist ever publicly calling into question Jesus' messianic identity. If he had his doubts he kept them to himself and some chosen disciples. Though these disciples were told by Jesus to return to John and tell him about his works that would evidence his authenticity (i.e., his orthodoxy being revealed in his orthopraxy), we never are told (1) whether these disciples of the Baptist were able to bring him this "good news" or, if they did so, (2) whether Jesus' explanation convinced John of his mes-

sianic identity as the one bringing this “good news.”

It is important to realize that John’s imprisonment and execution did not occur because of his connection to Jesus; it occurred because of his challenge to the ways of Herod. Having noted this, if we stay faithful to the texts as we have received them, it seems John went to his death doubting Jesus’ messiahship or, at the very least, so unsure that we have no evidence that his earlier professed faith in Jesus as the Messiah was enough for him to commit to him as a disciple and invite his disciples to do the same. (The reader/believer is left wondering at what the text does not say.) As evidenced in John the Baptist’s crisis of faith, free of our “pre-understandings,” it seems an unbiased reading leaves us with the figure of John the Baptist as a reformist Jew who also may have wanted desperately to become a believer but was unable to become convinced of Jesus’ messiahship, much less (if we follow an earlier redaction of John’s Gospel) accept Jesus’ “baptism.”

This makes us ask: Why couldn’t he make this commitment at the most critical moment of his life: his death-impending imprisonment? While his martyrdom for moral principles gave him what some later called a “baptism of desire,” we still are left wondering why, before that, his desire to proclaim Jesus never led to a public commitment to become his disciple, even if Jesus never baptized.

Could it be, recalling the Isaiah passage used in all four Gospels of those who did not receive Jesus’ message, I wonder whether John too “had eyes to see but could not and ears to hear but did not.” At this point it is important to recall that Jesus’ response to John’s question came precisely because John had heard what Jesus was doing (Matt 11:2; Luke 7:18) and sent his disciples to question Jesus about his identity. But unlike the ones Jesus condemned for their hardness of heart that led them to refuse conversion (Mark 4:12, 8:17a–18b; Matt 13: 14–15; Luke 8:10b; John 12:39–40), it is clear that Jesus assumed John had eyes to see (“go and report what you see”) and ears to hear (“go and report what you hear”), and that this seeing and hearing evidence a sincere searching. This assumption seems confirmed when he invites those hearing his interpretation of John’s identity/purpose as needing “ears to hear” (Matt 11:15).

Where was the breakdown? Building on the Synoptics, I believe the issue regarding John’s non-acceptance of Jesus’ discipleship involves a way of seeing and hearing that led to *differences in understanding* (Mark 4:12; Matt 13:14; Luke 8:10b). I don’t think it was the lack of hearing or the seeing that kept John from converting to the message of Jesus. After all, in Matthew’s Gospel, the core message of both was

exactly the same; a change of heart enabling God to reign (Matt 3: 2 and 4:17). Later Jesus assumes that John actually is part of this reign (see Matt 11:12; Luke 16:16). It was not that the core message itself differed; it was the way the message would be put into practice. This is where the difference occurred. And, ultimately, the difference was based, I believe, on a difference in understanding. John understood the message in one way and acted on it; Jesus differed in the way it should be expressed in one’s life and lifestyle.

Gerhard Barth has shown that Matthew omitted or interpreted differently all the Markan passages that indicate lack of understanding on the part of the disciples (Barth). However, a central element in Matthew’s notion of discipleship is that they are disciples precisely because they understand (*syniēnai*). Matthew uses the word, according to his meaning, nine times; it expresses the response invited by Jesus’ words (13:13, 14, 15, 19, 23, 51; 15:10; 16:12; 17:13). Matthean disciples understand by acting on Jesus’ teachings; outsiders do not (Matt 13:13–15). The point of “understanding” in Matthew is that Jesus’ words are put into practice by his disciples. Their shared understanding creates a household of faithful disciples (Matt 13:51–52).

In John’s Gospel the people declare, “Everything that John said about this man [Jesus] was true.” Their hearing and seeing lead to their belief (John 10:41–42). If this was so, why didn’t John the Baptist himself “understand” in a way that would make him commit himself to Jesus as his disciple? I believe it was because his understanding was so clouded by his “pre-understanding” that, despite Jesus’ effort to explain his messianic identity to John, that testimony as to his messianic identity just never convinced John, as far as we know, to the breakthrough of belief that would make him a disciple of Jesus. John approached Jesus’ words and deeds from a mindset that was unable to change, not because of any hardness of heart but because of the mindset itself. In this sense, he did not have hardness of heart but a lack of understanding or ignorance of heart. As such it was not culpable—as was the case with others Jesus challenged.

We have a common saying about “Doubting Thomases” based on the Apostle Thomas’ non-experience of the resurrected Jesus (John 20:24–25). More recently we have been intrigued by the “crisis of faith” experienced by Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. In my mind, however, a new reading of the texts noted above reveal John the Baptist as the one with the *original crisis of faith* in the Gospels. In the process he becomes, for me, an exemplary model of one who believes in Jesus enough to struggle as to whether he is indeed, the Christ. While many of us today have resolved that struggle

in ourselves, by accepting the revelation of Jesus as risen and as the Christ, I certainly can have more sympathy with those who, like John the Baptist, without the experience of Thomas or even Teresa, just could not make such a commitment to accept Jesus as their Lord and God. His doubts, colored by his "pre-understanding" about the Messiah, seemed to have kept him from making the leap of faith.

Despite this—and more importantly—our reflection invites us to ask: Could it be that Jesus himself was actually honoring all seekers like John who have not been able to come to the belief of the "least ones" not because they have not been sincere enough—as is evidenced of their willingness to probe him himself about his ultimate identity? Could it be that their very "lack of faith" (or, really their own crisis of faith) does not come from any hardness of heart but from some pre-understandings of the nature/function of the messiah that could not be shaken? And, finally, as Jesus proclaimed of John, should they also not be honored as "great" precisely because they have been willing to ask such a question about Jesus' ul-

timate identity and, if not satisfied, have been reconciled with going to their deaths still convinced the answer they sought had not received a compelling response?

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