

the Baptist as the promised new Elijah. Luke makes no reference to the Baptist as the fulfilment of Malachi's prophecy, either when Jesus answers the Baptist's question or in his Transfiguration account.



Could Jesus Have Been a Disciple of John the Baptist?

There is no statement in the Gospels about Jesus ever having been a disciple of John the Baptist. However, the way the Gospel authors refer to John and his relationship to Jesus, shows that they felt the need to emphasise the distinction between the two to their readers whilst at the same time not undermining John's work. For many scholars, this provides clues to a pre-existing relationship between the two, one where Jesus may well have been one of John's inner circle, prior to commencing his own ministry.

If Matthew and Mark were the earliest Gospels, as generally held, then it may well have been the case that these would have been read by many people who had been disciples of John the Baptist and who would have known that Jesus had been an early follower of John. The case for the 'student' surpassing the 'master' would, in those circumstances, have to be carefully argued. Thus, John's role as the standard bearer of the Messiah is given prominence, including the nature of his death, whilst emphasising that he himself was not that person. In reality, there is no other real purpose served by describing his death in such detail in Matthew's and Mark's Gospels other than showing due respect to him to his followers.

Luke's Gospel maintains that strategy but in a structure that reinforces Jesus' relationship to the Baptist by showing them to be cousins. However, he may have felt that by then there was less practical need to give full measure to the life of the Baptist. By the time of John's Gospel, the need to refer in detail about the Baptist would have been even less, even enabling the author to have the Baptist stating that he had not known Jesus personally (Jn.1).

Jesus in the Gospels

4. Jesus and John the Baptist



Questions For Reflection

1. Why was Jesus depicted as being baptised?
2. What is the significance of John the Baptist?
3. Why do you think Matthew and Mark record how John the Baptist met his death?

The Significance of John the Baptist

One of the striking features when reading the Gospels is the prominence given to John the Baptist.

In all four Gospels John is shown as preaching the impending coming of the Lord as promised in Isaiah (ch.40) and the need for baptism (Mtt.3, Mk.1, Lk.3 & Jn.1). John's Gospel even includes the Baptist in its philosophic prologue about the Word, describing John as a witness to the 'light', while Jesus himself spreads lavish praise on John (see below). John's role is to fulfil the last prophecy of the Old Testament, that of Malachi (ch.3) that a risen Elijah would come to indicate the coming 'Day of Yahweh'.

Baptism and John

It is unclear where the need to baptise came from. Mainstream Judaism is clear about the need for ritual washing and the Essenes sect also stressed this. However, the notion of a formal cleansing from sin by baptism is a new development. The only possible basis for it occurs in Ezekiel (ch.36) where God promises a return home for the exiled Jews, after being cleansed by water being poured over them.

It is interesting that the Synoptic tradition depicts Jesus as being baptised but John's Gospel does not. The latter instead shows John explaining how he saw the Spirit like a dove come down on Jesus as a sign he was the chosen one (Jn.1). However, even in the synoptic gospels only Matthew and Mark make John Jesus' baptiser. In fact, in Luke (ch.3), John's imprisonment is described immediately prior to the statement about Jesus' Baptism, but this may just be an error in the narrative sequence made when the gospel was being finally edited.

Luke and the Baptist

The opening of Luke's Gospel intertwines the births of John the Baptist and Jesus.



The Baptist's birth is foretold, then Jesus' conception is announced to Mary. Then John is born and circumcised, followed by Jesus' birth and circumcision. Then it is told that John had a hidden life and a period of preparation in the desert before commencing his preaching and so does Jesus.



Luke (ch.5), together with Matthew (ch.9) and Mark (ch.2), also parallels Jesus and the Baptist in relation to the different behaviour of their disciples about fasting. This parallel of opposites serves to define the nature of the mission of Jesus

This parallelism comes to a climax with the Baptist sending a question to Jesus, asking whether he is the Messiah (ch.7 and Mtt.11). This question is really one meant for his own disciples, so that they would realise who Jesus really was. John's previous comments about Jesus show that he already knew the answer.

Despite this initial emphasis on the Baptist, Luke only refers to his death indirectly and then only in fleeting term (ch.9) whereas Matthew (ch.14) and Mark (ch.6) do so in considerable detail. It is as if, in Luke, the Baptist had served his purpose and no longer needed further attention. The reason for this will be discussed below.

Jesus' Praise of John the Baptist

Both Matthew and Luke continue the episode of the Baptist's question to Jesus with a remarkable speech of praise about him by Jesus. Jesus describes John as being '**much more than a prophet**' and states that, '**of all children born to women none has been greater than John the Baptist**'. In Matthew, Jesus also announces John to be the new Elijah, fulfilling the prophecy of Malachi.

After the Transfiguration, Matthew (ch.17) and Mark (ch.9) Jesus is shown as confirming the culmination of Malachi's prophecy in John