



## John the Baptist

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### Introduction

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In the New Testament, John the Baptist (c. 6 BCE–30 CE) is remembered as a preacher of fiery judgment and as the forerunner of Jesus. He was associated with the wilderness and baptized his co-religionists in the Jordan River. His conflict with the Herodian family led to his execution by Herod Antipas sometime in the third or fourth decade of the first century ce. Modern historians typically conceptualize John as an [‘apocalyptic’ Jewish figure](#). This article is broken down into two parts. First, it underscores basic difficulties of constructing the historical John the Baptist. Second, it outlines the features of first-century traditions that could plausibly be understood as intersecting with first-century apocalyptic ideology. Coupled with the recognition that seemingly most claims regarding the historical John the Baptist are fiercely debated among scholars, the present discourse’s application of the terms [‘apocalyptic’](#) and [‘apocalypticism’](#) in reference to the Baptist is not intended to convey that the actual first-century figure operated with an apocalyptic outlook. Rather, the listings of traditions in the primary sources that depict John the Baptist are intended to underscore their conceivable points of overlap with apocalyptic frameworks of thought.

### The Sources and Their Problems

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Several complex issues confront the historian who endeavours to access the John the Baptist of history. This section briefly outlines three of these problems. Firstly, the primary sources do not always agree with one another. For example, the Gospels of Mark and Matthew identify John the Baptist as Elijah, who was expected to return ‘before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes’ (Malachi 4:5; Mark 9:11–13//Matthew 17:10–12; Matthew 11:14 (cf. Luke 16:16); cf. Luke 1:17). The Fourth Gospel’s John, however, denies his identity as Elijah (John 1:21,24–28)—an assessment from a God-approved witness whom the Fourth Gospel expects its readers to trust (John 1:6–8). The general configuration of John the Baptist as Jesus’s forerunner in the Gospels differs from Josephus, who does not appear to link the Baptist with Jesus or early Christianity (*Antiquities* 18.116–19) (Mason 2003, 217; cf. Nir 2012, 2019). Consider also that the three earliest written traditions of John’s death depart from one another. Matthew, for instance, conveys that Herod Antipas wanted to kill John but (temporarily) refrained due his fear of the populace (Matthew 14:5). In contrast to Matthew’s portrait, fear of the crowds did not prevent Antipas from seeking John’s execution. It rather propelled him to take pre-emptive action by striking the Baptist before

an uprising materialized (*Antiquities* 18.118). Mark's Antipas, furthermore, sought to *protect* John from the real culprit who wanted to kill him—Herodias (Mark 6:19–20).

In an influential article republished as an excursus in his 2010 monograph, Dale Allison (2003, 6–27) questioned the scholarly manoeuvre of 'elucidating Jesus by contrasting him with John [the Baptist]' (2010, 204). Allison based his objection on the simple irony that some scholars somehow expect the latter figure—concerning whom the data available are considerably limited, especially compared to that concerning Jesus—to illuminate the former figure (2010, 205). Whatever one makes of Allison's argumentation, his discussion aptly captures the second problem of 'doing history' with respect to John: the relevant evidence available to configure his life is sparse.

In the third appendix of his 2018 book, Joel Marcus (2018, 129–32) provides a helpful catalogue of every reference to John the Baptist in the canonical Gospels and Josephus. He estimates that the Synoptic Gospels ([including Q](#)) speak of John the Baptist in twenty-five units of tradition, the Gospel of John in ten, and Josephus in one. A quick glance at the nature of the data, moreover, brings this meagreness into sharper focus. Josephus's late first-century work, *Antiquities of the Jews*, includes a parenthetical summary of John's message and execution (*Antiquities* 18.116–19). The summary of John's message therein is restricted to a mere two sentences (Allison 2010, 206). The Synoptic Gospels offer brief abridgments of John's preaching and rite of baptism (Mark 1:1–8; Matthew 3:1–12; Luke 3:1–20) and Jesus's baptism by John (Mark 1:9–11; Matthew 3:13–17; cf. Luke 3:18–22), and some speculation regarding the identity of Jesus vis-à-vis John (Mark 6:14–16; Matthew 14:1–2; Luke 9:7–9). Mark and Matthew have accounts of John's beheading and headless burial under the direction of Herod Antipas (Mark 6:17–29; Matthew 14:3–12; cf. Luke 3:19–20; 9:9). As Martin Dibelius once put it in reference to Mark's version, the story contains elements that would better fit 'in the palace of a fairy-tale king than in the palace of Herod' (1911, 79). Concerning the Baptist's direct speech, Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.116–19) does not quote him. And, as Allison observes, John's own speech in Mark's Gospel spans only two verses (1:7–8) (Allison 2010, 206; but cf. Mark 6:18). The most extensive block of biographical material about John—his infancy narrative (Luke 1:5–25, 39–45, 57–80)—is preserved only in one source and is widely considered by scholars to be a legendary construct aimed at demonstrating John's inferiority to Jesus from their infancies (Taylor 1997, 9). As for John's Gospel, apart from 1:26–27 and 3:23, most traditions concerning the Baptist are treated cautiously by scholars in their historical reconstructions (Allison 2010, 206–7). Finally, John also appears in several apocryphal and Gnostic texts, patristic writings, Mandaean literature, and the later *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions*. However, these works are typically relegated to the margins in terms of their value for reconstructing the life of John (Lupieri 1988; Ernst 1989; Webb 1991; Lupieri 1992; Tatum 1994; Taylor 1997; cf. Marcus 2018, 11–26).

To be sure, from the vantage point that the non-elite of antiquity rarely left behind smatterings of their existence, the very fact that we have some early traces of John the Baptist at all is quite remarkable. Nevertheless, in light of the small volume of evidence we do have, we must remind ourselves that 'we can know very little about John as a person' (Taylor 1997, 9). Allison's assessment—'the brief summary descriptions of the Baptist are just that, brief summary descriptions' (2010, 207)—is sobering. Of course, this recognition does not necessarily mean that we can know nothing about John. At minimum, it compels us to acknowledge the restricted data at our disposal and proceed carefully without going past the evidence.

Not only is the ancient evidence about John the Baptist slighter than we would like it to be but also the

traditions we do have are conditioned by the concerns of the literature that preserves them. That is to say, Josephus and the Gospel writers do not dispassionately remember the Baptist; like any ancient text, their portrayals are selective and bent by their rhetorical strategies and convictions. Josephus condenses John's preaching to an exhortation of 'justice' and 'piety towards God' (*Antiquities* 18.117). These expressions encapsulate Greco-Roman civilization's chief moral values and showcase Josephus's attempt to demonstrate for his Greek-speaking readers that Jews exemplify these values (Mason 1992, 66, 153; 2003, 214–15). Josephus transforms the Baptist 'into a popular moral philosopher of Stoic hue' (Meier 1994, 21). Accordingly, if there was any apocalyptic language of resistance in John's preaching, Josephus is either unaware of it or quells it (cf. Meier 1994, 20). With respect to the Gospels, generally speaking, they share the same aim: to persuade readers of Jesus's status as the messiah. The Gospel of John is perhaps the most explicit about this agenda:

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31, emphasis added)*

On the one hand, the Gospels seem reluctant to admit tradition about John that might undercut Jesus's superior messianic identity. The prevalent scholarly interpretation is that the Gospels, as Meier puts it, 'struggle to "make John safe" for Christianity' (Meier 1994, 21). John is consistently subordinated to Jesus as the latter's forerunner. Mark appears to position Jesus in 1:9–11 as the fulfilment of John's anticipation of a coming 'stronger one' (1:7–8). In Greek, the comparative adjective 'stronger one' (*ischyroteros*), as the grammatical category implies, makes a comparison: John is placed in the inferior position as Jesus (the superior one) is in turn proclaimed God's beloved son (1:11). Whereas Mark's Jesus submits to John's 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (1:4; 9–11), Matthew's Jesus undergoes John's baptism only after the Baptist objects and acknowledges his own inferiority: 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' (Matthew 1:14). Luke mentions Jesus's baptism in passing after John has already been imprisoned by Herod Antipas (Luke 3:21–22). The Gospel of John seems careful to avoid mentioning Jesus's submission to John's baptism explicitly (John 1:29–33). The Fourth Gospel's John, moreover, outright denies the possibility that John himself was 'the Messiah' (John 1:20,28; cf. 1:8). Instead, John's identity consists entirely of his being the 'witness' to Jesus's distinctiveness as the Son of God (John 1:6–8,19–23,24–28,29–34,35–37). The Fourth Gospel does not even refer to John according to his synoptic moniker, 'the Baptist/Baptizer'.

On the other hand, the Gospels also show signs of associating Jesus (and/or Jesus's followers) with John the Baptist's authority and prestige. From this vantage point, the Jesus tradition is not so much intent on subordinating John to Jesus in a bid to placate or combat potential embarrassment as much as it is fixated on capitalizing on John's fame in order to bolster Jesus's prestige. The Gospels afford John a prominent role in their narratives. The 'beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ' (Mark 1:1) is indelibly linked to John, whose proclamation of baptism was so popular that 'the entire Judean countryside' and 'all the Jerusalemites' flocked to him (Mark 1:4–5; cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116–19). In an essay published in 2012, Rafael Rodríguez questioned the standard scholarly manoeuvre of authenticating Jesus's baptism by John via the criterion of embarrassment: 'The association of the lesser-known Jesus with the prestigious **prophetic** figure, John, *enhanced* the former's reputation, at least until it didn't anymore' (Rodríguez 2012, 143). Thus, while the transmission history of Jesus's baptism by John shows traces of embarrassment, perhaps

even as early as at the textualization of the Gospel of Matthew, this does not necessitate that this tradition was always embarrassing.

According to Mark 11:27–33 (Matthew 21:23–27//Luke 20:1–8), Jesus implicitly situates his authority alongside that of John, whom the people regarded as a [prophet](#). Jesus's assertion that 'the least in the kingdom of God is greater than [John the Baptist]' (Matthew 11:11b//Luke 7:28b) is only worthwhile if John's status as the greatest human is assumed (Matthew 11:11a//Luke 7:28a). Thus, although the saying subordinates John to Jesus, it is less about diminishing John than it is about harnessing John's prestige. As for John's reduction to a mere 'witness' to Jesus in the Gospel of John, John and Jesus are the only human characters in this Gospel described as being 'sent from God' (1:6; 3:17,28,34; 5:36,38; 6:29,57; 7:29; 8:42; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3,8,18,21,23,25; 20:21). In this regard, it is precisely because of John's stature as God-approved that his 'witness' concerning Jesus is considered trustworthy. Finally, John's importance is assumed in Acts 1:21–22 when the replacement of the dead Judas Iscariot is chosen on the condition that the replacement was with Jesus and the twelve Apostles 'beginning from the baptism of John' (1:21–22).

The Jesus tradition about the Baptist, therefore, appears torn between the impulses of acknowledging John's standing and minimizing it. Of course, both impulses are not strictly dichotomous insofar as they relativize John's prestige in relation to Jesus. But ascertaining a clear picture of the Baptist that takes into account these influences is difficult. Both strategies hold the potential to distort or elucidate the Baptist of history. Accordingly, the historicity of virtually every tradition about John is fiercely debated among scholars. The persistent 'Christianizing' of John the Baptist across the Gospels has led Rivka Nir (2019) to doubt the possibility of recovering an independent 'Jewish' portrait of the Baptist. Marcus (2018, 9–26) attributes the strong rhetoric of the Fourth Gospel in particular with evidence of competition between early Christians and early followers of John the Baptist. He suggests that 'the most logical explanation' that 'makes the most sense' is that the Fourth Gospel is actively debating John the Baptist followers who proclaimed John—not Jesus—as the messiah (2018, 11–12). The historical John that emerges from his study is one with an apocalyptic outlook of himself as the inaugurator of God's Kingdom. Marcus is not alone in hypothesizing that some sort of competition between the two groups existed (e.g., Meier 1994, 21). Others, however, reject the competition hypothesis (Backhaus 1991; 2011, 1752–53) or caution against an overemphasis on polemic in projecting messianic rivalry as the Gospels' immediate contexts (Wink 1968, 107–15; Rothschild 2005, 36–43). Renewed research on the historical John the Baptist is needed in dialogue with advancements on memory, tradition, and historiography (see, e.g., Kirk and Thatcher 2005; Le Donne 2009; Rodríguez 2010; Keith 2011; Keith and Le Donne 2012; Keith 2014).

## The Apocalypticism of John the Baptist

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This section provides a catalogue of tradition in the Gospels and Josephus that could plausibly be understood as intersecting with Jewish apocalyptic ideology. The catalogue consists of four general categories.

### Eschatology

First, there are sayings credited to John the Baptist that focus on eschatology, the anticipation of a coming figure, the kingdom of heaven, judgment, and repentance. Additionally, the Gospel of John situates John as

a recipient of divine revelation:

- 1. In Mark 1:7–8, the Baptist anticipates a coming ‘stronger one’ who will ‘baptize you in/with the Holy Spirit’. According to Matthew 3:11–14//Luke 3:15–18, the coming ‘stronger one’ will baptize ‘with the Holy Spirit and fire’, ‘clear his threshing floor’, ‘gather the wheat into his granary’, but ‘burn’ the chaff ‘with unquenchable fire’. The present-tense verb *erchomai* in Mark 1:7//Matthew 3:11//Luke 3:16, moreover, makes this anticipation seem imminent. Daniel McManigal (2019) argues that John the Baptist’s water-baptism functions as a **prophetic** sign-act of the coming one’s immersion in Spirit/fire in Matthew 3:11. According to Matthew 11:2–6//Luke 7:18–23, John sends disciples to Jesus to ask whether Jesus is ‘the one who is to come’ (*ho erchomenos*). Jesus’s response—which includes a reference to ‘the poor’ having good news proclaimed to them (Matthew 11:5//Luke 7:22; see also Isaiah 61:1)—implicitly affirms John’s query. As for whom John envisaged this coming figure to be (if this tradition preserves something the Baptist actually anticipated), Yahweh, the Son of Man, Elijah, or the messiah are frequent suggestions (see Webb 1991, 282–88).
- 2. In Matthew 3:7–10//Luke 3:7–9, John questions the crowds concerning who warned them to flee from ‘the wrath about to come’. He cautions that every tree not bearing good fruit will be ‘cut down’ and ‘thrown into the fire’. The imagery of ‘fire’ also appears in Matthew 3:11–14//Luke 3:15–18. The description of ‘wrath’ as ‘about to come’ (Matthew 3:7//Luke 3:7), the note that the axe is ‘already’ lying at the root of the tree (Matthew 3:10//Luke 3:9), and the persistence of the present-tense verbs translated as ‘is lying’, ‘not bearing’, ‘is cut down’, and ‘is thrown’ (Matthew 3:10//Luke 3:9) underscore the temporal nearness of this expectation. According to Matthew 3:2, John similarly highlights the proximity of the kingdom of heaven: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near (*ēngiken*).’
- 3. Upon his appearance in the wilderness, in Mark 1:4, John the Baptist proclaims ‘a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’. Similarly, Luke 3:3 has John announce ‘a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’. And Matthew 3:11 has John state: ‘I baptize you with water for repentance.’ In Matthew 3:2, John’s proclamation of the impending kingdom substantiates his command to ‘repent’. Mark and Matthew each indicate that those who accepted John’s proclamation underwent his baptism ‘confessing their sins’ (Mark 1:5; Matthew 3:6).
- 4. The Fourth Gospel rehearses John’s testimony that he himself ‘beheld the spirit descending from heaven as a dove and it remained on him [Jesus]’ (John 1:32). Thereafter, John explains that he was a recipient of divine revelation, which explains the significance of his encounter with Jesus and the descent of the spirit: ‘I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, “The one on whom you see the spirit descending and remaining, this is the one who baptizes with the holy spirit”’ (cf. Mark 1:10–11//Matthew 3:16–17//Luke 3:21–22). In the Gospel of John’s narrative, of course, the figure who ‘sent’ John is God (John 1:6; 3:28).

### **Elijah and the Voice of Isaiah 40:3**

Second, the Gospels contain several passages that associate John with (1) Elijah, who would prepare the way of the Lord’s coming (Malachi 3:1–5; 4:5–6; Sirach 48:10; cf. *Sibylline Oracles* 2.187–89; 4Q558 [fragment 1 ii]), and/or with (2) the voice in the wilderness who would prepare the way of the Lord’s coming (Isaiah 40:3):

- 1. The Gospel of Mark aligns John’s appearance and proclamation in the wilderness (Mark 1:4) with (1)

the Lord's messenger (Elijah?), who would prepare the Lord's way (Mark 1:2; Malachi 3:1; cf. Malachi 4:5-6; Exodus 23:20), and (2) the voice in the wilderness also preparing the Lord's way (Mark 1:3; Isaiah 40:3). Matthew 3:3//Luke 3:4-6 link John with the voice in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3) but do not wed this designation to Malachi 3:1. According to John 1:21-23, John denies his Elijan identity but identifies himself as the voice in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3).

- 2. According to Matthew 11:10//Luke 7:27, Jesus identifies John the Baptist as the messenger of Malachi 3:1 who would prepare the Lord's way. Matthew's account portrays Jesus proceeding to explicitly label John as Elijah: 'And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come' (Matthew 11:12). The parallel passage in Luke 7:24-28 does not include Jesus's identification of John as Elijah.
- 3. In the descent from the transfiguration (Mark 9:9-13), Peter, James, and John ask Jesus 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' (Mark 9:11). Jesus then says that Elijah is in fact coming to restore everything (9:12) before indicating that 'Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased as it is written about him' (9:13). The 'they did to him whatever they pleased' seems to be an allusion to John the Baptist's beheading under Herod Antipas's authority, previously narrated at Mark 6:17-29. Ernst (1989, 34) attributes Mark's lack of an explicit identification of John as Elijah in 9:9-13 to Mark's narrative technique of indirectness. Matthew's version of the descent is similar to Mark's but ends with the explicit note that the disciples understood Jesus to be associating John the Baptist with Elijah: 'Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist' (Matthew 17:13; cf. 14:3-12). The Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John do not recount the descent from the transfiguration.
- 4. John's clothing in Mark 1:6//Matthew 3:4 is described as 'camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist', which seems to recall the [prophet](#) Elijah's similar garb: 'They answered him, "a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist." He said, "It is Elijah"' (2 Kings 1:8). The wording of Elijah's description in 4 Kingdoms 1:8 (LXX) is very similar to the Greek of Mark 1:6. The Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John do not recount the descriptions of John's dress found in Mark 1:6//Matthew 3:4.
- 5. John the Baptist's anticipation of the stronger figure who comes 'after me (*opisō mou*)' (Mark 1:7; Matthew 3:11; cf. Luke 3:16) and his interaction with Jesus at the Jordan River, where the latter is anointed with the spirit [of God] (Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17), might recall the relationship between the [prophets](#) Elijah and Elisha. In the Greek version of 1 Kings (3 Kingdoms), Elisha runs to Elijah and offers to follow 'after you [Elijah] (*opisō sou*)' (3 Kingdoms 19:20 [LXX]). And in 2 Kings 2:6-15, Elijah and Elisha cross the Jordan River together and the latter receives a double portion of the former's spirit.
- 6. The death of John the Baptist (Mark 6:17-29; cf. Matthew 14:3-12; Luke 3:19-20; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116-19) might be modelled on the conflict between Elijah, King Ahab, and Jezebel. According to Mark 6:17-29, John repudiated the marriage between 'King' Antipas and Herodias (6:18), and Herodias sought to kill the Baptist (6:19). According to 1 Kings 18:17-18, Elijah rebuked King Ahab for idolatry, which is indelibly linked to Ahab's marriage to Jezebel (see 1 Kings 16:31-33). In 1 Kings 19:2, moreover, Jezebel swears to kill Elijah (see Pellegrini 2000, 280-81).
- 7. According to Luke 1:17, an angel of the Lord declares to Zechariah that John the Baptist would go before the Lord in 'the spirit and power of Elijah'. Luke's Gospel generally seems to distance John the Baptist from an Elijan identity, however. Luke 3:4-6 links John with the voice in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3) without connecting this designation to the messenger (Elijah?) of Malachi 3:1 (cf. Malachi 4:5-6). Luke 7:24-28 links John the Baptist to the messenger of Malachi 3:1 but does not explicitly identify this

messenger as Elijah (cf. Matthew 11:10–12). The description of John’s clothing (Mark 1:6//Matthew 3:4) that parallels the dress of Elijah in 4 Kingdoms 1:8 (LXX), the descent from the transfiguration (where John is associated with or identified as Elijah: Mark 9:9–13; Matthew 17:9–13), and the account of the death of John the Baptist (Mark 6:17–29; Matthew 14:3–12) (which may be intended to recall the conflict between Elijah, Ahab, and Jezebel) all have no Lukan counterparts. Luke, moreover, tends to affiliate Jesus with Elijah (see Luke 7:7–17 (cf. 1 Kings 17:17–24); 9:51–56 (cf. 2 Kings 1:10–14)).

## Revolutionary Symbols

Third, the Gospels have John occupy the uncultivated land near the Jordan River in Judea and beyond the Jordan River in Perea. The wilderness near the Jordan and the region beyond the Jordan opposite Jericho are significant locations in Israel’s collective memory that could ignite apocalyptic fervour. As Robert Webb (1991, 360–66) has shown, the wilderness and the Jordan could contribute to the ideology of revolutionary movements as symbols of the Exodus and Conquest. For example, it was beyond the Jordan ‘opposite Jericho’ (Joshua 3:16) where Joshua and the people of God moved to cross over the Jordan River to enter and conquer the Promised Land (Joshua 1:2–3; 3:1–17). The river miraculously parted when the priests’ feet touched the water. To commemorate the entry to the Promised Land, Joshua had twelve ‘stones’ taken from the Jordan River and placed where they first encamped (east of Jericho), having crossed the river (Josh 4:1–9, 19–24). Sometime after John’s death, a certain ‘magician’ named Theudas, who regarded himself as a [prophet](#), convinced a large measure of the people to follow him to the Jordan River. There he aimed to part the river and provide passage through it. The Roman procurator Fadus, likely aware that such a manoeuvre was an attempt to stage a re-enactment of entering and conquering the Palestinian landscape, sent cavalry after them and ultimately had Theudas’s head cut off (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.97–99). Josephus does not associate John with the wilderness or the Jordan River (*Antiquities* 18.116–19), but the Gospels do:

- 1. The Synoptic Gospels link John the Baptist to the voice of Isaiah 40:3 crying in ‘the wilderness’ to prepare the Lord’s way (Mark 1:3; Matthew 3:3//Luke 3:4–6), as the previous category’s catalogue shows. The Gospel of John has John identify himself overtly in this way: ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord”’ (John 1:23; Isaiah 40:3).
- 2. In Mark 1:4–5, John appears ‘in the wilderness’ proclaiming his baptism, and people from Jerusalem and Judea go out to him and are baptized ‘in the river Jordan’. Matthew 3:1, 5–6 indicates that John appeared in ‘the wilderness of Judea’ and that people from Jerusalem, Judea, and ‘all the region along the Jordan’ received his baptism ‘in the river Jordan’. According to Luke 3:2–3, the word of God came to John ‘in the wilderness’ and John himself went ‘into all the region around the Jordan’ announcing his baptism. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist spends time baptizing in Bethany ‘across the Jordan’ (John 1:28; see also 3:36; 10:40–41) and Aenon near Salim (John 1:23). Both locations, according to Joan Taylor (2017), should be understood as located east of but near the Jordan River.
- 3. According to Matthew 3:9//Luke 3:8, John exclaims to the crowds coming to receive his baptism: ‘Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”: for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham’ (emphasis added; see also Joshua 4:1–9, 19–24).
- 4. Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River, according to Mark 1:9–11 and Matthew 3:13–17 (cf. Luke 3:21–22; John 1:29–34).

- 5. According to Luke 1:80, John the Baptist was ‘in the wilderness’ ‘until the day he appeared publicly to Israel’.
- 6. In Matthew 11:7-9//Luke 7:24-26, Jesus identifies the wilderness as John’s prime location: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?’

## Socioeconomic Reform

Fourth, and finally, the Jesus tradition and Josephus leave the impression that John was a figure interested in socioeconomic reform. In reference to worldwide millenarian movements, Allison once commented: ‘Proclamation of a near and retributive end does not ... preclude social concern’ (2010, 208). In fact, perceived socioeconomic upheavals experienced in the present can produce or energize apocalyptic ideology that focuses on socioeconomic reformation. Thus, John’s purported interest in repentance from ‘sin’—the idea of ‘sin’ in John’s context frequently carried socioeconomic connotations of law-breakers (the unrighteous) who gained wealth at the expense of exploiting others (Crossley 2015, 96-111)—as well as his ethical directives, his poor appearance, and his anticipation of the transformation of the present world order might point in this direction:

- 1. On John’s preaching of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, see number 3 in the first general category above.
- 2. On John’s anticipation of the transformation of the present world order, see numbers 1, 2, and 4 in the first general category above.
- 3. At Luke 3:10-14, John’s explanation of producing ‘fruit worthy of repentance’ (Luke 3:8) to those who approach him for baptism is socioeconomic in nature: ‘And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”’ The image of producing ‘fruit worthy of repentance’ (Luke 3:8) also appears in Matthew 3:7-10.
- 4. Josephus’s account of the Baptist does not explicitly use the language of ‘sin’ or ‘repentance’, but it does indicate that John exhorted Jews ‘to lead righteous lives, to practise justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism’ (*Antiquities* 18.117). For Josephus’s John, ‘the soul’ was ‘cleansed by right behaviour’ and this inner cleansing was a necessary preliminary if baptism were to succeed in consecrating the body (*Antiquities* 18.117).
- 5. According to Mark 1:6//Matthew 3:4, John’s clothing consisted merely of camel’s hair and a leather belt. Double-tradition material at Matthew 11:7-8//Luke 7:24-25 has Jesus contrast the attire of royalty (i.e., soft robes) with John’s prophetic garb.

## Conclusion

To summarize, reconstructing the life of John the Baptist is complex. The pieces of evidence relevant to

this reconstruction are sparse, framed by the agendas of the Gospels and Josephus, and are often in conflict with one another. The earliest evidence showcases several ideas and motifs about John that intersect with apocalyptic ideology, including (1) his anticipation of a coming figure, the kingdom of heaven, judgment, baptism of repentance, and divine revelation; (2) his association with or identification as Elijah or as the preparer of the Lord's coming; (3) his location and activity in certain politically charged localities—that is, 'the wilderness' and the 'Jordan River'; and (4) his apparent interest in socioeconomic reform.

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