

# The Indisputable Fact of the Baptism: The Problematic Consensus on John's Baptism of Jesus<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

As there is now an emerging “Quest” for the historical John the Baptist, it is important to look at how previous quests have treated his baptism of Jesus. Often regarded as a virtually indisputable fact of history, the baptism is asserted almost blindly without any argumentation or with only a few minimal points in its favor. In this essay, the case for the baptism is briefly evaluated and found to be entirely lacking, hinged instead on problematic assumptions and errant uses of the criteria of authenticity. Disavowing these uses, there instead emerges a rather simple set of arguments in favor of the baptism being ahistorical. It is argued that we do not have enough evidence to find the baptism historical, which has drastic ramifications on those attempting to produce biographies of both Jesus and John.

**Keywords:** John the Baptist, historicity, Jesus, early Christianity, baptism

## **Introduction**

In the last few years there has been an increased interest in academia on the figure of John the Baptist. Joel Marcus' volume *John the Baptist in History and Theology* (2018) seems to be at the head of a possible “quest” for the historical John, leading to an entire issue of the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Vol. 19, no. 1 [2019]) being devoted to responding and engaging with his work. In 2021, the Nangeroni Conference of the Enoch Seminar focused on John the Baptist, and a number of scholars including James F. McGrath have announced intentions to follow up with their own works on the historical John the Baptist. On the converse of this historical quest, Rivka Nir has written *The First Christian Believer* (2019) in response, arguing that the only John the Baptist we have access to is the literary-theological figure of Christian invention. In short, there appears to be an early stage of a John the Baptist historical quest emerging, and as such it seems prudent to first raise concerns both with current and previous treatments of certain aspects of his life and the methods used to reconstruct it.

In this article, I wish to first address the methodology used to establish that John the Baptist did in fact historically baptize Jesus of Nazareth and argue that our methods and evidence are insufficient to say with any certainty that this was a historical event and in fact contend that it may be a fictitious event.<sup>2</sup> I will then raise concerns about the trajectory of a quest for the historical John the Baptist and instead contend we should search for the literary figure and the ramifications

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Neil Godfrey and *Vridar* for the excellent blog posts and commentary that helped shape many of my ideas on this topic.

<sup>2</sup> The historicity of the baptism has been challenged before, see Leif Vaage, “Bird-Watching at the Baptism of Jesus: Early Christian Mythmaking in Mark. 1:9-11,” in *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack*, eds Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 280-94 and Morton S. Enslin, “John and Jesus,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 66 (1975): 1-8.

he has on the historicity of John's biography. My conclusion is that instead of searching for the historical John that the study of Early Christianity and Second Temple Judaism and Mandaean history would instead be best served by studying him as a literary figure. I argue that the baptism of Jesus is beyond our grasp and that attempting to dissect the Gospels and Mandaean sources for nuggets of historical fact will only lead to a repeat of the same pitfalls and failures of the Quest for the Historical Jesus. This is not to say that John the Baptist or Jesus never existed, though a number of scholars have given concise arguments for the negative (mythicist) position and should be engaged with closely and carefully.<sup>3</sup> For this essay, I assume the historicity of these two figures, and instead wish to challenge the problematic methods and arguments used to assemble biographies about them.

## Literature Review

### *Consensus Positions*

The historicity of the baptism has been considered one of the most unassailable "facts" regarding the lives and biographies of Jesus and John the Baptist. E. P. Sanders stated that the baptism was one of a few facts which "are almost beyond dispute."<sup>4</sup> The late James D. G. Dunn claimed that it

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<sup>3</sup> Though the present author is not a mythicist. For the mythicist position in academia, see John Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970); Yan Changyou, "Yesu—chuanshuo zhong de xugou renwu," *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 2 (1983): 122-28; Iosif Aronovic Kryvelev, *Christ: Myth or Reality?* (Moscow: USSR Academy of Sciences, 1987); Jean Magne, *From Christianity to Gnosis and from Gnosis to Christianity: An Itinerary through the Texts to and from the Tree of Paradise* (BJS, 286; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993); Robert M. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000); Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2004); Arthur Droge, "Jesus and Ned Ludd: What's in a Name?," *Caesar: A Journal for the Critical Study of Religion and Human Values* 3, no. 1 (2009): 23-25; Thomas L. Brodie, *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus: Memoir of a Discovery* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012); Richard Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014); Norman Simms, "Jesus the Jew: Who Says So?" in Zev Garber (ed.), *Teaching the Historical Jesus* (Routledge Studies in Religion, 42; London: Routledge, 2015), 121-32; Hermann Detering, *Buddha, Josua, Jesus und der Weg Zum Anderen Ufer: Die Gnostische Interpretation des Exodus und die Anfänge des Josua-Jesus-Kultes* (Independently published, 2018); Raphael Lataster, *Questioning the Historicity of Jesus: Why a Philosophical Analysis Elucidates the Historical Discourse* (Leiden: Brill, 2019). Various other academics have also raised doubts about Jesus' historicity, see David Madison, *Ten Things Christians Wish Jesus Hadn't Taught: And Other Reasons to Question his Words* (Houston: Insighting Growth), 92-120; Hector Avalos, *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press), 10; Huang Xinchuan and Dai Kengsheng, *Shijie san da zongjiao* (Beijing: Sanlian Press, 1979); Sima Ying, "Jidujiao de qi yuan he Yesu," *Wai guoshi zhishi* 12 (1981): 34-36; Tina Rae Collins, *The Judaeo-Christian Myth* (New York: M. F. Sohn Publications, 2015); Yvon Thebert, "À propos du "triomphe du Christianisme," *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 14 (1988): 277-345 (278). Non-experts in the field have also managed to get peer reviewed publications on the subject as well, see Alvar Ellegård, "Theologians as Historians," *Scandia* 59, no. 2 (1993): 169-182; Earl Doherty, "The Jesus Puzzle: Pieces in a Puzzle of Christian Origins," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 4, no. 2 (1997): 68-102; René Salm, "A response to 'Surveys and excavations at the Nazareth village farm (1997-2002): final report'," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 26 (2008): 95-111; Frank R. Zindler, "A New Paradigm for the Study of Christian Origins: Replacing the Dendritic Model," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 4, no. 1 (2022): 114-152.

<sup>4</sup> E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 10.

was one of the facts which “command almost universal assent.”<sup>5</sup> Joel Marcus has since regarded it as one of the most certain things which can be said about John.<sup>6</sup> Given this, one should be expecting it to have some strong argumentation and evidence establishing that it is indeed this certain fact. One will not find such upon inspection, however.

Meier, Dunn, Keener, Ehrman, Marcus, and more all rely on the exact same line of thought for their justification of the baptism: the criteria of embarrassment, multiple attestation, and treating early Christian theology as homogenous (i.e., Jesus universally thought of as sinless and the Baptism violates this).<sup>7</sup> Essentially, they point to the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John as all displaying uncomfortable attitudes and redactional practices toward the baptism (John omitting it altogether), and then arguing that the baptism is attested in multiple “independent” sources (Mark, *Q*, *M*, and John). A more overt manifestation of this “Third Quest” thinking and methodology, including the criteria of embarrassment and similar, has been Josephine Wilkinson’s *John the Baptist: His Life and Afterlife* (2022). Here Wilkinson explicitly references the criteria of authenticity, a “criterion of authentic context,” dissimilarity, and embarrassment.<sup>8</sup> It demonstrates an acute issue that despite these methods being rather thoroughly debated (and for good reason) in NT scholarship, they are still utilized rather freely.

More recently, there has been a push by scholars such as James McGrath<sup>9</sup> and Charles Häberl to make usage of the Mandaean sources for John. Together they edited the *Mandaean Book*

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<sup>5</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 339.

<sup>6</sup> Joel Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018), 81.

<sup>7</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Volume II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 21–22; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1, 350–2; Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 165–77; Bart Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels: How the Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and Invented Their Stories of the Savior* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 211–4; Marcus, *John the Baptist*, 81–82; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 207; James Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 14–15; John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 44. Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 184–185 makes use of dissimilarity, multiple attestation, and embarrassment. In older literature, things were even less critical. Shirley Jackson Case, for instance, argues that the baptism was historical because if it had not been, disciples of Jesus would still be alive to correct the message, see Shirley Jackson Case, *Jesus: A New Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1927, reprinted Greenwood 1968), 214.

<sup>8</sup> Josephine Wilkinson, *John the Baptist: His Life and Afterlife* (The Hill, UK: Amberley, 2022 Kindle Edition), Kindle pages 43–44.

<sup>9</sup> McGrath has also suggested that John the Baptist may have originated in Nazareth, see James F. McGrath, “Could John the Baptist Have Been from Nazareth?” *Patheos* (2 July 2021), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/religionprof/2021/07/could-john-the-baptist-have-been-from-nazareth.html>. The present author would argue that the historical Jesus was never from Nazareth and that this was a Matthean invention (likely by accident). The word Nazareth (Ναζαρέτ) only appears once in the textus receptus of Mark (Mark 1:9). I would argue that the original passage simply supposed that Jesus came from Galilee (ἦλθεν Ἰησοῦς ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας), and later in 2:1 it specifies from where, Capernaum. That this passage is an interpolation has been argued elsewhere, but mostly within mythicist literature, see Robert M. Price, *The Christ Myth Theory and Its Problems* (Cranford: American Atheist, 2011), 273; Frank R. Zindler, *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew: Sepher Toldoth Yeshu and the Quest of the Historical Jesus in Jewish Sources* (Cranford: American Atheist, 2003), 91; Richard Carrier, *Proving History: Bayes’s*

of *John*, a document purported to have been written by John himself.<sup>10</sup> Despite this push, relatively few academics have actually utilized the Mandaean sources in any cohesive fashion, though there are multiple reasons why the Mandaean sources may, in fact, not actually help us to find the historical core of the baptism of Jesus, if there is one.

One of the more detailed essays in support of the baptism's historicity is Robert L. Webb's "Jesus' Baptism: Its Historicity, and Implications" (2000).<sup>11</sup> However, while elongated, the arguments of this essay largely fall in line with the previously established consensus positions. The more interesting point is to try and argue that the baptism may have been a part of the Q document as well, thus, potentially providing an independent narrative from Mark. However, this is all assuming that Q existed, and that Matthew and Luke were independent of each other and therefore that their supposed Q material is not a case of reliance on each other. Webb claims that the baptism is "assumed" in the Gospel of John, though this seems to rest upon shaky foundations, as it depends entirely on people's interpretation of John 1:31. Webb attempts to make use of much later and fragmentary non-canonical texts such as the Gospel of the Hebrews and such, but the uncertainty abounding with these texts precludes their usefulness. Where they came from, when they were written, and the uncertainty about the rest of their contents (which would help determine the above issues) makes them all questionable as sources. Webb ultimately is ineffectively stacking up the Criteria of Authenticity in favor of baptism's historicity and it fails to convince, but at least he does attempt to find more sources than what the vast majority scholars cite: the Synoptic Gospels and occasionally Q.

This is all of the evidence and argumentation afforded generally: the reliance on the old Criteria of Authenticity and then usage of hypothetical documents and the presumption of the Gospels of Mark and John as independent of each other (with occasional reference to much later non-canonical texts whose provenance and origins are highly debated). On the converse have been the "John the Baptist mythicists" and other skeptics and because research on various grounds of skepticism is often lacking, I have endeavored give here a brief overview of skeptical positions on John the Baptist and his historicity as well, as these issues have been often neglected and overlooked.

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*Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2012), 143; R. Salm, *The Myth of Nazareth: The Invented Town of Jesus* (Cranford: American Atheist), 299-300; Robinson Smith, *The Solution to the Synoptic Problem: Sources, Sequence and Dates of the Gospels and Epistles, and the Consequent Life of Christ* (London: Watts & Co., 1920), 229. Matthew 3:13 notably (a parallel to Mk. 1:9) does not mention Nazareth, which makes no sense, as Matthew previously spent a length of time inventing a prophecy to place Jesus in Nazareth. The evidence seems to point to Mark 1:9 being interpolated to include Nazareth. Matthew's invention of a Jesus of Nazareth was likely an accidental misunderstanding of Mark's usage of "Nazarene" and therefore an attempt to rectify two contradictory origins: that Jesus was from Nazareth (mistaken belief) but supposed to be from Bethlehem, and that he was also from Capernaum. I would posit that the earliest Christian traditions likely held that Jesus was from Capernaum and that this was then obscured by Matthew and Luke, who declared he was from Bethlehem first and then Nazareth, and Mark's text was harmonized. As such, "Nazarene" does not denote someone from Nazareth, and having John the Baptist stem from there seems errant.

<sup>10</sup> Charles G. Häberl and James F. McGrath (eds), *The Mandaean Book of John: Critical Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Webb, "Jesus' Baptism: Its Historicity, and Implications," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2000): 261-309. Webb does not engage with the work of Vaage or Arnal in any detail. He only engages with Enslin, and so misses some of the different critiques that Arnal brings up in direct reference to the Criteria of Authenticity.

***Skeptical Positions***

In 1661 David Blondel proposed that the passage on John the Baptist (*Antiquities* 18.109-119) was completely inauthentic and had been interpolated by the hand of one of John's disciples.<sup>12</sup> One of the next earliest records of doubts over the Josephan passage on John the Baptist, is from the L. E. du Pin, who wrote in defense of the passage against skeptics of his time in the 1690's.<sup>13</sup> Du Pin argues for the authenticity of the passage largely on the basis of Origen and others, who have since come into doubt. He further argues that Eusebius' own account may not be an exact reiteration of the passage in Josephus because Eusebius was not prone to perfectly recount what was written in Josephus, for which he then provides a few examples. This establishes, however, that by the 1600's there were already doubts forming about the authenticity of the passage on John the Baptist.

In the 1700's doubts and responses increase. The passage was still clearly called into question, evidenced by the responses that were often made to claims that it was not. In 1769, a polemic was published which was a defense of Judaism against the criticisms of Voltaire. This piece written jointly by Christian apologist and priest Antoine Guenée and the Sephardic Jew Isaac de Pinto specifically noted that one le Clerc argued that the three passages regarding Jesus, James, and John the Baptist were forgeries.<sup>14</sup> Nathaniel Lardner likewise responded to claims about the genuineness of the John the Baptist passage, specifically arguing that by comparing the passages on John and the *Testimonium Flavianum* one can actually conclude that the passage on John is authentic and the passage on Jesus is inauthentic, which he seems to hold.<sup>15</sup> Doubts over the authenticity of the passage continued into the 1800's. The century began in its first year with George Maynard and Edward Kimpton writing *The Genuine and Complete Works of Flavius Josephus*,<sup>16</sup> which contained in it all of the passages regarding Jesus, James, and John the Baptist, and was highly dismissive of any attempts to regard them as total forgeries. Most early doubters seem to have regarded the passage as strange particularly due to how positive Josephus, a Pharisaic Jew, was to John the Baptist, since his practices do not seem to have been traditionally Pharisaic.

Interpolations into the work of Josephus were frequently commented upon by writers of the time, especially with the rise of the Christ Myth debate in England and the United States (though such debates were not particularly notable in France or Germany as of yet, both of them entering into the fray more heavily in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). One of the most notable arguments against the authenticity of the John the Baptist passage comes from Frederic Huidekoper, who argued in *Indirect Testimony to the Genuineness of the Gospels* (seventh edition 1887) that the passage seems to interrupt the flow of Josephus' writing and does not fit with Josephus' clear agenda in the preceding and succeeding parts of the passage which do not

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<sup>12</sup> David Blondel, *A Treatise of the Sibyls* (London: Printed for the Author, 1661), 17. Blondel went as far as to propose that all the passages regarding James, John, and Jesus were interpolations.

<sup>13</sup> L. E. du Pin, *A Compleat History of the Canon and Writers of the Books of the Old and New Testament by Way of Dissertation with Useful Remarks on that Subject*, translated into English from French (London: 1699), Vol. II, 164-168.

<sup>14</sup> Antoine Guenée and Isaac de Pinto, *Letters of Certain Jews to Monsieur de Voltaire: Containing an Apology for Their own People and for the Old Testament*, translated by Philip Lefanu (Dublin: William Watson, 1777), Vol. 1, 197.

<sup>15</sup> Nathaniel Lardner, *A Large Collection of Ancient Jewish and Heathen Testimonies to the Truth of the Christian Religion, with notes and observations* (London: Various, 1765), vol. 2, xv-xvi

<sup>16</sup> George Henry Maynard and Edward Kimpton, *The Genuine and Complete Works of Flavius Josephus* (London: J. Cooke, 1800), 533-542.

discuss the Baptist.<sup>17</sup> Huidekoper supposed that the interpolation was actually due to a disciple of John and not to a Christian, but that it may also be an innocent marginal comment that was inserted into the text.

In the nineteenth century, Jesus mythicists begin to appear on the scene more consistently and with more publicity, challenging most of all passages which were written about Jesus, James, and John the Baptist in Josephus' writings, along with most of all the passages from pagan writers as well. Jonathan M. Roberts, a mystic and mythicist, argued that Josephus never recorded any figures from the New Testament and that this was enough to consider that none of them lived, at least not as portrayed in the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> One of the most notable mythicists especially in England was the ex-pastor, Rev. Robert Taylor, aka "The Devil's Chaplain", a secularist who spent much time attempting to prove Jesus never existed (in between his numerous jail sentences for blasphemy and other crimes meant to quell freethought movements). Taylor, in one of his mock sermons (dated around 1831-1832), argued that the passage on John the Baptist was inauthentic as proven by internal evidence (what evidence is not stated), and the Baptist is made to be a symbol of the Zodiac by Taylor soon after.<sup>19</sup> More notable claims of forgery were made by scholars such as H. Graetz (later cited by scholars like Drews) who argued that the passage was a "brazen forgery" in his third volume of *Geschichte der Juden* (1888).<sup>20</sup>

However, despite these occasional doubts, the vast majority of all academics and even most mythicists still accepted the authenticity of the John the Baptist passage in Josephus, and that he existed as a historical figure, a trait which has continued to the current day, with John the Baptist mythicism really only gaining any acceptance within the Soviet Union.

In the Soviet Union, under pressure from the ideology of "militant materialism" and from the atheist propaganda, antichristian (and antisemitic) resentments and positions were actively endorsed by the state, habitual denial of the existence of Jesus was commonplace.<sup>21</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>17</sup> Frederic Huidekoper, *Indirect Testimony to the Genuineness of the Gospels*, Seventh Edition (London: 1887), 154-156. Curiously enough, Huidekoper likewise supposed that the James passage may have been a marginal comment interpolated accidentally into the text, which, in fact, means that this is work proposed the theory before Richard Carrier did by over a century (156-157).

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan M. Roberts, *Antiquity Unveiled From the Spirit Realms Disclose the Most Startling Revelations, Proving Christianity to be of Heathen Origins* (Philadelphia: Oriental Publishing, 1892), 86. Curiously, an anonymous Jewish writer earlier held that the passage was authentic and said there was no real doubts about its authenticity, but this same author argued Jesus never existed, see *The Existence of Christ Disproved by Irresistible Evidence, in a Series of Letters, From a German Jew, Addressed to Christians of All Denominations* (London: A. Heywood and J. Taylor, 1841), 220.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Taylor, "The Devil's Pulpit No. 4: John the Baptist, A Sermon," *The Comet* Vol. 1 (1832-1833): 66-77.

<sup>20</sup> In earlier editions Graetz considered it authentic but changed his mind, see Samuel Tobias Lochs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Hoboken: KTAV, 1987), 39. For the original source, see Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden: von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Leiner, 1888), 277-278.

<sup>21</sup> James Thrower, *Marxist-Leninist 'Scientific Atheism' and the Study of Religion and Atheism in the USSR* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), 426-432; Alena Frolíková, "Některé aspekty vývoje sovětského bádání o vzniku křesťanství za posledních 30 let," *Listy filologické / Folia philologica* 108, no. 3 (1985): 159-164; and Dalibor Papoušek, "The Soviet School of Historians of Early Christianity and Its Influence in Former Czechoslovakia: The Question of Jesus' Historicity," in Iva Doležalová, Luther H. Martin and Dalibor Papoušek (eds), *The Academic Study of Religion During the Cold War: East and West* (New York:

Soviet Scholars, many of them ardent and hardline militant atheists associated with antichristian movements, began to declare openly that not only did Jesus never exist, but neither did the twelve disciples, Paul, or John the Baptist.<sup>22</sup> The position was espoused in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (1926), up until after the major debates in the 1960's.<sup>23</sup> Scholars such as Nikolai Rumyantsev argued extensively that the passage on John the Baptist was a forgery and that he had never existed.<sup>24</sup> This hyper-skepticism later became notably condemned by even some mythicists.<sup>25</sup> Today, the nations which once made up the Soviet Union now universally declare that John the Baptist was historical, along with Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

In Germany, the most principal member (and the one whom later inspired Lenin and the Soviet Union) of the mythicist camp was Arthur Drews, who argued extensively that Jesus never lived, and that John the Baptist also was ahistorical in his *Die Christusmythe* (1909).<sup>27</sup> However, this view was later rebutted by one of Drews' more staunch critics, one A. Kampmeier, who responded in *The Open Court*.<sup>28</sup> P. Jensen likewise seemed to argue for mythic constructions to how John the Baptist originated, linking John, Paul, Moses, and Jesus to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.<sup>29</sup> Jensen's arguments stemmed from the pan-Babylonianist movement of the era, which attempted radical reinterpretations of history, as various figures stemming from Babylonian myths and legends. Shirley Jackson Case considered Jensen's views ludicrous and vehemently dismissed them as unsupported (and often uncited) parallelomania.<sup>30</sup> In all, none of their views were readily accepted. Drews later responded to critics with *Die Christusmythe II* (1911) later translated as *The*

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Peter Lang, 2001), 119-135. See also Christopher M. Hansen, "The Christ Myth Debate in Marxist Literature," *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2022), 190-222.

<sup>22</sup> For this debate, see A. Andreev, "Diskussiya Ob Istorichnosti Iisusa Khrista V Sovetskom Religiovedenii," *Vestnik PSTGU I: Bogosloviye. Filosofiya* 58, no. 2 (2015): 73-88 (78).

<sup>23</sup> s.v. IOANN KRESTITEL', in O. YU. Shmidt (ed.), *Bol'shaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya: Interpolyatsiya-Istoricheskoye yazykovedeniye* (65 Vols.; Moskva: Sovetskaya entsiklopediya, 1926), XXIX, 73.

<sup>24</sup> N. V. Rumyantsev, "Iosif Flaviy ob Iisuse Khriste i Ioanne Krestitele," *Ateist* 36 (1926): 32-57 and *Mif ob Ioanne Krestitele* (Moskva: Ateist, 1930). I. A. Kryvelev, *Istoriya religiy* (Moskva: Mysl', 1988), 196 seems to regard John the Baptist as at least semi-mythical.

<sup>25</sup> S. I. Kovalev, *Osnovnyye Voprosy Proiskhozhdeniya Khristianstva* (Moskva: Nauka, 1964), 34 considered the testimony of Josephus on John the Baptist to be authentic. Throughout he declares John to likely have been historical along with some other figures. Jesus is, however, firmly a myth for Kovalev. However, in his earlier foreword to the Russian translation of Archibald Robertson's *Origins of Christianity*, Kovalev was more skeptical of John the Baptist it appears, see S. I. Kovalev, "Vstupitel'naya Stat'ya," in Archibald Robertson, *Proiskhozhdeniye khristianstva*, trans. Yu. V. Semenova (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Inostrannoy Literatury, 1959), 8.

<sup>26</sup> See entries in Chrystian Boyer and Gérard Rochais (eds), *The Historical Jesus Around the World* (Quebec: Fides, 2009), specifically Thomas Söding, "Beyond Bultmann: Recent Jesus Research in Austria and Germany," 121-138; Jesper Svartvik, "The Historical Jesus in Scandinavia," 195-212; Petr Pokorný, "The Historical Jesus in Eastern Europe," 229-239.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Drews, *The Christ Myth*, Third Edn, trans. C. Delisle Burns ([reprint] Amherst: Prometheus, 1998), 119-123.

<sup>28</sup> A. Kampmeier, "Did John the Baptist Exist?" *The Open Court* 7 (1913): 433-437.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Jensen, *Moses, Jesus, Paulus: drei Varianten des babylonischen Gottmenschen Gilgamesh: eine Anklage und ein Appell*, Third Edition (Frankfurt: Neuer Frankfurter Verlag, 1910).

<sup>30</sup> Shirley Jackson Case, *The Historicity of Jesus: A Criticism of the Contention that Jesus Never Lived, A Statement of the Evidence for His Existence, An Estimate of His Relation to Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928), 78-87.

*Witnesses to the Historicity of Jesus*,<sup>31</sup> however the argument largely reiterated his points before and nothing substantial was added. Drews' thesis was that John and Jesus both stem from astrotheological myths about the Sun and Zodiac. Of similar note, in 1907, Gerald Massey, a self-taught "Egyptologist", argued that John the Baptists' origins lay with an Anup the Baptizer, a figure that Massey invented via some of his many mistranslations.<sup>32</sup>

In recent years, the only qualified scholar to have challenged the existence of John the Baptist is Jean Magne, who published his doubts in *From Christianity to Gnosis and From Gnosis to Christianity* (1993) in the Brown Judaic Studies series.<sup>33</sup> In this volume, Magne argues for an originally gnostic origins of Christianity and that Jesus and John were both mythical characters. The volume is notable for its endorsement by Jacob Neusner as well. Magne has been partly rebutted by Bruce Chilton.<sup>34</sup> Robert M. Price has argued that the passage on John the Baptist in Josephus may be an interpolation, though he does not clearly challenge the historicity of John. Despite this, he entertains the possibility of John's nonexistence.<sup>35</sup>

Amateur mythicists in the modern era have continued to have their own skepticism about the existence of John the Baptist and the authenticity of the passage referring to him. Principal among them have been Frank R. Zindler, Acharya S (real name Dorothy Murdock), Pier Tulip, René Salm, and Lena Einhorn all of whom have argued that the Josephus passage may be an interpolation and that John the Baptist may never have existed, though none have presented any more substantial argumentation.<sup>36</sup> Tom Harpur, an ex-Anglican priest, argued that John the Baptist had a parallel predecessor in "Anup the Baptizer" stemming this from Gerald Massey.<sup>37</sup> Acharya S likewise follows in Massey's steps. The only notable current defender of John's historicity has been John Meier, who gave a very short defense, largely based on the same reasoning as above.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Arthur Drews, *The Witnesses to the Historicity of Jesus*, trans. Joseph McCabe (London: Watts & Co., 1912), 183-194.

<sup>32</sup> Gerald Massey, *Ancient Egypt, the Light of the World: A Work of Reclamation and Restitution in Twelve Books* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907), Vol. 2, 855-856.

<sup>33</sup> Jean Magne, *From Christianity to Gnosis and From Gnosis to Christianity: An Itinerary through the Texts to and from the Tree of Paradise*, trans. A. F. W. Armstrong (Brown Judaic Studies series 286; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 203f.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce Chilton, "The Trial of Jesus Reconsidered," in Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans (eds), *Jesus in Context: Temple, Purity, and Restoration* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 481-500.

<sup>35</sup> Robert M. Price, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable is the Gospel Tradition* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2003), 102-104.

<sup>36</sup> Frank R. Zindler, *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew: Sepher Toldoth Yeshu and the Quest of the Historical Jesus in Jewish Sources* (Cranford: American Atheist Press, 2003), 91; Acharya S., *Suns of God: Krishna, Buddha and Christ Unveiled* (Kempton: Adventures Unlimited, 2004), 433; Pier Tulip, *KRST, Jesus a Solar Myth: A New Exegesis Explores Mythical and Allegorical Contents of the Gospels, New Hypothesis on the Historical Jesus*, trans. Robert Tulip (YouCanPrint, 2015), 111-112; René Salm, *NazarethGate: Quack Archeology, Holy Hoaxes, and the Invented Town of Jesus* (Cranford: American Atheist Press, 2015), 471; Lena Einhorn, *A Shift in Time: How Historical Documents Reveal the Surprising Truth About Jesus* (New York: Yucca, 2016), 123-133. Other mythicist amateurs have also suggested interpolation, see Earl Doherty, *Jesus Neither God nor Man: The Case for a Mythical Jesus* (Ottawa: Age of Reason, 2009), 699-670.

<sup>37</sup> Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2004), 93-94. Harpur followed this with *Water into Wine: An Empowering Vision of the Gospels* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2008), 46-47 where he argues that since Jesus and John were six months apart this is a significant astrotheological element.

<sup>38</sup> Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 19-23.



While doubts about John the Baptist's existence are rare, more recent doubts on the authenticity of the passage about him in Josephus are not. Recent scholars to have argued that the passage is a forgery or have been critical of the pro-authenticity arguments include Léon Herrmann,<sup>39</sup> Joshua Efron,<sup>40</sup> Clare K. Rothschild,<sup>41</sup> Rivka Nir,<sup>42</sup> and Nicholas Peter Legh Allen,<sup>43</sup> among a few others.<sup>44</sup> Another theory, similar to the debates on the authenticity of the *Testimonium Flavianum*, is that the passage on John the Baptist is only partially interpolated. This was supported first by Solomon Zeitlin and has recently been endorsed by the mythicist Richard C. Carrier in his blogs.<sup>45</sup> Another even stranger theory has been promoted is that John the Baptist in Josephus is actually an account of Hyrcanus II which had a complicated textual history, this view being espoused recently by Gregory L. Doudna.<sup>46</sup> This would mean that only the New Testament attests to the existence of John the Baptist, as Doudna notes. Nevertheless, the consensus is firmly on the side of authenticity, unlike with the *Testimonium Flavianum*, for which whole-sale interpolation

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<sup>39</sup> Léon Herrmann, *Chrestos: Témoignages païens et juifs sur le christianisme du Ier siècle* (Bruxelles: Latomus, 1970), 99.

<sup>40</sup> Joshua Efron, *Studies on the Hasmonean Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 334.

<sup>41</sup> Clare K. Rothschild, "Echoes of a Whisper: The Uncertain Authenticity of Josephus' Witness to John the Baptist," in David Hellhom (ed.), *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, in Three volumes (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), Vol. 1, 255-290.

<sup>42</sup> Rivka Nir, "Josephus' Account of John the Baptist: A Christian Interpolation?" *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10, no. 1 (2012): 32-62 and *The First Christian Believer: In Search of John the Baptist* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Peter Legh Allen, "Josephus, Origen, and John the Baptist: Exposing a Christian Apologist's Deceit," in Gideon R. Kotzé, Wolfgang Kraus, and Michaël N. van der Meer (eds), *XVI Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies*, Stellenbosch, 2016 (Septuagint and Cognate Studies 71; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2019), 7-31 and also *Christian Forgery in Jewish Antiquities: Josephus Interrupted* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2020), 261-290.

<sup>44</sup> Such as Lilian Armstrong, "A Renaissance Flavius Josephus," *Yale University Library Gazette* 58, no. 3/4 (1984): 122-139, specifically 123 and 132; Michael Grant, *The Ancient Historians* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1970), 263.

<sup>45</sup> Solomon Zeitlin, *The Rise and Fall of the Judean State* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967), Vol. 2, 148; Richard C. Carrier, "Mason on Josephus on James," *Richard Carrier Blogs* (17 May 2020), <https://www.richardcarrier.info/archives/16715>.

<sup>46</sup> Gregory L. Doudna, "Is Josephus' John the Baptist Passage a Chronologically Dislocated Story of the Death of Hyrcanus II," in Emanuel Pfoh and Lukasz Niesiolowski-Spanò (eds), *Biblical Narratives, Archaeology & Historicity: Essays in Honour of Thomas L. Thompson* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 119-137.

has gained increasing support among academics.<sup>47</sup> Debates on this issue should take in consideration the newest witnesses and discussions of the text that are available as well.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Yu Ke, *Yu Ke Xiansheng wenji*, edited by Long Xiuping (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2020), 5; Ken Olson, "Eusebius and the 'Testimonium Flavianum'," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1999): 305–22. Olson cites Tessa Rajak, J. Neville Birdsall, and Per Bilde (306). See also Ken Olson, "A Eusebian Reading of the *Testimonium Flavianum*," in Aaron Johnson and Jeremy Scott (eds), *Eusebius of Caesarea: Tradition and Innovations* (Cambridge: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013), 97–114; D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, "Eusebius of Caesarea and the Testimonium Flavianum (Josephus, Antiquities, XVIII. 63f.)," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 25, no. 4 (1974): 353–62 seems to accept it is inauthentic; Ivan Prchlík, "Ježíš řečený Christos' u Josepha Flavia: Jistota nejistoty," in Peter Fraňo and Michal Habaj (eds), *Antica Slavica* (Trnava: Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave 2018), 77–152 and 280–6; Michael Grant, *The Ancient Historians* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1970), 263; N. P. L. Allen, *Christian Forgery in Jewish Antiquities: Josephus Interrupted* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 98–228; Joshua Efron, *Studies on the Hasmonean Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 333; Paul Hopper, "A Narrative Anomaly in Josephus: Jewish Antiquities xviii:63," in Monika Fludernik and Daniel Jacob (eds), *Linguistics and Literary Studies: Interfaces, Encounters, Transfers* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 147–71; Ellis Rivkin, *What Crucified Jesus?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 64–7; Jürgen Roloff, *The Theology of the New Testament, Vol. 2: The Variety and Unity of the Apostolic Witness to Christ*, translated by John Alsup (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 1n1; Fausto Parente, "Sulla doppia trasmissione, filologica ed ecclesiastica, del testo di Flavio Giuseppe: Un contributo alla storia della ricezione della sua opera nel mondo cristiano," *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura religiosa* 36 (2000): 9–25; Kurt L. Noll, "Investigating Earliest Christianity without Jesus," in Thomas L. Thompson and Thomas S. Verenna (eds), *Is this not the Carpenter? The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 233–266 (250n56); Louis Feldman, "On the Authenticity of the Testimonium Flavianum Attributed to Josephus," in Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schachter (eds), *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations: In Honor of David Berger* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 13–30; Jürgen Becker, "The Search for Jesus' Special Profile," in Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (eds), *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2011), vol. 1, 57–89; Ambrogio Donini, *U istokov khristianstva (ot zarozhdeniya do Yustiniana)*, Second Edition (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1989), 50–52; Christopher M. Hansen, "The Problem of *Annals* 15.44: On the Plinian Origin of Tacitus's Information on Christians," *Journal of Early Christian History* (forthcoming); Paget notes that H. Schreckenberg and K. Schubert "tentatively" rejected the passage as a complete Christian interpolation, see James Carleton Paget, "Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity," *Journal of Theological Studies* 52, no. 2 (2001): 539–624 (583). It is also common in mythicist circles to deny the TF, see: Richard Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 332–42; Yan Changyou, "Yesu—chuanshuo zhong de xugou renwu," *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 2 (1983): 122–28; Robert M. Price, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2003), 38–9 and 90; Hermann Detering, *Falsche Zeugen: Außerchristliche Jesuszeugnisse auf dem Prüfstand* (Aschaffenburg: Alibri Verlag, 2011), 19–41; Raphael Lataster, *Questioning the Historicity of Jesus: Why a Philosophical Analysis Elucidates the Historical Discourse* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 192–202; Yakov Lenzman, *L'Origine du christianisme*, trans. Piatigorski (Moscow: Editions en Langues Etrangères, 1961), 65–7; S. Kovalev, *Osnovnyye Voprosy Proiskhozhdeniya Khristianstva* (Moskva: Nauka, 1964), 33.

<sup>48</sup> David B. Levenson and Thomas R. Martin, "The Latin Translations of Josephus on Jesus, John the Baptist, and James: Critical Texts of the Latin Translation of the Antiquities and Rufinus' Translation of Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History Based on Manuscripts and Early Printed Editions," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 45, no. 1 (2014): 1–79 and Marco Rotman, "The 'Others' Coming to John the Baptist and the Text of Josephus," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 49, no. 1 (2018): 68–83.

### The Argument Against the Baptism

Though virtually no scholars have dared challenge the historicity of the baptism, closer inspection shows that we would, in fact, have good reason for doing so. One of the first questions we should raise, especially for recent scholarship on John, is why the criterion of embarrassment is still in continued usage despite its thorough critique over the last two decades?<sup>49</sup> The criterion of embarrassment is, in most scholarship on the subject, a general linchpin for the historicity of the baptism as a historical event and, as a result, demolishing this position and revealing the rather problematic foundations that it rests upon leaves historical verification of the baptism up in arms. In this next section, I will raise several major issues that prevent myself and a handful of others from concluding that the baptism of Jesus was a historical event and not a literary creation.

Firstly, there is the problem that none of our sources can truly be said to be independent. Matthew and Luke are reliant on the Gospel of Mark, as is readily accepted by the vast majority of academics studying the Synoptic Problem.<sup>50</sup> This leaves the *M*, *Q*, and gJohn materials. *M* and *Q* are particularly specious to be used as historical sources validating the historicity of the baptism for multiple reasons. (1) They are hypothetical documents whose reconstructions are not certain, and (2) as hypothetical documents they cannot actually attest to anything concretely. A hypothetical document can only hypothetically attest to something, assuming our reconstruction is correct. We can reconstruct these documents in theory, but in this case the reconstruction does not even attest to the baptism of Jesus. This remains true even discounting the quite substantial debate on the existence of *Q* and such documents as well.<sup>51</sup> This leaves the Gospel of John, which a growing number of academics have been pointing out very likely *did* know of the Gospel of Mark and perhaps other Synoptic texts as well.<sup>52</sup> However, even if we assumed that the Gospel of John was an independent source, other problems will persist (see below). In short, we have no clearly attested independent sources of Jesus' baptism. The Mandaean sources fair no better. The *Mandaean Book of John* for instance appears to be acutely aware of at least some of the Christian baptism tradition when it relays the event.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the Mandaean texts, in their current forms, all post-date Christianity by several centuries, enough time for them to at least have a degree of knowledge or awareness of Christian traditions. As such, while they may contain prior and non-Christian materials about John (though I consider this speculative at best), excising the wheat from the chaff seems to be a repeat of the same problems and faults that defined the Jesus quests and

<sup>49</sup> Stanley Porter, *Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); articles in Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (eds), *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T&T Clark, 2012); Raphael Lataster, "Bayesian Reasoning: Criticising the 'Criteria of Authenticity' and Calling for a Review of Biblical Criticism," *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2012): 271-293.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004); Stanley Porter and Bryan R. Dyer (eds), *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

<sup>51</sup> The present author falls on the side of Mark Goodacre, see *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002). For other problems with hypothetical sources, see Raphael Lataster, "Bart Ehrman and the Elusive Historical Jesus," *Literature & Aesthetics* 26 (2016): 181-192. See also Tom Dykstra, "Ehrman and Brodie on Whether Jesus Existed: A Cautionary Tale about the State of Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies* 8, no. 1 (2015): 1-12 (specifically 6-8).

<sup>52</sup> Several entries in Eve-Marie Becker, Helen K. Bond, and Catrin H. Williams (eds), *John's Transformation of Mark* (London: T&T Clark, 2021).

<sup>53</sup> Häberl and McGrath, *The Mandaean Book of John*, 376-8.

their attempts to reconstruct Jesus from the gospels. Thus, usage of the criterion of multiple attestation has internal problems when the intertextuality of the gospels (and other sources beyond) is elaborated upon.<sup>54</sup>

Secondly, this actually causes severe trouble for the criterion of embarrassment and its application. Matthew, Luke, and (probably) John all rely on Mark, which means their embarrassment is not from a historical fact but from Mark's literary portrayal. Their issue is not with some historical event but with the Markan narrative.<sup>55</sup> When they write of the baptism, they redact Mark's own words or alter them, they do not show clear knowledge of an independent tradition here (nor do they specifically cite one either). As such, the criterion of embarrassment fails to validate the historicity of the baptism through the usage of these texts. The question then becomes whether or not Mark is embarrassed, which Ehrman argues is yes.<sup>56</sup> Ehrman's views I will discuss below, as they are also faulty and deserve reaction on their own.

Even assuming that gJohn is independent, however, we have another issue. As Arnal notes, in fact, if one considers gJohn independent, we may conclude that the unhistorical supernaturalistic elements precede the actual description of the baptism itself, because they are the only things multiply attested in John's gospel (which has no baptism sequence, only the descending dove and other supernaturalistic events).<sup>57</sup> In this case, multiple attestation helps to prove the narrative ahistorical, or at least beyond the grasp of the historian to discern as historical. If gJohn is independent, then we cannot conclude he actually displays embarrassment at the baptism. As the only early narratives of the baptism which exist are from the Synoptics, if he had knowledge of a baptism, and since gJohn is a much later source, if gJohn were embarrassed the easiest and simplest solution would be that he is aware of this Synoptic tradition (either directly from the texts, or that it circulated as a story to gJohn but ultimately deriving from the Synoptics). From the present author's perspective, there are four main options for the Gospel of John and the baptism: John is embarrassed at the Synoptic gospels which he has direct knowledge of; John is a pseudo-independent source embarrassed by a narrative that ultimately stemmed from the Synoptics; John is an independent source with no knowledge of a baptism narrative, and only the dove sequence, following Arnal; or John has independent knowledge of the baptism and is embarrassed by it and so omits it. In a Bayesian analysis, we may use the principle of indifference here, assigning each of these possible solutions an equal probability of 25%. Given that positions 1, 2, and 3, however, preclude independent knowledge of the baptism, the prior probability would be around 75% against (25% for) that John had independent knowledge of the baptism.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The only major response to this issue has been to conjecture oral or community traditions behind the text, but we have no way of establishing they actually existed or what their contents were, see Tom Dykstra, "'New, Unfounded, Unworkable, and Unnecessary': Thomas Brodie's Critique of Oral Tradition," *Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 1–18. See also recent critiques by Robyn Faith Walsh (cited below).

<sup>55</sup> Mark 1:9–11 is paralleled in Matt. 3:13–17 and Luke 3:21–22. See Mark Goodacre, "The Synoptic Problem: John the Baptist and Jesus," in *Method and Meaning: Essays on New Testament Interpretation in Honor of Harold W. Attridge*, eds Andrew B. McGowan and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 177–92.

<sup>56</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels*, 212.

<sup>57</sup> William Arnal, "Major Episodes in the Biography of Jesus: An Assessment of the Historicity of the Narrative Tradition," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 13 (1997): 201–26 (203–4).

<sup>58</sup> Similar problems bely the Gospel of the Hebrews and other sources which Webb cites (Webb, "Jesus' Baptism" 267–271). This text mentions a "baptism" but no dove spirit and also does not mention John the Baptist. Thus, perhaps we could conclude this is independent attestation of a baptism narrative which had

Returning to Mark, and again contra the thesis of embarrassing details being included, Raphael Lataster (and Christopher Tuckett, whom Lataster quotes) makes some excellent points on the matter:

Firstly, it could be possible that the author purposely provides an “embarrassing” or “dissimilar” example to make a point (perhaps on humility, or separation from the ego), or to provide a feeling of authenticity and credibility, avoiding suspicion over constant positive or beneficial assertions. Secondly, given the diversity of Jewish religions, and the diversity even of early Christianity, it cannot be assumed (with the canonical Gospels at least, with their anonymous authors) that the author would find the event or teaching in question to be embarrassing. Biblical scholar Christopher Tuckett (University of Oxford) argued that “The very existence of the tradition may thus militate against its being regarded as ‘dissimilar’ to the views of ‘the early church’.”<sup>59</sup>

Thus, the mere presence of these elements within Mark’s narrative could automatically undermine the conclusion that this was originally embarrassing as an idea. Likewise, it could be that Mark deliberately chose an “embarrassing” event to emphasize the humility and deferral of Jesus, his humility sets an example for humanity to then also be baptized, even if Jesus did not require it.

A third reason for doubting the historicity of this narrative is Mark’s intertextuality with the Elisha-Elijah narrative indicates that a strong reason for him saying John is a forerunner of Jesus (a central framing device for the entire narrative) has nothing to do with redacting historical fact but instead for prophetic and literary reasons. Elijah was conceptualized as the forerunner to the Messiah, as Rivka Nir notes, this tradition being found in Christian texts and in the Sibylline Oracles.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, it may be the case that Elijah may be the forerunner to the Messiah in *1 Enoch* and the *Apocalypse of Elijah*.<sup>61</sup> In short, (as noted above) Ehrman’s argument seems invalid on the basis that there was an expectation among Christians and possibly some Jews that Elijah would come before the Messiah/Christ. Furthermore, Ehrman’s neglect of the intertextuality in Mark as elaborated on quite convincingly by Thomas L. Brodie is troubling.<sup>62</sup> Brodie shows at lengths how the Elisha-Elijah narrative was used by Mark and the other Synoptics, and if the implicit references are not enough to convince (such as John and Elijah having similar dress<sup>63</sup>), Mark does seem to identify John with Elijah more explicitly elsewhere (Mark 9:10-12).<sup>64</sup>

There also seems to be little tension with the idea of Jesus’ baptism for the remission of sins if one considered Mark an adoptionistic text, where Jesus is a normal human prior to his

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nothing to do with John! The Gospel of the Ebionites Webb readily acknowledges (269) is likely reliant on the Synoptics. And the Gospel according to the Nazarenes which Webb cites explicitly denies that Jesus was baptized by John and may be reliant on Matthew. Thus, none of these sources can be used.

<sup>59</sup> Lataster, “Bayesian Reasoning,” 274.

<sup>60</sup> Rivka Nir, *The First Christian Believer: In Search of John the Baptist* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2019), 73–86.

<sup>61</sup> Nir, *The First Christian Believer*, 86–91.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas L. Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge: The Elijah-Elisha Narrative as Interpretive Synthesis of Genesis-Kings and a Literary Model for the Gospels* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000). Also on the topic of Elijah and John, see A. M. Okorie, “John the Baptist and Elijah,” *Melita Theologica* 50, no. 2 (1999): 79–85.

<sup>63</sup> Mark 1:6 cf. 2 King 1:8.

<sup>64</sup> Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 80, 92. See also Adam Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative: Considering the Practice of Greco-Roman Imitation in the Search for Markan Source Material* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2010), 70-1.

baptism and adoption. The baptism would be the start of his reign as Christ.<sup>65</sup> This might explain why we may detect counter imperial imagery in the passage, as Peppard has argued,<sup>66</sup> as adoption was an important aspect of the Imperial cult, with Julius adopting Augustus, who adopted Tiberius, who adopted Germanicus the father of Caligula.<sup>67</sup> In short, we have no reason to think of Mark as “embarrassed” by the baptism at all. To the contrary, we now have plenty of reason for suspecting that he may have invented it. Mark decided to invent the connection so as to: (1) have the Elijah precursor in the semi-famous figure of John the Baptist, and then (2) so he could create an event where Jesus becomes adopted by God in Imperial fashion. Fredriksen does point out that first century Jewish theologians were not preparing for a “baptized or crucified messiah” and therefore the criterion of dissimilarity follows, i.e., the authors likely would not make this up as they had no reason to do so in alignment with ancient Jewish traditions.<sup>68</sup>

Of course, however, if we assume that Mark knew of John as a baptizer (and baptism did exist elsewhere in Judaism, such as amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls community), and Mark wanted to use John as a precursor Elijah figure to the Christ (Jesus), then we can see perfect opportunity for him to, essentially, create his own “tradition.” Jesus is baptized by the Elijah figure, which anoints him as the Christ, when God then appears to declare Jesus his son, which also serves the adoptionistic and imperial link as well. This would also play on the meaning of “Christos” in a way, as it means “anointed,” and here Mark creates a parallel, but with the waters of the Jordan where Jesus can be literally anointed via his baptism. In this case dissimilarity could still make complete sense in the hands of a creative author, and if we allow Mark to actually have autonomy and control over the contents of his writing, then we have no reason to deny his creativity. Dissimilarity is only a valid criterion on the assumption that the authors of the gospels are not creative agents, that they are simply redactors of tradition.

Fourth, some have in turn argued that the baptism is a historical fact because Christians would not create something which conflicted with their theology.<sup>69</sup> But this speculation is problematic on several fronts. It does not appear to actually be a problem for the theology of Mark, who shows no signs of embarrassment in the text.<sup>70</sup> This assumes some kind of conglomerate view of early Christianity that must have universally thought of the baptism as unacceptable for a sinless person or that Jesus was considered sinless in every tradition.<sup>71</sup> It assumes that Mark, the first to

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<sup>65</sup> On this scene as adoptionistic, see Adam Winn, *Reading Mark's Christology Under Caesar: Jesus the Messiah and Roman Imperial Ideology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 73–4.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Peppard, “The Eagle and the Dove: Roman Imperial Sonship and the Baptism of Jesus (Mark 1.9-11),” *New Testament Studies* 56 (2010): 431–51. See also Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 86–131. See also the possible Homeric parallels, Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 135–6.

<sup>67</sup> Caligula died and was succeeded by Claudius, his uncle, who adopted Nero.

<sup>68</sup> Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 184.

<sup>69</sup> Werrett, *Review of Nir*, 521.

<sup>70</sup> Richard DeMaris, “The Baptism of Jesus: A Ritual-Critical Approach,” in Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina, and Gerd Theissen (eds), *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 137–58 (specifically 143). DeMaris thinks the baptism is historical and justifies it through usage of Anthropological types, however, there are equally valid types for seeing it as a literary invention. His attempt to see this as a spirit trance and ritual finds little support in comparison to Judean baptismal practices of the time, as Marcus has fully investigated.

<sup>71</sup> This is ironic for Marcus, who criticizes Rivka Nir for having been reductive of ancient Judaism to a single conglomerate religious theology, while Marcus himself treats the Gospels in such a fashion to argue

attest to the tale, could not have been accidentally contradictory as human beings generally are, even in their literary writings, or that he was deliberately writing something which we conceive of as embarrassing in order to make a point (as noted above).<sup>72</sup> Not allowing Mark to be contradictory or thinking the baptism must have been embarrassing is an attempt to disavow the humanity of Mark and maintain historicity above all else. This has been a notable feature in NT studies, where the authors of the gospels, epistles, etc. are regularly construed as having to be consistent and coherent, when humans, in reality, are not.<sup>73</sup> And lastly, on this same note, scholars assume that Mark conceptualized Jesus as sinless, though this is not actually explicit within his text on my reading. “Embarrassment” as a concept seems to be either unapplicable or a form of projection by modern a Christianizing lens, trying to push the modern or post-Markan theological embarrassment of the baptism onto Mark. Rafael Rodríguez notes:

Instead, “embarrassment” may simply be the most conspicuous feature of the historical narrative we tell ourselves to justify the conclusion that this or that datum from the tradition preserves history accurately. Jesus’ submission to John’s baptism, for example, becomes embarrassing when we plot the baptism within the narrative of a sinless messiah exalted by his later followers. The embarrassment of Jesus’ baptism becomes even clearer when we read Matthew (and, to a lesser extent, Luke and John) as an attempt to mitigate Mark’s relatively unadorned description of the event. If, however, we opt for the narrative of a relatively obscure messianic figure who benefitted from being associated with a more widely known prophetic figure (John), Jesus’ baptism serves that association well and appears propagandistic rather than embarrassing.<sup>74</sup>

As such, Mark using John the Baptist as a propagandistic measure for the Jesus movement or as a brilliant literary device, firmly rooted in Imperial imagery and scriptural intertextuality (setting up the popular figure of John as forerunner to Jesus, akin to Elijah), gives us many reasons to conclude that Mark would have motivation to create this story, and from which all “embarrassment” is lost. If Mark is taken as adoptionistic (which appears to be the case with the imperial imagery), if he

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the authenticity of the Baptism, see Marcus, *John the Baptist*, 125-127. Marcus’ defense of the Josephan passage on JtB is weak. As noted in Christopher M. Hansen, Review of Joel Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, in *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 22 (2021–2022): R93–R98, Marcus relies on a conglomerate view of Christian theology viewing the human figure of Jesus as always sinless. He does not ascribe that Mark may have invented the narrative and not realized the implications. Human error simply does not occur as a possibility. He says that the style of the passage would fit with the general tone of “wrongly convicted” people and philosophers, but the more immediate context is of rebels (see *Ant.* 18.1.1–6; 18.4.1–6; 18.9.1–9), so we would not expect Josephus to be positive of John.

<sup>72</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien’s writings provide a case in point for how hyper-conscious of their work one can be and still create numerous inconsistencies and contradictions, see Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (eds), *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader’s Companion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), xliii where Christopher Tolkien writes, “However much my father desired to achieve consistency at every level of his work, from capital letters to the dates of dynasties, he was bound to fail.”

<sup>73</sup> A key example of this are the Pauline epistles, which academics regularly parse to try and either harmonize or declare some part or another an interpolation on the basis of internal incoherence or inconsistency or self-contradiction. None of these reasons is particularly convincing as a basis for interpolation, as humans are consistently inconsistent creatures, see Patrick Hart, *A Prolegomenon to the Study of Paul* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 55-56. As a result, various theories of interpolation or harmonization attempting to correct or rectify a contradiction seem to be intrinsically problemated.

<sup>74</sup> Rafael Rodríguez, “The Embarrassing Truth About Jesus: The Criterion of Embarrassment and the Failure of Historical Authenticity,” in Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (eds), *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 131–51 (specifically 145).

wishes to connect Elijah to the coming messiah (as he does identify John as Elijah later), and if we remove the assumption of a monolithic high Christology of the Early Church then the historicity of the baptism seems to be on shaky grounds, as we can now see a very coherent way that Mark could have invented the story, which would explain the absence of any reference to the baptism in any of our earlier sources prior to Mark.

### What Now?

The question remains what rigorous evidence or arguments can be put forward that defend the historicity of the baptism? One may retort that Mark's intertextuality and agendas do not preclude the historicity of the baptism, but such a response does not actually demonstrate the baptism happened, it only opens up a possibility for a historical baptism at the core of Mark's literary inventions. Either way, however, the mere positing of the possibility does not validate the probability that the baptism occurred. This would be an appeal to possibility fallacy. Josephus *may* have mentioned John the Baptist in book 18 of *Antiquities*,<sup>75</sup> but this chronologically is inconsistent with the New Testament's depiction of Jesus, and never mentions Jesus' baptism.<sup>76</sup> The Gospel of John never mentions the baptism, and assuming with Marcus and others that he was an independent source makes this more problematic for defenders of the baptism. There is no independent attestation of the Baptism. Even the Gospel of Thomas shows evidence of reliance on the Synoptic tradition.<sup>77</sup>

Given all of this, we have to ask how the baptism of Jesus could be considered an unassailable fact when it rests on such flimsy evidence to support it? The answer may lie in the amount of Christian protectionism (that is the desire to apologetically defend certain aspects of the Bible from unwanted historical and theological criticism) inherent in the field of New Testament studies. Evidence of this is seen strewn throughout NT studies as a field. As Justin Meggitt previously noted, in no other field could one argue for a historical resurrection of a person and have this considered historical and critical research.<sup>78</sup> In fact, arguing explicitly that the resurrection was non-historical and that the Gospels are largely fictional can find one censured

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<sup>75</sup> For the growing list of scholars who have been arguing in favor of interpolation, see section 2.2 above. I posit, contra Marcus and Nir, that instead of a Christian interpolator we may be dealing with an interpolator who was a devotee of John the Baptist's *cultus*, following Huidekoper. The rebuttals to Nir by Ian Werrett, (Review of) *The First Christian Believer: In Search of John the Baptist*, by Rivka Nir, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (2020): 520–522 (specifically 521–522) are likewise unconvincing and also appeal to the embarrassment criterion again, with little to no reasonable argumentation.

<sup>76</sup> Numerous attempts have been made to try and resolve the chronological difficulties. This has led some scholars to now concluding, in my position rightly, that John the Baptist was executed after Jesus was crucified, see Tamás Visi, "The Chronology of John the Baptist and the Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth: A New Approach," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 18, no. 1 (2020): 3–34. One key contradiction is on how John the Baptist dies. Mark has it as resulting from Herod's marriage, while Josephus has it because he suspected John of being a seditious leader of rebellion. MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 241–243 provides a rather convincing solution which is that Mark is influenced by the Homeric Epic and has modeled John's death on that of the murder of Agamemnon. The parallels which MacDonald notes are extremely close and seem far too intricate to be coincidence.

<sup>77</sup> Mark Goodacre, *Thomas and the Gospels: The Case for Thomas' Familiarity with the Synoptics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

<sup>78</sup> Justin J. Meggitt, "'More Ingenious Than Learned': Examining the Quest for the Non-Historical Jesus," *New Testament Studies* 65 (2019): 443–60 (458).



depending on their university position.<sup>79</sup> But if a Roman historian were to contend that Augustus Caesar was actually raised up by the god Mars and there became a deity, or that Vespasian's healing miracles actually occurred, they would be derided out of all respectability in the field. Yet, in NT Studies, volumes and articles in mainstream journals affirming a historical resurrection or miracles are ample and considered regular scholarship rather than what they really are: apologetics by those wishing to protect the New Testament from critical scrutiny and evaluation.<sup>80</sup> If we dropped the outdated methods, and stopped reinforcing the idea of the baptism as "unassailable," we may find that it is far more assailable than we previously were led to believe, and that we may have reason to challenge other aspects of the traditional narrative of Jesus' life as well. And in doing so, perhaps we should be engaging in a wider variety of techniques and methods for analyzing the gospels. Seeing the gospel authors as creative writers, who are not bound or confined by "accurate history," tradition, community, or anything even remotely similar, may dispel many of these errant methods and assumptions, and allow us more varied and interesting approaches. As it stands currently, however, New Testament studies is plagued by a rather insular

NT scholars have far too often treated the canon sources as special and unique in the ancient world, while claiming not to. They will declare them ancient *bioi* while ignoring the highly fictionalized nature of ancient *bioi*. They will claim that they abide by standard practice of historians, while using hypothetical documents and oral traditions in ways that are unparalleled in any other historical field (for instance, historians do not use the *Kaisergeschichte* the way NT scholars would use Q).<sup>81</sup> And they will declare the skeptics who challenge these "certain" facts about Jesus' life to be uncritical or overly skeptical, and that historians do not practice such skepticism, while ignoring that this kind of skepticism is very similar to that levied toward Socrates (the so-called Socratic Problem) and attempts to reconstruct his life and teachings.<sup>82</sup> And we see this in the case of the baptism. It is asserted a fact, skeptics are routinely dismissed as either not serious, or "hyperskeptics", or similar, and the arguments for it rely on problematic methods and

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<sup>79</sup> Gerd Lüdemann, *Der große Betrug: Und was Jesus wirklich sagte und tat*, Fifth Edition (Springer: Zu Klampen Verlag, 2011 [orig. 1999]) led him to being removed as the Chair of New Testament studies and all of his courses were deemed outside the requirements for students of ministry ("Statement of the Dean in Regard to the Academic Position to be Held by Professor Dr Gerd Lüdemann," *Religion* 32 (2002): 141–2. Thomas L. Brodie was restricted from all teaching and writing as a result of his volume *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus*. His teachings were deemed dangerous by the Church, see Bernard Treacy, "From the Editor's Desk: Official Dominican Response to a Controversial Book," *Doctrine & Life* 64, no. 5 (2014): 2–4. Evangelical scholar Michael R. Licona was dismissed from his position for proposing that not all of the Gospel of Matthew, such as the resurrection of the saints, was historical, see Bobby Ross Jr., "Interpretation Sparks a Grave Theology Debate," *Christianity Today* (7 Nov. 2011), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/november/interpretation-sparks-theology-debate.html>.

<sup>80</sup> For extensive bibliography on this, see Michael J. Alter, *A Thematic Access-Oriented Bibliography of Jesus' Resurrection* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2019).

<sup>81</sup> Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament Within Greco-Roman Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) goes at length to demonstrate that these appeals to tradition, oral sources, and "community" stem from outdated German Romantic methods and how these have been abandoned in other fields of research.

<sup>82</sup> Louis-André Dorion, "The Rise and Fall of the Socratic Problem," in Donald R. Morrison (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. Donald R. Morrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1-23 states emphatically, "Historians of Socrates and Socratism thus have their work cut out, and this is why bothering with the useless and cumbersome Socratic problem is no longer of interest to them" (21).

assumptions which historians in similar cases (like Socrates) would dismiss as faulty. Jesus and the episodes of his life are protected from proper scrutiny by the retaining and recapitulation of “embarrassment” and other faulty methodological criteria, and those who challenge these “facts” are rarely dealt with in any proper detail. Historians should always be open to this skepticism, even when it leads to uncomfortable conclusions.

### Conclusions

Now in arguing this, I have not demonstrated conclusively that the Baptism of Jesus did not historically occur. However, I believe there is sufficient reason to challenge its historicity and, further, maintain agnosticism about the historicity of the baptism by John. There is ample reason for Mark to have invented this passage and the arguments against this have been rooted in the methodological errors that permeated the Criteria of Authenticity and uncritical review and usage of the sources. The supposed “embarrassment” displayed by Matthew, Luke, and (possibly) John is, firstly, late, and secondly (and more important) in response to Markan tradition. As Arnal noted, the Gospel of John’s absence of a baptism altogether is compatible either with embarrassment at the Synoptic tradition, a historical event, or that the Gospel of John simply knows a tradition that lacked a baptism altogether. Hypothetical sources like Q are problematic due to their very nature, but even treating them as reliable historical sources, Q does not attest to a baptism of Jesus in its current state. The passage in *Antiquities* 18 likewise bears numerous issues, not least of all is that it does not mention Jesus or establish his baptism. Lastly, the Mandaean sources are so late that intermingling or some distant reliance on Christian stories is generally accepted, such as with scenes in the *Mandaean Book of John*. The arguments in favor of the baptism seem to be built mostly on theological and traditional grounds. It is upheld as historical not because the evidence is damning or even consistent, but because traditional narratives about Jesus have been treated as paradigmatic and unchallengeable, and those who do challenge them are often regarded with derision, ignored, and sometimes even removed from their academic positions. Perhaps this is because when due skepticism is held over the sources, the foundations for regarding many of these narratives as historical collapse, and so such skepticism is seen as “overly skeptical” or “hyper skeptical” or similar, and scholars do not accept it or engage in it.

Did the baptism of Jesus by John actually occur? We cannot say, but I would err on the side of no. The evidence in favor of the baptism does not stand up to scrutiny, and when placed under a microscope, one can find good reason for thinking that Mark would have created the narrative, and that all of our other sources follow from Mark accordingly. Even accepting that Josephus wrote about John, he makes no connection to Jesus and so even here this source does not help establish that the baptism ever occurred. The reality is that this event has no clear indications of having been a historical one, but every marking of being a literary fabrication.