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BOOK REVIEW

Joel Marcus. *John the Baptist in History and Theology*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018. x + 278 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-1-61117-900-2. \$59.99.

This volume on John the Baptist has recently proved rather influential in New Testament studies and appears to be at the beginnings of a Quest of the Historical John the Baptist, with the entire issue 1 of the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 19 (2021) being devoted to Marcus's volume. Following this, the 2021 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.

Each chapter of this volume finds itself offering rather intriguing insight though, as I will note below, there seem to be a number of pitfalls in this volume which have become emblematic of the historical quests initiated by Jesus-scholars and similar. The first chapter frames this discussion in terms of the "competition hypothesis," noting that our earliest texts already reflect a conflict and competition between the followers of John the Baptist and those of Jesus of Nazareth, and that this should greatly inform our discussion of John in regard to the Gospels. Chapter two sets a historical background for John, arguing that he belonged to the Qumran community which is where his own ideas and concepts of baptism stemmed from, though he then left and developed his ideas further, the nature of his baptism ministry being more fully explored in chapter four. Chapter three argues that John "deliberately modeled himself" (59–61) on the figure of Elijah with his garb and teachings. Marcus describes it as "Elijan self-consciousness" (48). Chapter five focuses on his relation to Jesus. Marcus argues that John did

baptize Jesus but that he did not view him as the Messiah, citing Matt 11:2–6 as a possible indication of this. Chapter six focuses on John's execution by Herod and what can be said about it. As John's movement was a new and zealous one according to Marcus, this gives Herod reason to kill him. Marcus also appears to count the divorce issues as historical as well. The volume then ends with a short conclusion discussing the implications of what has been found. Following this are eleven appendices all focusing in on various items. Some of them are relatively short, such as Marcus's rather dismissive and uncomprehensive response to Rivka Nir's thesis that the Josephan passage on John was an interpolation. Others include an attempt to establish a chronology for John's life and ministry and various other interesting items.

This volume does offer a wealth of information that should prove extremely valuable to various scholars interested in John the Baptist, and despite the reservations that I will note below, the volume does come highly recommended from myself. However, I cannot help but voice concern with a number of the arguments and methodologies employed with the study, which I fear will continue to rear their head on future studies influenced by Marcus.

First, Marcus's continual usage of Q as a historical document is troubling. While I will not endeavor to argue whether or not Q existed (though I favor the Goodacre-Farrer hypothesis), whether it did or not is somewhat secondary to the concern that a hypothetical document cannot and should not be used as a primary source for information. Q is a reconstructed text, which we cannot definitively prove existed. As a hypothetical text, with a hypothetical reconstruction, any "evidence" it provides is hypothetical as well. The continued appeal to hypothetical documents, oral traditions, etc. seems to me to be more infantilizing of ancient authors than critical scholarship at this point, and it is a problem that New Testament scholars have refused to address. Any text in a possibly different style, or that is contradictory, or otherwise curious is constantly explained with appeals to oral tradition, hypothetical documents, or as an interpolation, and such a stance/view just removes the creativity

and human nature of these ancient authors. This issue has been elaborated on in detail by Raphael Lataster in rebuttal to Ehrman's similar usage of Q and other hypothetical documents ("Bart Ehrman and the Elusive Historical Jesus." *Literature & Aesthetics* 26 (2016) 181–92).

Another issue is that Marcus continues to make use of the thoroughly refuted criteria of authenticity, though Marcus does not use them by name. A case example of this is that he follows every scholar previously, such as Keener (*The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009, 165–77) and Ehrman (*Jesus Before the Gospels*. New York: HarperOne, 2016, 212–14), in using the criterion of embarrassment to validate the historicity of Jesus' baptism by John (81). This methodology is shoddy at best. First, that Matthew and Luke show embarrassment at the baptism is irrelevant because they are redacting and responding to Mark. They are embarrassed not by a historical fact but by Mark's literary work. Of the Synoptics, Mark is the only one that matters in this case, and it shows no clear evidence of embarrassment at the baptism, either. In fact, viewing this through Mark's regular use of Imperial imagery and theology, it becomes entirely consistent (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). The Gospel of John is the only other source in question, and he omits the baptism altogether. However, we have three possible ways of explaining this: (1) he never heard of a baptism narrative, paralleling Paul; (2) he is embarrassed at Mark's portrayal of the baptism and, therefore, provides no evidence for the embarrassment criterion; (3) he is embarrassed at a historical fact. One could cite probability theory here, and we would find that because outcomes that (1) and (2) provide no evidence for Jesus' baptism that the prior probability of John actually providing this evidence is 33 percent against 66 percent opposite (using the principle of indifference). Option 2 has recently been seeming more likely, especially given recent studies demonstrating Johannine reliance on Mark (Eve-Marie Becker, Helen K. Bond, and Catrin H. Williams, eds., *John's Transformation of Mark*. London: T. & T. Clark, 2021). As a

part of this, Marcus has neglected a number of key studies on the intertextuality of the Gospels as well, both with the Old Testament and with possible Greco-Roman sources. Particularly disappointing is the lack of any mention of Dennis MacDonald's work, especially how he notes the contradictions between Josephus and the Gospels on John's death, and that John's death in the Gospels may be better explained through literary influence from the Homeric epics (*The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, 241–43). The lack of mention of Thomas L. Brodie's critical study the Elijah-Elisha narrative and the Gospels is also noted (*The Crucial Bridge; The Elijah-Elisha Narrative as Interpretive Synthesis of Genesis-Kings and a Literary Model for the Gospels*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000). Though an oddity, it is disappointing to also see that Jean Magne's relevant study has been once again ignored despite having many ramifications that Marcus does not contend with (*From Christianity to Gnosis and From Gnosis to Christianity*. Brown Judaic Studies 286; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993). Marcus insists that the baptism "is one of the few things we can feel confident about in his [Jesus'] biography" (81) and yet the evidence for it seems flimsy and built on outdated and defunct methods. The continued usage of these methods seems more a way to avoid an uncomfortable conclusion, for example, that if there ever was a historical baptism of Jesus, we have no way of accessing it through the literary narratives of the Gospels.

Another critical issue with the volume is that there is an entire selection of sources which Marcus has neglected to work with, specifically Mandaean sources. Marcus spends barely over three pages arguing that the Mandaean sources aid his competition hypothesis (19–22) and then never deals with the Mandaeans again, even though they could present and help complicate numerous things in our existing sources if they were evaluated more fully.

Marcus's response to Rivka Nir's thesis that the Baptist passage in Josephus's *Ant.* 18.5.1–4 is inauthentic is likewise weak, and unimaginative. Though one may contest that Nir's hypothesis that it was interpolated by *Christians* is

unconvincing, Marcus inadvertently has provided a good background with the competition hypothesis for actually arguing that followers of John the Baptist interpolated the passage. If followers of John are contending with Christians and trying to disavow Christian tradition (as in Mandaean tradition), these followers could have interpolated a passage about John chronologically after Jesus' time in Josephus's *Antiquities* (which appears to be the case) and without mention of Jesus to discredit the connection between the two (that John's followers interpolated the passage was argued previously by Frederic HuidEKoper, *Indirect Testimony to the Genuineness of the Gospels*. 7th Edition. London, 1887, 154–56). Arguing that it was not Christians who interpolated the passage does not demonstrate it was not an interpolation. His counter to Josephus being too favorable to John is that John should be conceptualized as one of those unjustly feared in Josephus's work. While he can cite some disparate places where this may be valid in Josephus' work, the more immediate context is quite different. In book 18 of *Antiquities*, Josephus regularly is talking of actually rebellious figures who are rightfully put down. Judas the Galilean (18.1.1–6), the Samaritan who caused a tumult in need of suppression (18.4.1–6), Asineus and Anileus (18.9.1–9), etc. In short, the more immediate context *is* of those who were rightfully feared for rebellious activity. The only counter would be appeal to the *Testimonium Flavianum* (18.3.3) but Ken Olson has provided good reason to consider it a forgery (Ken Olson, "Eusebius and the 'Testimonium Flavianum'," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 [1999] 305–22) and, if not, a negative reading with Jesus as a seditious individual has gained some notoriety recently (Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, "Was the Hypothetical 'Vorlage' of the 'Testimonium Flavianum' a 'Neutral' Text? Challenging the Common Wisdom on 'Antiquitates Judaicae' 18.63–64," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 45 [2014] 326–65; Dave Allen, "An Original Negative Testimonium," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 15 [2020] 67–90). Since this is the case, it provides no clear evidence in its current state. Marcus's arguments continue following these weak lines.

Though this volume does come recommended, I cannot help

but list these caveats because they do illustrate something perhaps very important: that the John the Baptist of the Gospels is a literary character, and that we are perhaps just going down the same trajectory of Jesus studies with this volume, a continued reliance on outdated methods and with generally comfortable conclusions for the reader. At points it seems as though Marcus wishes to make John an easier historical figure to discover, and perhaps this is where Nir's own volume (*The First Christian Believer: In Search of John the Baptist*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2019) presents better highlights than Marcus's, in that she acknowledges the contradictions, the complications, and the literary character of John in the Gospels and comes to the uncomfortable conclusions which most scholars would rather ignore. Marcus instead harmonizes and relies on outdated methods, instead of telling us what is probably more justified: that we cannot say Jesus was baptized, and that our methods are inadequate for dissecting the historical John from his literary counterpart. Despite this, the volume adds a number of valuable insights, especially his usage of the Qumran material. It is a tightly written, engaging, and insightful volume even with these caveats. It is well worth the price and should be on the shelf of any academic wishing to study John the Baptist.

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