

The Virgin And The Priest The Making Of The Messiah

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6 Sibling Rivalry

The reason for the reluctance of gospel writers to make clear that John the Baptist was Jesus' older brother is self evident. It would have raised too many difficult questions. Later, the Gentile Church was at ease with the notion that their relationship was as cousins. Anything closer than that would have destabilized the whole foundation of its theology.

As brothers on their father's side, John and Jesus probably shared similar physical traits. As there was supposedly only six months age difference between them, they might even have resembled twins. This would explain why, after he entered the public domain, Jesus was confused with John the Baptist. When Jesus asked Peter, "Who do people say that I am?" the initial response was "some say John the Baptist." John cast a long shadow from which Jesus could not easily escape.

BLOOD BROTHERS

John's decapitation was recorded by Mark and Matthew. Mark's account ended with the line, "when his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb." Matthew made an addition that provides a further clue to the true nature of Jesus' relationship with John. John's disciples gave Jesus the news of his death,

And his disciples came and took the body and buried it; and they went and told Jesus.
Matthew 14:12

On the previous occasion when John's disciples visited Jesus, they were sent packing with a condemnation of John, "blessed is he who takes no offense at me." So it is safe to say that the relationship between the two was not close. Although John was dead, his disciples were not about to join forces with Jesus. So why then, did they visit him?

It was Jewish custom that a body was buried as soon as possible after death. Afterward, the immediate family of the deceased would observe a seven-day mourning period or *Shiva*, which is still practiced by traditional Jews. John's death was reported to Jesus because he was the closest adult male next of kin. Matthew stated that the period of mourning had begun, "when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart." Mark also implied that Jesus observed the *Shiva*.

And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while"...And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves.
Mark 6:30-32

OLDER VERSUS YOUNGER

The recurring biblical theme of sibling rivalry has never been a hot topic of theological debate.¹ Nevertheless, as an undeniable aspect of Hebrew tradition, it requires

explanation. First established in the story of Cain and Abel, it resurfaced on several other occasions in Genesis, and in other books throughout the Old Testament. The plot structure follows a basic formula. To review, there are two brothers; the younger is favored by God or the father, in opposition to the accepted tradition whereby priority is always given to the first born son. As a result, the older brother is resentful of the younger. Opportunities to resolve their differences are seldom taken, and the rift between them escalates into a conflict.

Modern folklorists have suggested that this particular motif was repeated so often by Jewish scribes because it signified Israel's position as the younger brother to the older pagan cultures that surrounded it. As God favored Israel, the older nations were indignant and therefore wished to destroy Israel.² This makes sense to a certain degree. But the details of these fraternal relationships were so finely tuned, and so crucial to the messianic bloodline that they must have had an explicit function in the salvation process.

JESUS VERSUS JOHN

New Testament scholars have long been aware of a semblance of discord between John the Baptist and Jesus in the gospel accounts, but it has remained an insignificant issue. As both men proclaimed the coming kingdom of God, it is assumed that they were on the same side. It was curious, then, that they did not work together. Apparently, after John baptized Jesus, they never even met again. What's more, the distance between them was confirmed by their respective followers, who were at odds over questions of lifestyle.

While John was in prison, he had time to reflect. We are told that he dispatched some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he "was the one to come or should we wait for another?" Though adamant about his messianic status, Jesus struggled to gain popular recognition. So he did not appreciate the question. John's incarceration might have given him cause to reconsider, but it was too late. He was already lost.

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Matt 11:11

This quote is commonly misinterpreted as an expression of Jesus' profound admiration of John, not only for his paramount position in the pantheon of Jewish heroes, but as the ultimate paragon of humility. The problem with this reading, apart from its sheer absurdity, is that Matthew had earlier clarified what Jesus meant by "least in the kingdom";

Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Matt 5:19

In the kingdom of God, John the Baptist ranked beneath the lowest of the low. His crime, therefore, was far worse than simply rejecting Jesus. So instrumental was John in shaping public opinion that Jesus held him personally responsible for his failure to gain popular acceptance. No one had "risen" greater than John the Baptist because he was born to be the Elijah -- a prophet who would lead the people to their Messiah. For some reason, he reneged on this destiny. And as John's immense popularity gave him a much greater

audience than Jesus, this had serious repercussions. Jesus' reported statement that, "he who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters," revealed his opinion of the independent Baptist movement. In cosmic terms, John the Baptist had become the anti-Christ.

THE PRODIGAL SON

To appreciate the significance of the sibling-rivalry paradigm, it is worth reading in full Luke's *Parable of the Prodigal Son*:

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry. "Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'

Luke 15:1-32

The standard analysis that the younger brother represents everyman is misguided. The *Parable of the Prodigal Son* is an articulation of the fraternal dynamic in the messianic line. The younger brother is Jesus. The tale was a synopsis of his relationship with John the Baptist.

The elder son lived the spotless life; which fits with what we know of John. The younger son disappeared for a while and lived as a wastrel. No information exists on Jesus' early adult life, but he was accused of being a drunkard and of associating with undesirables. He was unlikely to have drunk heavily during his public ministry, so this charge must

have been made in reference to his past.

Realizing the error of his ways, the younger son repents and returns to his father's house. The overwhelmingly positive reaction of the father (analogous to God) was responsible for the negative reaction of the older brother. The father dons the younger son with the best robe and gives him a ring -- traditional symbols of authority, even of royal investiture. So God instituted Jesus as his king. This was too much for John the Baptist to bear

JESUS AND JACOB

If Jesus considered himself as the Prodigal Son, then he must have understood the centrality of sibling rivalry in the salvation plan. Cain and Abel were models for all subsequent pairs of brothers, so Jesus saw himself as a type of Abel. So he demanded vindication for 'the blood of Abel.' Early Christians saw Jesus' crucifixion as prefigured by Abel's death. The Letter to the Hebrews explained that salvation was due "to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel."³

Because God accepted Abel and rejected Cain, the natural position of the brothers was reversed. This set up a challenge for Cain to overcome his hostility. God warned him that "sin was crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."⁴ Abel was killed because Cain failed to rise above his resentment. This same test presented itself to all future older siblings.

Isaac gave the birthright of the first-born son to Jacob, who was his second-born son. The older Esau wanted to kill Jacob. He did not do so because Jacob managed to win him over. Genesis explained that Jacob returned after twenty-one years of self-imposed exile, offered Esau his prized possessions, bowed down seven times before him, and even told him that, "to see your face is like seeing the face of God."⁵ Esau was melted. To say this story was well known in first century Palestine would be a gross understatement.

The brothers overcame sibling rivalry because Jacob loved his enemy Esau. This unity allowed the foundation of the Israelite nation. To be reconciled with John the Baptist, Jesus followed Jacob's model. Only when the messianic brothers were united could the kingdom of God be substantiated. "Love your enemy," therefore, was a cornerstone of Jesus' teaching, and submitting himself to John's baptism was its practical application.

The famous baptism scene has always been theologically contentious. By all accounts, John's baptism followed repentance, and represented the conditional forgiveness of sin and the start of a new life. Christian apologists struggle endlessly with why the 'sinless' Son of God, second person of the Holy Trinity, needed to be baptized by John. But Matthew explained it.

John resisted at first, saying he should rather be baptized by Jesus. He relents after Jesus says mysteriously, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Whether this conversation was fictional or not is secondary to the meaning implied by it. The words paraphrased how Jesus' baptism was explained by Matthean Christians. To 'fulfill all righteousness' was to repeat the successful precedents of the Hebrew patriarchs. By surrendering to John's baptism, Jesus had literally and figuratively bowed down to his older brother, as Jacob did before Esau. The motivation was to win John's heart.

What took place immediately afterwards is unknown. The synoptic gospels state that only Jesus saw “the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove.” The fourth Gospel, which was written to convert followers of John the Baptist, claims that only John saw it. In any event, John was presumably unmoved, because Jesus went directly into the desert to complete a forty-day fast, and John continued with a separate agenda.

Emerging from the desert, Jesus recruited twelve disciples to represent Jacob’s twelve sons. But though he began his mission as Jacob, he finished as Abel. Moreover, John did not repeat Esau, but Cain. In the end, Jesus blamed his crucifixion on John the Baptist.

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

Nothing concentrates the mind, as they say, like impending death. A condemned man’s final utterance is sometimes his most revealing. All four gospels describe the crucifixion scene, but they attribute different last words to Jesus. In John’s gospel, Jesus simply says, “it is finished.” Luke records, “Father, into thine hands I commit my spirit.” Mark and Mathew both report his last words as: “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” They cannot all be genuine, but that does not mean they are all false.

It is widely acknowledged that John’s gospel is closest in theology to the Gentile Church. Accordingly, Jesus is portrayed as being totally in control of every situation. The events of his life, including his death, were planned from the beginning of time. So his final statement, “it is finished,” is hardly surprising, but its authenticity is seriously suspect.

Luke’s Jesus was resigned to his fate. Even though the narrative describes a terrible miscarriage of justice, the crucifixion was inevitable. Jesus had done all he could do. The ball was in God’s court, “into thine hands I commit my spirit.” A great deal of Luke was lifted from Mark, but Luke chose not to copy Mark’s anguished Jesus who cried in desperation from the cross.

“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” has been described as the most theologically embarrassing verse in the entire New Testament. It serves no Church doctrine, provides no comfort for believers, and flies in the face of the traditional Christian interpretation of the crucifixion. What is even more perplexing is that nothing whatever is gained by including it. Defenders of orthodoxy have attempted to subvert the notion that Jesus was embittered by suggesting that he quoted an obscure line from the Book of Psalms.⁶ Critical scholars, who recognize the perversity of this idea, argue that Mark injected his own theology by putting this phrase into Jesus’ mouth. Theoretically, his readers would recognize the line of scripture, and realize that the crucifixion was the fulfillment of prophesy, and not the disaster it appeared to be.

The problem is that Mark wrote, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” in Jesus’ original spoken language of Aramaic, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” Matthew made a slight alteration and changed it to, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*” But the Aramaic version of Psalm 22:1 is markedly different, “*Eli elahi metul ma shabaktani.*” The meaning is similar, but Mark had no reason to change the wording of the original. That would only hinder its recognition, and contradict his supposed intent. More likely, the reason Mark quoted Jesus in the original tongue was to stress the authenticity of his words.

Matthew rarely missed an opportunity to let the reader know his familiarity with

scripture, but he neglected to do so at the most opportune moment -- when Jesus was about to die on the cross. As he did not identify Jesus' last words, presumably Matthew understood them as genuine.

Jesus' cry was heard by witnesses, and the memory of it was kept alive through oral tradition. Mark, whose gospel was the earliest, could not leave it out because it was so well known. The gospel writers, or later editors, translated the Aramaic into Greek for the benefit of Greek-speaking readers, but their translations were incorrect. There is nothing in Jesus' character, as described anywhere in Christian literature, to suggest that he would have accused God of betrayal. Let us re-examine the gospel narratives.

CALLING ELIJAH

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." And one ran and, filling a sponge full of vinegar, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last.
Mark 15:34-36

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "This man is calling Elijah." And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.
Matthew 27:46-49

Jesus' speech was neither garbled nor muffled. He "cried with a loud voice." Witnesses heard a yell from the depths of an anguished soul, not a calculated delivery. But the words did not convey "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" to the Aramaic speakers who heard them. They heard him call out to Elijah.

Mark used "*Eloi*," but no such word exists in Aramaic or Hebrew. Even later Christian Aramaic speakers did not consider "*Eloi*" to be Aramaic. The Syriac (Aramaic) version of the New Testament (written about 200 C.E.) translated the Greek text of "My God" (*ho Theos mou*) as *Elahi* and not *Eloi*. So Mark was either ignorant of the correct Aramaic, he purposely mistransliterated, or his text was amended.

Matthew recognized this 'confusion' in Mark, so he changed "*Eloi, Eloi*" to "*Eli, Eli*," but kept the rest of the verse intact. "*Eli*" is a Hebrew expression for "My God," and is sometimes used in Aramaic as a derivative from "*El*", which means God in both languages. But *Eli* was most commonly used in the vernacular as an abbreviation for the popular name Elijah, as it is today.

Of course, the gospel writers managed to make the Jewish bystanders appear stupid, which was a much favored ploy. Even in Jesus' final moments, the Jews were still incapable of discerning the true meaning of his words. All the same, the bystanders probably expected Jesus to blame his own followers for abandoning him, or the priests who allegedly stirred the crowd to demand Pilate crucify him. Yet Jesus held Elijah responsible.

ELIJAH THE PROPHET

The only evidence we have for the historical Elijah is written in Hebrew Scriptures. They claim Elijah lived during the first half of the ninth-century B.C.E. in the northern kingdom of Israel. Many centuries later, the writers of 1 Kings and 2 Kings incorporated existing Elijah legends into their accounts, and described him as an idiosyncratic, ascetic holy man called by God to cleanse Israel of Baal worship. There is no account of Elijah's death, and there is no tomb for him. He was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot; an event which created all manner of speculations about his return.

Extensive Jewish folklore featured Elijah as a heroic and magnanimous figure who lived in disguise among the Jewish people, keeping a watchful eye on events. In times of crisis or special need, he would appear as a stranger to bring comfort and resolution to those in distress. Elijah was a precursor of Santa Claus. Even today, books of inspirational Elijah tales are published for young Jewish children. Spectators at Jesus' crucifixion, who suggested that Elijah might come and rescue him, were not necessarily being sarcastic.

In first-century Palestine, Elijah expectation reached its peak. He is mentioned more times in the New Testament than Moses, Abraham, or any other revered Jewish figure. Elijah's return was fueled by prophecies that he would announce the Messiah in the last days. The final verses of the Book of Malachi summed up this expectancy.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

Mal 4:5-6

Similar to the Christian belief that Jesus will return, Orthodox Jews still wait for Elijah to come back. Most Jews everywhere keep the tradition of leaving an empty chair at the Passover meal in case Elijah should come to visit. But what is relevant here is whether or not Jesus imagined that a nine-hundred-year-old prophet would materialize, whisk him off the cross, and proclaim him the Messiah. If one resists the temptation to view biblical events through the lens of a Hollywood special effects department, then the notion of Elijah's return is plainly fantastic.

Jesus believed that John the Baptist was the returning Elijah. Not a literal reincarnation of the original prophet, any more than he understood himself a reincarnation of David, Moses, or Jacob. In Jesus' understanding of God's dispensation, John was a *type* of Elijah. There was nothing extraordinary in this concept. In Jewish tradition, every providential figure was seen in terms of those who prefigured him.

JOHN THE ELIJAH

Jesus' disciples were mostly illiterate. They did not follow Jesus because of their knowledge of scripture. Apart from his "miracles" and that he was a better fisherman, what persuaded them most was the strength of his conviction. Consequently, when testifying to Jesus to those more educated than themselves, they ran into difficulties. A common response must have been along the lines, "If Jesus is who you say he is, then where is Elijah?" Being unaware of Malachi's prophecy, the disciples floundered.

And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" He replied, "Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

Matt 17:10-13

On another occasion, Jesus stated that "all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come."⁷ Although he was unequivocal, apparently nobody else shared this opinion. For educated Jews, Elijah was an absolute prerequisite. Without Elijah first, there could be no Messiah. Jesus knew his dilemma and foresaw the inevitable outcome, "so also the Son of man will suffer at their hands."

The multitudes that came to be baptized by John did not think he was Elijah. In their opinion, he was the most likely candidate for Messiah:

As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ.

Luke 3:15

John did not teach that he was Elijah. He even denied it. In the Fourth gospel, a delegation of priests and Levites are sent from Jerusalem to question him,

When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."

John 1:21-22

In an effort to educate Baptists, the prologue of the fourth Gospel stated that John the Baptist was "not the light, but came to bear witness to the light." This also explains why John volunteered he was not the Christ without even being asked. But his contradiction that he was Elijah went against the grain of the narrative. The likelihood is that John's denial was historical and well understood by Christians and Baptists alike. Furthermore, it served the writer's theological purpose. Jesus did not explain that John the Baptist was Elijah in the fourth Gospel. The essence of Jesus' portrayal is more cosmic Christ than Jewish Messiah. And as the author had a particular Hellenized theology of Jesus, wherever possible, references from mainstream Judaism were kept to a minimum. Elijah was a Jewish passion and the issue was basically immaterial to Gentile Christianity, as it remains today.

SUMMARY

Jesus held John the Baptist responsible for his execution. John had deserted his Elijah mission, sabotaged Jesus' destiny, and thwarted God's Providence. Therefore, Jesus had to assume the task of Elijah. As the original prophet Elijah fasted forty days before starting his public crusade, likewise Jesus fasted forty days fast to inherit Elijah's assignment. So he adopted John's rallying cry "repent, the kingdom of God is at hand" and began to campaign.

The odds were heavily stacked against him. The Messiah could not proclaim himself. A recognized prophet had to do it. Samuel had anointed Saul, the first king of Israel, and

anointed David as his successor. In Jewish tradition, the end of history meant the culmination of all prophecy. It was a unity which allowed no loose ends. If Jesus declared himself king, without first having the popular support that a prophetic anointing would have given him, then he would have had a serious credibility problem. On several occasions, he asked others not to reveal his identity. Now we know why. The timing was not yet right. It was not, as some Christian theologians insisted, because too much public acceptance would hamper his duty to be crucified.

Early Christians, seeking to evangelize Baptists, could not risk portraying John too negatively in their written materials. The New Testament does reveal the intensity of Jesus' frustration with John, but there is little to show John's opinion of Jesus. The best source for that, of course, would be the literature of the early Baptists.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in hillside caves at Qumran in the middle of the twentieth century, has presented us with a collection of original and unedited manuscripts. Archeological evidence found at the site proves that the sect who produced the scrolls were contemporaries of Jesus and John. Furthermore, the location of the caves is close to the river Jordan where John baptized, and is only fifteen miles east of Jerusalem.

Many books have been published on the Dead Sea Scrolls. Most writers regard them as having no direct connection to the historical figures of either Jesus or John the Baptist. But so far, no academic theory to explain them has come close to satisfying the general public's fascination with the Dead Sea Scrolls. Rightly identified as the most important archeological find of the twentieth century, the real story of the scrolls is long overdue. Even more than the Gospel writers, Qumran scribes left behind clues to unlock vital information on the origins of Christianity -- knowledge hitherto cloaked in darkness, unwittingly or otherwise, by institutions of faith and education for two thousand years. Not only did the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls know of Jesus and John the Baptist, they were *obsessed* with them.