

John the Baptist who became Jesus the Christ

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Introduction

My intention with everything I write is to arouse enthusiasm for a process of spiritual transformation that leads to a unification with God. An important question to me with the production of this book was: How will it affect the reader when I meddle with the Divine status of Jesus?

For Jews and “heathens” in the time of Jesus it was important to be able to see him as the Son of God. However, this same Divine status constitutes for many people nowadays a religious challenge. Someone who is born of a virgin and walks on water; few people can still accept that. And as Son of God, Jesus is far removed from the spiritual seeker. It is difficult to compare yourself to a perfect God-man. This is one of the reasons why his mother Mary is sometimes more popular among believers than Jesus: as woman of flesh and blood she is much closer to us.

With this book I want to bring Jesus back to human proportions, so that he can be for us what he wanted to be: an example of how we can actualize the Kingdom of God within ourselves.

After a process of self-emptying he realized a complete unification with God (John 10:30, John 17:21-22). In Biblical terms: he made of himself a temple for God to live in. He overcame the world (John 16:33) and became an anointed one, a Christ.

Jesus was human being who became so intimate with God that he called Him Father. That’s something a modern spiritual seeker can relate to. That inspires imitation. And that is what Jesus wanted.

Jesus’ deeds, his teachings, his death and resurrection, are unique in human history. That he began his life under a different name, takes nothing away from that.

I have written this book out of love and deep respect for the life story of the greatest human being ever.



I

John who became the Christ

*And the light shines in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.
There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light,
that all men through him might believe.*

John 1:5-7 (KJV)

For two thousand years John the Baptist has been seen as the one who first predicted the coming of the Messiah and then recognized Jesus as “the Lamb of God” at his baptism in the Jordan River. Thus he is presented in the Bible, and with that John fulfilled the expectations of the Jews, who, based on the prophecies of Malachi, assumed that the long expected Messiah would be preceded by a great prophet.

John the Baptist, however, was not merely the herald of Jesus. He *was* Jesus. He became a *Christos*, an anointed one, after his process of God-realization, symbolized by the baptism in the Jordan. In this chapter I will show how this explosive supposition is covertly inserted in the gospel stories.

John the ascetic

In the gospels John the Baptist is described as an ascetic who lived in the wilderness and who wore clothing made of camel hair. He called upon people to repent and to be baptized by him. When Jesus wants to be baptized, John recognizes him as the Son of God:

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’

I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.

And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’

I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”

(John 1:29-34)

In reality Jesus and John were the same person. After a long process of purification, a unification with God occurs within John. He continues his life – at least in the gospels – by a new name: Jesus the Christ.



Baptism of Christ, by Elisabetta Sirani, 1658.
The Church San Girolamo Della Certosa in Bologna, Italy.

Jesus and John look the same. Their robes have different colors. Beside them stands a man who wears both colors and who points at John. Above them hovers an angel who also wears a combination of the two colors. John holds a wooden cross without a banner.

He has become the Messiah, for whom the Jews had anxiously waited all those many centuries. But this Savior was expected to fulfill a large number of prophecies from the Jewish Holy Scriptures. All evangelists, therefore, have permeated their stories with references to, and quotations from the Scriptures, to convince the reader that Jesus of Nazareth was the predicted Messiah.

John the Baptist did not satisfy these prophecies. Moreover, as Jesus himself attests in all four of the gospels, a prophet is never honored in his own hometown:

Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town,

among his relatives and in his own home.” He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

(Mark 6:4-6, also see Matt. 13:57, Luke 4:24 and John 4:44)

Jesus could not perform any miracles where people already knew him. It's difficult for people to acknowledge someone with whom they grew up as prophet, let alone as Messiah. Even his brothers, who traveled with him, doubted him:

Jesus' brothers said to him, “Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may see the works you do.

No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.”

For even his own brothers did not believe in him.

(John 7:3-5)

That's remarkable. According to the gospels, his coming as Messiah had been announced by an angel prior to his birth to both his father and his mother. He was also supernaturally conceived. At the age of twelve he caused quite a stir in the temple of Jerusalem with his wisdom (Luke 2:41-52). His brothers, however, don't believe in him?

This reaction of the environment and the family of Jesus fits a man who did not begin his life as Son of God, but as an ordinary human being, like us. Like John the Baptist.

Before we will have a look at how the various evangelists handled the John-is-Jesus-secret, first a brief elucidation of the illustrations in this chapter.

In works of art

Through the ages there has been a small group of free spirits, artists and mystics who guarded the secret that John the Baptist was Jesus. I have identified a large number of paintings from the 15th century and later, with pointers to John and Jesus being the same person. A number of works of art are shown



Madonna with Child, a Bishop and John The Baptist, by Antonio da Firenze, 15th century.
Hermitage museum, St. Petersburg.

John holds the *Ecce Agnus Dei* banner in his hand and points not to Jesus but to himself.
Mary and her child look at John.

in this chapter, and an additional selection appears in the appendix. There are, however, many more.

The pointers are usually subtle. The church was an important employer to many artists, and they could not afford to openly question established dogma. John and Jesus the same person ... that would have been intolerable! The large amount of paintings with a John-is-Jesus code, and the variations with which the theme is tackled, gives the impression of a certain delight on the part of the artists with exploring the forbidden subject.

The John-is-Jesus-code

Traditionally, John is depicted as an ascetic with a robe of camel hair, pointing with his finger to Jesus. Often he carries a banner with the words *Ecce Agnus Dei*, which means “See the Lamb of God”; the words which John uttered when Jesus approached him to be baptized by him (John 1:29).

The artists who incorporated the John-is-Jesus-message in their paintings made use of devices and alterations to traditional iconography that include:

- John and Jesus look nearly identical (pages 12, 18, 156, 159, 162, 163, 168, 174, 176, 183, 190).
- John carries the *Ecce Agnus Dei*-banner (“See the Lamb of God”) but points to himself instead of to Jesus, as if to say: *I am the Lamb of God* (pages 14, 166, 167, 169, 179, 180).
- John carries a wooden cross with the *Ecce Agnus Dei*-banner missing, which connects him to the crucifixion (pages 12, 18, 154, 157, 163, 164, 165, 170, 171, 173, 182, 183, 184, 185, 187, 188, 189, 191, 193, 194, 195).
- Jesus points to John instead of the other way around, or they point at each other (pages 18, 156, 159, 171).
- John, Jesus and/or one of the others on the painting display with their hands **the 2=1-code**: someone on the painting raises two fingers and (someone else) one finger. In other words: the two persons are in reality one (pages 16, 24, 153, 155, 162, 164, 198, and the cover of this book).
- The others on the painting look at John instead of (the infant) Jesus. Anachronism is customary in paintings of this era: for example, John is depicted as a grown man and Jesus as child (pages 26, 184).



A pieta composition with various saints, by Andrea Lilli, first half of the 17th century.
Private collection, Bagnacavallo, Italy.

John points with one finger to Jesus and with two fingers to himself (the 2=1-code).

- John is displayed in a fashion that gives him the appearance of Jesus (pages 32, 154, 191, 193).
- The dove of the Holy Spirit hovers over John instead of Jesus at the baptism, or is positioned between them (pages 173, 174, 175, 177, 178, 198).

The gospel of Luke

The evangelist Luke gives us the most details of the life of John. Because of this gospel John is generally seen as the cousin of Jesus, but this is not confirmed by the other three evangelists. Luke opens his gospel with the annunciation of the birth of John by the angel Gabriel to the priest Zechariah. When we look at chapter 1 with the right kind of eyes, the message of Gabriel about John could easily be construed to be about his future life as Jesus the Christ:

But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”
(Luke 1:13-17)

The pregnancy of Elizabeth is special because she is advanced in years and appears to have been infertile thus far (Luke 1:7). With that Luke places John on the list of other remarkable pregnancies in the Old Testament and makes his birth even more special. Patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah were advanced in years when they were given a son: Isaac. Isaac’s wife Rebekah appeared to be initially barren but then, upon God’s intervention, had two sons Jacob and Esau.

Then there are Rachel and the wife of Manoah who had sons only after a long period of infertility. Hence all these births demonstrated the favor and



Madonna of Casalmaggiore (copy), by Antonio Allegri, also known as Correggio, ca 1522.
Städelsches Kunstinstitut Und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt.

Jesus and John look the same and point to each other. Mary looks at John.
John holds a wooden cross without a banner.

grace of God, which in turn fell upon the whole of Israel. Luke deliberately places John in this honored gallery of great names. Additionally he submits impressive genealogical information:

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

(Luke 1:5-6)

Someone's descent was to the Jews in that time very important. The family lineage of both Zechariah and Elizabeth traces back to the very first high priest Aaron, the brother of Moses. An enviable business card!

Zechariah, Elizabeth and the birth of John are not mentioned by the other evangelists. With them John enters the stage at the baptism of Jesus. Luke, however, spends almost as many words on the birth and early years of John as on those of Jesus. The entire first chapter of Luke is in fact about John. The evangelist knows that John doesn't have the paperwork to be accepted as the Messiah, but he wants the truth to be found in his gospel, hidden behind a veil.

After the annunciation of the birth of John by Gabriel, Luke proceeds with the annunciation of the birth of Jesus to Mary by the same angel. The hidden meaning of this second birth is that it will come about *in* John: the birth of the Christ-child in his soul.

Pregnant by the Holy Spirit

Mary plays a varying symbolic role in the gospel stories; she represents the inner feminine on different levels. In the annunciation of the birth of Jesus she represents the soul (which has been regarded as feminine since antiquity).

The conception of the Christ-child will take place through the "overshadowing" of the Holy Spirit, says verse 35. Said otherwise: the Divine birth

Annunciation of the birth of Jesus

- ²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,
- ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.
- ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."
- ²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.
- ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.
- ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.
- ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,
- ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."
- ³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"
- ³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.
- ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.
- ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."
- ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

(Luke 1:26-38)

in the soul (Mary) will be possible because the Holy Spirit will perform the necessary purifications. In the average spiritual aspirant this takes years rather than months. During this period one is “pregnant” by the Holy Spirit.

Mary will be pregnant and bear a son without having intercourse with a man (verse 34). This virgin birth – for twenty centuries a topic of heated debate – confirms that this is not about a physical but a spiritual birth.

Zechariah’s song

In his first chapter, Luke has both Mary and Zechariah dedicate a long prayer of thanksgiving to God (see next page). During her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, Mary exclaims her famous song, which fittingly became known as “Mary’s song”; an all time favorite with choirs and church goers.

Somewhat less familiar is Zechariah’s song, which in length and poetic beauty is certainly not inferior to Maria’s song. When we place the two texts next to each other, we notice that Zechariah explicitly mentions his child that will be born, but Mary makes no mention of a child. She speaks only about herself and the mercy she encountered!

Maria confirms the reason of this in her opening sentence: *My soul glorifies the Lord ...* Mary symbolizes the soul of a person in which God is born. In this case it’s the soul of John but the gospels are written in such a way that the stories apply to every seeker of God. It will also be the song of praise of our soul when it is unified with God. A mystical marriage out of which the Divine child, the Christ-child, is born. A birth that can only transpire in a humble heart (verse 48). A heart like John’s.

The trailblazer

A remarkable element of Zechariah’s song is his statement that with the birth of his son God’s promise to the patriarch Abraham is fulfilled (verse 73). Now finally the Messiah will come, who will liberate Israel from the (inner) enemy (verse 71) and who will lead the Jews onto an era of (inner) peace (verse 79).

People commonly assume that Zechariah refers to Jesus and that John will be his “trailblazer” or herald, but that is not what the text says. Verse 76 says

Mary's Song

⁴⁶ And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will
call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their
inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."
(Luke 1:46-55)

Zechariah's Song

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:
⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed
them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David
⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—
⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the
Lord to prepare the way for him,
⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the
path of peace."
(Luke 1:67-79)