



## *The 2009–2010 Essay Prize for Doctoral Candidates*

# The Role of John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel

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It may seem to the soul that everything is moving in the contrary direction to what it has been led to expect, and yet, even if many years go by, it never loses its belief that, though God may use other means incomprehensible to men, in the end what He has said will come true; as in fact it does.

—Teresa of Avila<sup>1</sup>

Literary critics have argued that the author of Matthew's Gospel deliberately shapes the characters within his narrative to emphasize the theme of discipleship.<sup>2</sup> John the Baptist, often viewed only as a forerunner and foreshadower of Jesus, is just such a character, one shaped by Matthew to accent this theme. The evangelist, by highlighting "exemplary" discipleship traits of John the Baptist and by presenting two contrasting portraits of him, links discipleship and suffering in such a way that we, the readers, are enabled to view John the Baptist differently,

<sup>1</sup>The two quotations included in this essay from St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) are from her book *Interior Castle*—this one from chapter 3 of "Sixth Mansions"; the second from chapter 1 of "Fifth Mansions."

<sup>2</sup>Literary criticism, a method pioneered by Jack Kingsbury in Matthean scholarship, applies literary analysis to the Gospel and focuses on the Gospel as a narrative whole. It incorporates such literary dimensions as plot, settings, and characters. The narrative aspects adopted in this essay include the idea of a narrator who leads the reader through the story and the notion of characters who are molded by the author. See Jack Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), and *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), as well

*John the Baptist has frequently been seen as a forerunner and foreshadower of Jesus, but he can also be seen as a model of discipleship. Both Jesus' crucifixion and the death of John establish the fact that the gospel does not guarantee the avoidance of suffering. To be a disciple means to lose one's life for Christ's sake.*

thereby glimpsing various aspects of discipleship in Matthew's story and being "addressed by the message of the story itself."<sup>3</sup>

#### JOHN THE BAPTIST AS A DISCIPLE-TYPE CHARACTER: EXEMPLARY TRAITS

While commentators are quick to notice the parallels between John and Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, they are not as quick to see John as a disciple-type figure. To be sure, many John/Jesus parallels exist. Janice Capel Anderson sums them up well when she writes,

John's message, pronouncements about the Jewish leaders, arrest, and execution foreshadow Jesus' message, pronouncements about the Jewish leaders, arrest, and execution. The reactions of the crowds and Jewish leaders to John foreshadow their reactions to Jesus. *John is the foreshadower as well as the forerunner of Jesus.*<sup>4</sup>

Yet Matthew's depiction of John's character illustrates not only John's role as forerunner and foreshadower, but also as disciple. Undeniably, John is not one of the twelve, nor does he follow Jesus around in the story, but the author of Matthew's Gospel portrays him as one who illustrates many traits that Jesus urges upon his disciples. For example, as John dresses in camel's hair and dines on locusts, he exemplifies not worrying about what to wear or eat, demonstrating what a true disciple of Jesus is like (3:4; 6:25–33).<sup>5</sup> Along the same lines, John is portrayed as one who is not concerned about storing up treasures here on earth (6:19–21), but instead he is concerned about the kingdom and its advent (6:33). Moreover, his persecution, which results in his imprisonment, vividly demonstrates what Jesus means when he says, "Blessed are the ones persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for to them belongs the kingdom" (5:10, my translation). Furthermore, the narrator emphasizes that Jesus tells the disciples to proclaim the same gospel that he and John have pronounced previously (3:1–2; 4:17; 10:7). Likewise, the author uses the same verb, παραδίδωμι ("to hand over"), to speak of John's fate, Jesus' fate, and the fate of the disciples.<sup>6</sup> Anderson notes that this verb's occurrence forms a pattern, describing the reception of God's messengers.<sup>7</sup> These two aspects—same message and same fate—along with the other aforementioned discipleship characteristics that John displays in the Gos-

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as David B. Howell, *Matthew's Inclusive Story: A Story in the Narrative Rhetoric of the First Gospel* (England: Sheffield Academic, 1990), and Jeannine K. Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective: The Portrayal and Function of the Matthean Disciples* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002).

<sup>3</sup>M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 108; Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 3–40.

<sup>4</sup>Janice Capel Anderson, *Matthew's Narrative Web: Over, and Over, and Over Again* (England: Sheffield Academic, 1994) 172 (emphasis original).

<sup>5</sup>For the idea of thinking about John in this way, I am indebted to Stanley Hauerwas, "The Gospel of Matthew" (lecture, Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC, 1 February 2005). Other commentators, however, see John's clothing and diet as an indication of his prophetic role as Elijah (cf. Mal 4:5). See also the comment at footnote 10.

<sup>6</sup>Anderson, *Matthew's Narrative* (86–88; 173), provided me with these two insights about the same message and same fate.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 173.

pel, connect John to the disciples and to Matthew's concept of discipleship. In this way, John's character functions as more than a forerunner and a foreshadower; he functions also as a disciple-type figure.

**JOHN THE BAPTIST AS A DISCIPLE-TYPE CHARACTER:  
TWO CONTRASTING PORTRAITS**

Along with these discipleship traits, the two portrayals of John in chapters 3 and 11 further portray him as a disciple-type figure. In 3:11–12 John proclaims a message of repentance and characterizes the one he expects, the one who is coming after him. John's figure, the coming one, brings not only the Spirit but also judgment. In 3:13, the narrator reports Jesus' appearance and the reason for his appearance on the baptismal scene: Jesus comes to be baptized by John. Interestingly, the narrator does not convey how John knows that Jesus is the coming one of whom he spoke. The narrator simply relates that John does not want to baptize him, and the reader overhears his statement to Jesus: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (3:14). From the first two chapters of the Gospel, the reader already knows Jesus' identity and now knows that John knows as well. John's recognition that he should not baptize Jesus but instead should be baptized by him demonstrates John's certainty of Jesus as the coming one.

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In chapter 11, John's character takes center stage once again. From his prison cell, he hears about the deeds of Christ and sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the coming one or should we expect another?" (11:3, my translation). Interestingly, this same account appears in both Matthew and Luke, but with several important differences. First, Luke deliberately portrays Christ as performing the works in front of John's disciples (Luke 7:21), while Matthew emphasizes that the hearing of the works of Christ is what prompts John to send a message to Jesus. The deeds that Luke places after John's query are the deeds that Matthew *has already* narrated in the previous chapters before John's question. Thus, it is these deeds that are significant for Matthew and these deeds that he wants to emphasize as those that John hears about. Second, Matthew's account highlights the Baptist as central to this pericope. The Baptist hears, the Baptist sends, and the Baptist asks—John becomes the subject of all the verbs. Thus, Matthew reveals the centrality of John in this questioning episode. Furthermore, Matthew includes in the baptismal scene John's recognition of Jesus as the coming one (3:14), whereas Luke does not (cf. 3:21). Consequently, the readers of Luke's Gospel are not provided with a previous picture of John's certainty about Jesus like the one Matthew's Gospel provides.

The fact that the accounts of John's query appear in both gospels in a somewhat different fashion demonstrates Matthew's narrative sensibility in relating

these two episodes in chapters 3 and 11. The deliberate highlighting of John's previous certainty, his hearing of Jesus' deeds, and his subsequent question invite not only speculation, but serious reflection on what happened between chapters 3 and 11 and what Matthew hopes to achieve by presenting such conflicting scenes—certainty in the former scene and uncertainty in the latter. As a result, the reader is drawn into Matthew's narrative, and John's question leads the reader, in light of his earlier portrayal in the Gospel, to ask her own question: What caused John to waver from his previous conviction? The answer may lie in the suffering that John experienced in prison as well as the incongruity between John's expectations of the Spirit and fire (3:11–12) and the "works of Christ" (11:2) that he hears about during his incarceration.

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In these two Matthean portrayals, John exhibits both great faith and wavering faith, permitting him to embody perfectly the spectrum of faith illustrated in this Gospel. On the one hand, the centurion who asks for his servant's healing displays a faith that is far greater than the Jews that Jesus meets in the narrative (8:5–13). The Canaanite woman who seeks help for her daughter in 15:28 also displays great faith. These characters perform a valuable role in developing Matthew's view of discipleship.<sup>8</sup> Such depictions parallel John's own stance in chapter 3.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the reader sees Jesus point out to the disciples that the reason they cannot cure a sick child is because of their "little faith" (17:20). This little faith appears in several places as a description of the Matthean disciples (8:26; 14:31; 16:8; cf. 6:30). Thus, John's wavering in 11:3 puts him in good company with the twelve. As one can see, the author has permeated his Gospel with examples of great faith, little faith, and even no faith (13:58). John's character personifies these different degrees of faith.

Viewing John as not only a forerunner and foreshadower but also as a typical disciple figure provides an answer to John Meier's question of why Matthew, who has laced his narrative with episodes that make Jesus and John parallel figures, still goes to great lengths to preserve John's subordinate stance. Meier pointedly asks, "What theological reason or reasons have led Matthew to this surprisingly consistent redactional endeavor of paralleling yet subordinating?"<sup>10</sup> Our narrative analy-

<sup>8</sup>Brown, *Disciples in Narrative Perspective*, 41.

<sup>9</sup>One might argue that these characters' faith is quite different from the faith of John the Baptist in Matthew 3. I would argue that they are very similar. Both the centurion and the Canaanite woman seek Jesus in order that he might do something for them. Their requests are based upon their knowledge of Jesus' identity—who they believe he is. Likewise, John in chapter 3 recognizes his need to be baptized by Jesus because he knows Jesus' identity. He has confidence in who Jesus is and in Jesus' ability, which is similar to that of other disciple-like figures.

<sup>10</sup>John P. Meier, "John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980) 401.

sis provides an answer. The author consistently subordinates John in order to demonstrate the discipleship aspect of John's character. In fact, Jesus states in 10:25 that it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher. Hence, the parallels between John and Jesus are appropriate, for they exhibit their similarities. Yet in 10:24 Jesus also states that the disciple is not above the teacher. By thus illustrating the discipleship characteristics of John, the author demonstrates that John, while similar, is not superior to Jesus. Such a depiction of John may also shed light on the early church's struggle with how to speak about the relationship between Jesus and John and their ministries. Matthew's narrative genius shines through in regard to this matter if our contentions are correct. The evangelist emphasizes the discipleship aspect of John's character to convey the subordination of John and John's ministry to Jesus and Jesus' ministry. The programmatic statement made by Jesus in 10:24–25 frames this assertion, illustrating that while the disciple (John) can be like Jesus in many ways, he cannot be equal to or above Jesus in any way.

Consequently, while it may be true that John's character introduces and establishes the identity and character of Jesus as well as foreshadows Jesus' fate, this is not the complete picture. John's character, who does not worry about what to eat or wear, who lives in expectation of the kingdom, and who exemplifies great and wavering (or little) faith, provides insight into the "complexity of Matthew's method for communicating discipleship."<sup>11</sup> John's character illustrates that discipleship, even for those who exhibit "exemplary" discipleship traits, is not simple. Thus, he provides Matthew's readers with a profound paradigm of what it means to believe and to live in the conviction that Jesus is the coming one.

#### JOHN THE BAPTIST AS A DISCIPLE-TYPE CHARACTER: LINKING DISCIPLESHIP AND SUFFERING

We can surmise, then, that John's question in 11:3 arises from the works that he hears Jesus *is* engaging in as well as from disappointment concerning the works Jesus *is not* engaging in, which allow suffering to continue. From John's viewpoint, Jesus' inaction allows John's imprisonment, his suffering, and the suffering of Israel to persist, and so he apparently begins to have reservations about his earlier confidence in Jesus' identity. John, like Peter in 16:22–23, does not fully grasp Christ's mission. Hence, John's question can be paraphrased as follows: "If you are the coming one, why am I still in jail? Why have I not been set free? And why is Israel still suffering under Roman rule?" No matter what he may have been sure of before, the future has now come into question and so have John's hopes.

John's uncertainty signifies that in moments of crisis and unfulfilled expecta-

<sup>11</sup>Brown, *Disciples in Narrative Perspective*, 152. One may be hesitant to see John as a disciple-type figure since he is depicted as prophet, forerunner, and foreshadower. Moreover, Jesus' identification of him as Elijah in 11:14 and 17:11–13 seems to preclude the likelihood of him being characterized as a disciple. However, as our brief survey has shown, the "complexity of Matthew's method" includes shaping John's character to exhibit disciple-like traits. Thus, Matthew indicates that, as an author, he does not limit the role possibilities of his characters, even those regarded as prophets.

tions, one may question an earlier confession of faith. But this questioning does not necessarily denote an uncommitted heart; it is, rather, part of the journey of discipleship.<sup>12</sup> For Matthew and his readers, wavering faith does not disqualify one from following Christ (14:28–32; 17:14–20). Disciples follow Jesus even when they do not always understand what he is doing or where he is leading them. Furthermore, discipleship does not mean that one never questions God while on the journey, but that in the midst of the questions—and even in spite of the answers—one continues to follow.

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With narrative skill, Matthew's presentation of John's character pulls his readers into the text. Are they like John, who, when God's ways do not match their expectations, wonders about the identity of God? Do they ask, "If God is a healer, why am I still sick?" Or, "If God is a God of love, then why is there oppression and death?" Through John's character, Matthew seeks to convey that God's identity and ability go beyond anything that can be expected. Humanity's expectations cannot bind God to what humanity thinks God should do or be. Thus, one of the questions that Ellen Davis finds raised for believers by God's speech to Job is especially pertinent here: "Can you love what you do not control?"<sup>13</sup> This question lies at the heart of Matthew's narrative depiction of John and encourages us to ask our own questions about the harsh realities of discipleship. Can we love and follow a God who doesn't always meet our expectations, who doesn't always answer prayer in the way we would like, and who doesn't always rescue us as soon as we think we should be rescued? Can we love and follow God even when our expectations and wishes no longer provide the divine agenda? Can we love this type of God or do we want to look for another?

Ironically, the deeds that John hears about in prison, which spark his uncertainty, are the same deeds that Christ references in order to *confirm* John's original confession. Jesus does not, therefore, explicitly tell John that he is the Messiah through a christological confession, but instead points John to his works. Jesus' reference to them illustrates that his works cannot be separated from his person. If one knows his works, then one knows his identity: The deliverer delivers. The healer heals. The creator gives life. The holy one cleanses. The incarnate Word speaks to the poor. Jesus tells John's disciples to report what they have heard and

<sup>12</sup>Thus, Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 335: "It seems most likely that Matthew recorded John's struggle with doubt not to condemn John but to encourage subsequent disciples...whose faith would be tested by hardships."

<sup>13</sup>Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2001) 140.

seen because these deeds testify that the coming one has surely come.<sup>14</sup> Jesus assures John that God is bringing deliverance and salvation to Israel and the world but in God's own way and in God's own time.

It is important to note that while the signs to which Jesus directs John serve to authenticate Jesus' identity, they do not alter John's imprisoned state. What should be altered, however, is John's perception of his situation through Christ's emphasis on telling John's disciples to relate what they hear and see. Jesus' works indicate that the messianic age, as foretold by the prophets, has indeed dawned. Thus, Jesus' response to John bestows "bifocal vision," allowing John to see both near and far. He can see the nearness of his prison cell but, at the same time, the distant future of deliverance, even if this deliverance takes place through his death.<sup>15</sup> Jesus' words also speak to the readers, granting them "bifocal vision" as well. Though they see and experience the "nearness" and "presentness" of suffering, they also see the distant and concurrent reality that to him has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (28:18). Hence, the kingdom has arrived in spite of appearances that may indicate the contrary.

Matthew does not report John's reaction to Jesus' statements. Ulrich Luz suggests that this omission is Matthew's way of confronting Israel with a decision.<sup>16</sup> Will they accept Jesus, the crucified one, as their Christ? While the omission of John's response to Jesus suggests a narrative tactic employed by Matthew to confront his audience, John's question and the absence of his response frames a thought-provoking scenario for all believers in every century.

#### ON LOSING ONE'S LIFE

How, you will ask, can we become so convinced of what we have not seen? That I do not know; it is the work of God.

—Teresa of Avila

In his book *Rhetoric of the Gospel*, Clifton Black writes, "To discern Matthew's theological commitments requires that attention be paid to his characterization of figures within that narrative."<sup>17</sup> Through our brief analysis of John's character, we see that one of Matthew's theological commitments involves depicting the radical nature of discipleship and its totalizing claim. Discipleship entails letting go of expectations that bind God to certain ways of being God and a willingness to follow God despite the consequences and no matter where God may lead. Hence, John's character serves as a vivid reminder of what it means to lose one's life for Christ's sake (10:38–39).

<sup>14</sup>Thus, W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) 2:244: "The works of eschatological salvation are being done through [Jesus] and neither those works nor the gospel can be separated from him."

<sup>15</sup>For the "bifocal vision" analogy, I am grateful to J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 284.

<sup>16</sup>Ulrich Luz, *Matthew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 135.

<sup>17</sup>Clifton Black, *The Rhetoric of the Gospel: Theological Artistry in the Gospels and Acts* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001) 28.

As a result of the fulfillment quotations in the beginning of the Gospel, by the time the attentive reader gets to Matthew 11 she already knows that the answer to the first part of John's question is an affirmative one. Are you the one who is to come? Yes. Once the reader responds affirmatively, however, she has to ask another question. What does such a confession entail? In his narrative, Matthew establishes that the gospel is not about avoiding tragedy; John's death and Jesus' crucifixion illustrate this fact. To be a disciple of a crucified Christ, therefore, means to suffer with him, to die for the sake of the gospel, and to lose one's life for Christ's sake. No wonder Jesus' identity was a source of conflict in Matthew's day and remains a source of conflict in ours, too. To say that the Christ of Matthew's Gospel is the coming one is to acknowledge that this Christ defies expectations and control as well as overturning the "normal" notion of power (20:24–28). Yet through the gift of grace we are enabled to hear and see the works of Christ in the midst of a suffering world and to participate in these works through preaching, healing the broken-hearted, and taking care of the sick, poor, and oppressed, thereby bearing witness to the truth—the Christ has indeed come. ⊕



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