

John baptized Jesus?

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John's full Aramaic name was Jochanan ben Sacharja, the son of Zechari'ah, or in short Johana in the Eastern Aramaic dialect still spoken today by the Mandaean, who are also called the Johannites. The birth of John to his mother Enisbai (Elizabeth) of the Aaron tribe was a miracle, because his father Aba Saba Zakhria (Zechari'ah), a priest of the priestly class of Abija, serving at the Jerusalem Temple, had considered himself to be too old to father a child [Luk 1; 4:51]. The Mandaean 'Book of John' [3] reports that Zakhria revealed to his fellow priests, that he had not been with a woman for 22 years and that 'neither by me or by you Enisbai will bear a child'. But his fellow priests responded: 'O, Aba Saba Zakhria, be content, firm and consoled, because the child will be planted in the highest height and given to you at very old age. Johana will be born; Johana will take the Jordan and he will be called a prophet in Jerusalem. We will be baptized in his baptism and be signed with his sign ... We will climb up with him to the place of Light' [3:80f]. John, as well as his cousin Jesus, have also been mentioned to be a reincarnation of the prophet Eli'jah [John 1:23; 3; 4; 5] in the Gospel and in the Mandaean holy books.

Quite similarly, the pregnancy of Mary, Elizabeth's cousin, only a few months later, was considered a Divine miracle as well: Mary was not married when she became pregnant [Luke 1:34]; Joseph, who married Mary when she already was pregnant, had second thoughts about it; but then in a dream an angel told him 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that, which is conceived in her, is of the Holy Spirit' [Matth 1:20]. Both boys were born into well connected and educated families and most likely got the best possible education available in Roman occupied Palestine. Jesus definitely was not an illiterate country boy; the New Testament gives an account of the 12-year old deliberating with priests and expert in the Jerusalem Temple [Luke 2:41ff]: John was literate at the early age of three according to the Mandaean tradition [3; 4]. Both young men remained unmarried, as far as we are told. John lived an ascetic life. The New Testament mentions a Maria Magdala, who must have been close to Jesus and was present at the crucifixion together with

Jesus' mother, but we don't know anything concrete about that relationship. Of course, it was and still is unusually rare in the Near East that men of standing are not married. John left the big city and started his Gnostic community on the river banks of the Jordan, calling for personal purification and preaching the end of the world.

Those were difficult times in Palestine, politically, religiously, and culturally. Traditional Talmudic Judaism was losing influence and Gnostic sects influenced by Zoroastrian thoughts out of Persia, mixed with Judaic prophetic elements, became extremely influential [1; 5]. The presence of Roman soldiers and officers made the political, social, and cultural scenes even more difficult. Much too many soldiers of Herods army followed the Gnostic call to fight the elements of Darkness and not to kill. Well known to us Christians is John's answer to Jewish soldiers, what to do in order to gain the kingdom of heaven: 'Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages' [Luke 3:14]. John and Jesus became influential figures all over Palestine; the New Testament and the holy books of the Mandaeans [3; 4; 5] testify to that at length. Thus, John and his cousin did not pursue a career which would have been normal for their social and family background. Instead, they choose – what we would call – an 'alternative lifestyle' of a new age: the coming end of the world, the call to change life's course, the final judgment and salvation, to stick with the powers of light and to fight the powers of darkness. This was most likely not to the pleasure of more conservative Jewish families and the Mosaic traditions in Palestine.

The religious communities of Christians and Mandaeans have their roots in the teachings of Jesus and John. The Johannites formed a strong eschatological and gnostic movement, combining element of Zoroastrian and Jewish belief and centered on the closeness of the end of this world of Darkness, the final judgment and salvation into the eternal worlds of Light [1; 2; 4; 5; 6]. We see references in the New Testament in regard to the competition and interaction between the disciples of Jesus, the Johannites and other Gnostic groups [5; 6]. Jesus, out of his free will, went to the Jordan to receive the Johannite baptism by his cousin John in the running waters of the Jordan. The power of eternal and victorious Light was and still is considered by the Mandaeans to be only in running water, not in cut-off water such as in a bowl or dish. Here is a report from the Ginza book of the Mandaeans: 'When John lived in Jerusalem in those days and took the river Jordan and baptized, Jesus came in devotion and received the baptism by John and becomes wise by the wisdom of John. But then he twisted the meaning of John's messages and changed baptism' [4:51]. John and Jesus, both, lost their lives in a political power struggle between Herod's cliques, the Roman occupiers, the Talmudic conservatives and the folks hailing and following the message of the new age of the kingdom of heaven and salvation 'at hand'.

The Mandaean scriptures present Jesus as someone, who has distorted the original 'mandayya', i.e. the Divine knowledge and the Gnostic message of John regarding the eternal fight between Light and Darkness, between the daughters and sons of the light and the daughters and sons of darkness, the final victory of salvation in light, the high value of marriage, the concern for purity and for doing good to others, materially and spiritually. Of course, the spiritual and soteriological context of the Johannite baptism and the Christian baptism, as we know it, are different and that is already evident in the quarrels between the disciples of John and Jesus over the authority to baptize. St. Paul's letters in the New Testament, vice versa, criticize Gnostic and chiliastic tendencies in early Christian communities, but don't mention the Johannites specifically [6]. Mandeans, or Johannites or St. John Christians as they sometimes were called, are those, who have received true Gnostic 'knowledge', in Arabic 'manda', and who have been baptized one or more times. Even today baptism is performed repeatedly and frequently among the Mandeans, sometimes weekly. Jesus, when questioned by the chief priests in Jerusalem about his authority to preach answered with a counter-question regarding the authority of John's practice of baptism, which run against their conservative Talmudic theology: 'The baptism of John, whence was it? from Heaven or from man?', he asks [Matth 21:23]. When they refused to answer and to state their position more clearly, Jesus also refused to answer their question about his own authority. But at another time, Jesus, using the Johannite cosmological language, pointed out, that the manna, given to the folks of Israel, was not from Moses, but from God; similarly Jesus understood his own mission: 'I am the bread of life... For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me... For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have Eternal Life; and I will raise him up at the Last Day' [John 6:35ff]. Scholars have pointed out a similar symbolic of Light and Darkness in the Gospel of John to the Mandaean dualism: 'In him was Life and the Life was the Light of Men. The Light shines in the Darkness and the Darkness has not overcome it' [John 1:4]. John and Jesus had one similar message, in Jesus' words: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' [Matth 4:17] and this was also the mission, he gave to his disciples as well: 'And preach as you go, saying: The kingdom of heaven is at hand' [Matth 10:7].

Can Christians or any other religious believers see a message for ourselves in John the Baptizers's six moral teaching: 'Don't trust the beauty of the bodies, as they can rot very easily? Don't put your trust on the limping Satan, as he is not good for anything and cannot save himself out of the all-consuming fire. Do not suppress the weak, who cannot support you in fighting. Do not move the borders of injustice and do not move border stones; if someone moves borders, the sentence of condemnation will be spoken over him. Criticize your friends in an open way and guide your friendship in a correct way. Do not

flatter and do not lie and cheat; whoever flatters, he will be drawn on his face into the burning fire.’[4:39].

And what can the Johannite concept of great purification and fasting tell us Muslims, Christians, Mandeans, and others who recognize fasting as spiritually and physically healthy; is fasting from the Internet, from email, Facebook etc. a new challenge in and potential benefit in the 21st century today?: ‘Fast the Great Fasting: Fast with your head in faith and honor and praise your Lord, the Lord of all worlds; do not honor the Satans and Goddesses, so they will be your underlings; if you have faith, they will be your servants. Fast with your eyes in not looking angry at one another; see and do no bad deeds. Fast with your mouth of lying and bad talk; do not say anything wrong or lies. Fast with your ears in not listening to the evil; listen and do nothing bad. Fast and clean your heart in faith, do not carry bad thoughts. Fast with your body from a woman, who is not your spouse? Fast with your hands from killing one of the children of Adam. – O, you Perfect and Believers! Your hands shall not do any magic. Fast with your knees from kneeling in front of the falling Satan. Everything, which has been born, will die and everything, which has been made with hands, will perish; have no trust on these. – My Chosen! Have trust in the high king of light, the master of all worlds, the true wisdom, the faith, the marvelous addresses and the marvelous commands given to you by your master, because out of them comes victory to you, out of them your soul will be released. This is the fasting, which is called for you; do not break it before your body dies.’ [4:39f]

The Mandeans – also called ‘St. John Christians’ by Christian missionaries since the 17th century – have survived 2000 years in hostile religious, social and cultural environments, strengthened by their Gnostic esoteric message and with not much sophisticated theological quarrels, still following the ‘great and last prophet’ John. They have no Saints as some Christian denominations have and use no intercessors to God. Not only as a camouflage towards other religions and tribes, normal Johannites – except priests and leaders – may join other religious or secular groups as long as they avoid circumcision and follow the ‘message’ (manda) to live a moral and charitable life in the respect of message and promise of Light in a world of Darkness. There are still Mandeans [1; 5; 7] in Southern Iraq and Southwestern Iran, decimated down from over 50 thousand before the persecution started by Saddam Hussein after the first Gulf War and in the subsequent aftermath of cross-religious and tribal killings after the second Iraq war; now only a few thousands are left, tracing back their roots to John the Baptist, who also is called the ‘last prophet’. Shiite Islam in Iran is quite tolerant to the Mandeans; in a few communities in southern Iran Mandaean Aramaic language is told; Iraqi Mandeans being prisoners of war in Iran are allowed to join Christian Sunday services in prison [5:XVIII].

Johannite religious and moral life still is based on baptism and on doing good in preparing themselves for the final judgment after and above this world

of darkness. They rarely mix with other people outside of their closely netted communities; but they will do good to their neighbors independent of their religion, tribe, wrongdoings, or culture. Baptism and a strictly moral lifestyle are essential to them. Killing is forbidden, even in times of war. Prayer, fasting and being good neighbors to others are still the main principles. Baptism is repeatedly performed, preferably every Sunday. In baptism, called 'masbuetae', the life of the baptized person stands still for a second or two and the person is submerged into light after which the 'new' person may start a new life without the ballast of old deeds and errors. During the process of being baptized the person is closest to the world of Light. Submerging under running water does not only washes away previous misdeeds and sins, but also relieves from diseases and even scares evil demons away; so a new life is allowed to start. All ceremonies of baptism, burial and eulogy are traced back to John. After death, the believer will enter the realm of the Eternal Light. Thus, Darkness of this world and Light of the other world are the two poles, around which life proceeds and everyone is challenged for making choices between good and bad.

A tricky narrative for both the Christians and the Mandeans is the gnostic baptism, requested by Jesus from his cousin John. If Jesus really was the 'son of God' why did he need purification by the running waters of the Jordan and rescue from the powers of Darkness by the powers of the eternal Light? The 'Drasia d-Iahia' [3:30,103-8] refers to God's intervention by sending the Light in form of a dove and thus solving the debate among the two cousins: 'So baptize me, O Iahia, with your baptism, and the Name that you take of pronouncing, pronounce over me. If I show myself to be your [true] disciple, I shall remember you in my written words; if I do not show myself to be worthy to be your disciple, erase my name from your leaf. You will be called to account for your sins, and I will be called to account for my sins', says Jesus.

The narrative of Creation is similar to the one, told in the Old Testament, but Eve is not created out of a rib of Adam, rather given to Adam in form of a materialized light figure; thus women are considered as at least equal to men, definitely not just a part of man; children bear the family name of the mother. Modern feminist movements have not recognized such a vision yet. Just as the Christians bypass Moses and Thora, the Mandeans bypass Moses, Jesus, and Mohamed by going straight to Adam, Beth, Abel, John, and the 360 true prophets, that separated themselves from the Jews of the Thora [5:147f]. John is not the 'sole prophet' nor did he 'invent' baptism as spiritual and real purification; there were and are others in the line of messaging the powers of Light and the powers of 'masbuetae'.

For modern people, Christians and others, it very well goes beyond sheer curiosity to become aware of those historic facts and Mandaean narratives surrounding John and Jesus, which are still alive in the traditions and holy books of the Johannites. Of course, for Christians of all branches, there is John's

message: 'Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world! This is he, of whom I said, "after me comes a man who ranks before me because he was before me. But for this I came baptizing with water". ... He, who sent me to baptize with water, said to me "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit"' [John 1:29ff]. It is the Christian kerygma, that John identified Jesus as the promised Messiah, expected to come at the end of times; this, however, is not shared by the followers of John the Baptist, nor is this view shared by the Muslims who have their own 'prophet, blessed be his name'. But, if we leave the truly Gnostic and other specific religious beliefs and rites aside, are modern spiritual people believing in Divine powers and in a call 'to do good' to fellow humans and to the entire creation really that far away from the Mandeans, who demand a rigorous moral and religious life, who see baptism as a symbol of salvation and the existence, expression and encouragement of a new personal life and a new age, – in the service of fellow humans, sisters and brothers, Mandeans and non-Mandeans, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Daoists, Animists?

The Pope, in a 1990 historic discussion with famous Mandaean sheik Abdallah and a group of other Mandaean priests and leaders in Rome, used the term 'cousins' to describe the relationship between Christians and Johannites: "The great respect you have for John the Baptist and the honor in which you hold the person of Jesus, John the Baptist's cousin, is the reason why you are pleased to call US "your cousins"... In your tradition, just as in the Gospel, when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove' [Osservatore Romano, June 9, 1990; 5:XVIIIf]. The evangelist John expressed his Christian view by letting the baptizing John say about his cousin Jesus: 'He must increase, but I must decrease. He, who comes from above, is above all; he who is of the earth belongs to the earth, and to the earth he speaks; he who comes from heaven is above all' [John 3:30f].

References:

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