

## Luke 7:18–35: A Historical Survey

### INTRODUCTION

LUKE 7:18–35 (// MATT 11:2–19) contains one of the longest fragments of traditional material dealing with John the Baptist in the NT. Many contemporary scholars attribute this material to a source no longer extant, commonly referred to as Q. Since the patristic era the Lukan passage has attracted the attention of interpreters who have sought to respond to the problem echoed by the question of Algasia to Jerome: “Why does John send his disciples to the Lord to ask: ‘Are you the one who is to come or should we wait for another?’ since he himself had previously said: ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world?’” (Hieronimus, *Epist.* 121.1).<sup>1</sup> In other words, how are we to make sense of the fact that in the Gospel of Luke the Baptist seems to question the identity of Jesus, while in the Gospel of John he had already identified Jesus as the “the lamb of God” (John 1:29–34)?

Although this apparent contradiction has been one of the major concerns of the passage for commentators, other important issues are addressed in the pericope. For instance, what is the relationship of the Baptist to the kingdom of God in light of Jesus’ praise that “among those born of women, no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (7:28)? Of no less significance for understanding the relationship between the Baptist and Jesus, and the relationship of both “to the people of this generation” (7:31), is the comparison that Jesus makes between the Baptist and himself in the parable of the children in the marketplace (7:31–35). The interpretation of these and other issues have influenced the way in which commentators understand the

1. Translation mine.

role of John the Baptist, the identity of Jesus, and the relationship between them.

## OBJECTIVE AND METHOD OF THE PRESENT WORK

Historical-critical methods have dominated the study of this pericope in recent times. The purpose of the present work is to investigate the function and meaning of this passage from a narrative-critical perspective. I analyze how literary aspects of the passage such as setting, character, and plot function within the whole of Luke-Acts. Although narrative criticism is the main approach of this investigation, the exegesis also takes into account historical-critical and redaction-critical observations to gain a fuller understanding of the passage. The study begins with a *Forschungsbericht* in which I present a historical overview of some notable interpretations of the passage, beginning with Origen and concluding with contemporary scholars. In the second chapter, I study the origin and redaction of the passage in comparison to the parallel material in the Gospel of Matthew 11:2–19. In the third and fourth chapters, I make a narrative-critical exegesis of the pericope, paying particular attention to the function of this passage within the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. In the fifth and final chapter, I summarize my findings and discuss their implications for the interpretation of the passage as well as for other issues related to John the Baptist within Luke-Acts and the other Gospels.

### LUKE 7:18–35: A *FORSCHUNGSBERICHT*

#### *From the Patristic Period to the Reformation*

One of the first authors to address the pericope in his homilies on the Gospel of Luke was Origen (185–255). While commenting on the birth of John, Origen states: “Greatest among the sons of women’ [7:28] he was evidently worthy of a greater upbringing.”<sup>2</sup> Origen emphasizes the greatness of John and compares him to Moses, who lived in the desert and “spoke to God.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, he considers the Baptist greater than Moses, because he associated himself with angels in preparation for his role as precursor of Jesus. In the eyes of Origen, the Baptist received an upbringing that made him worthy to be the forerunner of the Lord. Origen does

2. Origen, *Luke*, 43.

3. *Ibid.*, 43, 46.

not dwell on the meaning of the Baptist's question to Jesus (7:19–20), but he limits his remarks to note that "a question about Jesus arose."<sup>4</sup> Rather he points out that the Baptist taught even while in prison and that with the response he received from Jesus he was "armed for battle." Origen is convinced that, strengthened by these words, the Baptist believed in Jesus and affirmed his faith in him as the Son of God.

Ambrose of Milan (339–97) is another early Christian author that addresses the passage in his commentary on Luke.<sup>5</sup> For him it is impossible that the Baptist would have not recognized the identity of the person whom he had already identified, according to John 1:34, as the chosen one of God: *Non cadit igitur in talem prophetam tanti erroris suspicio* ("therefore, suspicion of so great an error does not fall on such a prophet").<sup>6</sup> Since Ambrose views the Baptist as a representative of the Law, he interprets John's question as a way of allowing his disciples to obtain the fullness of the Law, which is Christ.<sup>7</sup> For Ambrose, the question of the Baptist had to do with John's difficulty to accept that the "one who is to come" had to face death.<sup>8</sup> The greatness of the Baptist is directly related to his relationship with Christ, whom John saw, befriended, and baptized, but who is subordinated to Christ for two reasons: (1) John was born of a woman whereas Jesus was born of a Virgin; and (2) the Baptist is human and Christ is divine.<sup>9</sup> Jesus' remark about the Baptist's subordi-

4. Ibid., 113.

5. Like other patristic writers, Ambrose presumes the historicity and integrity of the passage. He occasionally interprets the pericope along allegoric lines. For instance, Ambrose (*Lucam*, 166, 168) views the two disciples of the Baptist as representatives of the Jews and the Gentiles who came to understand the OT through Christ and are witnesses to his contemporaries of the power of Christ. He also interprets in allegorical terms the reference to the fine clothing in 7:25 as representing the human body by which the soul is clothed (171). Ambrose also uses particular elements of the passage as a springboard for his moral exhortation. Hence, he uses Jesus' question about what the crowd had "come out to see" (7:24–26) to hail the Baptist's moral stature and contrast him to the fickle morality and worldly pleasures of those represented by the reed and those dressed in fine clothes (169–71).

6. Ibid., 165. Henceforth, when no English version is available, all Latin translations are mine.

7. Ibid., 166.

8. Ambrose (ibid., 167) considers the incredulity of the Baptist as *Non igitur fide, sed pietate dubitavit*, ("therefore, not the faith but his loyalty hesitated") and *Pietatis adfectus, non indevotionis est lapsus* ("the loyalty of his affection, not lack of religiosity is sliding").

9. Ibid., 172.

nation to the least in the kingdom of God is related to his subordination to the heavenly angels. God is wisdom (7:35), and the forgiveness of sins through the baptism of John is the reason for which the people and the publicans, the children of wisdom, justified God (7:29, 35).<sup>10</sup> In commenting on 7:31–34, Ambrose identifies the children of the parable with the Jews who frustrated the plan of God through their unbelief.

Cyril of Alexandria (378–444) deals in three separate homilies with each of the three main units of the passage (7:18–23, 24–28, 31–35).<sup>11</sup> In a hortative style, Cyril interprets the episode in light of other OT and NT references, repeatedly acknowledging the stature of the Baptist. Alluding to the Baptist's remarks in John 3:28–31, Cyril is convinced that the Baptist knew who Jesus was but asked the question about the identity of Jesus to lead his disciples into a deeper understanding of him.

[B]ut to produce a firm and steadfast faith in Him, in those, who as yet were halting, nor thus far convinced that He is the Christ, he puts on the appearance of ignorance, and so sends to Him certain [*sic*] to ask Him, saying 'Art Thou He That cometh, or do we wait for another'? . . . I said then, that he puts on the appearance of ignorance purposely, not so much that he might himself learn—for as being the forerunner he knew the mystery—but that his disciples might be convinced, how great is the Savior's superiority, and that, as the word of the inspired Scripture had announced before, He is God, and the Lord That was to come.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus' characterization of the Baptist as the "greatest among those born of women" means for Cyril that John represents a type of Jewish righteousness, which Jesus uses to exemplify the superiority of the kingdom of God over the Law.<sup>13</sup> Jesus praises the Baptist not only to illustrate how faith surpasses the righteousness of the Law but to show that those who have received the faith are greater than those who have been born of women.<sup>14</sup> The qualification of Jesus regarding the "least in the kingdom of God" is not made to diminish the status of the Baptist

10. *Ibid.*, 175–76.

11. Cyril, *Luke*, 156–69. Cyril glosses over 7:29–30.

12. *Ibid.*, 158.

13. Cyril (*ibid.*, 162) says: ". . . [T]he blessed Baptist is brought forward as one who had attained the foremost place in legal righteousness and to a praise so far incomparable. And yet even thus he is ranked as less than one who is least [in the kingdom of God]."

14. *Ibid.*, 163.

but to underscore the superiority of the gospel way of life.<sup>15</sup> Regarding the episode of the children in the marketplace (7:31–35), Cyril points out that the Jews failed to discern properly between good and evil and regarded the actions of the Baptist and Jesus as wicked, whereas in reality they were holy.<sup>16</sup>

Another early commentator on the passage is Bede the Venerable (672–735).<sup>17</sup> For Bede it is out of envy that the disciples of John bring him the report about the power of Jesus.<sup>18</sup> Along the lines of other previous authors, he interprets the question about the “one who is to come” as a pedagogical device of the Baptist to help his disciples appreciate the glory of Jesus. Bede paraphrases many verses of the passage and explains a number of its elements (e.g., the reed shaken by the wind) in the form of petty moral exhortations.<sup>19</sup> Thus when he comments on the eating and drinking habits of the Baptist and Jesus, Bede says:

*Et iustificata est sapientia ab omnibus filiis suis, ostendit filios sapientiae intellegere nec in abstinendo nec in manducando esse iustitiam sed in aequanimitate tolerandi inopiam et temperantiam per abundantiam non se corrumpendi atque oportune sumendi uel non sumendi ea quorum non usus sed concupiscentia reprehendenda est* (“and wisdom is justified by all her children; she reveals to the sons of wisdom the understanding that there is no justice neither in abstaining nor in eating, but in bearing need with patience, in not letting temperance be corrupted by abundance, as

15. Ibid., 164.

16. Ibid., 165–69.

17. Bede (*Lucae*, 163–64) also presumes the historicity and integrity of the passage. He refers constantly to NT and OT texts, including psalms and prophets, to support his interpretation. For instance, in his comment about the wisdom of the playing children’s metaphor, Bede recalls the book of Psalms (*Ex ore infantium et lactantium perfecisti laudem* [“out of the mouths of babes and infants you have perfected praise”], Ps 8:3) and the prophet Joel (. . . *convertimini ad me in toto corde vestro in ieiunio et in fletu et in planctu et scindite corda vestra et non vestimenta vestra* [“return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning and rend your hearts, not your garments”], Joel 2:12–13).

18. Here, Bede (ibid., 159–60) recalls the Gospel of John 3:26: *Rabbi qui erat tecum trans Iordanen cui tu testimonium perhibuisti ecce hic baptizat, et omnes veniunt ad eum* (“Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing and everyone is coming to him”).

19. Bede (ibid., 161) interprets the reed shaken by the wind symbolically as the weak *carnalis animus* (“carnal intellect”), which he contrasts to the moral uprightness of the Baptist.

well as in taking or not taking things of which only the carnal desire, not the use, is to be rejected").<sup>20</sup>

For Bede, the Baptist's greatness lies in his moral compass, and John's subordination with respect to the kingdom can be interpreted as referring either to the eschatological kingdom of God or to the Church.

Bonaventure (1221–1274), one of the most renowned writers of the Middle Ages, interprets this passage in his commentary on Luke. Although Bonaventure follows the interpretations of some of his predecessors, he approaches the passage more thoroughly and with a more organized methodology.<sup>21</sup> Following Bede, Bonaventure remarks that it is out of envy that the disciples of the Baptist report to him the works of Jesus.<sup>22</sup> He regards the question about the identity of Jesus not as a doubt but as a way by which the Baptist helped his disciples to understand the "truth" about Jesus more fully.<sup>23</sup> Bonaventure interprets Jesus' remarks about those who might be scandalized as a warning against those who have not acknowledged his divine status.<sup>24</sup> Jesus' praise of the Baptist allows Bonaventure to emphasize the virtues and austerity of the life of John. He contrasts the Baptist's spiritual life, his constancy, and his abstinence with the inconsistency and preference for worldly pleasures of sinners.<sup>25</sup> For Bonaventure, the humility of Jesus makes him "the

20. Ibid., 164.

21. Bonaventure makes a systematic theological exegesis of the passage, dividing and subdividing the different sections of the pericope and explaining the meaning of each particular statement. He makes frequent use of Scripture to support his interpretations, quotes previous authors, and allegorizes certain elements of the passage. Bonaventure also presumes the historicity and integrity of the passage and occasionally harmonizes some of its statements with other passages of Scripture. For instance, when commenting on 7:26, where Jesus identifies the Baptist as a prophet, Bonaventure recalls John 1:21, in which the Baptist rejects such characterization. But Bonaventure solves the apparent contradiction by stating, "Neither is there some contradiction here, but rather harmony. For a prophet foretells what is future and not present, but a voice openly declares what is present" (Bonaventure, *Luke*, 613).

22. Ibid., 596.

23. Ibid., 596–99. In a sense, Bonaventure implies that the disciples of the Baptist have taken as a question what was really a statement about the identity of Jesus. "*Or shall we wait for another?* As if to say: If you are the one, there is no need for us to wait for another, lest perhaps in expecting another, we receive not Christ but the anti-Christ" (598).

24. Ibid., 606.

25. Ibid., 609–12.

least in the kingdom of heaven” and therefore greater than John.<sup>26</sup> He attributes 7:29–30 to Jesus, underlines the soteriological significance of these verses, and regards them as a commendation of John for having proclaimed Jesus.<sup>27</sup> For Bonaventure the last verses (7:31–35) are an injunction against the Pharisees for their “infidelity, hardness, detraction, and blasphemy.”<sup>28</sup> They contradicted the wisdom of God, who is Jesus, and the behavior of his children, who are the apostles.

John Calvin (1509–1564) is one of the most important Reformation authors to comment on the passage. He dismisses as “foolish” the suggestion that the Baptist doubted the identity of Jesus and regards as speculation the proposal that, sensing the proximity of his death, the Baptist’s question was really an inquiry about what message he should carry to the deceased fathers.<sup>29</sup> Calvin proposes that the Baptist knew that Jesus was the Christ, and he sent his disciple to him so that they might be “aroused from their sloth.”<sup>30</sup>

Calvin also uses the passage to address his preferred moral issues.<sup>31</sup> According to him, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah “to teach all his followers the first lesson of humility, and partly to remove the offense which the flesh and senses might be apt to raise against his despicable flock.”<sup>32</sup> Calvin interprets Isaiah’s quote (7:22) ecclesiologically and soteriologically, as a reminder that the poor are those who are “qualified to appreciate the grace of salvation.”<sup>33</sup> He interprets the statement about scandal as an exhortation to remain firmly rooted in the faith of the gospel in the midst of offenses.

For Calvin, Jesus’ question about “what they had gone out to see” is an exhortation to remember and apply what they had learned from the

26. Bonaventure also suggests another possible interpretation for the “least in the kingdom of heaven”: the blessed (= angels) (*ibid.*, 617).

27. *Ibid.*, 617–20.

28. *Ibid.*, 620–25.

29. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 4.

30. *Ibid.*, 4.

31. For instance, when commenting on the Baptist’s delegation of his disciples to be instructed by Jesus, Calvin (*ibid.*, 4) says: “Besides, the pastors of the Church are here reminded of their duty. They ought not to endeavor to bind and attach disciples to themselves, but to direct them to Christ, who is the only Teacher.”

32. *Ibid.*, 5.

33. *Ibid.*, 6.

Baptist.<sup>34</sup> Calvin does not understand Jesus' words about the "fine garments" as a condemnation of extravagance but rather as an affirmation of the austerity of the Baptist. He is aware of the tension between Jesus' prophetic identification of the Baptist in 7:26 and the Baptist's denial of that category in John 1:21 and finds the preeminence of the Baptist in being the "herald and forerunner of Christ."<sup>35</sup> Calvin takes Jesus' words regarding the "least in the kingdom of God" as referring to the ministers of the gospel. "Again, the teachers who were afterwards to follow are placed above him, to show the surpassing majesty of the Gospel above the Law, and above that preaching which came between them."<sup>36</sup> In Calvin's opinion the remark is not a personal comparison between John and the "least in the kingdom of God" but a comparison of "offices." He interprets 7:29 as a denunciation of men's tendency to judge the gospel by human standards and as an invitation to acknowledge that everything that comes from God is just and holy.<sup>37</sup>

The parable of the children in the marketplace is for Calvin a reproach of those who have rejected the Lord despite the diversity of ways by which he has tried to draw the Jews to himself.<sup>38</sup> He understands the last clause about "wisdom" as implying a contrast between the true children of wisdom and the "bastards." Those who act with obstinacy are illegitimate children but those who remain steadfast in the faith of the gospel are her true children, who render appropriate praise and support to wisdom.<sup>39</sup>

In sum, the commentators surveyed above are aware of the apparent contradictions between portions of Luke 7:18–35 and other accounts in the Gospels and show an effort to harmonize these various reports. These commentators tend to exculpate the Baptist from any real doubt and explain his subordination to Jesus in a way that is benevolent to John. They also interpret the rest of the passage along moral lines for the benefit of their ethical exhortations.

34. *Ibid.*, 8.

35. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

36. *Ibid.*, 9.

37. *Ibid.*, 13.

38. *Ibid.*, 14–15.

39. *Ibid.*, 16.



*From the Modern Period to the Present*

The development of new critical methods of biblical exegesis during the modern period allowed scholars to implement a number of different approaches in the interpretation of Luke 7:18–35. These hermeneutical developments have resulted in the publication of a vast literature, in which many have taken to task the interpretation of the passage. In what follows I will examine the interpretation of Luke 7:18–35 in some of the most important historical studies on John the Baptist, commentaries, and specialized studies.

HISTORICAL STUDIES ON JOHN THE BAPTIST

When the interest of scholars in the search for the historical Jesus turned to John the Baptist, Luke 7:18–35 began to be examined in search for reliable data that would help to recreate an accurate portrayal of the Baptist's life and ministry. One of the first studies on John the Baptist was the work of Martin Dibelius. For Dibelius the pericope has essential elements of an old tradition, but one which the early Christian community has edited in order to preserve the sayings of Jesus about the Baptist in a single collection: "[M]an wollte die Herrenworte über den Täufer zusammenstellen, um durch solche Komposition das christliche Urteil über Johannes zu fixieren—das legt die Annahme nahe, daß in diese Weise die ganze »Rede« aus Sprüche zusammengestellt ist, um jenem Bedürfnis zu genügen."<sup>40</sup>

In the question put to Jesus by the disciples of John, the final warning forms the conclusion and point of the story, which is that the old hope of the people finds its fulfillment in Jesus. The meaning of the

40. Dibelius, *Johannes dem Täufer*, 7. However, because the words of Jesus seem to lack uniformity, Dibelius wonders whether they are based on a historical memory rather than the result of editorial composition. The proof of this redactional work is that both in Matthew (11:7–19) and Luke (7:24–35) these sayings, which in the original form belong to another place and form, have been framed in a different context (*ibid.*, 6–7). Dibelius expresses doubts about the use of the title **οσιος του αδερφου** (7:34) because it is used to depict Jesus in his daily life rather than in its original apocalyptic meaning. Similarly the use of the phrase **τη βασιλεια του θεου** (7:28) brings the authenticity of the verse into question because it appears as an end or a gift rather than as a fully realized state. For Dibelius, a saying in which the citizenship of the kingdom is presupposed reads not as coming from Jesus but as coming from the church. Therefore, only 7:28a can be considered an original saying. Dibelius doubts that the followers of the Baptist would have used the statement to assert the primacy of the Baptist over Jesus if the actual restriction would have been present in the current form (13–19).

answer is that the kingdom is near and the Messiah has no need for a speech. Only his final word in the form of an indirect warning is necessary: Blessed are they who recognize in the signs of the times, the fulfillment of the above promises (the coming of the kingdom of God).<sup>41</sup> Jesus gives the Baptist an answer that is both personal and prophetic. The experience of a new time has begun, and Jesus is in the middle of that messianic era. According to Dibelius, the question of the Baptist is ambiguous, and this suggests that he had not yet developed a definite relationship with Jesus.<sup>42</sup>

For Dibelius the Baptist's praise of Jesus indicates that Jesus had witnessed the rise and fall of the people's enthusiasm for John and was now trying to assess the meaning of the Baptist's ministry for those who did not have vain or unreal expectations about him. For Jesus, John was more than a Prophet. What is certain is that Jesus was impressed by the greatness of the Baptist.<sup>43</sup> Finally, in the parable of the children in the marketplace what is important is not the type of game that is envisioned but the argument of the children who do not want to play.<sup>44</sup> The parable reflects the misjudgment of the people regarding the ministries of Jesus and the Baptist.<sup>45</sup>

Maurice Goguel's reconstruction of the life and ministry of the Baptist focuses on the historical reliability of the passage.<sup>46</sup> Goguel highlights that nothing in the pericope indicates the reaction of the Baptist to the reply of Jesus. Moreover, the presentation of an apocalyptic Messiah rather than a historical one contradicts the messianic idea that Jesus would have had of himself. For Goguel, elements like these argue against the historicity of the episode. Consequently, the narrative attributes to the Baptist an attitude of reluctance, which must have been the same defiance or hostility that the group of the disciples of John would have shown against Jesus and the Gospel. The passage must have been used in the polemic against the followers of the Baptist in an effort to show that their master had refused to accept the messianism of Jesus as manifested by his mighty deeds.

41. Ibid., 36–37.

42. Ibid., 38.

43. Ibid., 15.

44. Ibid., 17.

45. Ibid., 19–20.

46. Goguel, *Jean-Baptiste*, 63.

The tribute paid by Jesus to the Baptist can have only one possible explanation for Goguel: “[E]lle consiste à admettre que la tradition a voulu concilier le témoignage éclatant qu’elle prétendait avoir été rendu à la messianité de Jésus par Jean-Baptiste avec le fait connu aussi bien des chrétiens que de leurs adversaires que ni Jean ni ses disciples ne s’étaient ralliés à Jésus.”<sup>47</sup> For Goguel one thing is clear despite the editorial activity that makes it almost impossible to determine the exact sense of the passage: an abyss has been created between the Baptist as the representative of the old economy and Jesus, who heralds the beginning of the messianic era.<sup>48</sup>

In his biography of John the Baptist, Carl H. Kraeling examines the text to see what can be extracted about the relationship between John and Jesus.<sup>49</sup> Kraeling also questions the historicity of the reported encounter between the emissaries of John and Jesus, dismissing it as an “anti-Baptist polemic.”<sup>50</sup>

Again, therefore, the historicity of the reported encounters is questionable, the importance of the stories for us being rather to highlight an ancient conviction that the meeting of the two men was not fortuitous but continuous, having a profound significance for them both, and that had John lived to witness the later events in the life of Jesus and of the early Church he would have given his personal allegiance to the new Christian faith.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, for Kraeling the story of the delegation sent by the imprisoned John to Jesus has no historical value to assess the relationship between John and Jesus. It is only a foil for the Christians’ own conviction in an effort to reconcile the tension between the Baptist’s conception of a fiery-like Messiah with the appearance of a wonder-working preacher of the kingdom.<sup>52</sup>

With regards to the rest of the pericope, Kraeling partially accepts the authenticity of the encomia of Jesus on John (7:24–30) because the

47. Ibid., 64.

48. Ibid., 68–69.

49. Kraeling, *John the Baptist*, 11–13.

50. Ibid., 127–28; 178–79.

51. Ibid., 128; Besides Luke 7:18–23 (// Matt 11:2–6), Kraeling includes in his assessment here the reported contacts between the Baptist and Jesus in Mark 1:9–11 and John 1:29, 36.

52. Ibid., 129–30.

historical circumstances would have scarcely allowed the early Church to have created such words.<sup>53</sup> He considers the phrase about “the least in the kingdom of God” (7:28b) an emendation made by a later generation which did not understand the meaning of the original statement and saw it as a threat to the primacy of Jesus. The authenticity of the remaining phrase confirms Jesus’ affirmation of the true prophetic character of John, who fulfilled the eschatological role of Elijah.

Jacques Dupont is one of the first authors to isolate and comment on the first part of the pericope (7:18–23).<sup>54</sup> Glossing over many of the contemporary critical issues, Dupont deals with the *sense* of the passage, which, for him, is based on an ancient and excellent tradition.<sup>55</sup> Dupont reviews some of the most common interpretations that have been given historically to the question of John the Baptist: fictitious doubt; real ignorance (both of which he considers extreme interpretations); and—a third one with many nuances—hesitation, astonishment, and impatience.<sup>56</sup>

After examining the meaning of the phrase “the one who is to come” within the context of the Baptist’s preaching, Dupont concludes that the Baptist understood his mission as the precursor of the eschatological agent. The only possible meaning of the question is: “Es-tu celui dont j’annonce la venue, le Juge redoutable qui condamne les impies aux supplices éternels?”<sup>57</sup> Regarding the answer of Jesus, Dupont focuses on the mighty deeds. The wonders performed by Jesus are characteristics of a typical messianic activity and thus manifest his messianism.<sup>58</sup> Rather than responding with a simple “yes,” which would have identified him with the “stronger one” that John awaited, Jesus makes the messengers relate the story about his benevolent activity. Jesus sends the messengers with precise terms, purposely chosen to evoke the prophetic descriptions of the messianic time in the book of Isaiah, to inform John that he

53. Ibid., 137–40.

54. Dupont, “Jean-Baptiste,” 805–21; 943–59.

55. For Dupont (ibid., 805), the differences between Matthew and Luke are insignificant and they exist more on a literary level than in substance. Dupont is not very concerned with historical or literary remarks, some of which he considers hypercritical: “Toute notre attention peut se porter sur le sens de la question posée par Jean et celui de la réponse que Jésus lui donne” (805, see also n. 3)

56. Ibid., 806–13.

57. Ibid., 821.

58. Ibid., 945.

was fulfilling the messianic promises.<sup>59</sup> According to Dupont, this was an aspect to which the precursor had not probably paid enough attention. The first part of the response affirms that the messianic age has begun and the final beatitude places the person of Jesus in the center of the eschatological age. Salvation is tied to the person of Jesus.<sup>60</sup> The potential scandal against which Jesus warns the Baptist may come not from the messianic claim of Jesus, but rather from the way in which he manifests that role.<sup>61</sup> The challenge for John is to recognize the Messiah not as a fiery judge but as a compassionate and merciful envoy of God.

Charles H. H. Scobie's quest for the historical John provides another example of how the pericope has been interpreted. Scobie recognizes that the traditions on the Baptist may have been preserved and adapted according to the life and activity of early Christian communities.<sup>62</sup> However, he attempts to restore the factual reliability of the passage by arguing that the material belongs to the Q source and enjoys historical credibility.<sup>63</sup> After acknowledging the apparent dilemma posed by the question of the Baptist in 7:19 and his previous recognition of Jesus as the "coming one" during his baptism, Scobie rejects previous attempts to solve the problem that denied the historicity of the passage.<sup>64</sup> What caused some authors to doubt the authenticity of the account (i.e., the lack of reaction from John) becomes for Scobie its most important sign of legitimacy: "Jesus' refusal to give a direct answer and the way he leaves John to make the leap of faith bears all the marks of authenticity."<sup>65</sup> The passage provides reliable information about the lifestyle of John, his habitation in the wilderness (7:24, 33), and his ascetic eating habits.<sup>66</sup>

59. Dupont (*ibid.*, 951) points out that the book of Isaiah has no shortage of oracles that insist on the arrival of the threatening end of time, where the wicked would suffer punishment for their sins, but Jesus only keeps the oracles of consolation, those that preach that God will take pity on his people and will send a merciful Savior.

60. *Ibid.*, 955.

61. *Ibid.*, 958.

62. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 13–17.

63. Scobie (*ibid.*, 17) concludes his discussion of the sources stating: "From all these considerations, it would appear that the Q source is the most reliable: it is the earliest, it contains the greatest proportion of material concerning John, it has the highest estimate of John, and it contains the clearest evidence of Semitisms."

64. *Ibid.*, 143–44.

65. *Ibid.*, 144.

66. *Ibid.*, 41, 47, 134–35, 160.

Jesus regarded John as the greatest of the prophets, the eschatological prophet.<sup>67</sup> But, although John is the greatest of the prophets, he belongs to the old dispensation and therefore the members of the kingdom of God are superior by their privileges.<sup>68</sup>

Another study that deals with the history of John the Baptist is the work of Walter Wink. This author sets out to “examine the manner in which each evangelist has used the traditions about John in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.”<sup>69</sup> According to Wink, 7:18–23 is a passage that places limitations on the esteem that should be accorded to John.<sup>70</sup> He discusses the challenges that have been leveled against the historical plausibility of the passage. Wink views the origin of the question not in the historical Baptist but rather in the early disciples of John who, now as Christians, sought to justify their faith in Jesus as Messiah.

Without completely rejecting the possibility of a historical origin of the Baptist's delegation, Wink contends that the report would still have been modified for apologetic purposes in dealing with the followers of the Baptist.<sup>71</sup> For Wink, Luke seeks to clarify the relationship of John to the kingdom. In qualifying the high esteem that Jesus expresses for the Baptist, the church engages in “evangelistic maneuvering”: “Unwilling to suppress Jesus' high regard for John, a regard which Jesus had already in his ministry defined eschatologically, the church simply hedged Jesus' enthusiasm with qualifications which made clear their perception of the fundamental distinction between still awaiting a Coming One and accepting Jesus as the Messiah.”<sup>72</sup> John occupies for Luke a soteriological place of honor, which can neither be compared to that of the previous prophets nor to the apostles of his time. He is the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah.<sup>73</sup> According to Wink, the passage does not suggest that there is an *ongoing* polemic with the disciples of John but rather an effort to limit the role of the Baptist in order to guarantee the uniqueness of Jesus.<sup>74</sup>

67. Ibid., 126.

68. Ibid., 157–58.

69. Wink, *John the Baptist*, xii.

70. Ibid., 23.

71. Ibid., 23–24.

72. Ibid., 25.

73. Ibid., 54.

74. Ibid., 82–86.

One of most thorough inquiries about a portion (7:18–23) of this passage dealing with John the Baptist has been undertaken by Santos Sabugal. After reviewing the history of the interpretation of the Matthean and Lukan versions, Sabugal analyzes the redactional work of both authors. In his opinion Luke has faithfully transmitted—although not without modifying his source through his characteristic vocabulary and style—the traditional material received from Q. Sabugal, like other authors, suggests that the historical circumstances that lie behind this source are the controversies between the sectarian disciples of John, who regarded him as the Messiah, and the early Christian community which had similar claims for Jesus.<sup>75</sup> Sabugal reviews many of the arguments that have been leveled for and against the veracity of the account and decides in favor of its historic reliability.<sup>76</sup>

After examining the different layers of tradition (Q and the Matthean/Lukan redactions), Sabugal concludes that at the core of the story lies a specific historical event, which has been fashioned by the particular theological interest of each evangelist, and not a fiction of the primitive Christian community.<sup>77</sup> The text records Jesus' attempt to reaffirm the faith of the Baptist, who harbored a different expectation about the "one who is to come," and John's sectarian disciples regarding Jesus' messianic dignity. Through the manifestation of eschatological signs that evoked the arrival of the kingdom of God, Jesus "halfway answers" the inquiry of the Baptist in a passage in Q that preludes the subordination of John to Jesus.

Josef Ernst is another author who begins his analysis of the traditional material about John the Baptist with a study of the pericope.<sup>78</sup> This author underscores the secondary setting of the passage and its historical growth, which, in his opinion, is difficult to trace beyond some obvious editorial changes.<sup>79</sup> Ernst wonders what would have guided the early

75. Sabugal, *Juan el Bautista*, 114, 193–94.

76. *Ibid.*, 9–27; 141–46.

77. *Ibid.*, 141–202, esp. 159, 191, 194. "Resumiendo los precedentes análisis, podemos decir: El relato de Q sobre la embajada mesiánica del Bautista no es composición cristiana. Ningún indicio literario objetivo favorece la interpretación contraria. Sí refleja, por el contrario, varios semitismos, algunos de ellos característicos del lenguaje de Jesús" (159).

78. Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 55–80.

79. *Ibid.*, 55. Ernst underscores the difficulty of the analysis, saying: "Letzte Sicherheit ist wegen der nicht eindeutig erkennbaren Redaktionstendenzen kaum zu erreichen"

community in their use of the traditions found in the sayings source and suggests that a question about the meaning of Jesus' mighty works could have been exacerbated by the tensions between the young Christian community and those who were still following the Baptist.<sup>80</sup> He sees the controversy (but not a strong rivalry) in the alleged "Son of Man" Christology reflected in the phrase "the one who is to come." Ernst finds in the passage a "literary reflection" of the Q-community's christological consolidation of Jesus, the "Son of Man," and the Baptist's eschatological judge.<sup>81</sup> Ernst thinks that this happened in the early Palestinian mission when people who had adopted the call to conversion had not yet taken the last step of faith in Christ.<sup>82</sup> The early captivity and beheading of the Baptist would have prevented a greater confrontation with Jesus but also resulted in a certain ambiguity regarding the historical relationship between Jesus and the Baptist.<sup>83</sup>

For Ernst, the meaning of 7:24–28 is that the Baptist cannot be classified in any traditional category.<sup>84</sup> The passage portrays John as the *Zeitenwende* man who initiated the coming of the reign of God, which had not yet been officially proclaimed by Jesus. Ernst also highlights the ecclesiological orientation of the passage that reflects the role of the community of Jesus in the process of the proclamation of the kingdom in Israel.<sup>85</sup>

After discussing the redactional difficulties of the parable of the children in the marketplace, Ernst interprets it as referring to the increasing opposition that the community behind Q experienced in its missionary efforts.<sup>86</sup> In his view, the competition between the disciples

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(56). His analysis is heavily indebted to Paul Hoffmann's *Studien zur Theologie der Logienquelle*.

80. Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 58.

81. For Ernst, Luke has exonerated the Baptist from his insecurity through the artistic construction of the pericope (ibid., 317).

82. Ibid., 59.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid., 62.

85. Ibid., 63.

86. Ibid., 73. Ernst discusses some of the distinctions that have been made since Dibelius and Bultmann between the original parable and the attached meaning including: (1) the allegorical and artificial interpretation of the children's cries; (2) the inversion of dance and grief; (3) the lack of correlation of images and facts; (4) the final remark on the *sophia*; and (5) the fact that an explanation had to be attached to the



of the Baptist and the disciples of Jesus is transferred to the present controversy with the Judaic contemporaries: “Der Gegensatz zwischen Johannes und Jesus einerseits und ‘diesem Geschlecht’ andererseits ist also der Gegensatz zwischen ihnen und dem Volk Israel, zugleich auch der Gegensatz zwischen der Kindern, die der Weisheit Recht geben, und den launischen Kindern, also zwischen den Gemeinde und Israel.”<sup>87</sup>

Among the works that apply a social-scientific approach to the investigation of John the Baptist, Robert L. Webb’s analysis of John within the context of Second Temple Judaism occupies a prominent place. Webb accepts for the most part the historicity of passage.<sup>88</sup> Although his research is focused on the ministry of the Baptist prior to the baptism of Jesus, Webb examines the implication of the Lukan episode for his social analysis. For Webb the question of the Baptist (7:19), which besides its explanatory notes and minor variations differs little from Q, helps to identify Jesus as the expected figured previously announced by John and the one who resolves the eschatological tension set forth by the Baptist’s proclamation.<sup>89</sup> In the pericope, Jesus legitimizes the prophetic role of John as the greatest among all human beings and implicitly identifies him as Elijah *redivivus*.<sup>90</sup> Jesus also condemns the people for rejecting his message and that of John, and forecasts the vindication of their ministries by the acknowledgment of their wisdom.<sup>91</sup>

In a short but scholarly presentation of the Baptist, Carl R. Kazmierski deals with the question of John and the testimony of Jesus. Recognizing that the tradition received from Q has been shaped by the theological interest of the evangelists and the underlying situation of their communities, Kazmierski nonetheless defends the overall historic-

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parable (ibid., 73–74 nn. 153, 154). Ernst observes that other scholars warn about a rigid interpretation and distinction between parable and meaning, given the metaphorical character of the passage (74 n. 156).

87. Ibid., 79.

88. After discussing the adaptation process that the traditions about the Baptist experienced, Webb (*John the Baptizer*, 88) points out: “These general observations substantiate as a working premise that the synoptic accounts are generally reliable sources for information concerning John the Baptist. They should therefore be taken seriously, though at the same time they need to be taken critically, in recognition of their limitations mentioned above.” See also ibid., 278–82.

89. Ibid., 49, 65–66.

90. The term “Elijah *redivivus*” characterizes the Jewish expectation that a reincarnated Elijah would return to assume an eschatological role (ibid., 50 n. 11; 70 n. 66).

91. Ibid., 50, 65–66.

ity of the account.<sup>92</sup> Applying a social-scientific approach that focuses on stereotyped role-playing or labeling theory, Kazmierski explains that the text reflects the historical concerns of the people to identify the Baptist and Jesus within the context of their prophetic messianic expectations.<sup>93</sup> The passage also depicts the struggle of the early church to understand the Baptist's role in the plan of God and his relationship with Jesus.<sup>94</sup>

Another author who examines the passage in a historical reconstruction of John the Baptist is Joan Taylor. Following the lead of many other investigations, Taylor accepts that the traditions about the Baptist in the NT are overlaid with an ongoing Christian polemic regarding Jesus' superiority, but at the same time, she argues that the NT material is historically valuable.<sup>95</sup> Taylor discusses the possible links of the Baptist to the Essenes, and his role as teacher and prophet as well as his relationship with the Pharisees and Jesus. Taylor appeals to 7:18–35 as a witness to John's ascetic lifestyle and highlights his role as teacher with a group of disciples.<sup>96</sup>

Taylor cites 7:29–30 in her discussion about the relationship between John and the Pharisees to support her claim that they were not necessarily at odds despite the harsh assessment of the Pharisees in some passages.<sup>97</sup> For Taylor, in the delegation of his disciples to Jesus, John was trying to find out whether Jesus was the expected prophet, that is, Elijah. Moreover the question indicates that John was still alive at the time Jesus began his public ministry.<sup>98</sup> In dealing with the relationship between Jesus and the Baptist, Taylor concludes that Jesus seems to be saying that John, as the greatest man that ever lived, enables people to enter the kingdom of God but, by virtue of a new order, the members of this kingdom become greater than he.

The point does not really concern John at all, who remains 'more than a prophet': there is still no one greater than him. The point is about the radical inversions of the kingdom of heaven, in which someone as insignificant as an innocent little baby may be con-

92. Kazmierski, *John the Baptist*, 42–66.

93. *Ibid.*, 51–52, 58, 88.

94. *Ibid.*, 49.

95. Taylor, *Immerser*, 5–8.

96. *Ibid.*, 32–43; 102.

97. *Ibid.*, 201–3; 211.

98. *Ibid.*, 288–94.

sidered 'greater' than John (who is still part of the kingdom, and no doubt the greatest one in it); the innocent little baby is the paradigm of excellence."<sup>99</sup>

In Taylor's assessment, 7:31–35 is a protest of Jesus against the people who rejected his and John's prophetic call.<sup>100</sup>

John P. Meier's critical analysis of the historical Jesus examines the pericope in discussing the relationship between the Baptist and Jesus.<sup>101</sup> In outlining the secondary nature of the exact narrative setting, Meier discusses the complex tradition history that would have influenced the placement of a similar saying of Jesus in different contexts (Matt 11:12–13 // Luke 16:16).<sup>102</sup> He presumes "certain points" generally accepted by most scholars regarding the authenticity of the Baptist tradition and repeatedly argues in favor of the historicity of the account.<sup>103</sup> Meier downplays the often heard claim that most of the pericope has been developed by the early church in its polemic against the Baptist sectarians. According to Meier, the Baptist seems to be revising his previous view about the "coming one" given the shift of emphasis in the message of Jesus. "John's question is therefore a genuine, tentative probe, allowing that he might have to revise his hopes in order to avoid giving them up entirely."<sup>104</sup>

In Meier's opinion, the indirect answer of Jesus and the concluding beatitude is a tacit exhortation to John to recognize in him the realization of the plan of God.<sup>105</sup> Jesus balances his appeal to John with a high praise that extols the Baptist as more than a prophet and the greatest of those born of women with a statement that may hold a veiled contrast to Herod Antipas, who executed John.<sup>106</sup> For Meier the main focus of the entire unit is the relationship of John to the eschato-

99. Ibid., 303.

100. Ibid., 304–5.

101. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 130–81.

102. Ibid., 130–31.

103. Ibid., 131, 135, 139, 143–44. "While recognizing secondary and tertiary additions on the levels of both Q and the evangelists, we have seen that the substance of these three pieces of traditions fulfills various criteria of authenticity, and so the substance has a good claim to come from the historical Jesus" (154).

104. Ibid., 133.

105. Ibid., 135.

106. Ibid., 154–55; 205 n. 116.

logical message of Jesus.<sup>107</sup> The thrust of the pericope shows respect for John, emphasizes a new eschatological situation, and draws a parallel between John and Jesus.

Ulrich B. Müller also addresses portions of the passage in his presentation of John the Baptist. For him, the words of Jesus about the Baptist belong to an old tradition.<sup>108</sup> In his praise of the Baptist, Jesus shows his solidarity with him, who as an eschatological messenger breaks with the scheme of OT prophecy, but remains subordinated in regard to the new order.<sup>109</sup> Müller grants considerable historical credibility to the words of Jesus: "Das ganze Wort ist so sehr von Jesu Verständnis von der mit der Gottesherrschaft anbrechenden eschatologischen Heilswende geprägt, dass hier keine nachösterliche Gemeindebildung vorliegt, sondern der historische Jesus selbst zu Worte kommt."<sup>110</sup> The words are missionary in character, but not of a later date.

According to Müller, during the life of the Baptist, or probably shortly after his death, Jesus was trying to persuade the people to accept the message of the kingdom of God.<sup>111</sup> In the proclamation of Jesus, the admiration for the Baptist is relativized by the broaching of the kingdom of God. For Müller the introductory parable of the children originally belonged together and formed a unit with the words of Jesus about the Baptist. In this parable the similarities and differences between Jesus and the Baptist are underscored. Both are rejected by their contemporaries, but both messengers of God stand in contrast with each other: the Baptist is the ascetical preacher of conversion and Jesus the proclaimer of the message of jubilation.<sup>112</sup> Luke portrays the Baptist as a significant prophet, but without saving efficacy.<sup>113</sup> John is for Luke the precursor and forerunner of Jesus.<sup>114</sup>

107. Ibid., 154.

108. Müller, *Johannes der Täufer*, 67.

109. Ibid., 68–69.

110. Ibid., 68. He recognizes, however, the last verse in the parable of the children in the marketplace (v. 35) as an addition to a source saying that exceeds the defined framework (70).

111. Ibid., 67–69.

112. Ibid., 71.

113. Ibid., 136.

114. Ibid., 156.

Recently, Catherine M. Murphy has also undertaken an analysis of the passage in her investigation of the life and ministry of John the Baptist. Murphy seeks to decipher the role of John by taking into consideration the purification movements in first-century Judea and their notions of “purity and pollution.” She studies the redaction of fifteen different vignettes, four of which are part of Luke 7:18–35.<sup>115</sup> Although in her analysis Murphy weighs the possibility that Jesus’ affirmation of John may be a process of reflection in the early church rather than Jesus’ own words, she ultimately accepts the historical reliability of the account.<sup>116</sup> For Murphy, the episode recounts the concern of the Baptist, who has not seen the fulfillment of his messianic prophecy of judgment, regarding the healing and preaching ministry of Jesus.<sup>117</sup> The testimony of Jesus about John means that the Baptist stands between the Law and the Prophets on the one hand, and the kingdom of God on the other. Based on the awkwardness of the statements from the point of view of the early Christian community and on the attribution of the tradition to Q, Murphy also accepts the authenticity of the parable of the children in the marketplace, which she uses to establish the ascetic lifestyle or lack thereof in the lives of the Baptist and Jesus.<sup>118</sup>

To summarize, the historical studies of John the Baptist raised new questions regarding the reliability of Luke 7:18–35. Greater awareness about the origin and diversity of the Synoptic accounts regarding the role of the Baptist results in a protracted debate about the authenticity of the story. Consequently, fewer commentators resort to harmonization in order to explain the apparent contradictions between the passage and other testimonies in the Gospels. They are also less constrained at attributing real ignorance or doubt to the Baptist, and eager to find in the prehistory of the text echoes of the controversies between John’s followers and the early Christian community. Many of these authors emphasize the difficulties that Jesus’ contemporaries faced in understanding the role of the Baptist in light of the messianic expectations of Second Temple Judaism.

115. In Murphy’s book (*John the Baptist*, 65–69), vignettes 7, 8, 9, and 15 deal with Luke 7:18–35.

116. *Ibid.*, 65–69.

117. *Ibid.*, 66.

118. *Ibid.*, 130, 142.