

John the Baptist

John the Baptist played a significant role in shaping Jesus's ministry.

There are only a few events (outside the Crucifixion and Resurrection) which appear in all 4 Gospels but the role of John the Baptist as 'the forerunner' to Jesus does appear in all four.



Also in **Mark** and **John's** Gospel, John the Baptist is right at the beginning. You can find detailed teaching on the start of each the Gospels on my Jesus Centred Youtube Channel - Playlist: 'Setting up the Gospels'.

Introducing the Gospels of Mark and John

<i>The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.</i>	Mark 1:1
In <i>the</i> beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word.	John 1:1
The same was in <i>the</i> beginning with God.	John 1:2
Everything came to be through Him, and without Him not even one-thing came to be that has be-come.	John 1:3
In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.	John 1:4
And the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.	John 1:5
There came a man who was sent from God. His name was John.	John 1:6
As it has been written in Isaiah the prophet, ("See, I send My messenger before your face, who will fully prepare your road."):	Mark 1:2
"A voice of one calling out in the wilderness, 'make-ready the road for the Lord, set His paths straight.'"	Mark 1:3

This one came as a witness to testify about the Light, so that through Him everyone might believe.	John 1:7
He was not the Light, but <i>he came</i> to testify about the Light.	John 1:8
This was the true Light who gives light to everyone by coming into the world.	John 1:9
He was in the world, and the world came into being through Him, and the world did not know Him.	John 1:10
He came to His own, but His own did not accept Him.	John 1:11
But to all who did accept Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the authority to become children of God—	John 1:12
not born of blood, nor carnal desire, nor human choice, but born of God.	John 1:13
And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we looked-long at His glory, glory as the Father's only-begotten <i>Son</i> , full of grace and truth.	John 1:14
John testified about Him. He cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has precedence-over me, because he was before me.'"	John 1:15
So, from His fullness we all received grace upon grace.	John 1:16
For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.	John 1:17
No one has seen God at any time. The one and only Son, who is in the heart-embrace of the Father, He has declared Him.	John 1:18

Mark's Opening Quote

Mark is the first person to apply the word 'Gospel' to the story of Jesus. He draws from **Exodus** and **Malachi** and blends them to set the platform for his quote from Isaiah.

- "See, I send **My messenger before your face, who will fully prepare your road.**" **Mark 1:2**
- "See, I send **A messenger (angel) before your face, to keep you by the road, and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.**" **Exodus 23:20**
- "See, I send **MY messenger, and he will prepare the road before me... and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple**" **Malachi 3:1a**

The significance of John the Baptist in relation to Jesus

We know from Jesus' birth narratives in **Luke 1** that John the Baptist and Jesus are related, and his parents are old at the time (**Luke 1:18**). John seems to have had some influence from the Essenes (a very strict order of Jewish priests who lived in the wilderness and practised a form of baptism) and comes with a message.

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We find this message elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul meets Apollos (who was from Alexandria) in **Acts 18:24-25** and others in Ephesus in **Acts 19:1-3** who only knew the Baptism of John. A branch of the Essenes lived at Qumran, by the Dead Sea and, interestingly, we can see similarities in Paul's letter to the Ephesians and the documents from the Qumran community (The Dead Sea Scrolls).

- Children of Light - see **Ephesians 5:8**
- Fellow citizens with the saints (holy ones) – see **Ephesians 2:19**
- Community of people as the Temple – see **Ephesians 2:21**

Luke 1:80 also seems to imply that John may have grown up with the Essenes.

Apart from the reaction of John the Baptist in his mother's womb when the pregnant Mary comes to visit Elizabeth, we aren't given any detail in the Gospels of other direct interaction between Jesus and John before Jesus' Baptism. However, there are subtle indications that they had spent time together in ministry and that it is likely that Jesus worked under John as an apprentice rabbinic preacher. Eg. **John 3:26** where some of John's disciples speak to John referring to Jesus 'as the one who was with you' recognising that Jesus' status under John was higher than theirs.

At first sight it may be surprising that John does not recognise earlier that Jesus is the one for whom he is preparing the way. However, we know that the birth narratives that are told in detail by Luke have probably come from James (Jesus' brother) who Luke and Paul spent time with and who **Luke** appeared to know better than Paul (**Acts 21:17-18**). It's possible that as Elizabeth's was quite secret (**Luke 1:24**) that the detail about Mary's visit may not have been widely known and, as John grew up in the wilderness, the detail may have been lost as Mary 'stored these things in her heart' (**Luke 2:19**) before passing on to **Luke** much later.

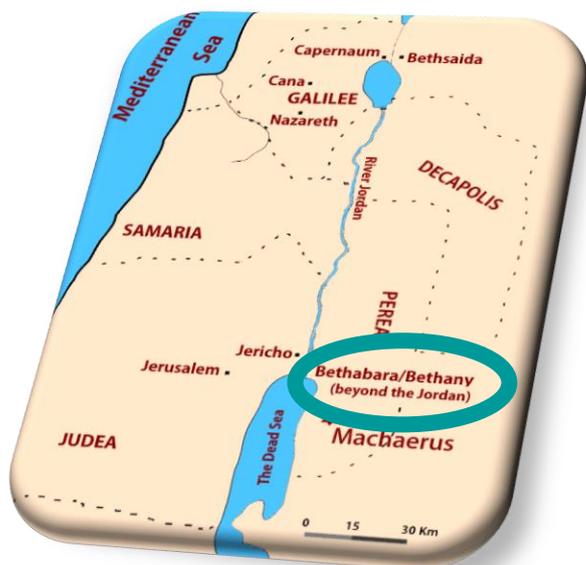
We see more of their joint history at Jesus' Baptism. John recognises Jesus' clean heart and says, 'You don't need to be baptised – you should baptise me!' But Jesus wants to 'fulfil all righteousness' and recognises John's role in preparing Jesus (**Mal 3:3-4**). Again, this hints at their deeper relationship rather than a first-time meeting at the Baptism.

For more work on the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus see:

- Paul, The Apostle's Life, Letters and Thought: E.P.Sanders (See <https://amzn.to/2pz9Kba>)
- Various titles – James. D.G. Dunn

Another interesting point to note is that John the Baptist personally baptised his disciples whereas it was Jesus' disciples who did the baptising of Jesus' disciples so, when John the Baptist is executed, that is the end of the movement. Jesus' movement has a different quality - it is always about giving away and passing on what we have and this is modelled right at the very beginning.

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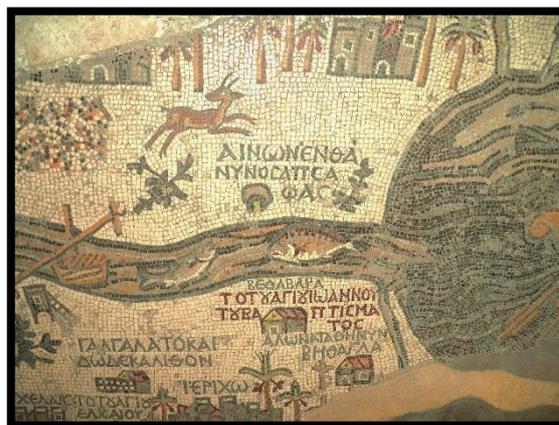


It seems that John deliberately vacates Bethabara – a prime location for Baptism – to give space to Jesus and in **John 3:30** he says, ‘He must increase; I must decrease.’

The area of Bethabara has been located via a mosaic map. And an ancient church has been found marking the spot...



The supposed location where John baptized Jesus Christ East of the River Jordan. Producer 23/4/2009. GNU Free Documentation License Version 1.2 or later from Free Software Foundation.



Site(s) of Baptism on Madaba Map M. Disdero, Madaba 21/02/2007. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic License.

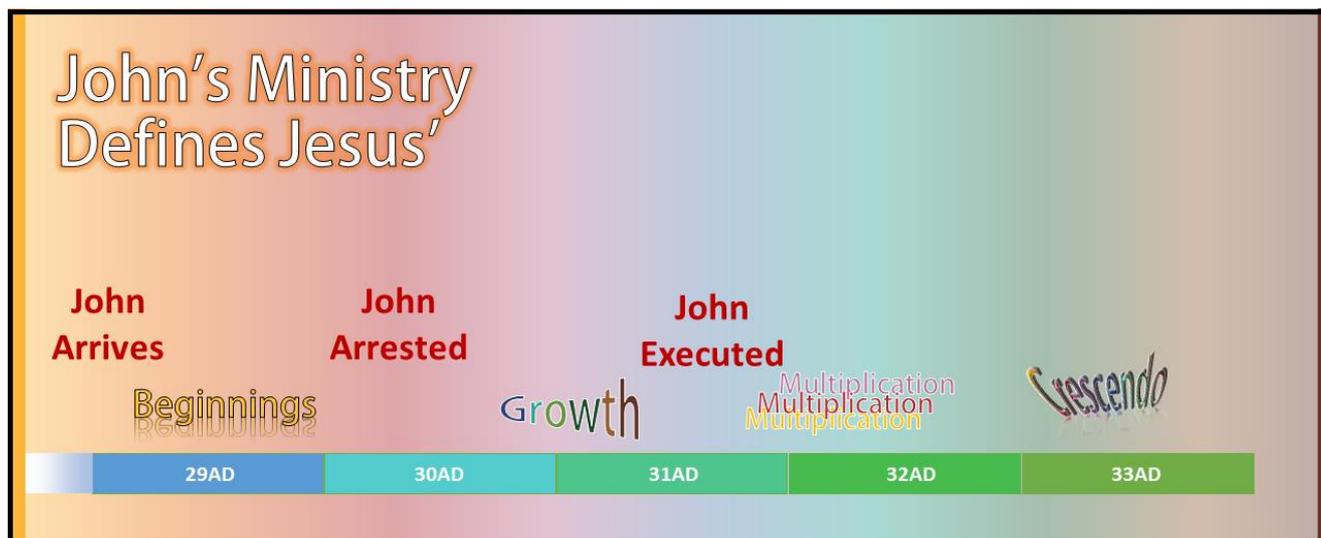
According to Jewish legend it was here that...

- Joshua (who shares the same name as Jesus) led the children of Israel across the Jordan and into the Promised Land.
- And Elijah (who is linked by Jesus to John **Matthew 11:14**) ascended to Heaven.

According to Acts it was here that...

- All of the twelve apostles and other disciples first connected with Jesus, **Acts 1:21-23**

The events which happen to John the Baptist become key transition markers in Jesus' ministry.



The secular historical record of John the Baptist

Josephus is a Jewish historian. He highlights the importance of John the Baptist's ministry and put it in the context of the humiliation of Herod Antipas.

About this time Aretas, the king of the Arabian city Petra, and Herod Antipas had a quarrel.

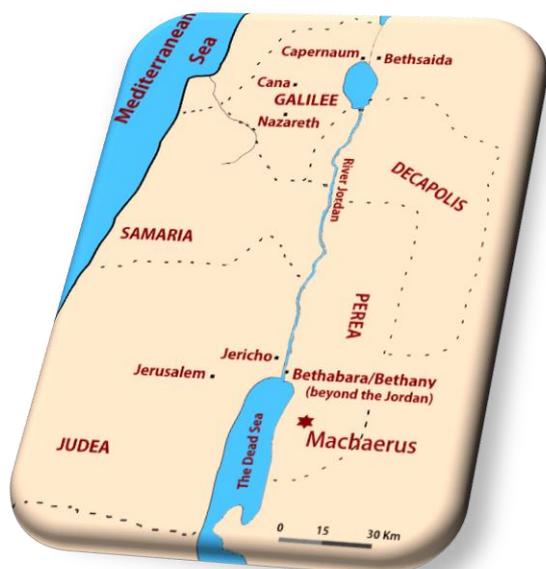
Herod the tetrarch had married the daughter of Aretas [called *Phasaelis*] and had lived with her a great while. But when he was once at Rome, he lodged with Herod [*Philip*], who was his brother indeed, but not by the same mother (this Herod was the son of the high priest Simon's daughter).

Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.109

Here, he fell in love with Herodias, this other Herod's wife, who was the daughter of Aristobulus their brother, and the sister of Agrippa the Great.

Antipas ventured to talk to her about a marriage between them; when she admitted, an agreement was made for her to change her habitation, and come to him as soon as he should return from Rome: one article of this marriage also was that he should divorce Aretas' daughter.

Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.110



So Antipas made this agreement and returned home again.

But his wife had discovered the agreement he had made before he had been able to tell her about it. She asked him to send her to Machaerus, which is a place in the borders of the dominions of Aretas... She met her father and told him of Herod's intentions.

Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.111+

NB. Machaerus is where John the Baptist is going to be arrested and executed.

So Aretas made this the first occasion of the enmity between him and Herod, who had also some quarrel with him about their limits near Gamala. So both sides raised armies, prepared for war, and sent their generals to fight.

When they joined battle, Herod's army was completely destroyed by the treachery of some fugitives, who, though they were from the tetrarchy of Philip, had joined Aretas' army.

Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.113+

NB. Josephus says the dispute about his wife is the **first occasion** or the cause of tension. So when eventually there were issues about the borders they prepared for war and went to battle. The battle was in 36AD but there is time for the enmity to grow over the years - it is not saying that the enmity arose in 36AD which would be inconsistent with the timings with the rest of the Gospels.

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God as a just punishment of what Herod had done against John, who was called the Baptist.

Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.116

For Herod had killed this good man, who had commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, righteousness towards one another and piety towards God. For only thus, in John's opinion, would the baptism he administered be acceptable to God, namely, if they used it to obtain not pardon for some sins but rather the cleansing of their bodies, inasmuch as it was taken for granted that their souls had already been purified by justice.

Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.117

NB. This indicates that John's Baptism was a sign of a changed heart and behaviour rather than a ritual that made someone clean.

Now many people came in crowds to him, for they were greatly moved by his words. Herod, who feared that the great influence John had over the masses might put them into his power and enable him to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best to put him to death. In this way, he might prevent any mischief John might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late.

Accordingly John was sent as a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I already mentioned, and was put to death.

Now the Jews thought that the destruction of his army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure with him.

Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.118

John was a key figure and understood to be someone sufficiently significant to be able to raise an army against Herod Antipas.

Finally, there is a small community still existing today called the Mandaean who were originally Jewish. Numbering about 70,000, they were in Iraq until spreading further afield after the Iraq war. They trace their ancestry to John the Baptist and for them John is the ultimate prophet - rejecting Jesus and Moses and Abraham. It seems it has come as corruption of the Essene agenda who themselves had rejected the Temple. In the past they called themselves the Nasoraean. Remember previously we met a Jewish sect called the Nasoreans who had become Christians and were using the **Gospel of Matthew** written in Hebrew. Maybe the two were the same and they split at some point??

Summary of the significance of John the Baptist

John has had a huge impact over the ancient world and communities of people have already been influenced by him when the Gospel goes out. He is viewed by Herod as someone who could raise an army. Having a close working relationship with Jesus, John becomes mentor for Jesus as He learns to preach and minister. Later John deliberately steps back to allow space for Jesus' ministry to flourish and the events of John's life seem to coincide with the key transitions of Jesus ministry.