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“I am not...”: the Theme of Self-Renunciation in the Gospel of John

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There would certainly be few extensive studies of the Gospel of John or of the New Testament that would fail to take note of those passages in the Gospel where Jesus speaks the words “I am” (*egô eimi*) in a manner that seems to render the verb of that phrase as far more than a mere copula, and the phrase itself as far more than a matter of casual self-characterization (e.g., John 4:26*; 6:20*, 35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12, 24*, 28*, 58*; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 13:19*; 14:6; 15:1, 5; 18:5*, 6*, 8*).¹ The so-called “absolute” occurrences of the expression – i.e., where it the “I am” lacks a predicate – as R. Bauckham correctly noted, may be more difficult to identify in an English translation because the translators adopt a number of different strategies to render the phrase into more comprehensible or smoother English, such as “It is I” in 6:20, and “I am he [i.e., the one for whom you are looking]” in 18:5.² It is also true that the conjectures regarding backgrounds and meanings ascribed to the phrase by various exegetes in commentaries and extended studies of the New Testament or the Gospel of John exhibit a striking degree of variety.³ To these studies could be added a respectable number of articles and even a few books

¹ Marked with an asterisk are those verses in which the expression *ego eimi* is absolute in the Greek text: i.e., used without any explicit predicate. The question of whether in each case a predicate is implied, or whether instead the expression “I am” is truly being spoken in an absolute sense, is often a far more difficult one to answer.

² Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 244.

³ E.g. to give just a few notable examples, Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John (i-xii)*, The Anchor Bible, eds. William F. Albright and David N. Freedman, no. 29 172-3, 177; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*, translated by G.R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 192, 225-6 n.3; Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:745, 767-70, 2:1081-2; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Oliphants, 1972), 191, 336; Eduard Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Leipzig, 1913,

devoted entirely to this theme.⁴ More recently, Pope Benedict XVI concludes the first volume of his work *Jesus of Nazareth* with a reflection on these very words.⁵

Subordinate to these "I am" statements of Jesus but seemingly intended by the Evangelist as a sort of mirror image of them, is a series of statements of John the Baptist in which the latter pays homage to Jesus precisely by denying to himself that which is being affirmed in the Gospel of the Lord: *egô ouk eimi ho christos* in 1:20; *ouk eimi ho prophêtês* in 1:21; *ouk eimi [egô] axios* in 1:27; *[egô] ouk eimi egô ho christos* in 3:28. The correlation between these statements and their Christological counterparts is perhaps more easily missed than the latter statements as such, although some commentators have noted it explicitly; Francis Moloney points out in his commentary, for example, that "The Baptist's vigorous denial ... (v. 21 *ouk eimi*) is remote preparation for Jesus, who alone can claim 'I am he' (*ego eimi*);"⁶ and Craig Keener notes, "Certainly John's confession contrasts with Jesus' positive 'I am' statements in this Gospel (e.g., 4:26; 11:25), fitting the running contrast created by John's abasement and Jesus' exaltation (1:15; 3:28-30)."⁷ It seems, in fact, that a number of exegetes have not given much attention to this apparently deliberate contrast between Jesus' "I am" affirmations and John's "I am not" statements within the Fourth Gospel itself. Instead, they have focused – perhaps understandably in an atmosphere that prefers to focus on empirically observable data – more intently on the thorny exegetical problem of the tension between Jesus' characterization of John the Baptist as "Elijah" in the Synoptics,⁸ on the one hand, and John's disavowal of the very same identification

⁴ ed Stuttgart, 1956), pp. 177-201; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series, Daniel Harrington, ed., no. 4. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 204, 269-274, 284-5, 485; John O'Grady, *According to John: the Witness of the Beloved Disciple* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1999), 11-14; Hugo Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel Interpreted in its Relation to Contemporaneous Religious Currents in Palestine and the Hellenistic-Oriental World* (Chicago: Argonaut, Inc., 1968), 308-10; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), vol. 1 (translated by Kevin Smyth), 442, vol. 2 (translated by Cecily Hastings, Francis McDonagh, David Smith, and Richard Foley, S.J.), 27-30, vol. 3 (translated by David Smith and G.A. Kon), 224-5. The differences among the various writers concerning background and interpretation will be treated below.

⁴ E.g., David Mark Ball, "I Am" in *John's Gospel*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series 124 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); André Feuillet, "Les EGO EIMI christologiques du quatrième évangile" *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 54 (1966) 5-22; Edwin D. Freed, "Ego eimi in John 1:20 and 4:25 in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979) 288-291, and by the same author "Ego eimi in John VIII.28 in the Light of its Context and Jewish Messianic Belief", in *Journal of Theological Studies* 33 (1982) 163-166, as well as his "Who or What Was Before Abraham in John 8:58?" in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 17 (1983), 52-59; W. Manson, "The ΕΓΩ ΕΙΜΙ of the Messianic Presence in the New Testament", in *Journal of Theological Studies* 48 (1947), 137-145; Gillis P. Wetter, "'Ich bin es', eine johanneische Formel", *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 88 (1915) pp. 223-38; Heinrich Zimmerman, "Das absolute 'Εγω εἰμι' als die neutestamentliche Offenbarungsformel" in *Biblische Zeitschrift* (1960) 54-69, 266-276, and also by the same author "Das absolute 'Ich bin' in der Redeweise Jesu" in *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 69 (1960), 1-20.

⁵ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 345-355. Hereafter the author's name will be given here as "J. Ratzinger" not, of course, out of any wish to avoid acknowledging his role as Supreme Pontiff, but rather to avoid any potentially clumsy characterization of these volumes as pontifical documents. Indeed, in such a capacity he would have felt himself obliged to refrain from publishing certain judgments of a scholarly rather than a magisterial nature. It is in the former capacity that the Holy Father offers his scholarly judgments, which deserve to be considered as such in their own right.

⁶ F. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 52, commenting on 1:20. Similarly, Bultmann: "these three titles [i.e., *the Christ, the Prophet, or Elijah*], which the Baptist rejects as being inapplicable to himself, denote the eschatological bringing of salvation. And this is what John in no way wishes to be" – p. 90.

⁷ Keener, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*, 1:134.

⁸ For example, Matthew 11:14 – "...if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who was to come"; Matthew 17:12-13 – "I tell you that Elijah has already come, but they did not recognize him and did with him as they

in the Gospel of John.⁹ Certainly the tension found between the different Gospels is deserving of consideration and in fact needs to be resolved. Even so, it is the intra-Johannine tension that is more telling for the sake of apprehending the real message of the Fourth Gospel and its own characterization of John the Baptist.

The manner in which the figure of John the Baptist has been interpreted by different exegetes in fact provides a vivid illustration of the divergent types of data yielded by different exegetical methodologies due to the differing types of questions that each respective methodology leads one to ask of the text and the manner in which one seeks to arrive at one's conclusions. As will be observed below, historico-critical studies, by definition, have considered the figure of the Baptist against the backdrop of the cultural and intellectual milieu out of which he is thought to have emerged.¹⁰ Any resulting tensions within the biblical text have often been read in correlation with tensions known or conjectured to have existed within the early Church, and perhaps also between the Church and the outside world. It is one thing to consider whether the findings of such diachronic studies of the biblical text are judged to be objectively valid. It is quite another matter, however, to ask whether and to what extent such findings – even if such an evaluation proves positive – can redound to the spiritual benefit of the one who hears the sacred text proclaimed in the Liturgy, who recites its words in public or private prayer, or who venerates the Precursor of the Lord whom the Liturgies of both East and West rank higher than every Saint except for the Mother of God, and whom the Lord himself characterizes thus in the synoptic Gospels. Nor does it seem that the historical likelihood of this latter characterization should be minimized, as Ben Witherington observes – “It then seems virtually impossible to maintain that Matt 11:9 and 11 and parallel are anything other than the very words of Jesus, for the church surely would never have invented them.”¹¹

Since a synchronic reading of the Johannine text seems clearly to suggest an intentional contrast between John's disavowals of honors, on the one hand, and those titles and expressions applicable uniquely to Jesus, on the other, including especially the Lord's “I am” statements in the Gospel, we shall begin the present study with a brief consideration of these statements of Jesus. This will be followed by an examination of John's negative statements concerning himself as contrasted with Jesus' self-characterization, including the evaluations of modern exegetes.

wished... Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist” (parallel in Mark 9:13). Unless otherwise noted, all translations of biblical passages into English are the present writer's own.

⁹ Such studies include, e.g., Georg Richter, Richter, “Bist du Elias?” (Joh 1:21)”, in *Biblische Zeitschrift* 6 (1962), 79-92; 238-56; and 7 (1963), 63-80; also John A.T. Robinson, “Elijah, John and Jesus: an Essay in Detection,” in *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 28-52. The latter seems to have focused on this historical problem and drawn plausible conclusions in its regard while maintaining at the same time a genuine appreciation of the real spiritual depth of the biblical character of John the Baptist.

¹⁰ Predominant in this field has been the question of his affiliation (or not) with the sect of the Essenes, with an apparent consensus according to which any possible such affiliation would have been balanced by an eventual distancing of himself from that community, so as to account for certain marked differences between his teachings and theirs: e.g., Hartmut Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran: on the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 219-25; Steinmann, Jean. *Saint John the Baptist and the Desert Tradition*. Trans. by Michael Boyes (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 60; Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 15-48. Not to be overlooked among such properly historical studies of the Baptist is J. Meier's vast work in which he isolates the figure of “John without Jesus” (i.e., in his own right apart from the question of his relationship to Jesus), in *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 19-62.

¹¹ Ben Witherington, “Jesus and the Baptist – Two of a Kind?” in *SBL 1988 Seminar Papers*, 235. Chiefly at issue here is the statement of Jesus in 11:11 that “there has not arisen among those born of women anyone greater than John the Baptist....”

Finally, we shall consider the way in which these various findings might be found fruitful for the one who wishes to approach the biblical text not merely as an object of academic study but also an invitation to enter into the world that the text makes present to the reader, thus developing the reader's relationship with the figure of the Precursor found there and – still more importantly – with the One whose coming is acknowledged by the Johannine Precursor to be the very reason for the Precursor's own existence.

The "I am" Statements of Jesus

Even if the exegetical landscape of the last century proffers a bewildering variety of conjectures as possible background and as precise interpretations for the "I am" statements of Jesus that John seems to underscore within their Gospel context, all seem to agree at least that these statements, considered globally, cannot be read as mere matter-of-fact statements of self-identification. While the somewhat ordinary renderings "It is I" or "I am he" or similar renderings are possible in several instances, there are other "absolute" occurrences of the "I am" formula in the Gospel of John which are, in Bauckham's words, "as strangely incomplete in the Greek as it is in a literal English translation" (e.g., 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19).¹²

That the use of the formula "I am" in very significant contexts and (at least syntactically) in its absolute form is to be regarded as stemming from Jesus himself seems supported by multiple attestation, as its use in John 6:20 is to be found also in the synoptic parallels Mark 6:50 and Matthew 14:27.¹³ Even so, it is in John's Gospel that the full significance of the expression is most clearly seen. As Moloney points out in reference to Jesus' 3-fold repetition of the formula "I am" in chapter 18 at the beginning of the Passion Narrative in response to those who are seeking to arrest him, and specifically to the reaction of those who heard Jesus' words, "the collapse of the arresting party before the word of Jesus (18:6) shows that something more than 'Jesus of Nazareth' is present."¹⁴ And as far as the force of the words themselves is concerned, Jesus' statement in 8:58 that "Before Abraham came to be, I AM", seems susceptible only of a claim to timeless pre-existence in contrast to the ebb and flow of even the weightiest events of human life and history. As Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) observes, drawing also from the insights of others:

"Before Abraham came into existence, I am (8:58). "I am" – once again, the simple "I am" stands before us in all its mystery, though now defined in contrast to the world of birth and death, the world of coming into being and passing away. Schnackenburg correctly points out that what is involved here is not just a temporal category, but "a fundamental distinction of nature." We have here a clear statement of "Jesus' claim to a totally unique mode of being which transcends human categories" (Barrett, *Gospel*, II, pp. 80f).¹⁵

¹² R. Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 245.

¹³ G.P. Wetter, "Ich bin es", 228, n. 1. The same author (230) notes other synoptic examples in the parallels Mark 13:6 and Luke 21:8 which Matthew records instead with a predicate: *egō eimi ho christos*; and also Mark 16:42 and Luke 22:70; though these passages do seem to bear implied predicates. Highly significant also is the fact that in all three parallels the expression occurs together with the words "Do not fear!", which are typically found in biblical theophanies.

¹⁴ Francis Moloney, "Johannine Theology", in *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Chapman, 1989), 1423. Similarly, as noted by Wetter, 229, and others, the fact that Jesus' use of the expression in 8:58 induces his hearers to pick up stones throw at him.

¹⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1:350.

Here it is necessary to consider first of all the passage in the Book of Exodus in which God reveals his name to Moses in answer to the latter's question (Exodus 3:13-14):

And Moses said to God: "Behold, when I go to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers sent me to you', and when they say to me, 'What is his name?', what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I AM THAT [which] I AM". And he said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM' has sent me to you."

Given the striking suitability of this passage as a key for understanding the Johannine "I am" affirmations – especially for anyone already in possession of the developed dogmatic understanding of the divinity of Jesus Christ – it may even seem surprising at first glance that anyone would propose anything else as a better key to the understanding of the Johannine "I am" statements of Jesus. Nevertheless, there are reasons for doing so that cannot be regarded as inconsequential, even if they do not impose themselves to the absolute exclusion of those ineffable words spoken by God from the Burning Bush. Perhaps most formidable is the observation that in the Septuagint Greek text of the Old Testament, the Greek rendering of the passage in question found in Exodus 3:14 – a translation which presumably would have been the most familiar Greek text for anyone reading the New Testament likewise written in Greek – the Hebrew *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* ("I AM THAT [which] I AM") is rendered not with the *egô eimi* that one finds in the Johannine text (which would have been a likely translation into the Greek from the Hebrew), but rather with the affirmation *egô eimi ho ôn*, a statement that would have had its own unique resonance in the Hellenistic world: "I am 'he who is'" or perhaps, as a paraphrase of the present participle that it utilizes, "I am 'BEING' [itself]".

We might even propose that when Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches the identity between God's *essence* and his *existence* by characterizing him as *ipsum esse subsistens*, he is using a phrase that is roughly equivalent to the concept brought to mind by the Greek words of the Septuagint (hereafter LXX) where God identifies himself to Moses as *ho ôn* in Exodus 3:14. While this characterization is exceedingly provocative in its capacity to spur philosophical reflection, and while it might not be altogether alien to the sense of the Hebrew text, it is arrived at only by means of a rather laborious mental route traveling some distance from the starting point represented by the original Hebrew statement *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* ("I AM THAT [which] I AM"). Accordingly, it is not unreasonable to express reservations concerning whether the formula *egô eimi*, encountered in the Gospel of John on the lips of Jesus, could have been intended to evoke in mind of the hearer or the reader a passage (i.e., Exod 3:14) rendered quite differently (i.e., *egô eimi ho ôn*) in the most widely diffused biblical text in the same [Greek] language.

Once all this has been acknowledged, however, what has perhaps still been given short shrift is any adequate consideration of the fact that the writer of the Gospel of John seems to operate primarily in thought patterns governed not by the Hellenistic world, but by the Old Testament in its Semitic background. It is now abundantly clear that after decades of focus on various currents of thought in the Mediterranean world as the principal background for the content of the Gospel, Johannine research has recently come to focus much more intently on Judaism and on the Old Testament as the primary crucible in which Johannine thought has been forged. Even more to the point: while it is true that most citations of the Old Testament in the Gospel of John correspond to the Greek wording of LXX, this is by no means always the case, and there are other instances in which the Old Testament text being cited in John can only be the Hebrew text:

Overall, John seems to exhibit a pattern of closeness to the OT text in the Hebrew and as reflected in the LXX. John's default version seems to have been the LXX, but in no way does he use it slavishly, and throughout he exhibits a highly intelligent and discerning mode of OT usage. In four passages his Greek is identical to the LXX wording (10:34; 12:13, 38; 19:24) In several other passages John likely adapts the LXX rendering by making minor changes to suit his context (1:23; 2:17; 6:31, 45; 15:25; 19:36) In four cases John seems to be independent of the LXX (12:15, 40 represent independent adaptations of the relevant texts; 13:18 may feature John's own translation from the Hebrew; 19:37 may draw on a Christian *testimonium* (in this final case the LXX is unsuitable because it misconstrues the Hebrew). It therefore appears that John was familiar with both the Hebrew text and the LXX (as well as with Jesus' own use and earlier Christian quotation practices) and thus was able to cite the Scriptures either in the exact or slightly adapted LXX version or to draw on the Hebrew version where this suited his purposes or seemed necessary for some reason or another.¹⁶

Nor, indeed, does it seem prudent to rule out that the words, rather than being crafted in Greek by an Evangelist in view of a Greek text of the Old Testament, are in fact being *remembered* by a narrator as they might actually have been spoken by Jesus!

Even if it seems unwarranted on the basis of these arguments to exclude a deliberate intention to evoke the communication of the divine name to Moses when Jesus speaks the words "I am" in certain of the Johannine passages (especially those that clearly lack even an implied predicate, as Schnackenburg has observed),¹⁷ then neither was it unreasonable for exegetes to search elsewhere for the background of these texts in the hope of finding parallels or likely allusions based on actual texts, whether biblical or extra-biblical, as they currently stand.

Scholars of the "History of Religions School" such as the German E. Norden and the Swede G.P. Wetter, for example, thought that they had found a key to the understanding of the Johannine passages in certain papyri of the ancient Near East containing magical formulae in which the magician invokes other-worldly power and authority by means of an "I am" formula.¹⁸ With his own predilection for Gnostic literature, R. Bultmann characterizes the "I am" statement as a "revelatory formula" (*Offenbarungsformel*) native to that current of thought.¹⁹ H. Odeberg brought to the table, in addition to texts of Jewish mysticism, other texts originating in the Mandaeen sect centered in Mesopotamia, with its monotheistic religion characterized by a strongly dualistic worldview and a mysterious reverence for the figure of John the Baptist.²⁰ While conceding that to some extent the precise meaning of the words in their original context remains hidden from us, these authors interpret the use of the words to be more or less equivalent to the sense that one would have drawn from an implied reference to Exodus 3:14 – the words are understood to express the identity of the speaker with God by expressing God's own divinity and power.²¹ At the same time, from the standpoint of the Bible's spiritual message, it would

¹⁶ G. Beale and D. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Ada, MI: Baker, 2007), Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 15987-98. Also R. Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 246.

¹⁷ 1:769 -- "Even in its absolute form, it does not necessarily imply deity when it contextually implies 'I am (the one in question)' (9:9: cf. 4:26: 6:20)... When 'I am' lacks even an implied predicate, however, it becomes unintelligible except as an (p. 770) allusion to God's name in the Hebrew Bible or LXX."

¹⁸ Cf. Norden, *Agnostos Theos*, and Wetter, "Ich bin es", already cited above. Norden, in this work whose title alludes to the "Unknown God" of Acts 17, examines the possible background or roots of biblical words and expressions in the context of Greek, Roman, Jewish, early Christian, ancient Egyptian and other oriental literature and rhetoric.

¹⁹ R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 192.

²⁰ H. Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel Interpreted*, 308-10 in reference to John 8:58.

²¹ Wetter, "Ich bin es", 235.

seem disappointing if such conjectures had proven to provide the true cultural background and interpretive key to Jesus' statements, since they would suggest that we have in these words merely a characterization of Jesus, in rather abstractly metaphysical terms, as divine, without any connection to the rich fabric of God's self-revelation throughout the course of Israel's history.

Not for this reason but principally because of a growing realization of the anachronism entailed in the attempt to explain biblical text by too many other texts that were not actually attested until much later,²² and also because of the realization that formal parallels do not always demonstrate causal connections between texts,²³ exegetes have come to look instead for the origin of the "I am" sayings, and indeed for the background of the Gospel of John as a whole, primarily in first-century Judaism and in the Old Testament. Still more recently, the use of synchronic methodologies has underscored the utility of illuminating the "I am" statements more fully on the basis of their interplay with other passages within the same Gospel even prior to any search for external background.²⁴ In fact, the literary function of the "I am" statements within the Gospel has itself been enlisted to suggest that its background must be in the Old Testament and in Judaism: the sayings tend to occur in discussions on specifically Jewish topics (John 4, 6, and 8), involving the Old Testament Patriarchs (Jacob, Moses, and Abraham respectively), and Jesus tells his disciples that their own Scriptures are going to be fulfilled in such a way that they will believe that *egô eimi* (13:19).²⁵

While some scholars in possession of the above-mentioned arguments still consider the "I am" statements of Jesus to be deliberately evocative of Exodus 3:14²⁶ (a position with which the present writer would also agree), most see instead a more likely allusion to the passages of Deutero-Isaiah for which there occur in LXX a number of occurrences of the identical form *egô eimi*, absolute in its construction due to its occurrence at the end of a sentence, where the underlying (or at least still) Hebrew most frequently has *'ani hu* (= "I am he" or perhaps "I am the one" – 41:6; 43:10; 46:4); while in a couple of instances the underlying Hebrew phrase is *anoki anoki hu* (= "I, I am he" – 43:25; 51:12). In this light, the statements used by Jesus are shown to stand against a background of God's action in favor of Israel throughout salvation history; now Jesus is being designated, then, precisely as the one in whom and through whom this salvific work of God is being brought to its definitive climax.²⁷ J. Ratzinger is probably not simply being imprecise or indecisive (!) when he seems to speak interchangeably of the Exodus and Deutero-Isaiah passages as background for the sayings of Jesus, without making a choice between them, referring to them rather as "the two essential texts on which the matter hinges."²⁸

In terms of their message, in fact, whether the "I am" statements of Jesus are seen as rooted in Exodus 3:14 or whether they are interpretation against the background of Deutero-Isaiah, more or less the same result seems to emerge, as articulated here by J. Ratzinger in dialogue with the spectrum of current literature on the subject:

²² H. Zimmermann, "Das absolute 'Εγώ εἰμι'", 58; J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1:346.

²³ D.M. Ball, "*I Am*" in *John's Gospel*, 13.

²⁴ E.g., D. M. Ball, "*I Am*" in *John's Gospel*, e.g., 65, 143-5, 257.

²⁵ D. M. Ball, "*I Am*" in *John's Gospel*, 257.

²⁶ C. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 770; H. Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel Interpreted*, 308-10; J. O'Grady, *According to John*, 12; J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 346-7.

²⁷ H. Zimmermann, "Das absolute 'Εγώ εἰμι'", 63-9; A. Feuillet, "Les EGO EIMI christologiques," 12-13; D. M. Ball, "*I Am*" in *John's Gospel*, 194-200; J. Ratzinger, 1:347.

²⁸ J. Ratzinger, 346-347.

When Jesus says "I am he," he is taking up this story and referring it to himself. He is indicating his oneness. In him, the mystery of the one God is personally present: "I and the Father are one." H. Zimmermann has rightly emphasized that when Jesus says "I am," he is not placing himself *alongside* the "I" of the Father ("Das absolute 'Ich bin'," p. 6) but is pointing to the Father. And yet precisely by so doing, he is also speaking of himself. At issue here is the inseparability of Father and Son. Because he is the Son, he has every right to utter with his own lips the Father's self-designation. "He who sees me, sees the Father" (Jn 14:9). And conversely: Because this is truly so, Jesus is entitled to speak the words of the Father's self-revelation in his own name as Son....

... Jesus is wholly "relational," ... his whole being is nothing other than relation to the Father. This relationality is the key to understanding the use Jesus makes of the formulae of the burning bush and Isaiah. The "I am" is situated completely in the relatedness between Father and Son.²⁹

In Ratzinger's words it becomes evident how necessary it is to read the words of the Gospel not only in the context of their Old Testament roots, but also in the context of ecclesial faith, and indeed, in the context of the reader's own *relationship* with the one whose own identity is utterly defined by such relationality vis-à-vis the Father. It is not out of any skeptical spirit that B. Lindars asserts: "John never simply identifies Jesus with God."³⁰ The accent of that assertion would be on the word *simply*. On one level, these statements *do* constitute the revelation of Jesus' divinity. As R. Bauckham notes:

There is no doubt that it is an important aspect of the understanding of Jesus in John that he does in this sense act as God's emissary. But when these ideas are put in their wider context in the Fourth Gospel, including the absolute "I am" sayings, it is clear that it is not sufficient to suppose that God sends someone else to act as his agent in salvation. What this agent does is not something God can delegate to someone other than God, since it belongs to the uniquely divine prerogatives of the one God. Only one who truly shares the unique divine identity can give eternal life and reveal God's glory in the world.³¹

Even so, there could be no clear comprehension of any bald statement to this effect without one's first being initiated into the space opened up for such an awesome truth by the very fact of the *intra-divine relationality* that constitutes the Son's very existence, as Ratzinger expresses it. To a lesser degree and in an analogous manner, as we shall see, there can be no real appreciation of the profound significance contained in the "mirror" statements of John the Baptist – his "I am not" statements, without the recognition that what is really at issue is not so much the respectively singular metaphysical identities of these two men, but rather the *relationship* between them. An understanding of this relationship, furthermore, is crucial because it is paradigmatic of all discipleship.

²⁹ J. Ratzinger, 348-349.

³⁰ B. Lindars, *Gospel of John*, 336.

³¹ *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 249.

The Testimony of John the Baptist: "I am not ..."

CHAPTER 1

Interestingly, the very first testimony to Jesus that is recorded by the Fourth Gospel as having been given by John the Baptist is a comparison of himself to Jesus cast in negative terms: "The One coming after me ranks ahead of me, because he was before me" (1:15). This temporal priority, ascribed to Jesus who has already been characterized as "the Word" who was "in the beginning" (1:1), is also the affirmation being made by Jesus himself in 8:58 when he says, "Before Abraham came to be, I AM." In short order, John then gives a word of testimony, "I am *not* the Christ," the Greek words *hômologêsen* and *ouk êrnêsato* (20) giving his affirmation, as Bultmann insightfully notes, the "full weight of the solemn testimony of a witness in a trial."³² These disavowals on the Baptist's part confirm his acceptance of a fact that has already been stated about him in reference to another epithet of Jesus in v. 8, "*he* was not the Light...". Nor is this statement crafted so as to cast the Baptist in a negative light; quite the contrary: "...but [he came] to bear witness to the Light." John's very identity, it would seem, consists in this self-effacing service of the One in whose name he is sent. In this respect, neither is his own self-effacing to be regarded as self-denigration. Rather, his whole purpose for existing lies not within himself, but in the One to whom he bears witness.

In vv. 20-21, it is not one but three times that John utters such self-effacing declarations. It is in response to the "priests and Levites" who asked him "who are you?" in the preceding verse that he "confessed and did not deny" that he was *not* the Christ. In response to the follow-up question "Then who *are* you? Are you Elijah?" John answers, "I am *not*" (*ouk eimi*). "Are you the *Prophet*?" then elicits from him a simple "No." The full expression with which the whole series begins bears the syntactically unnecessary pronoun *egô*, on which emphasis is therefore being placed; in other words, "I am not the Christ" because *another is*." The placing of this syntax at the head of the series of declarations then invests both of the declarations that follow immediately with the same sense.

It is only after this 3-fold disavowal of any claim of his own to being the fulfillment of Israel's expectations that John answers the visitors' questions – now bolstered by the plea that they must be able to give and answer to those who have sent them – in a positive way, with reference to Isaiah 40:3 – "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" While the Hebrew text (in earlier times devoid of its later diacritical notations clarifying punctuation) could be understood either in this way or as "A voice crying, 'make straight in the wilderness a path for the LORD,'" the Johannine text adopts the sentence structure suggested by LXX, but with a difference in vocabulary: LXX says not "make straight" (*euthynate*) but rather "prepare" (*hetoimasate*). This would seem to suggest that John is either: 1) providing his own translation of the Hebrew text; or 2) perhaps more likely, expressing in Greek the content of an oral tradition, emerging out of a Semitic context, that he remembers hearing: one that is obviously well known because it is found (likewise with "make straight") in all four Gospels in association with John the Baptist (Mark 1:2-3; Matthew 3:3; Luke 3:4), even if only the Fourth Gospel actually places it on the lips of the Baptist himself.

The word *kyriou* ("of the Lord") occurs here without the definite article, which would normally be unexpected in Greek unless it were referring simply to "a Lord"; in LXX, however, this usage without the article is observed quite regularly to indicate that the Greek word is being

³² R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 87-8.

used not for the Hebrew word "Lord", but rather for the all-holy *tetragrammaton*, the divine name YHWH. In the context of the Gospel as a whole (i.e., not just John but all four of the Evangelists), there seem to be two rather profound conclusions to be drawn from this: 1) that here, close to the beginning of each of the four canonical Gospels, Jesus for whom the Baptist's ministry is preparing is already identified with the God of the Old Testament or – at the very least – as one so closely allied with him that preparing the way for Jesus *is* nothing less than preparing the way for God himself; and 2) that even a *positive* affirmation of the Baptist's identity can only be articulated in *relation* to the One whose way he prepares.

CHAPTER 3

Two chapters later, Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus has concluded with a recurrence of the same theme of "*the* Light" (i.e., with the definite article), which has been considered not simply in itself, but in terms of its effect on the disciple who moves toward it: his works are made manifest because they have been done *in the Light*. It is precisely then that there appears again the figure of the Baptist, whose ministry of baptism is described in summary fashion immediately after the statement in v. 22 that "Jesus and his disciples came into the region of Judah, and he lingered there and baptized." Actually, John's reader knows from 1:25– and from the synoptic Gospels, if these are indeed known to the reader – and certainly from a well-attested tradition, that John's ministry of baptism preceded that of Jesus chronologically. Yet here, the order of narration is reversed; after mentioning Jesus' work of baptizing,³³ the Evangelist says, "Now John was *also* baptizing at Aenon near Salim" (v. 23). Here the Evangelist seems to be ascribing to Jesus' baptism a priority that cannot be chronological but is nonetheless real. His own work of baptizing, though chronological antecedent to the appearance of Jesus, is regarded as a *reflection* of the work of Jesus, a relationship somewhat analogous to the one expressed in chapter 5 where Jesus, who *is* "the Light" as such (1:4-5; 7), chooses to describe John saying "He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the testimony which I have is greater than John's" (5:35-6).

Once again in such a context where John's very identity is depicted as derived from that of Jesus, John himself affirms the same: "You yourselves testify about me that I said '*I am not* the Christ'; rather, *I* have been sent before *him*" (3:28, where the use of the pronouns seems to suggest the emphases shown here, highlighting the nature of the relationship between the two men). John then continues with another image that is quintessentially relational – the "bridegroom" and the "friend of the bridegroom" (3:29). In response to questioners obviously referring to the multiplication of Jesus' followers as a development that he should consider detrimental to his own honor, John replies instead, "It is the bridegroom who takes the bride; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands by and listens, rejoices greatly to hear the voice of the bridegroom. And so, this joy of mine is now full" (v. 29).

³³ It is not possible to enter here into the discussion of the problem of an apparent contradiction between this assertion in 3:23 and 4:2 which says that "It was not Jesus himself who baptized, but rather his disciples." In fact, taken with 4:1, this seems to indicate that the work of baptism was regarded as that of Jesus in the sense that his disciples baptized under his direction.

The use of this image depicts the relationship between Jesus and John as one that actually can be expected to engender the kind of joy that he professes to have, yet what is particularly astounding to the listener is the fact that this image is used at all for the situation of such a turning of the tables between the ministry and following of the one who preceded and the one who now supplants him. Just how counter-cultural such a reaction on John's part appears to be – far more even than would be the case today – is vividly explained by J.H. Neyrey and R.L. Rohrbaugh in terms of the social and cultural worldview of the times.³⁴

THE CRITICAL APPRAISAL

What are we to make of such a picture of the self-effacing and ever-deferential Baptist? Considered against the cultural and religious landscape in which he first emerges, John the Baptist appears at first glance to be one of the most strikingly "original" figures in world history. In its external contours, his ritual of immersion is perhaps one of the *least* original elements of his trademark, corresponding to ritual ablutions practiced by various elements in the Jewish world; yet it was uniquely John's contribution to have associated this external gesture with the interior act of repentance (Matthew 3:1-2; 5-6). Even those who have studied his possible ties to the Essene community – regardless of their widely diverging opinions of the relationship between John and Jesus – exhibit a general consensus view that if there was any such association, the Baptist's teaching was also crafted as an explicit rejection of certain elements of theirs.³⁵ Only a figure truly remarkable in his own right could have even been considered by so many to be *a* prophet after the silence of prophecy in Israel for several centuries, let alone being fancied to be *the* Prophet (1:21) who was expected either on the basis of Deuteronomy 18:15³⁶ or of the Samaritan hopes regarding the *Taheb* (cf. John 4:19-20).³⁷ And equally striking, despite the doubt that has been and should be cast on any characterization of John the Baptist as "founder" of a sect as far afield as the Mandaean of Mesopotamia, is the fact that the very claim of his patronage suggests a lingering loyalty to him in some quarters independently of Christianity. How did such a singular figure come to be cast by the New Testament in such an unambiguously submissive role?

F. Moloney describes what he considers to be the prevailing opinion among exegetes, saying that many have said that the above-mentioned characterization of John the Baptist in the Gospel of John has been crafted in an attempt to subordinate him to Jesus as an antidote to the allegiance that some still held toward him. He says of this conjecture: "Originally the suggestion of Baldensperger, this position has been further developed and argued strongly by Bultmann

³⁴ Jerome H. Neyrey and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "'He Must Increase, I Must Decrease' (John 3:30): a Cultural and Social Interpretation," in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63 (2001), 464-483.

³⁵ J.A.T. Robinson, "The Baptism of John and the Qumran Community", in *Twelve New Testament Studies*, already cited; Hartmut Stegemann, Hartmut. *The Library of Qumran: on the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 221-225; Jean Steinmann, *Saint John the Baptist and the Desert Tradition*. Trans. by Michael Boyes (New York: Harper & Brothers), 60; Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism*, 15-48.

³⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1:1-8;

³⁷ Sumkin Cho, *Jesus as Prophet in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2006), 83-93; 172-187. This reference is intended to fill out the picture of *the* expected Prophet rather than to suggest any precise connection between the Samaritan community and John the Baptist. On the latter point, however, it may be significant that at least one tradition placed John's beheading and burial precisely in the city of Samaria: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaria_\(ancient_city\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaria_(ancient_city)), accessed 6/1/2011.

(Gospel 167-172) and others, who see the insertions on the Baptist in the Prologue (1:6-8, 15) as anti-Baptist material added to an original pro-Baptist hymn."³⁸

Some exegetes, in noting the "embarrassment" of the early Church regarding the Baptism of Jesus by John and the attempt by Christian propagandists to whitewash out of the picture any semblance of subordination of the latter to the former, go so far as to suggest that Jesus began his ministry as a mere disciple of the Baptist, a role that supposedly came to be denied and covered up only after Jesus eventually gained irrevocably the upper hand as a result of John's execution. One illustration of just how far such reflections have been carried is found in the work of Joan Taylor:

At face value, the circumstances seem quite clear: Jesus accepted the veracity of John's predictions of the imminent end and counted himself as one who had not fulfilled the Law adequately. With a repentant heart, he turned from his past ways and committed himself to walking along the way of righteousness in accordance with John's teaching. He may have given away his possessions to the poor. He then came to John for the purification of his body, which completed the process of turning around to become one of God's obedient people. How far off the tracks Jesus may have been can only be the subject of fruitless speculation. He may well not have been particularly lax or sinful in regard to Torah. Sensitive people can imagine that they have behaved far worse than they actually have. We just cannot know.³⁹

The contrast between the Gospel portrait and the one conjured here by Taylor could not be more striking, as the latter could be regarded as virtually the antithesis of the former. As Taylor conjectures, it would be Jesus who would have given himself over so completely to the Baptist's message that this message became his own claim to fame. As for the Baptist's poignant avowal in the Gospel that "He must increase; I must decrease" (3:30), Taylor concludes that "It is more likely that the Fourth Gospel's account is the invented one," pointing out also that the older Gospel of Mark features no explicit recognition by John of Jesus as the Messiah.⁴⁰ W. Wink, in rejecting some of the more radical conjectures of this nature, nevertheless points to certain similar opinions proposed even by those whose works were the most widely known among 20th-century exegetes:

It is methodologically illegitimate...to reconstruct the views of John's disciples by reversing every denial and restriction placed on John in the Fourth Gospel, as Bultmann and Bauer have done. By their line of reasoning, John was worshiped as Elijah, prophet, messiah, the Light and the Life of men, a wonderworker, the pre-existent Logos through whom all things were made, indeed, even as the Word made flesh!

Luke's infancy narrative of the Baptist was likewise invested with the suspicion of having attenuated the importance of the Baptist by inserting this account – supposed to have been originally an independent one – into a scheme that would subordinate him to Jesus. Carl Kraeling suggests, for example, that "When the story of John's birth is taken out of its larger setting and examined separately, its essentially Baptist character becomes thoroughly clear. The account shows not the slightest trace of the common Gospel tendency to subordinate John to

³⁸ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 109. The bibliographical reference that Moloney offers is to Wilhelm Baldensperger, *Der Prolog des vierten Evangeliums. Sein polemisch-apologetischer Zweck*. Freiburg: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1898. Likewise Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1968), 98.

³⁹ J. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 263.

⁴⁰ J. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 296.

Jesus and to regard him as Jesus' Forerunner."⁴¹ Subsequently placed side by side, however, the configuration of the two stories supposedly would have been crafted to show the superiority of Jesus: Jesus' virgin birth, for example, is depicted as "more miraculous than John's conception by aged, barren parents".⁴² The double infancy narrative in Luke has even been seen as a vestige of earlier expectation of two distinct Messiahs, one priestly [i.e., John as the son of Zechariah the priest] and the other Davidic [i.e., Jesus as the son of David], which may be attested in extra-biblical literature but finds little actual support in the New Testament accounts themselves.⁴³ The final configuration of the narrative would therefore stand as a corrective to an earlier schema in which the two figures supposedly stood more or less as equals. And as the lives of the two men unfold, the subordinate status of John the Baptist would thus be seen as a "corrective" to a risk presented by the undeniable fact, "embarrassing" to the early Church, of Jesus' own Baptism at the hands of John, regarded by some as a telling clue to an even more enigmatic period of Jesus' life when he would have been seen simply as one of the Baptist's own disciples.⁴⁴

The preceding accumulation of examples will inevitably have presented only a very patchy summary of recent exegesis concerning John. There are very important questions that have not been given more than a passing mention, such as that of the identification of John as "Elijah," or the significance of his baptism especially of Jesus. The studies mentioned above have been chosen, however, in order to illustrate certain significant currents of thought that are present in critical biblical scholarship regarding the Baptist. Ben Witherington sums up the ebb and flow of these currents of thought, and it is significant that according to his summary view, both the ebb and the flow seem to presuppose a portrayal in the Gospels of a figure of John the Baptist who is essentially a creation of the Evangelists, propped up by them for various purposes to occupy within the story of Jesus an important place where he sits precisely in order to keep the *real* John the Baptist from taking his place there and making trouble:

...[I]t has often been urged or suspected that a great deal of the Baptist material reflects the polemics of the Christian Church against the Baptist sect in the period 70 A.D. and afterwards. It is the salutary result of Wink's efforts that it can now be safely concluded that what we find that the gospel tradition, far from being polemics against John and his followers, is an attempt to claim John for the Christian cause. Thus as one progresses from the first to the fourth gospel chronologically, one notices that John's words about Jesus become increasingly confessional.⁴⁵

Such conjectured reconstructions of the historical substratum of the New Testament accounts yield a portrait of John the Baptist that could not be regarded merely an adjusted version of the one that we find in the New Testament taken at face value; rather, it is a portrait of an *ersatz*-Baptist held by some exegetes to be, from head to toe, a creation of Christian wishful thinking. According to such theories, the biblical accounts would not be presenting us a real historical figure at all; instead, they would be substituting for the flesh-and-blood Baptist a figure

⁴¹ Carl H. Kraeling, *John the Baptist* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 17.

⁴² J. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 9, where Taylor also cites approvingly the characterization of the double infancy narrative in Luke 1-2 as a "literary construct intent on teaching Christians that John was inferior to Jesus at the very start, as Raymond Brown has convincingly argued" (citing the latter's *Birth of the Messiah*, 256-85 and 330-92). Taylor also approvingly cites (pp. 4-5) John Meier's description of "neutralizing the Baptist's independence to make him safe for Christianity" (in *Matthew's Gospel*, 384).

⁴³ W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, 72-82.

⁴⁴ J. Taylor, *John the Baptist within Second Temple Jerusalem*, 4-5, 262; H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran*, 219.

⁴⁵ B. Witherington, "Jesus and the Baptist – Two of a Kind?," 225.

that they have rendered innocuous to Christianity by making him an ardent adherent of the Christ to whom he might otherwise stand as a rival. In Jesus' praise of John in the synoptic Gospels (or alternatively, in Q as attested by Matthew 11:11 and Luke 7:28) with the statement that "among those born of women" there was "none...greater than he", and in the Fourth Gospel with the characterization of him as "a burning and shining lamp" (5:25), we would be able to recognize, not the soaring eulogy that first appears to us as the obvious sense of the text, but rather a damning with *feigned* praise in order to place the Baptist forcibly into the subordinate role desired by the partisans of Jesus.

Perhaps it has not been sufficiently considered by many how profound are the implications regarding the historical truth of the Gospels even in their essential message if the proposal of such a re-casting of the figure of John the Baptist by the Evangelists is accepted. All of the Evangelists enlist the Baptist prominently into the service of their proclamation of Jesus Christ as Son of God, Messiah and Savior. Mark goes further and characterizes the Baptist's own preaching as nothing less than "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (1:1). But it is the Fourth Gospel's presentation of John the Baptist that integrates him most fully into the Gospel story as such: so fully, in fact, that his own portrait is drawn in lines determined entirely by the figure of Christ himself, as shown very clearly in the interplay seen above between Jesus' key "I am" statements and John's deferential "I am not..."

As W. Wink correctly expresses it, it is clearly the Fourth Evangelist's intention "to portray John as *the ideal witness to Christ*, a theme to which he returns again and again." Thus Wink notes further that "John is made the normative image of the Christian preacher, apostle and missionary, the perfect prototype of the true evangelist, whose one goal is self-effacement before Christ."⁴⁶ Accordingly, John the Baptist plays a key role in the communication to the believer of the manner of life that is meant to follow upon the acceptance of the Gospel message: "With the same self-effacing disregard for title, for recognition and for a following, the Christian reader is summoned to identify with John and become transparent, invisible as it were, a 'voice' only, bearing witness to the Son of God."⁴⁷

In contemplating the Gospel story being presented and reading it as a "Way" to be followed, can one ever really be satisfied by reading the story in a manner that empties of all historical reality the figure enlisted by the Evangelists to "make straight the way" not only for Jesus Christ but also for the believer? Furthermore, to cast the same question in terms more suited to scholarly inquiry: is it really likely that the only Gospel even making an explicit claim to contain an eyewitness account of Jesus' public ministry, Passion and Resurrection – the Fourth Gospel – would have enlisted for such a key position in this account an historical figure who did not really conform, at least in the most basic contours of his personality, to the pattern thus presented?

Saint John the Baptist in Christian Devotion

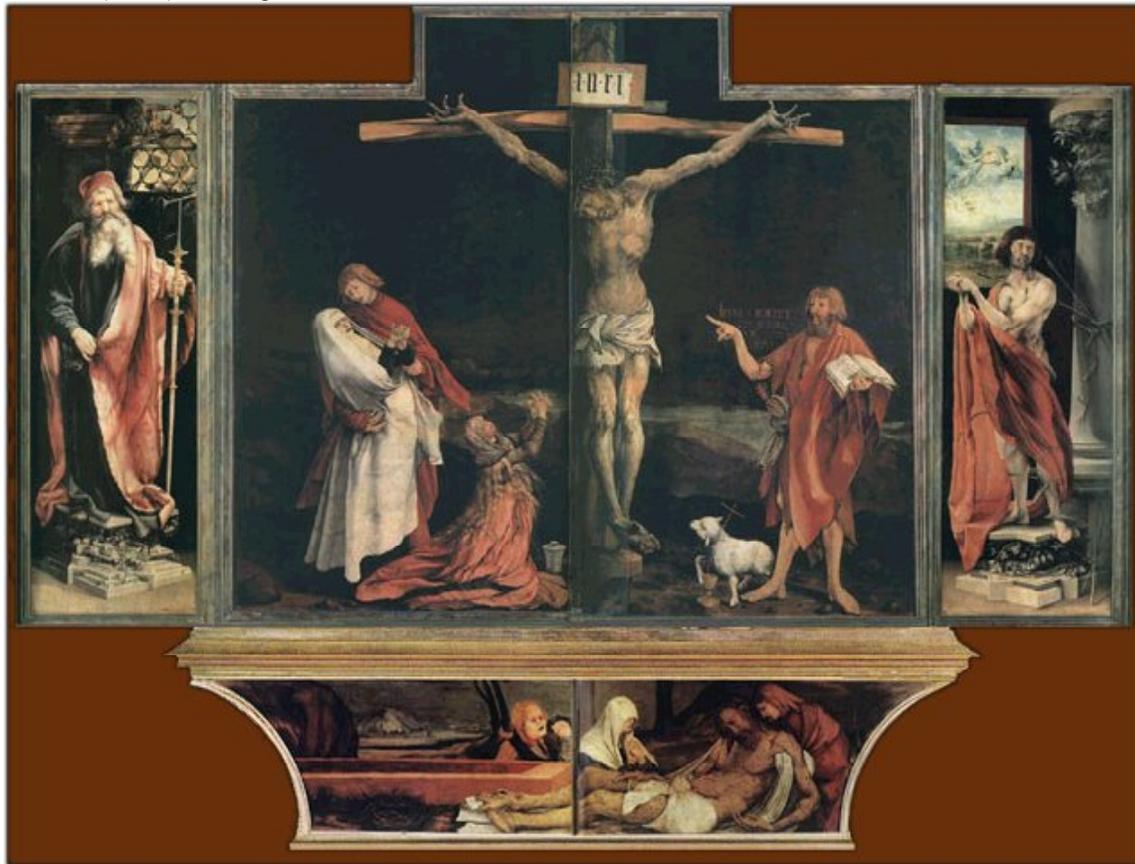
The figure of John the Baptist as presented by the Gospels, and in the greatest spiritual depth by the Gospel of John, is in fact the *Saint* John the Baptist who has captured the imagination of believers throughout the centuries, beginning in fact with the Evangelist himself. In his German commentary on the Gospel according to John that is currently being prepared for publication in English, Benedikt Schwank, OSB, notes insightfully the affinity between these two

⁴⁶ W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, 105.

⁴⁷ W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, 106.

Johns as he comments on the words of 1:6, "There came into being [*egeneto* as in v.3] a man, sent from God, John (is) his name:"

If we see John the Baptist behind John the Evangelist, then we are not surprised that 1:6 mentions the name of a certain "man" who bears testimony to the light. "John is his name": that is, his name as well as his mission, which both tell us that God is gracious to us (John = *jeho-ghanan* = YHWH has shown himself to be gracious). Did not that great artist of the altarpiece at Isenheim [Alsace, France] interpret the Gospel correctly in depicting the Baptist in the place of the Evangelist, with an outstretched index finger under the Cross? The testimony of John the Baptist to the "Lamb of God" and the testimony of John the Evangelist to the Lord lifted up on the Cross and pierced (19:35) flow together as one.⁴⁸



The Isenheim Altar. Source: <http://www.artbible.info/art/isenheim-altar.html>

Certainly it can be no mere literary construct that is venerated by the Churches of East and West above all other Saints after the Blessed Virgin Mary. Apart from her, it is he alone who is honored in the Roman Rite with a liturgical commemoration of his Nativity (June 24) as well as of his martyrdom (August 29), and additionally in the East with the celebration of the "synaxis" of Saint John the Forerunner (January 7) soon after that of the Mother of God (December 26), and one day after the Epiphany with its commemoration of the Lord's Baptism

⁴⁸ Benedikt Schwank, *Evangelium nach Johannes: Praktischer Kommentar*, 3. Auflage (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 2007), 28.

at his hands.⁴⁹ The hierarchical ordering of the Votive Masses in the *Missale Romanum*, still in the 2002 *editio typica tertia*, rank him next in dignity after the Persons and Blessed Trinity, the Mother of God, and the Angels, and before all other Saints including even Saint Joseph.

Similarly to the Isenheimer Altarpiece seen above, he is depicted in the East in the widely diffused *Deisis* icon together with the Mother of God in close proximity to the Savior, a fact that is all the more striking considering the lack of any biblical or extra-biblical account suggesting that they would ever have met; the proximity seems to indicate rather a profoundly spiritual affinity between the woman of the *Magnificat* and the man *qui solus Prophetarum Agnum Redemptionis ostendit*, in the words of the Preface of the Roman Liturgy prayed in Masses in which he is commemorated.⁵⁰ Both figures occupy the central roles that they do in salvation history precisely by pointing away from themselves and toward the One whose coming defines their very existence and mission.

Thus, the Johannine figure of John the Baptist, in his very posture of self-negation before the Lamb that he was sent to show to the world, in his "I am not" before the "I am," emerges from the Gospel as the model of the ideal disciple and the ideal evangelizer. It is in him that we find the pattern for the creature's acknowledgement of his own identity in relation to God. Paradoxically, it is this very prostration before the divine mystery that constitutes his exaltation in the mind of the Evangelist and in the hearts of Christians. And it can be seen that this is so for a reason far more profound than simply the fact of John's self-renunciation making way Jesus: a reason that Evangelist of the Fourth Gospel underscores as he paints his picture of the Son of Man who is "lifted up" precisely in the act of emptying himself of his own will in fulfillment of his Father's plan. Thus, the relationship between Jesus' "I am" and John's self-negation is more than just a "contrast" as described by Keener as noted above, and more than John's "remote preparation" for Jesus' "I am" affirmations, as noted by Moloney. Rather, in a mysterious way, it is precisely in renouncing himself in deference to the Son of God that John most clearly shows himself to be *imitating* the same Son of God.

In the verbal contrast that is drawn by the Fourth Gospel between the Baptist's "I am not" and Jesus' "I am" statements, there shines forth an admirable example of the creature's recognition of his own status as such, and of his willingness to bow before the majesty of his Creator, in submission to the latter's plan as his own highest good. Even so, there is another series of passages which – clearly, though in different words – shows forth the Son's own "I am not" in love and obedience to his Father, even as he assures his disciples that "I and the Father are one" (10:30) and that "the one who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9).

In Jesus as he appears to us in the Gospel of John, in fact, the negation of self that is the Baptist's signal trait appears to us also as the very pattern of God's own holiness itself. As Hans Urs von Balthasar points out, the "meaning of the Incarnation, of Jesus' manhood, is first borne in upon us as a not-doing, a not-fulfilling, a not-carrying-out of his own will." This is reflected in Jesus' words, "I have come down from heaven to do not my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (Jn 6:38).⁵¹ Balthasar then accumulates an impressive collection of similar declarations of Jesus as found in the Gospel of John:

⁴⁹ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Friend of the Bridegroom: on the Veneration of the Forerunner*, translated by Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 1; also <http://www.orthodoxchristian.info/pages/synaxis.htm>, accessed June 1, 2011.

⁵⁰ S. Bulgakov, *The Friend of the Bridegroom*, 1-2.

⁵¹ H. U. von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 29.

The negation is primary. The Son can do nothing of himself (Jn 5:19, 30); he cannot speak on his own authority (7:17; 12:49; 14:10). And he does not do his own will (5:30; 6:38), although he has a will of his own (5:21; 17:24; 21:22) and so cannot be described as a vacuum in which God exists. . . . It is of the essence of the Son to receive life (5:26), insight (3:11), spirit (3:34-35), word (3:34; 14:24), will (5:30), deed (6:9), doctrine (7:16), work (14:10), and glorification (8:54; 17:22, 24) from another, from the Father.⁵²

It is evident that Jesus' essential posture of self-negation cannot be because of sin: certainly not because of any personal sin committed by him, but not even because of His having taken upon himself the sin of the world. This taking on the sin of the world does have something to do with the fact that his essential self-negation will take the form of His death on the Cross, but the self-negation itself is something even more profound. It is the appearance in human form of his eternal modality of being, even as the pre-existent Son who is *pros ton theon* (1:1) – i.e., *ad Patrem*, utterly oriented *toward* the Father, as both the Greek biblical text and its Latin translation of this verse of the Johannine Prologue are able to express better than any English translation. Unlike the Father, the Son possesses the divine nature as received *from Another*. As Balthasar continues in his reflection, "If in him 'having' were for one moment to cease to be 'receiving', to become a radically independent disposal of himself, he would in that moment cease to be the Father's Son, would have forfeited all claim to be believed, and would have to call on men not to believe him (10:37)".⁵³

The renunciation of self that is asked of Christ's disciple, then – and especially by those whom he calls to represent him and to proclaim him before others – is shown by this Johannine constellation both of words and of persons to be something still far more profound than a spirituality of "*islam*" – referring here to the original sense of the word as "submission." In Jesus, the self-emptying love of God has appeared in human history not only to be the object of awed contemplation and adoration from a distance, but who calls disciples, as Mark also notes, "so that they might be with him". And the Fourth Gospel shows us in its own way that in imitating John the Baptist whose "I am not" constitutes his voluntary abasement before the majestic "I AM" of the Word made flesh, the believer is at the same time led beyond all earthly worship into the intimate communion of the Triune God, where such self-emptying love has now been laid bare to us as constituting the very personhood of the One through whom all things have come into being.⁵⁴

⁵² H.U. von Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 29-30.

⁵³ H.U. von Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 30. In a different context I recently highlighted this attitude of self-negation, patterned upon the Son's own posture before the Father, also as paradigmatic for priestly ministry: "Men of Prayer: Priests and Holiness," in *Faithful in Christ: the Ministry and Life of the Catholic Priest*, ed. by Dennis J. Billy, C.Ss.R. (Phoenix: Leonine Publishers, 2011), 12-18.

⁵⁴ Another passage where the Fourth Gospel expresses this acquired relationship of similarity between the Lord and his disciple by similarly making allusion to Jesus' "I am" statements, is in the familiar pericope of the Man Born Blind, where the man who has received his sight at Jesus' hands now shares in the rejection experienced by his new-found Master; confronted with the perplexed inquiry of bystanders who question whether he is the same one whom they had known as a beggar, now clearly seeing, the man confirms by his own echo of Jesus' words: *egō eimi* (9:9). Another, related subtlety found in the Gospel is Peter's illustration that not every form of self-negation is praiseworthy; faced with the threats of bystanders who recognize his association with the Lord who is presently standing trial, John casts Peter's denial in words that are verbally equivalent but diametrically opposed in spirit to the posture taken by the Baptist, verbally distancing himself from the Lord rather than acknowledging his Lordship: "And they said to him, 'Are you not one of his disciples? But he denied and said, 'I am not' (*ouk eimi*: 18:25).