John the Baptist and the resurrection traditions in the Gospels

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ABSTRACT
When Jesus is called John redivivus by Herod and the people of his time, it raises the question of the existence of a tradition relating resurrection with John the Baptist. It seems fairly obvious that such a tradition survived in the Gospel records. Whatever the original content of the tradition, which cannot be accurately reconstructed, this much seems clear: although John the Baptist was not physically raised from the dead, his death and "resurrection" were recorded as a prefiguration of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This paper traces the outline of such a tradition and the way in which the evangelists used it to suit their own purposes.

1 INTRODUCTION
The Synoptic tradition of the resurrection from the dead is related on three distinct occasions to John the Baptist.
* When Herod learns of the deeds which Jesus is performing he relates these events to John the Baptist, whom he believes to have risen from the dead (Mk 6:14-16; Mt 14:1-5; Lk 9:7).
* When Jesus questions his disciples on the way to Caesarea Philippi as to his identity they reply that people consider him to be John the Baptist. The inference is clear: Jesus is John the Baptist who has been raised from the dead (Mk 8:28; Mt 16:14; Lk 9:19).
* At the Transfiguration on the mountain Jesus is seen in the company of Elijah and Moses. On this occasion Elijah is described as the precursor who will restore all things before the rising from the dead of the Son of man (Mk 9:9-12). Jesus confirms this and adds that Elijah has already come (Mk 9:13). The narrator clearly identifies Elijah with John the Baptist.

The importance of these statements is the relationship between Jesus, John the Baptist, Elijah and Moses. On this occasion Elijah is described as the precursor who will restore all things before the rising from the dead of the Son of man (Mk 9:9-12). Jesus confirms this and adds that Elijah has already come (Mk 9:13). The narrator clearly identifies Elijah with John the Baptist.

From these sketchy recordings it seems justified to conclude that Jesus was identified with a revived John, who in turn was the embodiment of the Elijah expectations of the day. Although the outlines of these expectations...
are hazy, we may nevertheless attempt to understand John's relationship with Elijah. Such an understanding could throw light on the death and resurrection of Jesus as reflected and prefigured in the events of John's life and death.

1.1 John the Baptist and Elijah
When we first meet the Baptist in the Synoptic Gospels we get the impression of an Elijah-like figure. Matthew 3:4 and Mark 1:6 describe the life, food and other customs of John the Baptist. The description corresponds with the picture of Elijah described in 2 Kings 1:8. In the Gospel recordings of John's attire, the accounts are followed by his preaching of the judgement and the eschatological character of the kingdom. Thus John himself is placed in this end-time dimension. This tradition is reflected more distinctly in the transfiguration scene, where Jesus explicitly states that Elijah must come first to restore all things before the resurrection from the dead (Mt 17:9-13; Mk 9:9 13). In Matthew 11:14 Jesus states clearly that John is the Elijah "who was to come".

Luke is more explicit on the point of identifying John with Elijah (Lk 1:17). By quoting Malachi 4:5-6 he records the function of the Baptist. This function is detailed in the song of Zechariah (Lk 1:67-80) which in many respects shows a close correspondence with Malachi. In this text John functions as forerunner, peacemaker (Lk 1:75-79) and judge "to turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous " (Lk 1:17). How he does this is recorded in Luke 3:10-14. Luke uses Q-material for the judgement announcements of John. However, he does not - as does Matthew - localise these judgements in the context of the coming of the kingdom but in the framework of the forgiveness of sin (Lk 1:77; 3:3). Luke adapts existing traditions in an unique way to fit his own purpose (Evans 1987:82-83).

From the above statements, it is clear that Elijah is related in various respects to John the Baptist (Elliott 1982:20-23). The reason for these variations should probably be sought in the plurality of expectation of an end-time personality or personalities in the time of Jesus. These aspects are lucidly discussed by Den Heyer (1983:7ff). What concerns us, however, are the Elijah traditions which existed at the time of the New Testament, and how they are adapted and applied to John the Baptist, particularly in respect of the resurrection from the dead.

1.2 The Elijah tradition
The Jewish traditions concerning Elijah are complex. They developed over a long period and existed in various forms.

* Elijah is primarily an 'ish ha-elohim who acts as mediator between God and man. As "man of God" he did miracles and was able to heal the sick. But he was also involved in everyday matters like supplying food in times of famine
(Vermes 1983b:6,27). This is how the historical Elijah is conveyed in the Old Testament.

* The tradition contained in Malachi is a later development which sees Elijah as an individual who is concerned with the final restitution of Israel. He is the messenger of the Lord (MI 3:1; 4:5) who prepares the people for the coming of the day of the Lord. Elijah becomes the mediator between Israel and God. According to this tradition Elijah seems to be a saviour and a peacemaker (Vermes 1983a:94).

* Closely related to the historical Elijah in the Malachi tradition is the concept of the eschatological Elijah who is active in the last days of the present times (Vermes 1983a:94). In this tradition he is the one who announces the messianic age and who acts as the forerunner of the Messiah. He should remind the people of the Torah of Moses and thus introduce the restoration of Israel. This tradition was probably known and kept in the Qumran community, although this is by no means certain (Den Heyer 1983:197). In fact, there is considerable doubt among scholars whether such an expectation of an eschatological Elijah forerunner existed in late Jewish tradition (cf Robinson 1958:269-270; Faierstein 1981:76-78).

* In the Mishna tractate Sotah 9:15 we find a more specific and detailed development of the Elijah tradition. Rabbi Phineas ben Yair compiles a chain of virtues to combine mainstream rabbinic piety with ideals proper to the Hasidim (Vermes 1983a:102): "Watchfulness leads to cleanness, cleanness to purity ... devoutness to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit to the resurrection of the dead, and the resurrection of the dead to Elijah of blessed memory." In this rabbinic tradition the resurrection and righteousness – and righteous deeds – are attached to the figure of Elijah who was zealous for the Lord, who did not die but who was taken alive into heaven. Vermes (1983a:102) rightly says: "At the end of the path of perfection ... stands once more the Hasid's model Elijah."

From the above traditions concerning Elijah one cannot conclude that at the time of Jesus and John there was a general resurrection tradition attached to Elijah's person. We may infer from the superhuman traits of his life and ascension into heaven that a general notion of resurrection could have been associated with him.

1.3 The resurrection

* The concept of the resurrection of the dead was not a generally accepted one at the time of Jesus. The Pharisees accepted the notion, while the Sadducees rejected it (Ac 23:8; Mt 23:23-33; Jagersma 1985:72). The first clear indication of the resurrection in biblical literature is found in Daniel 12:2.
However, the idea of resurrection as such is not foreign to the Old Testament (Gowan 1986:4ff; Gowan 1980:471-490). There are two aspects of the resurrection idea which we note:

- A physical change or transfiguration of a living person, such as Enoch, who was taken away from earth into heaven (Gn 5:24), Saul who was transformed but not taken up into heaven (1 Sm 10:6), and Elijah whose ascension is mentioned in 2 Kings 2:11.

- The Old Testament records physical resurrections of three individuals: The raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath by Elijah (1 Ki 17:17-24), the restoration of the Shunammite’s son by Elisha (2 Ki 4:18-37), the resurrection of an unknown man whose body came into contact with the skeleton of Elisha (2 Ki 13:20-21).

The relatively scant reference to resurrection in the Old Testament must be interpreted from the background of the sovereignty of God over life and death. Because of the people’s trust in God’s righteousness and their hope for the final day when all God’s promises would be fulfilled, the necessity for a resurrection did not arise. A further reason for the late development of a resurrection belief was the aversion of the Israelite to the surrounding mystic religions of Egypt, Greece and Asia Minor which were accompanied by magic, mystery and extensive burial rituals. These often led to veneration of the dead (Lapide 1983:23).

* In the time of the persecution by the Syrian king Antioch IV, the subsequent revolt of the Maccabees gave impetus to renewed hope in resurrection from the dead. The martyr’s death of numerous faithful upholders of the Torah, who died without experiencing the righteousness which they expected, gave rise to the question of whether it was worthwhile to die for your faith and whether there would be a day of reckoning for the unrighteous. Their faith in God’s love and steadfastness which did not end at death gave hope that the righteousness of God would be exacted in the life after death. The wicked who are now apparently prosperous will receive their just punishment while the righteous will receive eternal life (Den Heyer 1986:230).

This aspect is reflected in two Old Testament personalities who served as inspiration and examples of zeal for the Lord: Phineas the son of Eleazar (Nm 25:10-13) and the prophet Elijah (1 Ki 19:10,14) who faithfully served the Lord, despite his persecution by Jezebel. From these examples it seems that two aspects were related: (a) the faithful upholding of the Torah by the zealous for the Lord, which formed the basis for (b) the hope of the resurrection from the dead. Both these notions are found in the person of Elijah who combines them in a singular hope.

2 JOHN AND THE RESURRECTION

Some of these notions are found in the New Testament but they are seen from the perspective of Jesus. There are relatively few statements on John
and the resurrection. What we do have, however, is significant for our understanding of resurrection in general, as well as for the resurrection of Jesus. As Mark served as the basis for the other Gospels, particularly his description of the "resurrection" of John the Baptist, we use his Gospel for the discussion of our theme.

2.1 Mark

* From the report in Mark 6, we distinguish three aspects of the person of John: (a) Herod causes the death of John; (b) in the mind of Herod (the narrator) John rose from the dead (the existence of a John redivivus tradition can be concluded from this statement); (c) the basis of John's resurrection lies in the fact that he was a righteous and holy man. Herod could have inferred such a notion from the fact that John reprimanded him prophetically because of his immoral relationship with his brother's wife and because he often listened to John (Den Heyer 1986:110). At the root of this report it is possible to discern a tradition in which a righteous and holy man like Elijah, who died a martyr's death for his upholding of the law, will rise again from the dead. In this instance Herod sees Jesus as the risen John by virtue of his knowledge of his righteousness and holiness.

The narrator uses this tradition to draw a parallel as a prefiguration of the death and resurrection of Jesus. By doing so his narration closely links up with the three announcements of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. In this way, in his narration of John the Baptist, he gives a preliminary but decisive guarantee that Jesus as a righteous and holy man of God will die, but rise again from the dead.

* This conclusion is confirmed in Mark 8:26-28. In reply to Jesus' question to his disciples as to his identity according to the people, they reply: John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets. It is clear that the tradition of Mark existed not only in the mind of Herod but was probably also a general belief among the people of his day. This is also borne out by Mark 6:15: "Others said 'He is Elijah'." These words form the basis of Jesus' first announcement of his death and resurrection (Mk 8:31). From this moment the accent shifts from the shadow to the reality, from the forerunner to the one who was to come. This is exactly what Peter confesses: "you are the Christ" (Mk 8:29). This pronouncement dominates the subsequent narration. This confession of Peter is qualified by the three announcements of Jesus concerning his suffering and death.

* This resurrection motif is fully expanded in Mark's version of the transfiguration on the mountain (Mk 9:9-13). The occasion for this resurrection account is Jesus' instruction to his disciples in Mark 8:30 not to tell anyone. In Mark 9:9, once again, Jesus charges his disciples not to tell anyone what
they have seen until the Son of man has risen from the dead. Among themselves the disciples argue about the meaning of resurrection, but when they approach Jesus they formulate their question as a desire to know the time of Elijah's coming.

Jesus responds by saying two things:
- He confirms the priority of Elijah's coming and adds that he has in fact already come. His words, no doubt refer to the public ministry of the Baptist.
- Jesus states somewhat mysteriously in this context that the Son of man must greatly suffer and be scorned and despised. Jesus' final words unveil the mystery. When Jesus says that Elijah has already come and that they did to him whatever they pleased, he most certainly refers to John the Baptist and his death as a martyr (Den Heyer 1985:22). By referring to John's death, he also implicitly concedes John's resurrection as a John redivivus. By this explicit and implicit narration the question of Mark 9:10 as to the meaning of resurrection is given prominence and relief. What resurrection meant they must have known, but what it meant as an event involving the suffering and death of Jesus was a question which called for an answer. The answer is clear: for Jesus there could be no death without resurrection and no resurrection without suffering and death. The framework of this narration once again underlines the fact that the basis for resurrection is the righteousness of the dying one.

It seems clear that the fundamental issue in the resurrection faith, as recorded here, is the innocence, justness and righteousness preceding the resurrection. Whether the disciples understood Jesus' words in this way is open to debate. However, the way in which the narrator records the discourse indicates that the narrator wanted his reader to understand the matter as described above.

* The resurrection of Jesus, which is prefigured by the narration of the Baptist's death and implicit resurrection as a John redivivus, brings the whole issue to a climax in the final words of the Gospel. By heavenly intervention the bystanders at the grave are told that Jesus of Nazareth was the one who had been crucified, that he died but that he rose again, that he was no longer in the grave and that the empty place where he had lain clearly proved his departure from the tomb. Thus he was alive after rising from the dead.

2.2 The rest of the Gospels
The way in which the Gospels relate the events of Jesus' death and resurrection as that of John redivivus yields a particular progression. In Mark and Matthew the evidence is extensive. Luke uses the material sparingly. We have already noted that he employs a different Elijah tradition when portraying the Baptist (Bammel 1971:106-107). The fourth Gospel is completely silent on the question of whether Jesus is a John redivivus. In fact the Baptist himself emphatically denies that he is Elijah (Jn 1:21,25).
When we survey the Gospel evidence it is clear that no fundamentally new aspect is found in Matthew, Luke and John. This could be due to each evangelist's preconceived purpose. It is all the more understandable as Mark provides us with a basic version of the oldest tradition regarding John the Baptist. This basic tradition is employed and re-interpreted by each evangelist to serve his own purpose. The pronouncements, in which the resurrection theme is associated with the Baptist, are found almost unchanged in Mark (6:14-16), Matthew (14:2; 16:14) and Luke (9:9,17). The slight differences in these reports indicate a diminishing of the John redivivus notion. Luke's rendering of Herod's reaction to the reports concerning Jesus is unequivocal: "I beheaded John. Who then is this I hear such things about?"

Although the fourth Gospel does not display a redivivus tradition it does contain perspectives on John's significance for the understanding of Jesus' death and resurrection.

2.3 The fourth Gospel
We have already noted this Gospel's complete silence on the possibility of Jesus being a John redivivus. Jesus as the pre-existent Logos is too unique to be a John or an Elijah redivivus. Nevertheless it does seem as if the tradition is not entirely absent from the Gospel.

The appearance of Jesus at Bethany across the Jordan is significant. In the first scene (Jn 1:19-34), John initiates Jesus' public ministry by His baptism and receiving of the Holy Spirit. At the second and final mention the reader is being prepared for the conclusion of Jesus' ministry. All these events take place at Bethany across the Jordan where John baptised (Jn 10:39-42): for the last time the two figures appear on the scene and are place by the narrator next to each other in the same frame. Although John has probably long been dead, his importance is so great that the narrator will just not surrender him to posterity. Even in memoriam he lives at Jesus' side as his crown witness. . .

For the narrator John is still the "mediator" of the gifts of salvation so that "through him [John] all men might believe" (Jn 1:7). It is therefore not surprising that the people's evaluation of Jesus is not directed at Jesus himself but is recorded as a confirmation that "all that John said about this man was true" (Jn 10:41). It is John's witness which identifies Jesus. Even after his death those events which took place where John was baptising, witness to the light and, through this witness, people believe. The narrator finds it necessary to add that John attained all this even though he did not perform any signs (Jn 10:41). What he achieved was done solely by witnessing.

His words were prophetic in more than one respect. For the narrator the events of John have prophetic overtones. The message of the impending death of Jesus is a subtle reminder of the triumph of his resurrection. It is, so to speak, a sneak preview of the events to follow. It forms a bridge from one dispensation to another; this is clearly reflected in the raising of Lazarus (Jn
11:1-16). For the disciples the news of the impending death of Lazarus is so disconcerting that Thomas says: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (Jn 11:16). For Jesus, however, death is not the final word. He replies: "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going to wake him up" (Jn 11:11). The death and resurrection of Lazarus is a reflection of his own death and resurrection.

John's own death is also charged with meaning. It calls to mind - and serves as an overture to - the death of Jesus. John lives in the message concerning him, although he has already died. His death is not a mere prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection; it is in fact a warranty for its reality. Thus the witness to Jesus guarantees the triumph of the death of Jesus. Lazarus' death and resurrection is tangible proof of the final differentiation between the "forerunner" and the "fulfiller". The priority of Jesus is thus placed beyond all doubt.

3 THE RABBINIC TRADITION

Robinson (1958) and Faierstein (1981) have rightly shown that the New Testament authors did not use a late Jewish paradigm for Elijah. On the contrary, they created their own model of John as the Elijah. In this construction John serves as the forerunner who foreshadows the two most cardinal and vital facts of Jesus, namely his death and resurrection. In this way his death and more particularly his resurrection are signified as events of salvation.

The development of the Elijah tradition up to the time of the rabbinic versions can be constructed as follows.

As has already been shown there probably was not a uniform or clearly formulated Elijah tradition which could have served the New Testament authors as a source for their Elijah-Baptist narration. The tradition existed in various forms which developed over a period into a particular form, which the New Testament writers found appropriate to adopt for their message of John the Baptist being the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah. It seems probable that this tradition developed even further in post-biblical times. This is the conclusion we draw from the few rabbinic statements at our disposal: Mishna tractates Shekalim 2:5; Taanith 2:4; Sotah 9:15; Baba Metzia 1:8; 2:8; 3:4:5; Edooyoth 8:7 (cf Danby 1977).

In the Sotah tractate (9:15) it is recorded that Elijah is responsible for the resurrection from the dead. This is a notion not found in earlier - that is late Jewish - literature. It is therefore not improbable that the New Testament literature influenced the post-biblical and the rabbinic teaching on John the Baptist as Elijah, particularly the resurrection from the dead as Elijah's final achievement.
4 CONCLUSION
As in the case of all historical reconstructions this one concerning the Elijah tradition is open to debate and differences in interpretation. What seems certain is that the New Testament writers created an own Elijah–John the Baptist tradition from whatever existing material they found suitable for adaptation. Thus a tradition was formalised to serve as a prologue to and parallel for the death and resurrection of Jesus.

WORKS CONSULTED
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