

Tatum, W Barnes 1994 — John the Baptist and Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar

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As is indicated by the subtitle of this book, it is a report of the work of the Jesus Seminar, up to this point in time already well known and widely discussed. On this occasion the Seminar's attention was not focussed on the historical Jesus but on the historical John the Baptist (=JB). In this regard the book can be seen as a successor to the *The Five Gospels*, the report of the Seminar's work on the *words* of Jesus. The study of JB by the Jesus Seminar marks the transition from the *words* phase of the Seminar to the *deeds* phase. This volume presents the result of that study, but in the case of JB it comprises the results of putting to a historical test both the *sayings* attributed to him and the reports of *deeds* done by him. In this quest for the historical JB the same procedure was followed as was the case in the quest for the historical Jesus. This means that after the presentation of a variety of relevant papers and after a thorough discussion of the issues concerned, statements related to JB were voted on (by red, pink, gray or black beads, as is customary). More than 100 different narrative statements were put to the vote, and the same weighted scale and formula adopted for the 'sayings' phase of the Seminar were used to calculate the collective vote on each narrative statement and to translate the vote into the appropriate colour. A distinction was made between two different kinds of statements: *action* statements and *status* statements. Action statements have to do with activities and events, and status statements with participants and setting.

The book is composed of three main sections, respectively entitled *The Historical John the Baptist; Literary Sources for John the Baptist; and Historical Assessment of John the Baptist*. These sections are preceded by the list of narrative statements voted on, coloured according to the outcome of the respective votes, and followed by four appendices at the end of the book. Some of the conclusions of the Seminar which may be of interest to the reader are the following: JB's baptism was understood to be a protest against the temple establishment (pink). JB was indeed convinced that a figure stronger than himself would follow after him (pink). JB was part of a broader baptizing phenomenon or movement (red). Jesus was a disciple of JB (pink). Jesus deliberately separated from JB's movement (pink). Herod Antipas had JB executed for political expediency (red). The movements of JB and Jesus were rivals during Jesus' life-time as well as after Jesus' death (pink).

The first main section comprises two short essays on Roman Palestine and the man called 'Baptizer', which serve as a kind of background introduction to the real stuff the book consists of. In the second main section every extant source containing whatever narrative statement(s) about JB is briefly discussed, together with a presentation of the relevant information contained therein. Apart from the canonical Gospels, the list of sources includes the so-called apocryphal Gospels of the Nazorenes, the Hebrews, the Ebionites and the Infancy Gospel of James, as well as passages from the Pseudo Clementines, Josephus and Mandeism.

In the third main section the different narrative statements about JB are presented accompanied by an indication of the percentage of votes brought out in favour of each colour respectively, as well as the final average colour result. Headings under which the statements are presented are: historical setting; birth, family, and upbringing; ministry of baptizing and preaching; John and Jesus; imprisonment and death; the Baptist movement after John's death; apocalypticism, Jesus, and John. What is, however, the most important and indispensable feature and contribution of this section is the commentary by means of which an explanation is given as to why the majority of the votes went in this or that direction. This is extremely helpful in giving the reader an insight in the ways in which the material was evaluated, and regarding the criteria applied in verifying the available data.

In addition to this there are ten quite informative cameo essays on different topics related to JB. Among these are: JB in film; JB in art; JB in historical research; and the Book of Revelation as a 'Baptist' apocalypse. What is also very informative and helpful in coming to an understanding of the criteria applied and the *modus operandi* used by the Seminar are three of the appendices added at the end of the book. These are respectively: voting guidelines and calculation; rules of procedure; and rules of evidence. The latter rules are especially important because they spell out the criteria laid down for determining the historical reliability of a specific source or statement. Among these we find the following, to mention just two of them: Canonical boundaries are regarded as irrelevant in assessing literary evidence insofar as *Scriptural texts* in themselves have no greater claim to historical accuracy than *non-Scriptural texts*. A distinction must be made between the number of *written texts* and the number of independent sources because some written texts are literally dependent upon other texts as sources for their information.

This book is undoubtedly a must not only for those who would like to keep up with the results of the work done by the Jesus Seminar, but also for anybody who may be interested in the current state of affairs in JB research. The book naturally does not claim to be the only or the last word about JB, but it certainly represents the findings of a significant number of the most prominent scholars in this field at this point in time. I am convinced that the book not only makes available startling new evidence about JB, but that it will definitely also revive and stimulate further JB research. The language usage and style of the book is of such a nature that it can be enjoyed by specialists and non-specialists alike. It accordingly deserves a wide readership and is strongly recommended.