


R. STEVEN NOTLEY

IN
THE MASTER'S
STEPS
THE GOSPELS IN THE LAND

 THE CARTA NEW TESTAMENT ATLAS Volume 1

CHAPTER 2

THE MINISTRY OF JOHN AND THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING. In all of the Gospels the ministry of Jesus begins with his participation in the baptism of John. The geographical setting for John’s ministry varies in the four Gospel accounts. In both Christian tradition and modern scholarship this has resulted in uncertainty regarding the location of John. All of the accounts cite Isaiah 40:3 to introduce the reason for the Baptist’s presence in the wilderness. “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” Like the Qumran Congregation (IQS 8:13–14), John believed that preparation for the Lord should take place in the wilderness.

Mark reports that John was “in the wilderness” (Mark 1:4) without any specification where that wilderness lay. The Greek term, similar to its Hebrew counterpart, need not indicate an arid, uninhabitable place, i.e., desert. It may also describe unpopulated, pasturing areas belonging to residents of a nearby city (cf. Luke 8:29). So, we hear of a “wilderness” near Bethsaida (Luke 9:10–12), where Mark describes green grass (Mark 6:39). We find a similar breadth of usage for the Hebrew term in the Old Testament (Gen 21:14; Joel 2:22; Isa 42:11).

Mark does record that crowds came to John from “all Judea and Jerusalem” (Mark 1:5; cf. Matt 3:5; John 1:19), which may or may not imply proximity to the arid regions in the lower Jordan Valley. It is difficult to know how much weight Mark intends for us to give to these geographical details about the crowds. Are they instead the Evangelist’s periphrastic style of emphasizing John’s role as the Voice of Isaiah 40:3? In the Isaiah passage the Voice is to speak to Jerusalem and the cities of Judea (Isa 40:9).

If Mark is employing here a technique of verbal allusion, it would not be the only instance. For example, elsewhere he omits explicit testimony to the popular notion that the Baptist was Elijah redivivus (cf. Mal 4:5 [HMT 3:23]; Matt 11:14; Luke 1:17). Yet, Mark was certainly aware of this opinion, because he describes John’s clothing with clear intent to present John in Elijah’s attire (Mark 1:6; Matt 3:4; 2 Kgs 1:8). On that occasion, Markan detail is not intended to merely describe John’s clothing but to signal to his readers the eschatological importance of John’s prophetic role. The challenge for the modern reader remains how to read these Markan details. Matthew on both of these occasions shares Mark’s features, but he alone of the Synoptic Gospels—perhaps anticipating the mention

of the Jerusalem and Judean crowds or reflecting the earlier Judean wilderness setting of Isaiah 40:3—specifies that John was in “the wilderness of Judea” (Matt 3:1).

While Luke agrees with Mark’s portrayal that John is in the wilderness, he lacks Mark and Matthew’s geographical reference to Judean and Jerusalem crowds. Instead, Luke notes only, “[John] went into all the region about the Jordan” (Luke 3:3). The Fourth Gospel contributes unique geographical details about the location of John’s ministry, before and after its description of John’s baptism of Jesus. At points the Evangelist parallels the Synoptic Gospels, and at other points he presents independent traditions. Of the setting prior to Jesus’ baptism, John’s Gospel records that the Baptist was at “Bethany beyond the Jordan” (John 1:28). Sometime later he is reported at “Aenon near Salim” (John 3:23). So, in apparent agreement, John and Luke present the Baptist moving between different venues and not limited to any single location.

The site of Bethany in the Transjordan finds no mention in early literature outside of John’s singular reference. Origen reports in c. A.D. 200 that no such place exists (Orig. *Comm. John VI.24*). In spite of his admission that “[Bethany] is found in almost all of the copies [of John’s Gospel],” he proposed a textual emendation for the verse to read Bethabara. Eusebius’ *Onomasticon* (58:18) a century later describes Bethabara: “Where John was baptizing, beyond the Jordan. The place



The baptism of Jesus as depicted in the Church of St. John the Baptist, Ein Kerem. (photo S. Magal)



The wilderness of Judea. (photo S. Magal)

is shown where even today many of the brothers still endeavor to receive a bath.” Eusebius embraced this textual solution first heard from Origen, because he makes no mention of Bethany in connection with John’s baptism. While these early Christian conjectures exchanged the known for the unknown, manuscript support for Bethabara prior to Origen is nonexistent. Bethany appears in our earliest and best manuscripts of John’s Gospel. Confusion in the later Byzantine period is compounded by the Medeba Map, which preserves “Bethabara, the sanctuary of Saint John the Baptist” on the *western* bank of the Jordan River, not as the New Testament describes Bethany, “beyond (i.e., *east of*) the Jordan.”

John’s reference to Aenon shares Bethany’s absence in the early sources. The Medeba Map describes an Aenon in the Transjordan and identifies it with the site of Sapsaphas. A second “Aenon near Salim” is depicted on the west side of the Jordan River not too distant from Scythopolis (i.e., Beth-shean). This latter site is attested also in Eusebius’ *Onomasticon* 40:1–4 and Egeria’s *Travels* 15:1–4. A third suggestion for Aenon, perhaps owing to the fact that mention of Aenon occurs within the Fourth Gospel’s narrative about Jesus in Samaria, identifies the Baptist in the interior of the hill country of Samaria. Its location is remembered near the modern-day Arab village of Salim (*Jdt* 4:4). While the toponymic challenge of springs (=Aenon) near Salim may be resolved, it is difficult to understand how the interior of Samaria served as the venue for John’s ministry to call Jews to repentance and ritual immersion. Identification of an early Roman location for the springs of Aenon remains uncertain.

Returning to Bethany, it is suggested that the reference in John 1:28 is not to a village, but to the region of Bashan in the Transjordan. Designation of the region of biblical Bashan—extending

from Mount Hermon in the north to the southern boundaries of the Lower Golan—with the term Batanea is also heard by Greek writers from Josephus (*Life* 54; *Ant.* 9:159) to Eusebius (*Onom.* 44:9–11). Additionally, according to the Septuagint the region of Bashan is demarked like Bethany, “beyond the Jordan” (*Deut* 4:47; *Josh* 9:10).

If “Bethany beyond the Jordan” does signal the region of ancient Bashan (Batanea), then it indicates that John’s ministry reached regions northeast of the Sea of Galilee. A northern setting for John better suits the description that two of his disciples, Andrew and Peter, together with Philip came out from Bethsaida to follow Jesus the day following his baptism (*John* 1:44). The location of John’s disciples at Bethsaida on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee is not easily reconciled with the traditional location of Jesus’ baptism in the lower Jordan Valley near Jericho.

It may be of some significance that in rabbinic opinion, the waters of the Jordan River above the Sea of Galilee were preferable for ritual immersion. The waters of the Yarmuk and lower Jordan rivers were reckoned unsuitable, since they included “mixed waters” (*m. Parah* 8:10).

In other words, these rivers south of the Sea of Galilee received tributaries of questionable purity. The rabbinic estimation accords with the lack of any mention of the practice of Jewish ritual immersion in the lower Jordan River in the days of the Second Temple.

John’s ministry in the north seems a more fitting setting for his critique of actions involving the Herodian families, who resided in Galilee and the north. John’s popularity and outspoken critique resulted in his imprisonment by Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee. Josephus mistakenly transcribes the mention of Macherus from a few lines earlier and repeats it to identify the place where John was imprisoned and executed (*Ant.* 18:119). Such a location for these events is highly unlikely and probably indicates the historian did not know where John died. In addition, Mark’s description that “leading officials of Galilee” (*Mark* 6:21) were present during the banquet when John was condemned, strengthens the contention that John was imprisoned and executed in Antipas’ Galilean palace in Tiberias.

John’s calling to the crowds to repent and ritually immerse in the regions of the Jordan above the Sea of Galilee may also explain the large crowds (*Ant.* 18:118) that Jesus encountered on the plains near



John the Baptist
(Hagia Sophia, Istanbul; photo R. S. Notley)



Qasr el-Yahud, south of the Sea of Galilee, is thought by some to be the traditional site of the Baptism. (photo S. Magal)

Bethsaida, where he withdrew upon hearing of the Baptist’s death (Matt 14:13). According to Mark, when Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion for them, “because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). With these words the Evangelist hints both to the relationship of the crowds with the recently deceased John, and the popular notion among some that John was the anticipated prophet-like Moses (Deut 18:18; John 1:25; cf. 4Q175 1:5–8). Mark’s creative use of the phrase—“sheep without a shepherd”—is intended to echo the same words spoken by the Lord to Moses in Numbers 27:17 to emphasize the need for new leadership after his death.

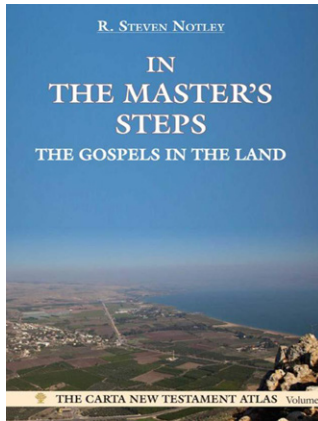
What we witness, then, with the topographical setting for the Feeding of the Multitudes in the Synoptic Gospels (Luke 9:10–17 *parr.*) is not unlike the Fourth Gospel’s fragmented description of Jesus’ return beyond the Jordan.

Then Jesus returned beyond the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days (i.e., Batanea/Bashan; John 1:28). Here he stayed and many people came to him. They said, “Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true.” And in that place many believed in Jesus.

(John 10:40–42)

FROM NAZARETH TO CANA AND CAPERNAUM

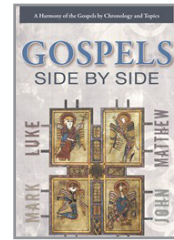




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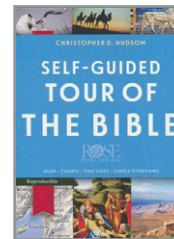
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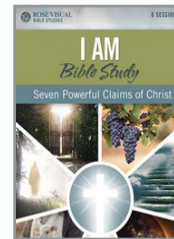
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