Luke’s Use of Story Advancement by Comparison (synkrisis) to Delineate and Develop the Respective Roles of Jesus and John the Baptist

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Abstract: Luke crafted his erudite Gospel with considerable deliberation and finesse. A pivotal character in his narrative is John the Baptist. By way of classical rhetorical method (synkrisis), Luke uses John’s story, especially the Infancy Narratives in comparison with those of Jesus, to advance and illustrate a new theology. He overlays these stories with extensive allusions to the prophetic call narratives of the Old Testament and presents the new theology as the fulfilment of God’s historical covenant with the Jewish people.

Key Words: Bible N.T. Luke; Jesus Christ; John the Baptist; synkrisis; comparison; rhetorical criticism; infancy narrative – Luke

At the beginning of his gospel Luke sets out clearly his intention to write an orderly, assured and accurate “narrative about the matters that have been brought to fulfilment among us” based on previous written accounts, consultation of eyewitnesses and judicious research (1:1-4). His quality of expression and construction and creative use of language and structure to produce this narrative reflect a classical education in philosophy and literature,¹ and a considerable familiarity with the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures.²

Luke’s concept of history³ is to a large extent rhetorical.⁴ The historical ‘synchronisms’ at the beginnings of Chapters 2 and 3 are important, but Luke is basically concerned with “the story of Jesus...as the decisive event not only in sacred history, but in the secular history of the world,”⁵ and arranges his material so as to bring out its meaning, rather than to assert a definite chronological order.⁶ His intention is to show that there is

⁴ “Rhetoricians were more concerned with plausibility than truth...”; Aune Luke-Acts and Ancient Historiography, 83.
⁶ As in his account of Jesus’ journey towards Jerusalem (9:51-18:14).
one salvation and the one saving God working throughout history; for Luke faith and history work together. Luke applies the rhetorical artifice of synkrisis (comparison) to both develop this theological premise and to demonstrate and delineate the respective roles that John the Baptist and Jesus have in this plan of salvation.

Underlying Luke’s methodology is the presentation of the new faith as if it were old and established, “as the divinely sanctioned outgrowth of Judaism.” This is clearly demonstrated as we proceed from Luke’s classical style preface into his nativity and infancy accounts in the first two Chapters, with their pronounced biblical flavour and continual reference back to great prophets of the past.

In the Infancy Narrative Luke presents Zechariah and Elizabeth as “the representatives of the best in the religion of Israel,” and their son, John the Baptist, as a contemporary prophet, the last and greatest of the old order, announcing the arrival of the predicted messiah, who will usher in the new order. Jesus is presented as the Lord, the Son of the Most High, the fulfilment of God’s Covenant as foretold and foreshadowed in the Old Testament, and now offered to all mankind regardless of background as the universal saviour. Herman Hendrickx indicates that this title can be understood within the context of the Old Testament, but that the title ‘son of God’ in 1:35 goes beyond this perspective, and that in eschatological terms Luke saw the conception of Jesus as a parousia in itself.

Both Matthew and Luke, unlike Mark, present nativity stories, albeit totally different types of stories with different points to make and different audiences to satisfy. Luke’s style is to advance story development by comparison, using doublets or parallels, and to integrate old style hymns or canticles into the narrative. In these and the infancy

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7 “Revelation occurs within history through divine acts that bring the plan of God to ultimate fulfilment. Biblical theologians have labelled this combination of faith and history as ‘salvation history.’” Aune, Luke-Acts and Ancient Historiography, 111.


9 David Balch echoes Joseph Fitzmyer’s suggestion that this section was probably added in the final editing of the gospel. See Balch, “The Genre of Luke-Acts,” 15 and see his note 67 for the Fitzmyer reference.


11 “Even from his mother’s womb he will be filled with the Holy Spirit” (1:15).

12 “…there was no Jewish expectation that the Messiah would be God’s Son in the sense of having been conceived without a male parent.” Hendrickx, The Infancy Narratives, 76.

13 Hendrickx, The Infancy Narratives, 76. In the Acts this theme is expanded to show this mission to the world. Luke postulates no explicit theology of atonement with respect to the cross although several models have been suggested from the time of Conzelmann to the present to account for his presentation of the death of Jesus. See detailed discussion of this in Greg Herrick, The Atonement in Lucan Theology in Recent Discussion at http://www.bibleo.org/docs/nt/books/luk/luketheo.htm

stories the significance of the event is acknowledged and reinforced by this process of parallels.\(^{16}\)

**Annunciation**

The stories commence with the prophesying of the births of John the Baptist (1:5-25) and Jesus (1:26-38). In the first case by an angel, to the priest Zechariah in the temple, announcing that his aged wife would bear a son, and in the second to Mary, a young woman in Galilee, announcing the extraordinary news that she, as a virgin,\(^{17}\) would conceive a child, who would be called ‘son of the Most High’ (1:32). Zechariah’s response to the questioning results in his losing the ability to speak, while Mary’s question, which is also the product of some doubt, is answered differently. Probably in the true Old Testament sense Zechariah was asking for a sign and got it by having his power of speech taken away. Similarly Mary asked for a sign and received it by being told of Elizabeth’s pregnancy.

These infancy narratives in Luke themselves parallel the prophetic call narratives of the Old Testament with Yahweh’s call and mission, followed by a question or objection by the person called, which is then overruled by a promise, and a sign is given by way of confirmation of that promise.\(^{18}\) If the stories are set out more fully, at least five common characteristics can be discerned.\(^{19}\)

Firstly a divine theophany, whereby “an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah” (1:11); and “the angel Gabriel was sent from God …to a virgin…Mary” (1:26-27).

Secondly a Prophetic commission in which Zechariah is told, "You will give him the name John…He will go before the Lord with the spirit and power of Elijah…in order to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (2:13, 17), and Mary, “You will give him the name Jesus…He will be great…He will be called son of the Most High…His kingdom will never end” (1:31, 32, 33).

Next there is an expression of Human reservation or denial of the call. Zechariah states that his wife is too old to bear a child (1:18). This echoes the concern of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18:9-15) and that of Manoan and his unnamed wife (Judg 13:2-23). Jeremiah questions whether he is not too young to be a prophet (Jer 1:6).\(^{20}\) Mary raises the question as to how she could have a child if she has not had intercourse (1:34). “Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (Isa 7:14).

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\(^{15}\) i.e. the Magnificat, Gloria, Benedictus and Nunc Dimittis. Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives*, 74; Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, 20.

\(^{16}\) Annunciation (1:5-25) and (1:26-38), Visitation (1:39-56), Birth (1:57-8) and (2:1-7, 2:8-20), Circumcision (1:59-64, 1:65-79) and (2:21), and Development (1:80) and (2:22-40, 2:50-52). Byrne sets this out diagrammatically in Byrne *The Hospitality of God*, 20.

\(^{17}\) Questions about Mary’s words in 1:34 and the apparent ambiguity of the text concerning the virginal conception, comparing and commenting on the views of Raymond Brown and Joseph Fitzmyer and subsequently Jane Schaberg are discussed in David T. Landry *Narrative Logic in the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38)* http://personal1.stthomas.edu/dilandry/mary.html

\(^{18}\) See Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives*.


\(^{20}\) See the wonderful call to Jeremiah “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you” (Jer 1:5).
Then there is the Divine reassurance. To Zechariah, “I am Gabriel. My place is in God’s presence. I have been sent to...announce this good news” (1:19). To Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...your child will be holy. He will be called son of God” (1:35). This verse has been described as “the culminating point of the announcement”. Herman Hendrickx draws parallels between it and Acts 1:8 and Romans 1:4, with their tripartite themes of the Spirit, the power and ‘divine filiation.’ Luke’s “originality consists in bringing together the three themes in a coherent Christological synthesis...and in tracing this synthesis to the origins of Jesus...”

Finally there is the Sign of the prophetic call. Mary was told that Elizabeth in her old age had conceived (1:36), whereas Zechariah was rendered unable to speak until John was named (1:20). In the Old Testament the sign is often connected with the mouth e.g. Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel. It has been suggested that the connotation of punishment for lack of faith was contrary to how Jews of the Old Testament would have seen the questioning.

From these we can also see the apocalyptic character of the announcements, whereby “a revelation is mediated by a celestial being to a human addressee to unveil a transcendent reality.” The actual stories themselves are firmly rooted in time and space, but the narrative extrapolates the angelic announcement as “the primordial revelation that the child about to be born is the fulfilment of the promises and the eschatological manifestation of God’s power.”

**Visitation**

There is then a conjunction of the stories and themes with Mary’s visit to Elizabeth. Brendan Byrne refers to this as ‘a favourite device’ of Luke, in bringing together people with individual religious experiences which they only partly understand, in order that they may completely understand. Luke has the momentous encounter of Jesus with John the Baptist, and the prophesying of Jesus' greatness by John leaping for gladness in Elizabeth's womb (1:40, 44). Elizabeth reacts to this event by then blessing Mary and saying: "You are blessed among women! And the fruit of your womb is blessed! How do I deserve to have the mother of my Lord visit me?" (1:42, 43), and Mary responds with her song to God (1:46-55) “the Mighty One has accomplished great things for me (1:49)...He has taken Israel his child by the hand...(1:54).” The Magnificat contains a series of Old Testament allusions, written in the form of a thanksgiving psalm, and relies particularly on Hannah’s song. “My heart exults in the Lord...I have swallowed up my enemies; I rejoice in my victory” (1 Sam 2:1-10). It has been described as “a literary mosaic of Old testament texts which should not as such be attributed to Mary, or Elizabeth” but regarded as a scene “edited and placed within its framework by Luke to convey certain theological ideas.”

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22 It may also “have been added to the original story on its translation from Hebrew into Greek.” See the discussion in Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives*, 68-69.
23 Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives*, 70.
24 Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, 24-5
26 Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives*, 80-81.
Birth

Luke parallels the births and infancy of John (1:57-80) and Jesus (2:1-52) which, although not as perfect a doublet as those in the annunciation stories, again illustrate by comparison the development of their respective roles. In respect to John’s birth, Luke says: “Elizabeth completed her pregnancy and gave birth to a son” (1:57). For Luke there appears no question of pre-existence or incarnation. For him the first phase of Christ’s existence and the development of God’s plan begin with the nativity. The birth of Jesus is surrounded by a complete scene and a full cast, and is strong on historical and Old Testament allusion. Luke has the angel announcing to the shepherds [to all the world?], “Today in the city of David a saviour was born for you. He is Lord Messiah” (2:11). To emphasise the importance of the occasion Luke then introduces a worthy triumphal scene with a ‘heavenly army’ singing God’s praises (2:13).

Circumcision

John’s circumcision and naming constitutes the central theme of his birth narrative. Zechariah echoes the previous announcement of the angel “[John] will go before the Lord with the spirit and power of Elijah...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (1:17) and prophesises, “… you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High. You will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (1:76). This echoes the imagery in the Book of Malachi. “I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me” (Mal 3:1). “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the day of the Lord comes, the great and terrible day” (Mal 3:23). Zechariah continues the Old Testament theme: “Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people” (1:68). This theme is subsequently revisited by Luke at the beginning of Jesus’ public life. “John answered all of them, ‘I am


30 Brown points to the symbolism of the announcement being made to shepherds in the city of David the shepherd and king. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 421. Also Luke traces Jesus’ Jewish genealogy through Joseph, who was ‘of the house of David’ (3:23-38), “and the Lord god will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (1:32-3) cf 2 Sam 7:9,12-16

31 “Sôtêr was a title in frequent use in the contemporary Greco-Roman world.” Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 204. In particular it was given to the Emperor Augustus to denote the relative peace during his reign. “Glory to God...and on earth peace...” (2:14). Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, 33

32 A title which at that time would have denoted “an expected anointed agent sent by God either in the Davidic, kingly or political, tradition for the restoration of Israel and the triumph of God’s power and dominion.” Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 198.

33 Brown suggests that this is a concept also found in roughly contemporaneous Jewish literature. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 426


35 See discussion in Joseph A. Fitzmyer *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, Anchor Bible, vol. 28, 2nd ed. (Garden City: Doubleday 1986), 213-214; Hendrickx, *The Infancy Narratives*, 67 where he discusses the possibility that since John the Baptist is discussed in Luke as the forerunner of God and not of the Messiah that this narrative may have come from John’s disciples “who did not intend to stress the inferiority of the prophet with regard to Jesus the Messiah.” (page 67).
baptizing you with water. But the one stronger than me is coming. I am not fit to loose the straps of his sandals. He himself will baptize you with a Holy Spirit and with fire” (3.16). Jesus says specifically of John that, “He is the one of whom it is written, ‘Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of me. He will prepare my way before me’” (7.27).

At Jesus' circumcision and naming, Luke emphasises that he was called Jesus, “the name given by the angel before he was conceived,” (2:21) but treats the episode as a very short interlude between birth and purification.

The two scenes of Jesus in the temple have no parallel in John's story, but emphasise Jesus' importance in the salvation process and the portended direction of this process. The purification is set in the temple in Jerusalem. The physical presence of 'temple' is important in Luke. The gospel begins (1:8) and ends (24:53) there, While there Luke presents us with two elderly 'model faithful Israelites. One of them, Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and announces that his "eyes had seen the salvation...prepared for all the peoples: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and a glory for your people Israel." (2:30-2); the other, the prophetess, Anna "kept speaking about him to all those awaiting a liberation for Jerusalem" (2:38).

**Childhood**

Luke then says, Jesus returned to Nazareth and "was full of wisdom, and god's favour was upon him" (2:40). Luke revisits Jesus some twelve years later on a visit with his parents to Jerusalem for Passover (2:41-42). Luke refers to his theological discussions with the teachers in the temple "both listening... and questioning" (2.46) and the onlookers' amazement at his understandings and responses (2:46-47). When asked why he was there, he replies, "Did you not know I must involve myself in my father's affairs?" Luke then comments ‘They did not grasp what was said to them' (2:49-50). Mark Coleridge suggests that here, for the first time, Luke has Jesus himself move to centre stage. By his revelation he is clearly announcing that he is the Son of God and Luke has set the scene for his reappearance and role in his future public life. Luke then states that Jesus went back to Nazareth with his parents "and made progress in wisdom and stature" (2:41-52).

Of John, Luke says that he "grew and became strong in spirit... [and] stayed in desert places until the time of his manifestation to Israel" (1:80).

**Baptism**

The baptism of Jesus is described in all the synoptics, but different approaches are taken by Luke (3:19-22) to Matthew (3:13-17) and Mark (1:9-11) on the actual Baptism. There is an underlying problem and possible misunderstanding as to whether Jesus by being baptised by John recognises subservience to John in some way and also whether it implies

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36 “Yeshua”: was the fifth most common Jewish name. Apparently 4 out of the 28 Jewish High Priests in Jesus’ time were called Yeshua. Also Joseph was the second most common male name and Mary the most common name amongst women. See Jonathan Went, Jesus the Jew (1996), 4 [http://www.leaderu.com/theology/jesusjew.html](http://www.leaderu.com/theology/jesusjew.html)


that Jesus had sin, which required repentance. In respect to the first matter, Matthew has John saying: "I ought to be baptized by thee" (3:14). Whereas Luke neatly sidesteps the problem by removing John from the scene and having him imprisoned before Jesus is baptised. “As a result, the reader does not see Jesus acted on by John, but John in prison and Jesus baptized amid a crowd of people.”41 In relation to the second, Josephus, who gives considerable space and a very sympathetic commentary,42 has John saying that baptism was good, not so much to free one from certain sins as to purify the body,43 the soul being already cleansed from its defilements by justice.44 [In Luke], John's approach is, “Produce...deeds appropriate to conversion” (3:8), and then accept “the baptism for conversion” (3:3). Those who wanted baptism without having been spiritually cleansed he called “Offspring of vipers” (3:7). The immersion follows on from the repentance that has led to a remission of sins.45 Thus baptism without prior righteousness was both useless and ineffective. In Jesus' case his righteousness was attested to both by the presence of the Spirit in the form of a dove and approbation by way of voice from heaven (3:22), and indeed it could be argued that Luke's downplaying of the actual physical aspect of the baptism puts greater emphasis on the real importance of the occasion in Jesus' anointment with the spirit and God's identification of him as “beloved son”.

**Life Style**

Luke draws a further parallel to contrast the life styles of Jesus and John and uses it to illustrate the hypocrisy of certain Pharisees and lawyers. He makes special mention of John’s desert habitat (3:2), his clothes (7:25), and the contrast in the attitude of John and Jesus and the approach of their disciples to Jewish fasting laws, and prayer. His critics said, “Why are you eating and drinking with tax-agents and sinners?” (5:30) “John’s disciples fast frequently and pray. So do the disciples of the Pharisees. But yours are eating and drinking”(5:33). Jesus' responds pointing to their two-facedness, “John the Baptist has come neither eating bread nor drinking wine” and you criticise him by saying, “He has a demon!” On the other hand “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking”, and you criticise him by saying, ‘Look a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-agents and sinners!” (7:33-

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42 Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.3 (Jesus) and18.5.2 (John the Baptist).
43 See Isaiah 1:16, “Wash yourselves clean! Put away you misdeeds...cease doing evil...make justice your aim.”
44 Josephus would not seem to be at odds with Luke on the symbolic nature of the baptism. See Flavius Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2. There were many groups who practiced baptising around the time of Jesus. We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls, that the Qumran community used ritual washing as an act of purification, to keep themselves pure before God. Baptismal or washing rituals were also part of Judaism but did not have the kind of eschatological or prophetic orientation associated with John the Baptist. For John it was a way of expressing repentance in the face of imminent judgment. See Harold W. Attridge, *Historical Problems with John the Baptist, A Portrait of Jesus’ World* http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/john.html
45 The process is:
1. Repent and practice righteousness;
2. One’s sins are then remitted (i.e. one is cleansed inwardly);
3. One immerses;
4. God considers one's immersion acceptable and one becomes outwardly clean.
34). On another occasion he replies, "Can you force the members of a wedding party to fast while the bridegroom is with them?" (5:34).

Recapitulation

It is clear that Luke crafted his narrative with considerable finesse overlaying it with extensive allusions to Old Testament traditions. Thus this binary approach serves both to reinforce these old traditions and to introduce Jesus and John as the fulfilment of these traditions. Luke’s narrative bears strong similarity to the prophetic call narratives of the Old Testament.

John the Baptist is certainly a pivotal character in Luke. Gnuse states that many commentators assume that the theophany relating to Zechariah came from John the Baptist sources and that Luke used it to fashion the theophany of Mary. He draws parallels between it and various themes in the Old Testament such as the barrenness of the aged or aging wife, Elizabeth vis a vis Sarah, Hannah, and Manoah’s wife, and between the shared Nazirite background of John the Baptist (“he will never drink wine or strong drink” 1:15) and Samuel (“Neither wine nor liquor shall he drink, and no razor shall ever touch his head”; 1 Sam 1:11) and Samson (“take no wine or strong drink...no razor shall touch his head”; Judg 13:4-5), all of whom were born to previously barren parents. He alludes to the similarity between the introduction to the birth narratives of Samuel (1 Sam 1) and John (1:5), and between the announcements of the conception of both to [one of] their parents by revelation in the temple. Luke lends further dramatic impact by the powerful allusion in the appearance of the angel Gabriel in both nativity accounts, which then links them to the appearance of Gabriel and the apocalyptic revelations in the book of Daniel (9:21-27).

Conclusion

Luke returns to John (in prison) where he has been told of the wonders Jesus is working in Judea (7:18-19). Luke then has John sending two of his disciples to Jesus asking if

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46 This theme is taken up by the writer of the fourth gospel where John the Baptist says: “...I said, I am not the Messiah: I am sent before him. It is the bridegroom who has the bride. The groom’s best man waits there listening for him and is overjoyed to hear his voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase, while I must decrease” (Jn 3:28-29).

47 Hendrickx suggests that this ‘parallelism’ may not be as perfect as often thought, because although the formulations are similar, the meaning is somewhat different. He contrasts the ‘horizontal hagiographic code’ for John (1:5-25), who “will be great before the Lord”, and a ‘vertical code of revelation’ for Jesus (1:26-38), who “will be called the Son of the Most High.” Thus “the two annunciations are seen to reveal different orientations.” Hendrickx, The Infancy Narratives, 70.


49 Especially in so far as the numbers can be interpreted both in relation to the history of the Jews prior to the destruction of Jerusalem (490 years), e.g., seventy weeks of years (Dan 9:24), seven weeks to restore and build (Dan 9:25), sixty-two weeks in a troubled time (9:25), and ‘after sixty-two weeks an anointed one shall be cut down’ (Dan 9:26), and Luke’s possible application to the nativity stories, (6 months + 9 Months +40 days = 490 days). Certainly there is an apocalyptic flavour in Luke’s description.

50 Luke’s handling of John’s imprisonment by Herod Antipas is brief, mentioning particularly only John’s condemnation of his relationship with Heriodias. (3:19-20) Josephus indicates that there were major political reasons for John’s incarceration as great crowds clustered around John and “as they would do anything at his bidding”, Herod was afraid he might incite them to rebellion. [Flavius Josephus Antiquities of the Jews 18.5.2] Subsequent to John’s murder by Herod, many Jews believed that his crushing defeat by the army of Aretas was divine vengeance for John’s death. Luke here might be down-playing John’s political importance although he also tones down Mark’s report (14:62) and neatly sidesteps the political overtones associated with Pilate’s questioning of Jesus during his trial. (23:1-3)
indeed he is the Messiah. Given John’s previous wholehearted endorsement of Jesus, this appears to be another neat little set piece on Luke’s part. It both establishes “a solemn atmosphere for a proclamation” and enables a final development of Luke’s view of the respective roles and importance of Jesus and John. “Go tell John what you have seen and heard…” Blind people see, lame people walk, lepers are cleansed, deaf people hear, the dead are raised, and poor people are being told good news (7.22). After they have departed Jesus then launches into his paean concerning John. Three times he asks the crowd, “Why did you go out (into the desert)?” (7:24, 25, 26). Two answers are implied in the negative and then he asks, “To see a prophet?” and adds, “Yes, I tell you, and something more than a prophet. He is the one of whom it is written, ‘Look I am sending my messenger ahead of me. He will prepare my way before me.’ I tell you no one ever born of woman is greater than John”51 (7:26-28).

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51 “But the least person in the kingdom of God is greater than him” (7:28). John Dominic Crossan, Jesus and John the Baptist, A Portrait of Jesus’ World http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/john.html suggests that the difference between Jesus and John was that John the Baptist is an apocalyptic eschatologist, that is one who believes that God is going to descend in some sort of catastrophic event to solve the world, while Jesus preached an ethical eschatology, that required people themselves to do something about evil in the world in conjunction with God.