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Ho baptízōn and Mark i.4

In printed editions of the Greek New Testament[1] John the Baptist is named in two different ways in Mark's gospel. At Mark vi. 25 and viii. 28 he is ho baptistḗs, whereas at vi. 14.24 the form ho baptízōn is found. In the rest of the New Testament only baptistḗs is used.

Mark as a writer is normally insensitive to repetition and it is unlikely he varied his vocabulary for stylistic effect. Thus it is strange to find two titles for John in this gospel. It would be difficult – especially in view of the printed text of vi. 24 and 25 – to argue that the change in vocabulary is due to Mark's adoption of two different sources, the first of which referred to John by one title, the second by the other. The explanation for the alternatives in the printed text lies elsewhere.

There are textual variants at each point in the text where the name "Baptist" occurs in Mark:

vi. 4:	baptízōn	Sin ABC fam[1] and most minuscules
	baptistḗs	DSW Theta fam[13] (except 124) and a few other minuscules
vi. 24:	baptízontos	Sin BL Delta Theta 565 1596
	baptistoû	ceteri
vi. 25:	baptízontos	L 700 892
	baptistoû	ceteri
viii. 28:	baptízonta	28 565
	baptistḗn	ceteri

In view of the prevailing tendency to call John baptistḗs in Matthew, Luke and later Christian writings[2], it is likely that the direction of change in the text of Mark is away from an original baptízōn. Baptistḗs was introduced into the text by later scribes possibly because of assimilation to parallels at Matth. xiv. 2,8, xvi. 14 and at Luke ix. 19. Mark used baptízōn throughout as the designation for John. This represents the form of John's name before Christian tradition coined the noun baptistḗs to describe him[3].

Mark's constancy in this regard may help us solve the textual problem at i. 4. There are four main variants in this verse:

a) baptízōn en tê erḗmō kaí	AKPW Pi and the bulk of the minuscules
b) ho baptízōn en tê erḗmō kaí	Sin L Delta
c) ho baptízōn en tê erḗmō	B 33 892 and some Coptic mss.
d) en tê erḗmō baptízōn kaí	D Theta 28 and the bulk of Latin mss.

Variant a) is the reading followed by UBS[1], von Soden, Nestle[17], Merk[7] and the AV; b) is followed by Tischendorf[8], Souter, Tregelles (kaí bracketed), the RV and RSV; and c) by WH, most editions of Nestle and the NEB.

[1] Such as Souter, BFBS, Merk, Nestle, UBS, von Soden, Tischendorf, NEB Greek New Testament and Westcott and Hort.

[2] Ho baptistḗs is used only by Christian writers, with the exception of Josephus Ant. XVIII. 116 where he is referring to John.

[3] The use of the participle as a substantive is common in the New Testament; e.g. at Luke iii. 14 strateuómenoi = stratiōtai. Cf. also Matth. ii. 6, xxvi. 46, Mark v. 15f., John vi. 63, viii. 18,50, Acts xvii. 17, Rom. ii. 1, viii. 34, Eph. vi. 28, Phil.iii. 6, 1. Thess. i. 10, ii. 12, iv. 8, Hebr. vii. 9.

Reading c) is the one which explains the origin of the other variants. This reading also conforms to Markan usage. John is here described as ho baptízōn. Once ho baptistḗs became the normal title for John, the participle would be interpreted as a true verbal form. Thus in readings a) and b) kaí has been added to make both baptízōn and kērýssōn dependent on egéneto. In a) the definite article before baptízōn has been removed, thus preventing the participle being read as a substantive. This process is developed still further in d) where the two linked participles stand closer. Reading b) represents a half-way stage between a) and c) in which ho governs both baptízōn and kērýssōn, but this does not conform to Markan usage, where kaí would be possible only if ho were absent.

This variant at Mark i.4 is one of the few listed in the very select critical apparatus in the UBS Greek New Testament[4]. The explanatory note on this variant found in B. M. Metzger's companion volume to the third edition of this text[5] is instructive in showing us the methods used in establishing this text. According to Metzger the text of the forthcoming third edition of UBS is to read (ho) baptízōn en tê erḗmō kaí, that is a combination of variants a) and b). UBS$^{1-2}$ follow variant a) only. Ho, albeit bracketed, seems to have been added in order to reflect the reading of Cod. Sin. – a manuscript which has greatly influenced the editors of the UBS text.

Metzger's note claims that the original kaí was omitted by some scribes because ho baptízōn was taken as a title, but as we have seen, this is precisely what it was for Mark. Metzger has failed to recognize Markan practice. His note therefore should be seen as a caution against relying on the readings of the so-called "best" mss., or on the weight of ms. support, rather than on the style and usage of the New Testament author himself.

In accepting reading c) as original, egéneto can be taken as a verb with a force of its own ("John the Baptist appeared in the desert preaching . . .") which conforms to Markan usage elsewhere, e.g. ix. 7 (cf. v.l. at Mark i. 39 êlthe kērýssōn) and to New Testament practice, e.g. John i. 6, 1 John ii. 18 (cf. Rev. iii. 2 "become watchful", not "be watchful"), although egéneto kērýssōn could be seen as periphrastic ("John the Baptist was preaching in the desert . . ."). This use is also parallelled elsewhere in Mark (e.g. at ix. 3). Probably the former translation should be accepted here, as there is some significance in the context in John's appearance in the desert as the fulfilment of the prophecy in the preceding verses.

A subsidiary argument in favour of our taking reading c) as original may be found in C. H. Turner's comment that baptizing was not done en tê erḗmō but en tô Iordánē (Mark i. 5, cf. Matth. iii. 1.6, Luke iii. 3) and that therefore ho bapitízōn in i. 4 has to be a title[6].

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4 First edition (1966), second edition (1968) edited by Kurt Aland and others.
5 B. M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (1971), p. 73.
6 C. H. Turner, The Text of Mark I: Journ. Theol. Stud. 28 (1927), p. 150.