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Ho baptízōn and Mark i.4

In printed editions of the Greek New Testament¹ John the Baptist is named in two different ways in Mark's gospel. At Mark vi. 25 and viii. 28 he is *ho baptistēs*, whereas at vi. 14.24 the form *ho baptízōn* is found. In the rest of the New Testament only *baptistēs* 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:	<i>baptízōn</i>	Sin ABC fam ¹ and most minuscules
	<i>baptistēs</i>	DSW Theta fam ¹³ (except 124) and a few other minuscules
vi. 24:	<i>baptízontos</i>	Sin BL Delta Theta 565 1596
	<i>baptistoû</i>	<i>ceteri</i>
vi. 25:	<i>baptízontos</i>	L 700 892
	<i>baptistoû</i>	<i>ceteri</i>
viii. 28:	<i>baptízonta</i>	28 565
	<i>baptistén</i>	<i>ceteri</i>

In view of the prevailing tendency to call John *baptistēs* in Matthew, Luke and later Christian writings², it is likely that the direction of change in the text of Mark is away from an original *baptízōn*. *Baptistēs* 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 *baptistēs* to describe him³.

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) <i>baptízōn en tê erēmō kaí</i> | AKPW Pi and the bulk of the minuscules |
| b) <i>ho baptízōn en tê erēmō kaí</i> | Sin L Delta |
| c) <i>ho baptízōn en tê erēmō</i> | B 33 892 and some Coptic mss. |
| d) <i>en tê erēmō baptízōn kaí</i> | D Theta 28 and the bulk of Latin mss. |

Variant a) is the reading followed by UBS¹, von Soden, Nestle¹⁷, Merk⁷ and the AV; b) is followed by Tischendorf⁸, 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 baptistēs* 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 baptistēs* 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 Testament⁴. The explanatory note on this variant found in B. M. Metzger's companion volume to the third edition of this text⁵ 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 erēmō kaí*, that is a combination of variants a) and b). UBS¹⁻² 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 paralleled 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 erēmō* but *en tô Iordánē* (Mark i. 5, cf. Matth. iii. 1.6, Luke iii. 3) and that therefore *ho baptízōn* in i. 4 has to be a title⁶.

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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.