

John the Baptist, Wilderness Prophet

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Photo date and location unknown

One of the few Biblical figures attested in secular history was John the Baptist, a fiery, colorful enigmatic prophet. Of him and his times the Jewish historian Josephus wrote: "... but some of the Jews believed that Herod's army was destroyed by God, God punishing him very justly for John called the Baptist, whom Herod had put to death. For John was a pious man, and he was bidding the Jews who practice virtue and exercised righteousness toward each other and piety toward God, to come together for baptism. For thus, it seemed to him, would baptismal ablution be acceptable, if it were used not to beg off from sins committed, but for the purification of the body when the soul had previously been cleansed by righteous conduct.

And when everybody turned to John -- for they were profoundly stirred by what he said -- Herod feared that John's so extensive influence over the people might lead to an uprising (for the people seemed likely to do everything he might counsel). He thought it much better, under the circumstances, to get John out of the way in advance, before any insurrection might develop, than for himself to get into trouble and be sorry not to have acted, once an insurrection had begun. Because of Herod's suspicion, John was sent as a prisoner to Machaerus, the fortress already mentioned, and there put to death. But the Jews believed that the destruction which overtook the army came as a punishment for Herod, God wishing to do him harm." (Antiquities XVIII, 5, 2, translation of H. St. John Thackeray) John, commonly known as the Baptist, has been little studied in American scholarship; most studies of John were written in Germany.

He baptized, lived in the wilderness, called men to repentance, testified once to Jesus and died an ignominious death. And little more thought is given to him, aside from the few Eastern churches who celebrate feast days for John the Baptist. Some people speculate that John was a Nazarite or a member of the Essene community associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls. But no convincing case has yet been made for either.

Yet John's appearance must have been electrifying to the Jewish people. For 400 years God had not sent them a prophet. For 400 years they had endured domination and subjugation by five foreign powers, desecration of their temple, and threats of undermining their Jewish heritage by the all-pervading Hellenistic culture.

John and Elijah

The very last word they had heard from God was a promise to send Elijah, before the "day of the Lord." This prophecy was given by Malachi: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse." (4:5-6)

After the time of Malachi, the Jews believed that since the death of Malachi the voice of prophecy had been divinely stilled and the gift withdrawn. During the Maccabean revolt, when the rebels lacked a prophet to tell them what to do with the stones defiled by unclean sacrifices, they merely rolled them aside to wait for the rebirth of prophecy when Elijah returned. For Jesus to affirm that in John prophecy had been reborn meant more than that another name was added to the list of the all-time greats. It meant that the last days were at hand (I Maccabees 4:44-46).

John the Baptist is often described in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. His father Zechariah, a temple priest, received a vision while serving in the temple that his aged wife would bear a son. This son should be consecrated to the Lord. "And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Luke 1:17) Elijah was considered the greatest Old Testament prophet, and it was his return that Malachi prophesied. It is significant that the angel told Zechariah that his son would go before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elijah." The descriptions of Zechariah's son John follow the typical pattern of the Old Testament prophet. He was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey, according to Mark 1:6. In Zechariah 13:4 it is predicted that in the last days prophets would be ashamed of their visions and refuse to put on their hairy mantle. In other words, a hair garment was an indication of a prophet. Also II Kings 1:8 describes Elijah as Mark 1:6 does: "He wore a garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite."

There are additional parallels between John and Elijah. Both preached God's imminent judgment on the wickedness of men and the need for repentance. Both were intensely devoted to the welfare of their nation. Elijah denounced the wicked King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, while John denounced King Herod's relationship with his brother's wife. Both lived in the wilderness and practiced austerity of life, conduct, and dress. In fact, John's activity in the wilderness was in the very area from which Elijah had, according to the Old Testament, been taken up into heaven.

This latter fact is especially interesting in light of Malachi's prophecy of the coming of Elijah before the "great and terrible day of the Lord," the angel's prophecy that John would go before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elijah," and Jesus' statement that "if you will receive it he is Elijah who is to come." (Matt. 11:14) For the Jewish people, the Messiah could not come before Elijah's return. Justin Martyr speaks of a Jewish belief that Elijah would announce the Messiah in his Dialog with Trypho (8:4). Trypho, a Jew, told him, "Messiah, even supposing he has been born and exists anywhere, is unknown. He does not even recognize his own identity and he has no power at all until Elijah comes to anoint him and make him manifest to all." Therefore Jesus as the Messiah needed John the Baptist to testify to him in the position of Elijah.

Preparation for his mission

Carl H. Kraeling of Yale Divinity School and the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute says in his book John the Baptist, "Yet no aspect of the life and work of John is more difficult to describe and interpret correctly than that of his relationship to Jesus."

John was likely the son of a rural priest, who went to Jerusalem to fulfill his annual duties in the temple. It was during this time that he had the vision of the angel. The priests of Jerusalem were often accused of corruption, so the rural priests would be more likely to carry on the purer tradition of the law.

It would have been expected that John should follow his father's profession and become a priest. Perhaps he went to Jerusalem to study for the priesthood, but became so revulsed by the corruption there that he turned back and went into the wilderness. The wilderness, in Biblical symbology, is associated with clarification of insight, understanding, and the presence of God.

At the time of the Maccabean uprising and Jewish monarchy, it was the priestly family of Levi that was to prepare the way for, or produce the nation's deliverer. So John, who was from the tribe of Levi, was a logical person to fulfill this mission.

Also, Mary, Jesus' mother, was related to Elizabeth. This means that Jesus was a descendant of both David (the lineage of the Messiah) and Aaron (the national deliverer). Therefore, Jesus was the inevitable choice for the Messiah.

Biblical scholars ponder the significance of the baptism of John, the reasons why John and Jesus parted ways, and the fate of John. However, I have found hardly anyone who has noted the great importance of an Elijah figure to prepare the people to accept the Messiah.

John was the figure, according to the testimony of the angel and Jesus, but he categorically denied it: "And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him,

'Who are you?' He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.'" (John 1:19-21)

John's relationship to Jesus

John had heard the voice from heaven and saw the dove when he baptized Jesus (John 1:32-34); this should have convinced him that Jesus was the Messiah, and therefore him was Elijah, the promised forerunner." But he denied it.

Later, John was imprisoned and sent two disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3) Evidently, John had difficulty recognizing Jesus as truly the Messiah. Perhaps he expected him to come on the clouds, as prophesied in Dan. 7: 13. Mr. Kraeling speculates on the reason for John's doubts: "There is for John no possible meeting-ground between the wonder-working preacher of the Kingdom and the transcendent 'man-like one' who destroys the wicked in unquenchable fire, save on the assumption of a break with his fundamental convictions, for which there is no adequate justification." (p. 129)

He further notes seven significant differences between John and Jesus. Jesus was an itinerant preacher, traveling from hamlet to hamlet, while John stayed in the wilderness, forcing people to come to him. Jesus was considered a "glutton and drunkard" (Luke 7:34), while John was noted for fasting.

Jesus did not baptize, while John did. Jesus taught of the Last Days as a time of joy, while John instilled terror into people. Jesus waived the letter of the Law, while John demanded exemplary conduct of righteous people and the fulfillment of the Law's demands. Jesus taught of God's desire to seek the lost and His mercy to the sinner, while John taught of a righteous God who will soon institute judgment. According to Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven was in a sense already present, while according to John, the day of reckoning was yet to come.

Why did John and Jesus part ways?

Christian writers may easily note the differences between John and Jesus, but are puzzled why. How and when did they break? M. Goguel, in Jean Batiste, suggests a hypothesis. Originally, he thinks, Jesus proclaimed John's message of doom and repentance, baptizing men, demanding the observance of the law. He finds traces of this line of teaching in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. However, he had a divine revelation which made him conscious of a messianic mission. From this time forth he preached a new doctrine, the Gospel. Goguel times this break with Jesus' coming into Galilee after the temptations in the wilderness (Mark 1:14).

Mr. Kraeling disagrees with Goguel's theory that Jesus' conception of the absolute transcendence of God and the uselessness of all human effort, even repentance, caused his break with John. Dr. Kraeling believes there is still no adequate solution to this question.

Another problem without solution by Christian writers is the interpretation of the following passage: "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John...." (Matt. 11:11-13)

Mr. Kraeling interprets the first part to mean that John was the greatest among his kind (the prophets), but he cannot explain why John should be least in the kingdom of heaven. He cannot figure out why Jesus could think so highly of John and yet differ so radically from him. Verses 12 and 13 are "one of the most difficult sayings in the Gospel." Of it Kraeling makes three statements: (1) history moves to a divine purpose; (2) there are three periods of God's work: anticipation (Law and the prophets), violence (beginning with John and not yet at an end), and peace and fulfillment (in the future, implied); (3) the Kingdom of Heaven is regarded as present, but not an utopia; rather it is the Divine Power revealed.

Later history of the Baptist Movement

Puzzled over the relationship between John and Jesus while both were living on earth, scholars have tried to sort out from fragmentary evidence the later history of John's followers. In Acts 19, Paul met in Ephesus some people who had received the baptism of John, so it is apparent that his teaching spread beyond the boundaries of Palestine.

John the Baptist's followers accepted his prophecy and baptism; they made a conscious effort to live as a prepared people; they fasted and used set prayers. Some scholars believe that there was a close fraternization between Jesus' disciples and John's after Jesus' ascension. They cite as evidence the Christian practice of fasting and baptism, which Jesus had not directly taught.

Some assume that the infancy narratives of John the Baptist in Luke 1 are from an oral tradition of John's followers, not from the Christian tradition. Later a controversy probably arose over who took precedence, Jesus or John. To solve this the gospel writers mentioned the infant John leaping in Elizabeth's womb when Mary visited them. Also, in the fourth gospel, the references to the pre-existence of the Word may have been intended to stress Jesus' position as higher than John's.

Legends arose about John, similar to apocryphal stories about Jesus. These legends described a virtuous life in the desert ever since John's infancy, his adult life as the ideal prototype of a Christian hermit and ascetic, and a miraculous discovery of John's body and head.

As the centuries passed, John became a very important person in the Eastern church. Festival days were celebrated for him. Churches and martyria were built to him in Samaria, Alexandria, Constantinople, and some other parts of the Byzantine Orient. But the true significance of his life and mission remain undiscovered until the 20th century.