

Section 106

Jesus' Early Life

John The Baptist

Introduction

It is convenient to group all the material about John the Baptist together in one section. This will entail some of the material being repeated in other sections as we tell the story of Jesus.

We begin from the premiss that both John and Jesus were associate members of the Essene community at Qumran. (see section 105) First John and then Jesus left the community to preach and teach.

John Begins his Ministry

Mark starts his story with John the Baptist:

MARK 1.2 to 1.8 [Q102-01]

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Matthew picks up the story and elaborates

MATTHEW 3.1 to 3.12 [Q102-02]

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptising, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Luke's version is almost identical but a little fuller.

LUKE 3.1 to 3.20

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysani-as tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Ca'iaphas, the

word of God came to John the son of Zechari'ah in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

He said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."

Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than is appointed you."

Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, John answered them all, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he shut up John in prison.

Now we can turn to John's gospel and see a very different style. John is not concerned with how things happened, he is trying to draw out the good news. His version is much more dramatic and memorable. His facts are much more believable and he does not bother to embellish them with background.

He starts by identifying John the Baptist and making clear that he was not the Messiah foretold in the scriptures:

John 1.6 to 1.9

There appeared a man named John, sent from God; he came as a witness to testify to the light, that all might become believers through him. He was not himself the light; he came to bear witness to the light. The real light which enlightens every man was even then coming into the world.

He quotes John's own words to confirm this:

John 1.15

Here is John's testimony to him: he cried aloud, 'This is the man I meant when I said, "He comes after me, but takes rank before me"; for before I was born, he already was.'

Looking for the Messiah

John had been preaching and baptising for some time, continually on the look out for the person who would be recognised as the Messiah. Eventually Jesus comes to him to be baptised. Luke tells the story:-

Luke 3-21 to 3-22

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was

praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

John recalls later what happened

John 1.32 to 1.34

John testified further: 'I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove and resting upon him. I did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize in water had told me, "When you see the Spirit coming down upon someone and resting upon him you will know that this is he who is to baptize in Holy Spirit." I saw it myself, and I have borne witness. This is God's Chosen One.'

A deputation of the Jewish Clergy came down to Bethany to see what what John was up to:

John 1.19 to 1.28

This is the testimony which John gave when the Jews of Jerusalem sent a deputation of priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He confessed without reserve and avowed, 'I am not the Messiah.' 'What then? Are you Elijah?' 'No', he replied. 'Are you the prophet we await?' He answered 'No.' 'Then who are you?' they asked. 'We must give an answer to those who sent us. What account do you give of yourself?' He answered in the words of the prophet Isaiah: 'I am a voice crying aloud in the wilderness, "Make the Lord's highway straight."' "

Some Pharisees who were in the deputation asked him, 'If you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet, why then are you baptizing?' 'I baptize in water,' John replied, 'but among you, though you do not know him, stands the one who is to come after me. I am not good enough to unfasten his shoes.' This took place at Bethany beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Next day he spotted Jesus coming towards him and pointed him out:

John 1.29 to 1.31

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him. 'Look,' he said, 'there is the Lamb of God; it is he who takes away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I spoke when I said, "After me a man is coming who takes rank before me"; for before I was born, he already was. I myself did not know who he was; but the very reason why I came, baptizing in water, was that he might be revealed to Israel'

On the following day when John was standing with two of his disciples, Jesus passed again. This time John sent the two after him:

John 1.35 to 1.39 [Q102-09]

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples when Jesus passed by. John looked towards him and said, 'There is the Lamb of God.' The two disciples heard him say this, and followed Jesus. When he turned and saw them following him, he asked, 'What are you looking for?' They said, 'Rabbi' (which means a teacher), 'where are you staying?' 'Come and see', he replied. So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent the rest of the day with him. It was then about four in the after noon.

As will be seen the outcome was not as John had anticipated. Instead of Jesus joining his movement Andrew joins Jesus.

Competition with Jesus

For a short while both Jesus and John the Baptist were preaching and baptising people in Judea.

JOHN 3.22 to 3.24

AFTER THIS, Jesus went Into Judaea with his disciples, stayed there with them, and baptized. John too was baptizing at Aenon, near to Salim, because water was plentiful in that region; and people were constantly coming for baptism. This was before John's imprisonment.

This was obviously causing some confusion

JOHN 3.25 to 3.36

Some of John's disciples had fallen into a dispute with Jews about purification; so they came to

him and said, 'Rabbi, there was a man with you on the other side of the Jordan, to whom you bore your witness. Here he is, baptizing, and crowds are flocking to him.' John's answer was: 'A man can have only what God gives him. You yourselves can testify that I said, "I am not the Messiah; I have been sent as his forerunner," It is the bridegroom to whom the bride belongs. The bridegroom's friend, who stands by and listens to him, is overjoyed at hearing the bridegroom's voice. This joy, this perfect joy, is now mine. As he grows greater, I must grow less.'

He who comes from above is above all others; he who is from the earth belongs to the earth and uses earthly speech. He who comes from heaven bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his witness. To accept his witness is to attest that God speaks true; for he whom God sent utters the words of God, so measureless is God's gift of the Spirit. The Father loves the Son and has entrusted him with all authority. He who puts his faith in the Son has hold of eternal life, but he who disobeys the Son shall not see that life; God's wrath rests upon him.

The dispute reached the ears of the Pharisees and when Jesus heard of their interest he set off back north to Galilee.

2.5 JOHN 4.1 to 4.4

A report now reached the Pharisees: 'Jesus is winning and baptizing more disciples than John'; although, in fact, it was only the disciples who were baptizing and not Jesus himself. When Jesus learned this, he left Judaea and set out once more for Galilee.

John's Arrest and Execution

John's preaching was stirring up the Jewish religious elements and he was perceived to be a considerable threat to Herod. As a result Herod placed him under arrest.

Matthew gives Jesus' reaction to the news

Matthew 4-12 to 4-17

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali-- to fulfil what was said through the prophet Isaiah: "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

While under arrest John enquires after Jesus.

Matthew 11:2 to 11:6

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

Then he praises John and his work

Matthew 11:7 to 11:19 [Q102-11]

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone 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 been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear. To what can I compare this generation?

They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

We hear nothing more of John until much later when his death is recalled. John had been kept in prison to keep the peace and Herod had been quite impressed by what he had to say. However his wife, who had previously been married to his brother Phillip had a grudge against him. John had been preaching that to take a brother's widow was immoral, although it had been the traditional practice of the Jews for centuries.

Mark 6:17 to 6:29

For Herod had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because he had married her. For John said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe.

When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will grant it."

And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." And she went out, and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist."

And she came in immediately with haste to the king, and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And the king was exceedingly sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard and gave orders to bring his head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother.

When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Matthew tells essentially the same story and gives Jesus' reaction to the news of John's death.

Matthew 14:3 to 14:13

Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her."

Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet. On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked.

Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother.

John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.

This raises all sorts of interesting questions. A monarch such as Herod seems most unlikely to have allowed the whims of a dancing girl to have influenced him in the life or death decisions of John. Thus one can only draw the conclusion that Herod saw the death of John as a means of getting rid of a trouble maker - or was he got at? In either event the story of Salome can be nothing more than a very lame excuse.