SAINT JOHN *the* BAPTIST

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Priest, Prophet, and Martyr

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TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

Cover design by Jordan Avery
Cover image: *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness* by Philippe de Champaigne (1602–1674). Oil on canvas (c. 17th century). Photo © Lylho / Bridgeman Images.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024946204

ISBN: 978-1-5051-3141-3
Kindle ISBN: 978-1-5051-3142-0
ePUB ISBN: 978-1-5051-3143-7

Published in the United States by
TAN Books
PO Box 269
Gastonia, NC 28053
www.TANBooks.com
Printed in the United States of America

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Preface

The first church in the history of the Order of Praemontre, the order to which I belong, was dedicated to St. John the Baptist. This was not by accident. The chapel was the hub of a fledgling community dedicated to the reform of the clerical life in the Church. And it was a solitary chapel in the wilderness. The figure of St. John, the priest, preaching repentance and crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord perfectly encapsulated the vision St. Norbert had for his new community. The Norbertine Order was supposed to be for the Church of the twelfth century what St. John had been for God's people in his own time.

In our own time, the priesthood is in crisis, yet we have no lack of heavenly intercession and protection. May St. John the Baptist once more turn the hearts of the fathers to their children so that the priesthood of Jesus Christ may flourish once again, pure and beautiful, in the Church and for the salvation of the world.

Prologue

A Man Named John Was Sent by God

The prologue to the Gospel according to John is perhaps the loftiest theology found in all of Sacred Scripture. There, the beloved disciple unfolds the mystery of the Word eternally begotten of the Father, together with His coming into the world He created at the Incarnation. Yet, interwoven into this lofty theological discourse is the story of John the Baptist: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John."[1] The juxtaposition of the account of the inner life of God with the mission of John the Baptist is so stark that many modern scholars simply assert that the parts about John were later additions which did not belong to the original text. While such assertions ignore the fact that the text the Church has received was inspired by the Holy Spirit, who puts everything in its right place, nevertheless, they give testimony to the strangeness of the interweaving of the story of John the Baptist with the story of the eternal Word. But then again, is it so strange that the story of the Word should be bound up with the story of the voice?

[1] Jn 1:6. These words of St. John closely parallel the words of St. Luke: "the angel Gabriel was sent from God" (Lk 1:26).

The fact that the Apostle John thought he could not tell the story of the Word made flesh without including the voice crying out in the wilderness reveals that the Gospel itself cannot be told without John the Baptist. We cannot understand Jesus Christ fully without understanding John. So true was this that one of the prerequisites for becoming an apostle was knowledge of John the Baptist. And as John the Apostle goes on to say in his prologue, God sent John so that all might believe through him. We do well, then, to ponder over the life, the mission, and the person of John the Baptist, for in so doing, we shall understand more fully who Jesus Christ is.

Introduction

The World into Which St. John the Baptist Was Born

The coming into the world of St. John the Baptist was an instance of God exercising His dominion as Lord of history. The Russian novelist and philosopher Leo Tolstoy taught that human affairs and individual men were simply the necessary outcome of historical forces, the outcome of an infinite number of infinitesimal actions, no more free or good than the conclusions of calculus. But Christian revelation teaches, in contrast, that human affairs are ultimately intelligible in light of divine providence, since God governs not only human affairs but every detail of the universe. It would be difficult to find a clearer example of this than the birth of John the Baptist. From all eternity, God foreknew and predestined St. John to prepare the way for the Word of God to enter into creation. St. John was not determined by the world into which he came; rather, he was the one who molded and formed the world according to the light which he bore inside of him from God.

The world into which St. John was born was dark on all sides, and yet John was not overcome by the darkness. He was instead a shining lamp, which dispelled the darkness

and began to reform a world that had been deformed by sin. St. John came not as a political reformer: he had no political aspirations; he was not dressed in fine garments, nor did he dwell in royal palaces. When he confronted political figures like King Herod, he did so with a view to their salvation, not political advantage. He did not come as an economic savior. Rather than promising the people bread, he lived on locusts and wild honey. Nor did St. John come as a philosopher. He wrote no works, nor did he found a school, though he did gather disciples and teach them. St. John did not even come as a religious reformer, at least not the kind of religious reformer that people were expecting. He did not come to reorganize the worship in the Temple or to take authority from the Levitical priests. Instead, he lived in the desert, far from the Temple and its sacrifices, and he offered to God a pleasing sacrifice from within his own spirit. And it was there that the people spontaneously came to him to be baptized and to be reformed within their own spirits. John had become a new epicenter, a kind of alternative temple, where the people came to find the God of Israel.

There were about half a million people living in Palestine when John was born (about the population of Vermont today), and about eighteen thousand of these residents were clergy, priests, and Levites. Palestine was effectively under Roman control, though Herod the Great was the acting king. He was allowed to rule without significant interference from the Romans so long as he remained loyal to Rome and stability was maintained in his kingdom. When Herod died a few years after the birth of Jesus, his kingdom was divided into five parts: three of which were non-Jewish lands, and

two of which had a significant Jewish population. The Jewish territories were given to two sons of Herod the Great: Herod Archelaus (who ruled Judea, Idumaea, and Samaria) and Herod Antipas (who ruled Galilee and Peraea). However, in AD 6, the Romans deposed Archelaus so that Judea, Idumaea, and Samaria were turned into an imperial province under the control of a Roman prefect. During the public ministry of St. John, the prefect was Pontius Pilate, while Herod Antipas still reigned in Galilee and Peraea. Because the military force given to the prefect was relatively small (about three thousand Roman soldiers), he relied upon local leaders to enforce day-to-day discipline and order so that most of the year, the high priest governed in Jerusalem and mediated between the populace and the prefect. During St. John's public ministry, the high priest Caiaphas was effectively governing Jerusalem and its environs.

Perhaps as a result of the Maccabean revolts, combined with the relative unimportance of the region, Rome thought it prudent not to impose Greco-Roman customs upon the Jewish territories. This was reflected in a series of decrees by Julius Caesar, Augustus Caesar, and the Roman senate. For example, in respect for the Jewish observance of the Sabbath, the Jews were exempted from conscription in the Roman army, nor did Rome colonize Jewish Palestine. So the Jews were allowed to practice their religion largely unmolested. Nevertheless, they knew well that they were politically dependent upon and subject to the Romans so that, at the behest of the Romans, they lived as guests in their own land. Besides the military presence, some persons of gentile origin lived among and mingled with the Jews, though they were

not very many. Most of these gentiles living in Jewish territories were natives of nearby gentile cities or of Syrian origin.

The economic condition of the region was poor but not destitute. Some areas of Galilee were even modestly prosperous. The majority of inhabitants were able to support their families and pay their taxes. Most Jews supported themselves through fishing, agriculture, or manual labor, such as building. On the other hand, in this society, even basic healthcare was a luxury rather than a necessity, and only those who were rich could afford to see doctors. The Palestine of John's life was, therefore, abundant with many sick and injured people, as the Gospels frequently attest. Of the few who did become rich, most were merchants who served the Temple or aristocrats who were largely associated with the religious ruling class. Thus, a kind of religious-economic division arose, which lent itself to the narrative that those who were outwardly religiously observant were blessed by God with material prosperity. It was this view which seems to have prompted the apostles to exclaim in surprise, "who then can be saved?" when Jesus asserted that it was exceedingly difficult for the rich to enter into the kingdom of God.[1]

A number of significant sects existed in Jewish Palestine during St. John's lifetime. These sects included the Herodians, the Pharisees, the Sadducees (all mentioned in the New Testament), and the Essenes. Very little is known about the Herodians outside of the information given in the New Testament. There are some indications that they may have considered Herod the Great as a messiah figure and that

[1] See Mk 10:25; Mt 19:24; and Lk 18:25.

salvation for Israel would come from the continuation of the Herodian Dynasty. The Pharisees numbered about six thousand men and were reputed to be highly observant of the ceremonial and external precepts of the law. In addition to the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament ascribed to Moses), the Pharisees accepted a number of precise interpretations of the law based upon theological reflections and disputations by learned commentators. The Sadducees were numerically the smallest sect but politically the most powerful and influential. They included Caiaphas, the high priest, and composed the majority of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious council by which Jesus was condemned. Sadducees accepted the Pentateuch but did not accept many of the later theological developments (sometimes called the "traditions of the fathers") which the Pharisees accepted. The most notable theological point of dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees concerned the resurrection of the body: a doctrine approved by the Pharisees but rejected by the Sadducees.[2] The Essenes are not directly referenced in the New Testament, but abundant historical evidence indicates that they were active during the lifetime of St. John in significant numbers. It was a community of Essenes who lived at Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea who preserved a cache of documents now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Essenes had practically separated themselves from mainstream Judaism, and they seem to have considered the priesthood and worship in the Jerusalem Temple to be illegitimate by the beginning of the first century AD.

[2] See Acts 23:6–9.

Because St. John lived in the desert away from the Temple worship, some have speculated that he was either a member of this community or somehow influenced by them. But while St. John may have known the Essenes, it is clear that he acted on his own initiative and under a special mandate from God, not as a member of a religious community.

The majority of believing Jews had some kind of hope in a divine intervention which would liberate Israel. There was little agreement, however, about the particular way in which this deliverance would be accomplished. Many believed in a Messiah or Christ, a son of David, who was to come. Some thought that deliverance would come through a great war in which God would intervene in a miraculous way. Others believed that so long as Jews perfectly followed the divine law, God would restore peace, prosperity, and autonomy to Israel without the need for battle. Yet most agreed in hoping for something akin to a political salvation, and perhaps only a few of the most spiritually advanced Jews looked for a moral and spiritual salvation. This diversity of religious sects and beliefs, together with the episodic destruction of their hopes as pretender after pretender came forward claiming to be the messiah only to be unmasked as another deceiver, led to a growing sense of despair among the common Jews.

If this were not enough, Herod the Great was becoming more and more paranoid (a paranoia verging upon mental illness according to some historians). To maintain his grasp upon power, he killed a number of his own family members as well as the male claimants from the old Hasmonean royal line. His campaign of terror was supported by ruthless soldiers and a network of spies so that anyone who might seem

to lead a revolt, real or imagined, was systematically killed. Herod's slaughter of the children of Bethlehem was the culmination of his cruel tactics, and it perfectly conforms to the portrait of his character reported by historians of that time.

One might think that the death of Herod would have granted some relief, but the opposite was true. Many thought of his death as an opportunity to establish a free Israel, and so a number of open rebellions arose. As a result, Herod Archelaus, the young son of Herod the Great, sent his entire army to quell the rebellion. Josephus reports that three thousand men belonging to the rebellion were killed as a result of this conflict. Archelaus cancelled the Passover to prevent further uprisings, but the feast of Pentecost proved to be the occasion for further sedition. Consequently, the Romans sought assistance from Varus, the governor of Syria, who invaded Galilee first, including the region near Nazareth, then Judea, with two Roman legions together with allied forces. Josephus reports that two thousand rebels were crucified as a result of the campaign of Varus. And while Roman governance was eventually restored, deep resentment of the civil authorities burned within the hearts of many in Israel, especially those of the newly founded Zealot movement to which Simon the Apostle belonged. This superficial peace, undergirded by an aggrieved populace, remained in place throughout the entire lifetime of St. John and of Jesus and ultimately lead to the catastrophe of the late 60s in which Jerusalem was totally destroyed and the Temple demolished, never to be rebuilt again.

It is, therefore, understandable why any notable religious figures of this time should be suspected also of sedition and

insurrection. The great crowds following Jesus provoked just this fear in Caiaphas and the other Jewish leaders.[3] St. John seems to have initially avoided this scrutiny by living and ministering in a remote region far from major population centers. Nevertheless, as we shall see, his condemnation of the unlawful marriage of Herod Antipas brought about his own condemnation and death. It was a dangerous thing to be a holy man in ancient Israel.

[3] See Jn 11:45–50.