

Jesus meets the people

Jesus and John the Baptist

It is the gospel writer Luke who provides us with information on the origins of John the Baptist. John's father was a priest, who, when it was his turn, participated in the worship in the temple in Jerusalem. John's mother also came from a priestly family. The priests of Israel were descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, in theory at least [*1]. Of the twelve clans of Israel, they belonged to the clan of Levi. John could therefore have been a priest and followed in his father's footsteps as a revered priest with the honour and privilege of participating in the temple services in Jerusalem. However he turned his back on this life. Like him, a few of the prophets of old, for example Jeremiah and Ezekiel, had been of priestly descent, although most prophets were not.

As a priest John could have received a share of the tithes paid by the people. These were a tenth of their income, or with some items a tenth of their capital. But he turned his back on this way of life, and instead of eating the food provided by the people, he chose a life in the wild, living off what was available there. The gospels specifically mention wild honey and locusts. With the modern collection of honey by amateur and professional beekeepers and its sale in shops we have lost sight of the potential of wild honey. We perhaps only come across it in the stories of Winnie the Pooh! But in other countries it is a reality, just as it was for John. Locusts too are still part of the diet of people in rural communities in some parts of the Middle East. They can be a pleasant addition to an otherwise monotonous diet. They are generally fried before eating and can even be bought on stalls in some rural markets. The gospels are commenting not so much on the quality of the food as on John's lifestyle. He lived off what nature in the wild had to offer him.

As a priest John could have worn both the everyday clothes of his time, perhaps distinctive for priests, and on occasion could have worn the full priestly garments special to serving in the temple. Instead he wore clothing made of camel's hair. Camel's hair is still used in the Middle East for making tents, bags and rugs. It is not very smooth! Goat's hair is more common as camels do not have much hair.

The gospels tell us nothing about where John lived. He may have lived in caves, he may have lived in a tent. What we do know is that deserts can be very hot at times, and very cold at night when the dry wind blows and the sky is cloudless.

God had planned John's mission before he was born. The Jews were familiar with the prophets of old through the Old Testament. The Spirit of God would come upon them and they would gain particular insight into the events of their day. They would call the people to repentance, warn of disasters to come, and rebuke the rulers and priests and those who stood in their way. They were well aware too of their own weakness and sinfulness, as is shown most beautifully in the vision Isaiah had when he was called to deliver God's message (Isaiah 6).

Now after about four hundred years without a recognised prophet, Zechariah was told by the angel that his son, John, would be great in the presence of God and filled with His Spirit from birth (Luke 1:15). Being in the presence of God is pictorial language. God is seen as a king and the prophets and others were like his ministers and servants. John was to be of high rank in the presence of God. For him, like all prophets and saints, that relationship with God was at the heart of all he achieved.

It was during his time in the desert that John received his message (Luke 3:2). Deserts are places of silence and stillness. Unless you are beside a hill, your own voice travels off into the distance with no echo. In the isolation of a desert there is nothing else to make a noise. The only movement on a windless day is that of ants and beetles, with the occasional lizard or spider, and the very occasional scorpion or snake, perhaps attracted

by any water you may have spilt on the ground. The desert is therefore perhaps the perfect, though not the only place to be alone with God.

Some have suggested that John might have had connections with the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran. He may well have known them, we have no evidence either way, but I cannot see him as a member of a religious order with all its rules and regulations. If he ever had been a member, I reckon his independence of thought would have led to his excommunication!

So John appeared in the Judean desert ready to perform his mission and preach his message. What was his mission and how did he perform it?

Once again it is Luke who gives us the clearest answer to the aims of John's mission:

“He will turn many of the people of Israel back to the Lord their God ... He will change fathers to love their children and lead the ungodly to the wisdom of the righteous and make a people ready for the Lord.” (Luke 1:15-17).

These words were spoken by the angel Gabriel to Zechariah. There are three parts to this mission.

The first part is to “turn many of the people of Israel back to the Lord their God”. This was the never-ending mission of the prophets. It had to be repeated in every new generation. With John it was a message to individual members of the nation. The angel did not talk of reforming the nation's religious institutions. He talked about people and turning them back to God. The second part relates to the all important relationships within a family between parents and their children. The third part is to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord, who in Christian interpretation is taken to mean Jesus.

So how did John fulfil his mission?

To answer this we have to look at his message. His basic theme was that people should repent. There is no one who does not have quite a lot to be sorry about, and who could not find things they wish they had done better on a daily basis. It only takes a few thoughtless words to hurt others. There are other people who have become entrapped in a life or style of behaviour which is more obviously damaging to themselves or others. John was not short of people willing to go to him and listen to what he had to say. They came in plenty from all over Judea, including the capital Jerusalem. This was not an hour's drive in a comfortable car! The distance from Jerusalem to the River Jordan, where John was preaching, was about twenty miles, a good day's hike! And when they arrived, what did John say: “I welcome you in the name of God. I hope you enjoy this service of worship”? No. He said: “You bunch of snakes! Who told you to flee from the coming wrath?”

Let's make this clear. He wasn't talking to thugs, murderers and thieves in the local prison. He was talking to ordinary people. Matthew is even more specific. This message was particularly for the Pharisees and Sadducees - the religious leaders of the “chosen” people. Most of the priests were Sadducees. I bet he knew many of them. As his father Zechariah was a priest, I bet John had heard their deceitful machinations and plots while as a boy he brought them food and drink in his father's home! Of course he knew their almost total scorn and disregard for the ordinary people, their bigotry and their arrogance.

It is not only the New Testament which records this arrogance and scorn. The Rabbis own early publication, the Mishnah, records the same attitude. Strict Pharisees would not eat with the “common people” because they might not have tithed the food properly. They would not even buy from them or sell to them (Mishnah, Demai 2:2-3). Food containers belonging to the “common people” were considered unclean (Mishnah, Eduyoth 1:14), as also were their clothes (Mishnah, Tohoroth 4:5). They sought superiority through

knowledge and trivial religious practice. They failed to recognise the ability of ordinary people to achieve progress, and failed to help them. How like they were to many religious leaders today!

John has seen their deceit and is frankly rude to them: “You bunch of snakes!” Jesus after him used the same words for the Pharisees and other leaders (Matthew 23:33). The word for “snakes” is sometimes translated as “vipers”, but it is not clear that a particular species of snake in the modern sense is meant. The word I have translated, somewhat loosely, as “bunch”, because it gives the best overall idiomatic sense, is better translated literally as “young” or “offspring”. It gives the picture of a nest of poisonous snakes with the mother, perhaps, in protective attendance. A snake in the open will probably slink away from an approaching human. At the nest it will rear up and fight. Both John, and Jesus after him, were challenging the religious leaders in their lairs. No wonder they found them to be snakes! The same is true of many church leaders today. Pass them by at a distance and they will appear harmless, prod into their lairs and they will reveal their real venom. The only way to win such people for true religion is by severe rebuke. Soft words never win through a hard outer shell.

There was one lair of the priests John did not enter. Jerusalem! That would have meant certain and immediate death at their hands, as Jesus found.

Yet some of these Pharisees and Sadducees made the journey from Jerusalem and elsewhere to hear John. Had they perhaps seen something of the error of their ways? Were they perhaps tired of the emptiness of their barren doctrines? Or did they merely want to be sure they knew what was going on, like spies afraid of insurrection? They probably came from a variety of motives.

Some priests and Levites did come to John as a formal deputation. This certainly shows official concern on the part of the religious authorities. The Jewish state was a religious state and the religious leaders saw themselves as responsible for the religious behaviour of everyone in the state. There was no such thing as religious freedom. So the deputation asked John who he was (John 1:19-28). Clearly uppermost in their mind was the question of whether John was the expected Messiah, or whether he was claiming to be the Messiah. If he had said “Yes” they would undoubtedly have tried to assassinate him as they did when Jesus made that claim. But as he wasn’t the Messiah, and said so, he was safe on that charge.

They then reveal two other common expectations. The first was that Elijah would return. This expectation probably derived from the record in the Book of Kings that Elijah did not die, but was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire (1 Kings 2:1-18) and the prophecy in Malachi (4:5-6). Whether the expectation was of a physical return, in which Elijah would suddenly appear as a mature adult, or whether the expectation was that Elijah would be reborn in some form of reincarnation, or whether the expectation was merely of the return of prophecy, Elijah being the representative prophet, is uncertain. Probably different people had different views, with most being exceedingly vague about what they expected! John denied being Elijah, but in what sense is not made clear. Jesus, of course, later said that John was the expected Elijah, perhaps with a different sense in mind.

The other expectation which is mentioned here is that a special prophet will come. This probably derives from a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy: “The Lord your God will raise up a prophet for you, from among you, from your fellow-countrymen, one like me.” (Deuteronomy 18:14-19). The passage then goes on to tell the people how to distinguish a true prophet from a false prophet. To my mind it is clear that the intended meaning is not that there will be one special prophet, but there will be more than one, just as actually happened. However it appears that the reverse interpretation became predominant among the Jews so that the people were expecting one particular prophet. John denies being that

prophet. Let us not be deceived. The history of the people of Israel is littered with the assassination of prophets, just as the history of the church is littered with the assassination, by burning and other means, of reformers (with numerous unrecorded cases of skulduggery, threats and penalties!). If John had claimed to be the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet, he would have faced attempted assassination at the hands of the authorities. The deputation from Jerusalem had come to see if such a charge could be brought against John. There would have been a trial, just as there was a trial to condemn Jesus. The Mishnah records that the trial of a false prophet required a council, called a Sanhedrin, of seventy one men and that decision making was by a majority verdict (Mishnah, Sanhedrin 1:5-6).

So how did John reply to their question about who he was?

He said that he was “a voice of someone crying in the wilderness: ‘make straight the Lord’s highway’”. (John 1:23). There was no law against someone who claimed to be a “voice”! So the religious leaders could not put him on trial for that. The Pharisees then have to approach the issue from another angle: “If you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the prophet, why are you baptising?” (John 1:24-25). Here we are somewhat lost because we do not know enough about Jewish baptism, either when it was performed, what it meant, or who performed it. It was not a mainstream Jewish practice from the Old Testament and it is not mentioned in the Mishnah, though we do know that it was performed by the sect associated with the Dead Sea scrolls. We can only assume that it was not customary for “just anybody” to perform baptism. John was breaking with tradition in some way. He was of course a priest, which is perhaps why only the Pharisees in the delegation, not the priests, questioned whether John had the right to baptise. This would not be a safe basis of a charge against John in a Sanhedrin containing members of both religious parties. It could have led to a split, with the priests claiming that of course a priest had a right to baptise, and the Pharisees arguing the opposite. It was not pursued.

John ignores the question and goes on: “I baptise in water, 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.” I wonder how many of the delegation understood this thinly veiled reference to the Messiah. We do not know what the delegation reported back, but no further action appears to have been taken by the authorities.

It was not only the religious leaders to whom John made specific comments. Luke gives us some further details (Luke 3:7-18):

John said to the crowds who came to be baptised by him, "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit worthy of repentance. And don't even think of saying to yourselves, 'We are descended from Abraham.' For I tell you God can make descendants of Abraham out of these stones. 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 onto a bonfire."

Then the crowd asked. "So what should we do?"

John replied, "The man with two cloaks should share it with someone who hasn't got one, and someone who has food should do the same."

Some tax collectors also came to be baptised. They asked: “Teacher, what should we do?”

He replied: "Don't collect more than you have been instructed to."

Then some soldiers asked him, "And what shall we do?"

John replied, "Don't extort money by force and don't accuse people falsely be satisfied with your wages."

John had a clear message for everyone that their manner of living should change to reflect their repentance. In particular it meant giving help to the poor. Reliance on their origins would not help them. They would be judged individually, not by association with others. This is a lesson not easily learnt. There are many church members today who behave as though they are relying on their membership. They look to their leaders for guidance rather than think for themselves.

John also deals with people at work and the ethics involved in their work. First there were the tax collectors. Tax collecting was different in some respects in the Roman Empire from what it is now. The emperors and other organs of government were persistently living beyond their means and so always short of cash. To cover the shortage they had to borrow, but instead of collecting taxes through a government machinery and paying off their debts, they gave the creditors the right to collect taxes to pay off the debts. One creditor might, for example be given Greece, another Egypt and so on. The creditors would then appoint other tax collectors in a pyramid system down to the local collector. The local collector would collect what he had to pass on to his superior in the chain, plus his own share. This was privatisation of tax collection beyond the wildest dreams of any modern capitalist (at least I hope it is!). There were no controls over sums to be collected, no tax rate set by the government, no appeals board. Yet the government was involved. O yes! The tax collectors could call upon the armed forces of the state to impose their taxes! It is against this background that John said: "Don't collect any more than you are instructed to". It should also be noted that the taxes were required for the support of the rulers and the maintenance of the security of the empire against enemies outside and enemies inside. Unlike a modern society, there were no services provided for the people in return for the taxes paid, no education, no health care, no social services! We at least receive services in return for taxes paid, however much we may complain about the level of taxation.

To the soldiers who came to him John said: "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely, be satisfied with your pay." These were not soldiers in barracks learning how to use the latest piece of military equipment or on the borders of the Empire keeping out the enemy, they were part of a foreign army of occupation. As such they had power to arrest and imprison disruptive elements. Their word was unlikely to be questioned. What an opportunity for extortion! They could make false accusations and then extort money "to ignore it". They could easily be bribed to arrest someone's private enemy. John's message to them might be summarised as: "Don't abuse your position"; but John gives specific examples of such abuse. It would do us all well to think about our work and where we have to make ethical decisions. The accepted ethics of the profession might not be up to God's moral standards.

The gospels do not record here the degree of success achieved by John. However later on Jesus addressed the crowds following him as having been followers of John (Matthew 11:7). And later still he says to the priests and elders (Matthew 21:32): "John came to teach you the truth, but you did not believe him. However the tax collectors and the prostitutes did believe him. Even after you had seen that, you didn't repent and believe." So John was successful in building up a following among the despised classes of society.

The Jewish historian Josephus also records the success John achieved. In his book *The Antiquities* (Book 18, Chapter 5, Section 2) he wrote: "Herod feared that the great influence John had over the people might enable him and encourage him to start a rebellion, because people seemed to do everything he recommended."

When at a later stage the chief priests and elders came to Jesus in the temple and asked him by what authority he was acting he asked them whether John's baptism was from God or man. They were not able to say that it was of human authority because they were

afraid of the people who considered John to be a prophet. This too is evidence of the strength of John's following among the ordinary people. (Matthew 21:23-27).

By the time of the visit made by the official delegation of religious leaders from Jerusalem to John, Jesus had already been baptised by John in the story recorded for us by the first three gospel writers. Matthew gives us more details than the others (Matthew 3:13-17):

Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John, but John tried to stop him, saying, "I need to be baptised by you. Why have you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now. This way it is appropriate for us to do everything correctly." Then John agreed. As soon as Jesus was baptised, he left the water and that very moment heaven opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and resting on him. Then a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, who I love; I am well pleased with him."

Quite how well John knew Jesus and what he knew about him is uncertain. Elizabeth, John's mother, and Mary, Jesus's mother, were related (Luke 1:36). This relationship is not stated precisely. Elizabeth was from the clan of Levi, on her father's side at least, (Luke 1:5) but we do not know the clan to which Mary belonged, unless one of the two genealogies in Matthew and Luke actually relates to her. For the angel to mention Elizabeth to Mary, and later for Mary to visit Elizabeth, suggests a fairly close family relationship. It was therefore inevitable that John and Jesus knew of each other at the very least.

The passage quoted above (Matthew 3:13-17) indicates that John knew rather more about Jesus than just knowing him as a relation. He apparently looked upon him as a superior, and was thus reluctant to baptise him, feeling that it should be the other way round. Jesus is however insistent on being baptised by John. Perhaps the importance of this is that Jesus is showing solidarity with the reform movement that John has started, and paving the way for the followers of John to become his followers.

It also leads to the result which John states, as recorded in John's gospel (John 1:29-34)

The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the person I was talking about when I said, 'A man will come after me who is superior to me because he was before me.' I did not know him, but the reason I came baptising with water was so that he might be revealed to Israel."

Then John gave this witness: "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove and rest on him. I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, 'The man you see the Spirit come down on and remain on is the person who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I bear witness that this is the Son of God."

That is, John now knew for a certainty that Jesus was "the Son of God".

The next stage of the relationship between John and Jesus is that John introduces some of his disciples to Jesus. (John 1:35-51). This is the first mention of John's disciples. It shows us that in addition to calling upon the crowds to repent, John had gathered round himself a number of special disciples, as Jesus was to do later. That is, he was starting a religious movement which would live on after him. By introducing his disciples to Jesus, John is further preparing the way for his followers to become Jesus's followers. As a result of this introduction Jesus had four followers. They were Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael. The text only specifically states that Andrew was a disciple of John, but the presence of the others away from their home, Bethsaida, and in the vicinity of John, encourages us to believe that all four were disciples of John.

John continued with his mission and continued to baptise while Jesus himself, with some of his disciples, also baptised. It is John the apostle who tells us about this. (John 3:22-30):

After this Jesus and his disciples went out into the territory of Judea, where he spent some time with them, and baptised. John also was baptising, at Aenon close to Salim, because there was plenty of water there, and people kept coming to him to be baptised. (This was before John was thrown into prison.) A dispute arose between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew regarding ritual washing. So they came to John and told him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan, who you gave witness about, is now also baptising, and everyone is going to him."

John replied, "A man can't receive anything unless it given to him from heaven. You yourselves can give evidence that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but I was sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The best man who attends him and carries out his wishes waits is happy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is now mine. He must become greater, while I must become less.

At some point a dispute arose between John's disciples and one or more Jews about the meaning of ritual purification, no doubt in relation to John's baptism. (A copyist's error at a very early date means that some early manuscripts have a single Jew and some have more than one.) We can surmise that the Jew did not get on very well in the intellectual debate, so he turned to John in attempt to stir up jealousy between him and Jesus - it is quite normal for those who lose a debate to insult the opponent or create trouble for him in some other way! The attempt failed. It failed because John was not jealous. He had come to prepare the way for Jesus, and now that Jesus had started his ministry, he, John, would become less important. More than that he was pleased that Jesus had come! Like the best man at a wedding he was enjoying the occasion.

In passing we note that at least one Jew felt that John's ideas on baptism were not correct. This should warn us against interpreting John's ideas in terms of what we know about Jewish baptism at the time. John had taken an outward form that was known, but apparently given it a different meaning. John's baptism was symbolic of repentance, and, inevitably, an initiation into a new religious movement. As far as we can tell it was a once only baptism for each person, but this is not certain. As a symbol of repentance one might expect it to be something to be repeated, as an initiation one would expect it to be once only.

John's movement was a preparation for the coming of the Messiah, and it was firmly based in Judaism. John did not seek to set up a rival religion, nor are there any indications that he established any structure for his followers, such as a hierarchy of leaders. We are left to imagine that people came to hear John, were baptised and then returned to their daily lives, together with a continuation of attendance at the synagogue and participation in all the other aspects of Jewish life.

The time had now come for John to disappear from the scene. At some time he had upset Herod who was the civil ruler of the northern territory, Galilee, and Perea on the East bank of the Jordan. Herod had married the wife of his half-brother, Philip, who was still alive at the time [*2]. This was prohibited in the Old Testament (Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21). John told Herod that he was not entitled to marry her. (Mark 6:18). This was not solely a matter of moral right or wrong in a secular state. Jewish law applied, and that law dealt with all aspects of law, the criminal, the civil and the religious. Or, more accurately, the religion of Judaism itself encompassed all aspects of the life of the nation and the religious law was comprehensive of all areas of life.

The passage in Leviticus lays down the penalty for breach of the law relating to close relatives a man may not marry. In the words of Leviticus 18:29:

Everyone who does any of these detestable things must be cut off from his people.

Two possible interpretations of “be cut off” spring to mind. One is the death penalty, and the other is denial of all rights as a member of the nation, perhaps with the idea that God would then deal with them Himself. The latter appears to be the meaning in the Mishnah, though the former has much to commend it. The reason for the severity of the punishment for marrying a close relation is that in any society, but especially in a traditional rigidly controlled society, a man would have closer access to close relations by blood or marriage and was therefore in a greater position of trust. Breach of that trust would be particularly damaging to the close social relationships of the family. Outside these close relationships, access to people of the opposite sex was restricted.

However these are details requiring study in their own right. What concerns us here is that Herod the Tetrarch broke the law and by virtue of his position as the autocratic ruler was immune from any human court. It was traditionally in these circumstances that prophets acted. John acted. The text implies that he confronted Herod face to face because he addressed Herod as “you” he did not talk about him in his absence as “he”. The actual words in Mark 6: 18 are:

John had said to Herod, “You are not allowed to marry your brother's wife.”

Not unnaturally he was arrested and thrown in prison [*3]. I am sure the prison was not a very pleasant place. He was however allowed visits from his disciples. Added to the effects of prison life, being a prophet in a hostile environment carries with it special stresses and strains. The classic example is that of Elijah, who, following his great success over the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, sunk into severe depression at God’s apparent failure to follow the success through. John appears to have suffered similarly. He had achieved great success in having the crowds come to him and be baptised. He had suffered the strain of conflict with the religious leaders. He had finally been arrested for rebuking a tyrant who broke the law in an issue with moral implications. In the enforced inaction of prison following the intense activity of his life he had become depressed. This is an experience well known to those who lose their jobs and find themselves at home all day.

So he started to question himself: Was he really right about his own ministry? Was Jesus really the Messiah? Would not the real Messiah take over as ruler of Israel and establish a just society? Why did Jesus not use his power to release him, John? All these questions and many more would undoubtedly go through the mind of someone in John’s position. So we see John sending his disciples to Jesus with the question: “Are you the coming one, or should we expect someone else?”

At the time Jesus was healing many people, so he replied to John’s messengers:

“Go back to John and report what you have seen and heard: The blind recover their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear the good news. Blessed is the man who does not fall away because of me.” (Luke 7:22-23)

First Jesus points to the evidence. This was evidence in a special sense, because it uses the words of a number of passages in Isaiah which John would reasonably have interpreted as referring to the Messiah. These are particularly Isaiah 35:5-6 and 61:1. These read:

Isaiah 35:5-6: “Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf released, the lame will leap like a gazelle, and the dumb will shout for joy.”

Isaiah 61:1: “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for captives and release from darkness for prisoners of war.

Secondly Jesus gives a warning to John, or perhaps to all his hearers: “Blessed is the man who does not fall away because of me.” This in effect means: “don’t let what I am doing cause you to fail.” This may seem harsh for someone who had done so much in preparing the way for Jesus, but often the plain reality is more helpful than vague sympathy.

Then during one of Herod’s birthday parties, John was beheaded. The details of that story belong more to the study of Herod.

Jesus had a number of things to say about John and his role, both before and after his death.

Matthew 11:7-19 reads:

As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed blown by the wind? If not, what did you go to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? Of course not. People who wear fine clothes live in kings’ palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Indeed, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the person it was written about:

“ ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.’

I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist. But the person who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. From the time of John the Baptist till now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and strong men seize it. All the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who was expected. He who has ears, let him hear.

“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market-places and calling out to others:

“ ‘We played the flute for you, but you did not dance. We sang a dirge, but you did not mourn.’

John came not eating or drinking, and people say, ‘He is possessed by a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and people say, ‘He is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her actions.”

First we note that Jesus addresses the crowds as those who had been into the desert to see John. This is one more indication of the success John had in preparing the people for the coming of Jesus. That is it was not only in preparing some special disciples, as we have seen with regard to Andrew and some others, it was also in preparing larger numbers of people whose role would be less distinctive. John’s gospel also gives us evidence of this. (John 5:33 & John 10:41).

Jesus then said that John was a prophet, indeed more than a prophet. He was the one of whom God said through the prophet Malachi (3:1): “I will send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant, who you desire, will arrive.” says the Lord Almighty.

Finally, Jesus said that John was the Elijah who was to come. This is probably a reference to the last two verses in Malachi (4:5-6): “I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.” We have already seen that there

were several possible interpretations of this when we looked at the incident when some priests and Levites came to John as a deputation.

After Herod had John beheaded, John's disciples came to Jesus and told him what had happened. Jesus got into a boat and went off to a lonely place, no doubt to grieve the loss of a great prophet and colleague, and to think through the implications of this development for his own ministry (Matthew 14:13).

Some detailed notes:

*1 The situation was rather chaotic at times. Even King David's sons acted as priests [2 Samuel 8:18] although David was descended from Judah, but there is no evidence that this was passed on to their children. After the return from exile in Babylon the priests and Levites were reorganised [Ezra & Nehemiah].

*2 Josephus tells the story in much greater detail [The Antiquities, Book 18, Chapter 5, Section 1]. When Herod was on a visit to Rome he met Herodias, who was his half-brother Philip's wife, and agreed that she would later join him on his return to Palestine. Herod's existing wife was the daughter of Aretas, who was King of the Arabia Petrea. She learnt of the proposed relationship and escaped from Herod to her father. This and other matters led to war between Herod Antipas and Aretas.

Neither the New Testament nor Josephus actually make it clear that Herodias had become formally separated or divorced from Philip before she "married" Herod. The relationship could have been an adulterous one, though any such legal hair-splitting would not have interested Herod!

*3 Josephus [The Antiquities, Book 18, Chapter 5, Section 2] records that the prison was the Fortress of Macherus.

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