Biography Of John The Baptist Essay, Research Paper

John the Baptist

We are given the story of the ministry of John the Baptist, called the Precursor or

Forerunner of the Lord, with some variation of detail, in the three synoptic Gospels of

Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as well as in the Book of John. Luke tells us of the birth of

John the Baptist in a town of Judaea, about six months before the birth of the Saviour.

The attendant circumstances, which we have already recounted under the headings of \*St.

Elizabeth\* and \*St. Zachary\*, his parents, suggest the miraculous and wonderful. The

New Testament tells us nothing of John’s early years, but we know that his pious, virtuous

parents must have reared the boy with care, conscious always of the important work to

which he was appointed, and imbuing him with a sense of his destiny.

When John began final preparations for his mission, he was probably in his thirty-second

year. He withdrew into the harsh, rocky desert beyond the Jordan to fast and pray, as was

the ancient custom of holy men. We are told that he kept himself alive by eating locusts

and wild honey and wore a rough garment of camel’s hair, tied with a leathern girdle.

When he came back to start preaching in the villages of Judaea, he was haggard and

uncouth, but his eyes burned with zeal and his voice carried deep conviction. The Jews

were accustomed to preachers and prophets who gave no thought to outward

appearances, and they accepted John at once; the times were troubled, and the people

yearned for reassurance and comfort. So transcendant was the power emanating from the

holy man that after hearing him many believed he was indeed the long-awaited Messiah.

John quickly put them right, saying he had come only to prepare the way, and that he was

not worthy to unloose the Master’s sandals. Although his preaching and baptizing

continued for some months during the Saviour’s own ministry, John always made plain

that he was merely the Forerunner. His humility remained incorruptible even when his

fame spread to Jerusalem and members of the higher priesthood came to make inquiries

and to hear him. “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,”-this was John’s

oft-repeated theme. For the evils of the times his remedy was individual purification.

“Every tree,” he said, “that is not bringing forth good fruit is to be cut down and thrown

into the fire.” The reformation of each person’s life must be complete?the wheat must be

separated from the chaff and the chaff burned “with unquenchable fire.”

The rite of baptism, a symbolic act signifying sincere repentance as well as a desire to be

spiritually cleansed in order to receive the Christ, was so strongly emphasized by John that

people began to call him “the baptizer.” The Scriptures tell us of the day when Jesus joined

the group of those who wished to receive baptism at John’s hands. John knew Jesus for

the Messiah they had so long expected, and at first excused himself as unworthy. Then, in

obedience to Jesus, he acquiesced and baptized Him. Although sinless, Jesus chose to be

baptized in order to identify Himself with the human lot. And when He arose from the

waters of the Jordan, where the rite was performed, “the heavens opened and the Spirit as

a dove descended. And there came a voice from the heavens, Thou art my beloved Son, in

Thee I am well pleased” (Mark i, 11).

John’s life now rushes on towards its tragic end. In the fifteenth year of the reign of the

Roman emperor, Tiberias Caesar, Herod Antipas was the provincial governor or tetrarch

of a subdivision of Palestine which included Galilee and Peraea, a district lying east of the

Jordan. In the course of John’s preaching, he had denounced in unmeasured terms the

immorality of Herod’s petty court, and had even boldly upbraided Herod to his face for his

defiance of old Jewish law, especially in having taken to himself the wife of his

half-brother, Philip. This woman, the dissolute Herodias, was also Herod’s niece. Herod

feared and reverenced John, knowing him to be a holy man, and he followed his advice in

many matters; but he could not endure having his private life castigated. Herodias

stimulated his anger by lies and artifices. His resentment at length got the better of his

judgment and he had John cast into the fortress of Machaerus, near the Dead Sea. When

Jesus heard of this, and knew that some of His disciples had gone to see John, He spoke

thus of him: “What went you to see? A prophet? Yea, I say to you, and more than a

prophet. This is he of whom it is written: Behold I send my angel before thy face, who

shall prepare thy way before thee. For I say to you, amongst those that are born of women

there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” (Matthew xi, 10-12).

Herodias never ceased plotting against the life of John, who was not silenced even by

prison walls. His followers now became even more turbulent. To Herodias soon came the

opportunity she had long sought to put an end to the trouble-maker. On Herod’s birthday

he gave a feast for the chief men of that region. In Matthew xiv, Mark vi, and Luke ix, we

are given parallel accounts of this infamous occasion which was to culminate in John’s

death. At the feast, Salome, fourteen-year-old daughter of Herodias by her lawful

husband, pleased Herod and his guests so much by her dancing that Herod promised on

oath to give her anything that it was in his power to give, even though it should amount to

half his kingdom. Salome, acting under the direction and influence of her wicked mother,

answered that she wished to have the head of John the Baptist, presented to her on a

platter. Such a horrible request shocked and unnerved Herod. Still, he had given his word

and was afraid to break it. So, with no legal formalities whatever, he despatched a soldier

to the prison with orders to behead the prisoner and return with it immediately. This was

quickly done, and the cruel girl did not hesitate to accept the dish with its dreadful offering

and give it to her mother. John’s brief ministry was thus terminated by a monstrous crime.

There was great sadness among the people who had hearkened to him, and when the

disciples of Jesus heard the news of John’s death, they came and took the body and laid it

reverently in a tomb. Jesus, with some of his disciples, retired “to a desert place apart,” to

mourn.

The Jewish historian Josephus, giving further testimony of John’s holiness, writes: “He was

indeed a man endued with all virtue, who exhorted the Jews to the practice of justice

towards men and piety towards God; and also to baptism, preaching that they would

become acceptable to God if they renounced their sins, and to the cleanness of their bodies

added purity of soul.” Thus Jews and Christians unite in reverence and love for this

prophet-saint whose life is an incomparable example of both humility and courage

38a

1. Mark Ch.1-11

2. John ch.3-5

3. Corinthians Ch. 13