

# ***THE BEHEADING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST***

**August 29, 2016**

There are several different Feast Days in the Orthodox Church associated with different events in the life and history of John the Baptist. These are outlined below along with the Scripture readings that have been chosen for these Feast Days. To understand these Feast Days in context and to understand the background behind the events, these Feast Days will be followed consecutively according to their occurrence.

| <b>FEAST DAY</b>       | <b>DATE</b>     | <b>GOSPEL</b>              | <b>EPISTLE</b>  | <b>MATINS<br/>GOSPEL</b> |
|------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Conception of John     | Sept 23         | Luke 1:5-25                | Gal. 4:22-27    |                          |
| Birth of John          | June 24         | Luke 1:1-25, 57-68, 76, 80 | Rom. 13:11-14:4 | ----                     |
| John's Feast Day       | Jan. 7          | John 1:29-34               | Acts 19:1-8     | ----                     |
| Beheading of John      | Aug. 29         | Mark 6:14-30               | Acts 13:25-33   | Matt. 14:1-13            |
| Finding of John's Head | Feb. 24, May 25 | Luke 7:17-30               | 2 Cor. 4:6-14   | ----                     |

## **THE BIRTH OF JOHN**

**His Parents:** Zechariah was the Chief Priest of the 8<sup>th</sup> Lot (Luke 1:5, 1 Chronicles 24:10). This meant that he was in charge of the 8<sup>th</sup> Lot priestly duties for one week, then went home for 23 weeks until his turn came up again. In order to qualify for these duties, Zechariah had to be a descendant of Aaron among other things according to the very strict regulations of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism. The genealogy of every priestly candidate was checked against records kept in the Temple. Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron as Luke states (Luke 1:5), and priests generally married from within their own tribe.

According to tradition, Elizabeth was a cousin of the Virgin Mary. Thus John and Jesus were second cousins, and both were descendants of Aaron. Jesus was also a descendant of Judah (Luke 3:23-33, Matt. 1:1-16) through Mary's father's side of the family. For more details of Jesus' genealogy, see "The Genealogy of Christ", the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday before Christmas. According to tradition, Zechariah and Elizabeth were both over 70 years old when Zechariah had his vision in the Temple about the birth of John.

**The Announcement to Zechariah:** While Zechariah was offering incense to the Lord in the Holy Place as part of the morning and evening (Matins and Vespers) prayers on the Altar of Incense (Exodus 30:1-9), the Archangel Gabriel appeared at the right side of the Altar of Incense. Gabriel announced that Zechariah's and Elizabeth's prayers for a child had been heard and that they would have a son and that his name should be John. Zechariah was puzzled, since he and

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Elizabeth were already very old, well past the time for childbearing (Luke 1:18). However, he shouldn't have been too puzzled since he had witnessed the birth of the Virgin Mary 14 years earlier to Joachim and Anna when they were in their 70's and under similar circumstances. Because Zechariah doubted, he was made mute for 9 months. This caused quite a stir when he came out of the Holy Place to offer the Benediction and couldn't talk (Luke 1:21-22). Everybody knew that he had seen a vision in the Temple and Zechariah was very much respected for this.

About the time of Zechariah's vision, the Virgin Mary left Jerusalem for Nazareth, having been betrothed to Joseph. Since Zechariah had asked for a sign and was made mute for nine months (Luke 1:5-22), he had to be replaced as Chief Priest of the 8<sup>th</sup> lot, both for the remainder of his current week of service and for his next turn 24 weeks later. His replacement for the remainder of his current week of service, Samuel, commissioned the Virgin Mary and five of her companions to spin the special thread for embroidering the new veil for the Holy of Holies according to the pattern given to Moses (Exodus 26:31). This they did in Joseph's house in Nazareth while Joseph was away for six months building houses along the Sea of Galilee.

**The Visit by the Virgin Mary:** When Elizabeth was in her 6<sup>th</sup> month, Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary concerning the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:26-35) and also told her about the conception of John (Luke 1:36-37). The Annunciation, along with the Birth of Mary and the Presentation of Mary in the Temple are three of the Twelve Major Feast Days in the Orthodox Church all of which deal with the Incarnation. The Scripture readings used for these Feast Days focus on the Child who was conceived as well as the implications of the Incarnation. For example, the Epistle reading for the Annunciation is Hebrews 2:11-18, which addresses Jesus' humanity. He could not die for mankind if He were not truly a man. On the other hand, one of the Old Testament readings for Vespers of the eve of the Annunciation is Proverbs 8:22-30, which addresses Jesus' divinity as the Eternal Son. The Gospel reading for Matins is the account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth, which is linked to the Annunciation.

After the Annunciation, Mary immediately left for Elizabeth's house with her five companions, first going to Jerusalem to submit the purple and other color thread to the high priest for the veil. Upon receipt of the thread, the high priest was moved by the Grace of God and blessed Mary saying, "The Lord has magnified your name and you shall be blessed in all the generations of the earth".

Proceeding from Jerusalem they headed for Zechariah and Elizabeth's house, about five miles West of Jerusalem in the hill country of Judea (Luke 1:39). On her arrival, Elizabeth greeted Mary in a most extraordinary manner. As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, John leaped in Elizabeth's womb (Luke 1:41). As Mary entered the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth and greeted Elizabeth, the infant (or fetus!) John leaped in Elizabeth's womb (Luke 1:41, 44). John had been filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15) and would later be spoken of by Jesus as the greatest of the Prophets (Matthew 11:7-14). Thus John prophesied while still in his mother's womb.

At Mary's visit to Elizabeth, Zechariah was home also, but he was mute. There was a striking contrast between the two women, Mary and Elizabeth. Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her pregnancy with John the Baptist (Luke 1:36) and Mary had just begun her first month of pregnancy with Jesus. Elizabeth was in her 70s, while Mary was about 15. Yet, from Figure 1, Mary and Elizabeth were first cousins and Elizabeth knew Mary quite well from Mary's

growing-up in the Temple. For details about the life of the Virgin Mary, see Appendix B. Elizabeth also remembered how Mary was born 15 years ago to aged parents — and now Elizabeth herself is about to experience that same type of event.

Elizabeth was also filled with the Holy Spirit and responded to Mary with the same words used by the archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation: “Blessed are you among women” (Luke 1:28, 42). Elizabeth knew that Mary was still a virgin and this fact was not lost on Mary’s five companions either, as will be important six months later when Joseph returned to find Mary pregnant. Even though Mary was just in the first week or two of her pregnancy, Elizabeth called her “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43). From the illumination of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth recognized that the infant (fetus!) in her womb as God, the Second Person of the Trinity. Thus by the Holy Spirit, the mother of the prophet greeted the mother of the Lord, and both prophesied. As a side note, it is not inappropriate for us in the 20th Century to address Mary in the same manner as did the Archangel Gabriel and the Spirit-filled Elizabeth.

But one should also note Elizabeth’s humility. She said, “But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:43). Teenagers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine culture treated older women with respect. But Elizabeth, by the Holy Spirit, recognized Mary as special because of Who she carried in her womb. And Elizabeth deferred to Mary as greater than herself because she was very honored that her Lord (in Mary’s womb) had come to her.

The things Elizabeth said go beyond human understanding. Mary was barely into her first month. How could Elizabeth know she was even pregnant, never mind pregnant with the Son of God? She then went on to say (Luke 1:45) that Mary was blessed because she believed the things that were told her from the Lord; that is, at the Annunciation. Thus Elizabeth prophesied concerning the “mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:42-45).

Mary responded to Elizabeth with what has come to be called the Magnificat. [*Magnificat* is the first word in the Latin translation of Mary’s response.] The prophecy contained in the Magnificat is remarkable, coming from a 15-year-old girl. In a way, it foreshadows Mary’s Son as a 12-year-old boy when He astonished the teachers in the Temple with His understanding (Luke 2:46-47).

Beside prophesying that she would be called blessed by all generations from then on (Luke 1:48), Mary also spoke of:

- Scattering the proud
- Bringing down rulers
- Exalting the humble
- Filling the hungry with good things
- Sending the rich away empty-handed.

Some have said that the proud, the rulers and the rich were the Scribes and Pharisees or the Greek sages while the humble and hungry were the Gentiles who were afar off (Ephesians 2:11-18). The bringing in of the Gentiles was a mystery that was hidden from the ages, but it was now beginning to unfold (Ephesians 3:3-12, Romans 11:25-29, 16:25-26, Colossians 1:26-27).

Mary and her five companions stayed with Elizabeth for three months and returned to Joseph’s house just prior to the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:56). Just as Elizabeth had

hidden herself and stayed out of the public eye (Luke 1:24) when she became pregnant, so Mary did from the third month on. Thus no one but Zechariah and Elizabeth knew of her pregnancy.

**John’s Birth:** The occasion of John’s birth brought great rejoicing among all their neighbors and relatives (Luke 1:58). Since Zechariah was a nationally known public figure, even Herod took note of these events. When it came time to circumcise John on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, Zechariah’s muteness was finally released and he spoke praising God (Luke 1:63-79). Fear came upon all that dwelt around them and they wondered “what kind of child will this be?” (Luke 1:66). The expectation of something unusual or remarkable from John became important almost thirty years later when he began baptizing in the Jordan.

A deeper understanding of the purpose of John’s birth can be seen from the Epistle lesson for the Birth of John the Baptist (Romans 13:11-14:4). This lesson is also used in the Orthodox Church for the Sunday before Lent and contains a brief summary of John’s message, with striking similarities to preparation for Lent. John’s message was:

| MESSAGE                                     | REFERENCE                                 |
|---|---|
| 1. Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand | Matthew 3:2, Mark 1:4                     |
| 2. Be baptized                              | Matthew 3:5-6, Luke 3:3-7                 |
| 3. Clean up your life                       | Matthew 3:7-12, Luke 3:7-14               |
| 4. Messiah is coming                        | Matthew 3:11-12, Luke 3:15-17, Mark 1:7-8 |

As part of the preparation for the coming of Messiah, John taught his disciples an ascetic life of fasting and prayer (Matthew 9:14-17, Mark 2:18-22, Luke 5:33-39, 11:1). After the ascension, the Church has adapted to a life of fasting and prayer by seasons. The point of the fasting is not just a gloomy exterior as in a legal requirement, but a “bright sadness” as leading to self-control.

Comparing the Epistle lesson with John’s message, the Epistle lesson starts off with four sets of contrasting images as follows:

| EPISTLE MESSAGE                     | CONTRASTING IMAGE   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1. It’s time to awake out of sleep. | The night is far spent.   |
| 2. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.    | Make no provision or forethought for the lusts of the flesh.  |
| 3. Walk properly as in the day.     | Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in bed-hopping with no moral restraint, not in strife and envy. |
| 4. Put on the armor of light.       | Cast off the works of darkness.   |

For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed (Romans 13:11-14).

The above four items from Romans read point for point from the message of John the Baptist. **Awaking out of sleep** refers to a renewed repentance from association with things of the night, which speaks of the influence of evil powers. When this was written, most people awoke before dawn to begin the day’s work, since working at night wasn’t practical. With the advance of technology, it’s possible to work around the clock in different shifts, and we often miss some of the imagery implied by “night”. **Putting on the Lord Jesus Christ** is just another

term for baptism (Galatians 3:27). And making no provision for the lusts of the flesh refers to an Orthodox fast, where one fasts with the eyes, the ears, etc., as well as with food.

**Walking properly as in the day** is synonymous with cleaning up one's life. **Putting on the armor of light** speaks of the saints being revealed in light when Messiah returns and "we shall be like Him" (1 John 3:2). "Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:43). For He has "called us out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). And we "are all sons of light and sons of the day" (1 Thessalonians 5:5). For more on the implications of armor, see the Epistle lesson for the 27th Sunday after Pentecost titled "Armor and Weapons".

The theme that the Day of the Lord is at hand (and thus the need for repentance and preparation) is repeated often throughout the Scripture to encourage watchfulness and discourage laziness and bad habits with respect to one's spiritual life. For example, 1 Thessalonians 5:4-9, also speaks of waking up and putting on the armor of God as does Ephesians 6:10-17. Ephesians 5:14 quotes a first century baptismal hymn, "Awake, you who sleep, and Christ will give you light." 2 Peter 3:9-11 suggests that the Lord's delay in coming is to give more people an opportunity to repent.

In the second half of the Epistle lesson for the Birth of John, Paul wrote about eating or not eating meat. This is also applicable to the life of John, since John kept a very strict fast all his life (Mark 1:6). But yet the message for us today goes much deeper than just eating.

John Chrysostom stated that the issue Paul was addressing was a conflict centered on Jewish Christians. Some still adhered to the Jewish dietary laws (Leviticus 11) but didn't want to be obvious about it. So they became vegetarians and gave the appearance of fasting so they wouldn't have to eat pork. Like the Pharisees, they fasted twice per week (Luke 18:12) similar to John and his followers (Mark 2:18), thus esteeming one day above another (Romans 14:5). Others saw through this ruse and became very critical and offensive toward them. Paul began with a gentle rebuke for those who eat all meat: "Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat" (Romans 14:3). But he also included a veiled rebuke for the Jewish Christians by referring to them as weak (Romans 14:2). That is, Paul implies that if they're still holding onto the Law, they may be in danger of falling from Grace (Galatians 5:4).

Paul also addressed another problem concerning foods in his letter to Corinth. There the issue was about eating meat offered to idols that was later sold in the public meat market. Paul's admonition was similar, "Food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse" (1 Corinthians 8:8; see also Colossians 2:16).

Regarding foods, Paul stated, "Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). Regarding doctrines, he stated "If anyone preaches any other Gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:9), even if it be "an angel from heaven" (Galatians 1:8). Paul further stated, "But I fear, lest somehow as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached..." (2 Corinthians 11:3-4). The conflict over food according to Paul, (Romans 14:1) was a "dispute over doubtful things" and not fundamentals (Homily XXV on Romans 14).

Beneath the surface of the Epistle lesson is a message of forgiveness and tolerance among the members of the Body of Christ, which is very appropriate for both the beginning of Lent and the message of John. As people came to John and confessed their sins before baptism (Matthew 3:6), John counseled them regarding some specific things they could do. All the things he said have to do with relationships among the members of the Body of Christ (Luke 3:10-14). In the context of Romans 14, some will be able to fast; some won't be able to, even if they wanted to. Part of forgiveness is the acceptance in love of our brothers and sisters the way they are without judging them or despising them as not being spiritual enough. Each person gets out of fasting according to what they put into it. And since that is to be done in secret between each person and the Lord, each person stands, falls and is rewarded by the Lord who sees in secret.

The Lord has said: "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Matthew 7:1-2). The Lord applied this in the Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:22ff, compare Matthew 25:24-30) to the unprofitable servant. He also extended the definition of judging others, applying it to even careless words spoken without much thought (Matthew 12:36-37).

Dorotheos of Gaza (6th Century) wrote: "Why do we usurp God's right to judge? It is for God alone to judge, to justify or to condemn. He knows the state of each one of us and our capacities, our deviations and our gifts, our constitution and our preparedness...according to the knowledge that He alone has. How do we know what tears (our brother) has shed about (his problems) before God? We may well know about his sin, but we often don't know about the repentance. (Discourse on Refusal to Judge our Neighbors).

The whole point of the fasting, prayer and preparation is to turn our attention to the treasure in heaven, which is within us. The more we are diligent in this area, the more the gold gets refined and the more the precious stones get polished. For those that neglect so great a salvation (Hebrews 2:3), they run the risk of the servant with the one talent in the Parable of the Talents, where his treasure was taken away and given to someone else. This is an important understanding of John's role as the Forerunner of Christ, since it was John's stated purpose to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just (Luke 1:17, Malachi 4:6).

The hymns of the Church have had much to say about the birth of John. By his birth, John released the voice of his father, for it was not fitting for the father to be silent when the voice crying in the wilderness had come and foretold the coming of Christ (Isaiah 40:3, Matthew 3:3, Luke 3:4). John has been called the Voice of the Word and the Forerunner of the Light because of his relationship to Christ. In this respect, he has been called a lampstand because he held up the Light of Christ for all to see (Luke 1:76-79, John 8:12, 3:28-30). John has been called the first of the apostles, since he was sent by the Father also (John 17:18). Malachi called him an earthly angel (Mal. 3:1), where the Hebrew word *malak* (from which comes "Malachi") can be translated either angel or messenger. From his life of strict asceticism in the desert (Matt. 3:4, Luke 5:33-35), John lived his life as if he were dwelling in heaven and had no need of food. Born of a barren womb, John was an initiator of the Divine Plan, a fruitfulness beyond age (i.e. of his parents), who was followed by a conception without seed (i.e. Christ conceived by the Virgin Mary).

From the very womb of his mother he was a prophet, for he leaped and rejoiced as he saw the coming of the Queen (Luke 1:41), who was carrying Him who is outside time. Elizabeth conceived the Forerunner of the Grace of God, while the Virgin Mary conceived Christ, the Lord of Glory. The greater miracle was preceded by another. As the barren mother embraced the virgin mother, the child, who had been sanctified from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15), leaped for joy. Within the womb, the servant acclaimed his Lord. In her surprise, the mother of the Forerunner asked, "And how have I deserved that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?" In the Spirit, Elizabeth understood that while she carried one who proclaimed the Law, Mary carried the Author of the Law. Elizabeth carried the King's messenger who proclaimed the Word and made straight His paths, Mary carried the King Who is the Word from eternity (John 1:1,14).

Zechariah, the father of the prophet, was himself a prophet. By John's birth, John broke his father's silence that had come at the visit of an angel. His father came to know clearly the revelation of God and the ineffable condescension of Christ. Zechariah, in turn, prophesied how his son would be called the Prophet of the Highest, and how he would go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways (Luke 1:76). As the bud of Zechariah blossomed, he became the adornment of the wilderness (Luke 1:80) and brought joy to the hearts of the faithful (Luke 1:64-66). By his proclaiming of the Light, the ancient riddles and obscure images of the Law have begun to disappear. Through the Prophet, the Lord proclaimed that He shall be glorified and exalted (Luke 3:16-17), and in assuming fallen mankind, He will lift it to the wondrous Radiance of His Divinity (Eph. 1:9-12, 2:6-7, 3:9-10).

## **JOHN GROWING UP**

**The Birth of Jesus:** Jesus was born six months after John. This had a significant effect on John's father Zechariah. Eight days after His birth, Jesus was circumcised in the Temple according to the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 12:1-3). It was at this time that babies were given their name (Luke 2:21, 1:59-65). Zechariah was not in charge of Temple services during the week of Jesus' circumcision, but he may have been present, since he lived nearby. With his muteness gone, it came to be his week to serve as priest in charge of Temple services during the week that the Virgin Mary came for the rites of purification after childbirth. Forty days after Jesus' birth, Mary, Joseph and Jesus came to the Temple for the rite of purification according to the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 12:4, Luke 2:22). This event is remembered as another of the Twelve Major Feast Days of the Orthodox Church, and is called the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. It was during this week that Zechariah was in charge of Temple services.

During the rite of purification after Jesus' birth, Zechariah treated Mary different from the other women who had just had babies. Zechariah had Mary stand in the place reserved for virgins where married women had no right to stand. The midwives that attended Jesus' birth supported Zechariah in this position -- that Mary remained a virgin after childbirth. Zechariah had inquired of these midwives, Salome (Mary's first cousin) and Zelomi. In their post-natal care of Mary, the midwives were amazed that Mary's hymen was undisturbed, indicating a true virgin birth, and they testified about this. Thus Zechariah proclaimed the virgin birth in the Temple. Zechariah also remembered Mary's visit to Elizabeth ten months earlier and he knew that Mary had been carrying the Son of God.

The Pharisees and some other priests vehemently objected to Zechariah's treatment of Mary, but Zechariah insisted that she was still a virgin even though she was carrying her Son.

The Pharisees were as much bent out of shape by Zechariah doing this as they were later by Jesus who referred to Himself as The Son of God (John 8:37-42) and as the Great I AM (John 8:58) who spoke to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). The Pharisees were so angry that they immediately went to Herod to plot Zechariah's death.

Two people met Joseph, Mary and Jesus at the Presentation: Simeon and Anna. Simeon was a very old man, was righteous and devout, and looked for the consolation of Israel. It had been revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah (Luke 2:25-26). According to traditional sources, Simeon was over 200 years old and had been a translator of the Septuagint (the Hebrew Old Testament translated into Greek). The Apostle Matthias was described as once a student of Simeon; thus Matthias was one of the oldest of the Twelve Apostles.

Simeon took the infant Jesus in his arms and prophesied concerning the mystery, which for ages had been hidden in God. Namely that the Gentiles were to be fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body of Christ and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel (Ephesians 3:4-11, Colossians 1:26). With his Lord in his arms, he then asked his Lord to let him depart this life in peace after waiting so long to see his Salvation (Luke 2:29-30). Other sources add that Simeon's eyes were opened, like the eyes of Elisha's servant (2 Kings 6:15-17), and he saw angels standing in a circle around Him, like bodyguards standing by their King. Simeon then blessed Joseph and Mary and prophesied again about the impact Jesus was to have and about "a sign that shall be spoken against", which would be the Cross (Luke 2:34-35). One might wonder who was presenting whom. Was Simeon presenting Jesus in the Temple or was Jesus presenting Simeon to His Father (Let your servant depart in peace...) after a long and very fruitful life?

Just as Simeon was saying this, the Prophetess Anna entered. She was an 84 year old widow who did not leave the Temple, but served God with fasting and prayers day and night (Luke 2:36-38). She spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Israel. Anna had undoubtedly known Mary during the 10+ years that Mary lived in the Temple as a young girl. The Temple area was not so big that someone could be overlooked for 10 years, especially someone like Mary who was renowned for having regular contact with angels. Anna also knew about the virgin birth and she spoke to everyone about this following of the actions of Zechariah.

**The Visit of the Magi:** According to tradition, the Wise Men or Magi came from Persia. They were descendants of the Prophet Daniel and knew something about God from Daniel's writings. Daniel had predicted that there would be 483 years from the command to rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah came (i.e.  $69 \times 7$  years, Daniel 9:25). Having access to the records in Babylon, they knew about what year to expect Messiah.

Daniel had been promoted in Babylon in the 6th Century BC to be chief of the soothsayer priests, conjurers, master astrologers and diviners (Daniel 5:11). This was a position of technical and priestly duties. But Daniel and his three co-workers also had political responsibilities with Daniel as prefect and Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego in administration (Daniel 2:48-49, 5:29). It had become widely known that Daniel's God was a revealer of mysteries (Daniel 2:47) and that Daniel possessed "the wisdom of the gods" (Daniel 5:11-12, 6:1-3). And Daniel's God was even proclaimed to be above all others (Daniel 6:25-28).



The result of all this was a ruling class of Magi in Persia, who ran the government, appointed the kings and performed the religious functions. Three of these Magi led the entourage over the 800-mile journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. According to tradition, their names were Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar; in later centuries, the relics of these three Magi were very highly honored both in Constantinople and later in Medieval Europe.

The arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem accompanied by a small army created a tense political situation. Fifty years prior to the birth of Christ (in the Battle of Carrhae) the Persians had defeated the Romans and had occupied Jerusalem. But Herod's father (Antipater) had re-established Roman rule in Palestine. Thus the arrival of the Magi with their entourage commanded instant respect and very careful negotiations. All Jerusalem was troubled that a foreign army was in town (Matthew 2:3).

The Magi claimed to be following a star all the way from the East (Matthew 2:2). This was no ordinary star, and the Magi knew it! As the star moved, they moved; finally the star stopped over the house that Mary and Joseph and Jesus were living in (Matthew 2:9). Some people have tried to link this star with several planets; this may not be possible due to the context. Some of the Church Fathers suggested that the star was supernatural; that is, a very luminous angel.

The Prophet Balaam (15th Century BC), from Babylon, had prophesied concerning a star in connection with the coming Messiah (Numbers 24:17). That the Magi made the connection between the star they followed and 15-century-old prophecies indicates that their enlightenment was quite advanced.

John was about 18 months old when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem. The Magi probably didn't trust anything Herod said; he had been in power for over 30 years and had a reputation for extreme cruelty. For example, Herod had a number of his own family slain on the merest suspicion; Augustus Caesar was said to have commented "it is better to be Herod's hog than to be his son". Just before he died, Herod rounded up and imprisoned a number of the Jewish leaders. Then he gave orders that they all be executed the day he died so that no one would rejoice that Herod died (Josephus, Antiquities, Books 15, 16, 17; Wars of the Jews, Book 1, chapters 22-33). In short, Herod was a monster and Josephus recorded him dying an agonizingly painful death. In today's terminology, Herod would be described as seriously mentally ill.

When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, they must have known they were close. But the star had disappeared for a while (either intentionally or due to cloud cover); otherwise Herod's soldiers could have followed the star also. John Chrysostom reached this conclusion also. After leaving Herod's palace, the Magi "rejoiced with exceedingly great joy when they saw the star" again (Matthew 2:10). This indicates that the star reappeared to them.

The Magi saw right through Herod's lies about wanting to worship the new King himself (Matthew 2:8). After all, Herod had no idea that this event had happened in his own backyard and he hadn't noticed the star. The Jewish leaders also were totally unaware of what had happened. They, on the other hand, had come 800 miles with a small army carrying treasures (Matthew 2:11) to present to the new King that prophecy spoke of as the turning point of human history. One might excuse Herod for not knowing, but the Jewish leaders had no excuse at all.

If they had missed the announcement by the shepherds, they certainly hadn't missed the proclamation of the Virgin Birth by Zechariah, the chief priest and father of John the Baptist.

John Chrysostom commented on this as follows: "The Magi sought the Lord Christ, born King of the Jews, among those from whom they knew that Balaam, a prophet from the Gentiles, had prophesied that He would come. The faith of the Magi is the condemnation of the Jews. The Magi believed on the authority of their one soothsayer Balaam and the Prophet Daniel; but the Jews, from the testimony of many prophets, refused to believe. Whereas the Magi acknowledged that the coming of Christ would terminate their profane knowledge and magical acts, the Jews would not accept the Lawgiver's doing away with their sacrifices and refused to accept the mysteries of the divine dispensation. The Magi confessed a stranger; the Jews rejected their own" (Sermon for the Epiphany).

When the Magi reached the house where Mary, Joseph, Jesus (and probably James also) lived, they fell down and worshipped Him (Matthew 2:11). Joseph was not wealthy; the offering they gave at the time of their purification was two turtledoves — the default offering for those too poor to afford a lamb (Luke 2:22-24, Leviticus 12:1-8). Joseph, being a carpenter who built houses, had had time to build something to take the place of the cave. Jesus was about a year old when the Magi arrived.

### **The Holy Innocents of Bethlehem**

When Herod secretly called the Magi for a private audience (Matthew 2:7), he asked what time the star appeared. Herod figured — probably correctly — that the star appeared when Jesus was born. Thus Herod found out how old Jesus was and used this information as part of his murderous plot on the Holy Innocents (Matthew 2:16-18). The Magi probably didn't trust anything Herod said; he had been in power for over 30 years and had a reputation for extreme cruelty. For example, Herod had a number of his own family slain on the merest suspicion; Augustus Caesar was said to have commented "it is better to be Herod's hog than to be his son". Just before he died, Herod rounded up and imprisoned a number of the Jewish leaders. Then he gave orders that they all be executed the day he died so that no one would rejoice that Herod died (Josephus, Antiquities, Books 15, 16, 17; Wars of the Jews, Book 1, chapters 22-33). In short, Herod was a monster and Josephus recorded him dying an agonizingly painful death. When the Magi arrived from Persia with an air of royalty and with a considerable contingent of armed bodyguards, Herod's paranoia went into high gear when they said they came to worship the newborn King of the Jews (Matthew 2:1-8). When Herod then found out they double-crossed him, he sent his troops out in desperation to massacre every boy who might possibly be the newborn King (Matthew 2:16-18).

When the Magi were divinely warned in a dream not to return to Herod (v.12), they didn't need a lot of persuasion to put some distance between themselves and him very quickly. So they left for their own country by another route (Matthew 2:12). When they departed, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream saying, "Arise and take the child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the child to destroy Him. And he arose and took the child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt; and was there until the death of Herod" (Matthew 2:13-15).

Just as Joseph, Mary, Jesus and James left for Egypt, Herod went on a rampage. “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Magi, he became very enraged. He sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its vicinity from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the Magi” (Matthew 2:16). According to tradition, Jesus was about one year old when the 14,000 innocent children were massacred.

In connection with this slaughter, Matthew quoted a prophecy of Jeremiah, “A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning; Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they are no more” (Matthew 2:18, Jeremiah 31:15). Rachel was the wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin. Rachel had been barren for a long time prior to Joseph’s birth and had given her maid to her husband because of her barrenness; her children were very important to her (Genesis 30:1-8). As Jacob and his family were traveling back to Canaan from Mesopotamia, Rachel gave birth to Benjamin just before they arrived in Bethlehem. Rachel died in childbirth and was buried there (Genesis 35:16-20). Later, when the promised land was divided among the twelve tribes of Israel, Ramah along with Bethel, Jerusalem and Bethlehem were among the cities within the land allocated to the tribe of Benjamin (Joshua 18:21-28).

Thus, the prophecy of Jeremiah goes beyond the weeping of the mothers of the slaughtered children; even Rachel, herself, was weeping inconsolably. One might object that Rachel had been dead for c. 1800 years; how could she weep? To understand this, one needs to understand the Lord’s viewpoint concerning who’s dead. As proof of the Resurrection the Lord had quoted a much-used passage, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. God is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Matthew 22:32). If Jacob is not dead, neither is Rachel.

The heartless slaughter of all these children raises another issue: How could a loving God allow this tragedy to happen? After all, the Lord had said that a sparrow doesn’t even fall to the ground apart from the Father’s will and that the very hairs of our head are numbered (Matthew 10:29-30). So He knew what was going on!

John Chrysostom addressed this issue at length: “Although there are many people that injure (others), yet there is not so much as one that is injured. That which we may suffer unjustly from any one, it speaks either to the doing away of our sins, God so putting the wrong to our account, or it goes to the recompense of rewards”.

“To be clearer, let us use an illustration. Consider a certain servant who owes his Master a lot of money, and suppose that this servant has been spitefully used and robbed by unjust men. If it had been in the Master’s power to stop the plunderer and He didn’t, but instead He credited what was taken toward the servant’s debt, has the servant been injured? By no means! What if the Master credits the servant more than he lost? Has he not gained in the process?”

Chrysostom gave several other illustrations. “Remember David, as a fugitive from Absalom, came upon Shimei, a relative of Saul. Shimei followed David as he went along cursing him continually, throwing stones at him and reviling him, trampling on his afflictions as being well deserved”. David’s captains wanted to “cut off this dead dog’s head”. But David forbid it saying: “Let him alone and let him curse; perhaps the Lord will look upon my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day” (2 Samuel 16:5-12).

Quoting David again, “Look upon my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins. Look upon my enemies, for they have been multiplied, and they have hated me with unjust hatred” (Psalm 25:18-19 LXX). “And Lazarus again for the same cause enjoyed comfort having in this life suffered innumerable evils (Luke 16:20-25). They therefore who are wronged are not wronged at all if they bear nobly all that they suffer. Rather they gain even more abundantly whether they are disciplined by God or scourged by the devil” (Homily IX on Matthew 2).

With regard to the 14,000 children slaughtered in Bethlehem, the Church has referred to them as The Holy Innocents and has counted them among the martyrs. Chrysostom stated in another place: “Nothing is holier than the tongue, which, in evils, gives thanks to God. Truly in no respect does it fall short of that of martyrs; both are alike crowned. For over the martyr stands the executioner to force one to deny God by blasphemy. In the other case, the devil stands over one torturing him with executioner thoughts, darkening him with despondency. If then, one bears his grief and gives thanks, he has gained a crown of martyrdom. If her little child is sick and her mother still gives God thanks, this is a crown for her. What torture is so bad that despondency is not worse? Still it does not force her to vent any bitter word. If the child dies and again she gives thanks for the time spent, she had become a daughter of Abraham. She didn’t sacrifice with her own hand, yet she was pleased with the sacrifice, which is the same thing. She felt no indignation when the gift was taken away” (Homily VIII on Colossians 3).

Christ had said, “Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25). “For whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:27).

Most of the martyrs didn’t go out of their way to put themselves in harm’s way and seek martyrdom. They just couldn’t avoid it and faced it courageously and head-on. The Holy Innocents didn’t seek to die in their Lord’s place, but that’s what they did. “Their Lord knows what they might have achieved in terms of good works had they lived. For this reason, He laid up for them no small reward” (Homily IX on Matthew 2).

**Growing up in the Desert:** At the same time that Jesus left for Egypt with Joseph, Mary and Joseph’s son James (Matthew 2:13-15), Zechariah sent Elizabeth out into the desert with the toddler John. Herod had suspected that John was the child the Magi were searching for and gave instructions to his troops to show him and his parents no mercy. When Zechariah wouldn’t tell where John was hiding, the soldiers murdered him right in front of the Temple where he was serving. Zechariah’s blood left permanent stains in the marble paving as a reminder of the treachery of the Pharisees (Velimirovic, Prologue June 24). Thirty two years later, Jesus spoke to the scribes and Pharisees, “that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the Temple and the Altar” (Matthew 23:35). Not only was Jesus accusing them of the murder of His uncle Zechariah, but also he was calling them sons of Cain!

When Elizabeth took John to the desert (or the Wilderness of Judah just west of the Dead Sea, see Matthew 3:1) they hid in a cave during the massacre. Forty days after Zechariah’s death, Elizabeth (who was in her mid 70’s) also died leaving the toddler John alone in the wilderness. According to tradition, John was fed and guarded by angels until his public appearances almost 30 years later (N. Velimirovic, Prologue, September 5.)

This may have a lot to do with why John was received so strongly for several reasons. First, John was not the only one to come out preaching some message. According to Gamaliel, Theudas in the First Century BC and then Judas of Galilee about the time of the birth of John rose up claiming to be somebody. But they were killed and their followers were scattered (Acts 5:35-37). Secondly, John was not the only one living in the Wilderness of Judah. Much excavation has been done on monastic communities in that area, where the most famous of these is the site of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which showed much activity back to c. 100 BC. Thirdly, when one considers the public expectation of John from his remarkable birth from a barren woman, and his father's muteness, there were extremely high expectations of what John would do.

Fourthly, when John began his public appearances, he is not recorded as performing any miracles (John 10:41). He could have done so since he came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), but that was not his focus. However, if John had been raised and guarded by angels and everyone knew it (since that area was well traveled), then everyone would definitely start listening when John began speaking. John's message was one of an eyewitness account of the Kingdom of God due to the circumstances of his upbringing and the continuous presence of the angels.

As John grew up, he "became strong in spirit" (Luke 1:80). He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15) and did not drink wine or strong drink at all. This means he was a Nazirite similar to Samson (Judges 13) and the Prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1), both of whom were also born to barren women. A Nazirite vow separated the individual to a monastic-like life for a period of service to the Lord. During his vow he neither cut his hair nor ate anything made from grapes (Numbers 6). Most Nazirite vows lasted less than three months; the Apostle Paul took Nazirite vows often (Acts 18:18, 21:23-25).

John was described as dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt (Matthew 3:4). Clothing made of camel's hair or goat's hair (sometimes called sackcloth) was similar to burlap today and was very scratchy and uncomfortable (compare Matthew 11:7-8). People sometimes wore this kind of clothing during times of mourning or repentance. John was doing both: mourning the sins of Israel and calling for her repentance. John's food (Matthew 3:4) was described as locusts and wild honey. Locusts are among the kosher foods listed in Leviticus 11 and John's diet was very similar to a modern Orthodox fast that is used four times during the year. John and his disciples were also described as fasting often (Matthew 9:14).

In the following centuries, many monasteries were constructed in the Wilderness of Judea and farther south into the Sinai Peninsula, especially near Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai. Many of these were destroyed during the Moslem conquest of the 6th and 7th centuries, but some survived intact. Others have been rebuilt and more are currently being excavated. The entire issue of Biblical Archaeology Review Sept./Oct. 1995 is devoted to these desert monasteries.

## **JOHN'S MINISTRY**

**Old Testament Readings for the Feast Days of John:** There are two sets of Old Testament Readings for the Feast Days of John, one set for his nativity, and the other set for all the other Feast Days, according to the Table below:

|                               | <b>John's Nativity, June 24</b>                  | <b>All Other Feast Days</b>                                  |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>1<sup>st</sup> Reading</b> | Genesis 17:15-17, 19; 18:11-14; 21:1-2, 4-8      | Isaiah 40:1-3, 9; 41:17-18; 45:8; 48:20-21; 54:1             |
| <b>2<sup>nd</sup> Reading</b> | Judges 13:2-8, 13-14, 17-18, 21                  | Malachi 3:1; Mark 1:2; Malachi 3:1-3, 5-7, 12, 18, 17; 4:4-6 |
| <b>3<sup>rd</sup> Reading</b> | Isaiah 40:1-3, 9; 41:17-18; 45:8; 48:20-21; 54:1 | Wisdom 4:7, 16-17, 19-20; 5:1-7                              |

Each of these Readings speaks of John's message and his role as the Forerunner. The Readings from Genesis give a summary of the birth of Isaac by a barren woman, Sarah, when she was about 90 years old (Genesis 17:17). Similarly John was born to Elizabeth in her old age (Luke 1:36) when she was in her 70's. Nothing is impossible for the Lord (Genesis 18:14).

The Readings from Judges describe the circumstances surrounding the birth of Samson, who was also born of a barren woman. Like Samson, John was a Nazirite from the womb to the day of his death (Judges 13:7, Luke 1:15). The Nazirite vow of the Old Testament (Numbers 6) was the predecessor of the monastic vow of the New Testament.

The Readings from Isaiah describe what John was to do. For example:

- A voice crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord (Isaiah 40:3, Mark 1:3).
- Say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! (Isaiah 40:9)
- Water will flow in the desert (Isaiah 41:17-18). This speaks of three things: John's baptism (Mark 1:4), the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39), and the blossoming of monastic communities in the desert in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century.
- Water will come from the Rock (Isaiah 48:20-21), which is Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4).
- Godliness and righteousness will abound (Isaiah 45:8, Luke 3:8-14).
- The sons of the desolate one will be more numerous than the sons of the married woman (Isaiah 54:1, Galatians 4:27-28). This contrasts the New Jerusalem with those who refused to accept Christ.

The Readings from Malachi give more descriptive details to John's work.

- He was to be the Lord's messenger or angel to prepare the way before Him (Malachi 3:1, Mark 1:2).
- He was to act as a smelter and purifier of silver (Malachi 3:3, 12, 18). This imagery has been used often by the Church Fathers to refer to the burning away of our sins through repentance.
- Repentance to escape judgment was John's message (Malachi 3:5-7, Luke 3:7-14).
- Coming in the spirit and power of Elijah, John turned the hearts of the people (Malachi 4:4-6, Matthew 11:13-15, 17:10-13)

**His Message:** Before John's birth, the Archangel Gabriel quoted Malachi 4:5 to Zechariah (Luke 1:17). The complete text from Malachi is, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the Prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers lest I come and smite the land with a curse." Gabriel added that this was to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

John began his ministry in the region around the Jordan (that is, just north of the Dead Sea) preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Luke 3:4). All the Old

Testament prophets issued a call to repentance also. And included in the Old Testament purification rites was washing in clean water. But Old Testament remission of sins was by blood sacrifice, not by water. Water just cleaned up the person to qualify him to offer the sacrifice. John was thus preparing the people to worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24) where there would be no Temple to offer animal sacrifices at. The content of what John said can be broken down as follows:

- o Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:2)
- o Be baptized with confession of sins (Matthew 3:5-6, Luke 3:7, Mark 1:4-5)
- o Clean up your life (Luke 3:10-14)
- o Messiah is coming (Matthew 3:11-12, Mark 1:7-8, Luke 3:15-17)

John's message really struck a resonant chord and everyone was coming to him to be baptized (Matthew 3:5, Mark 1:5). Even the scribes and Pharisees came out to be baptized. [Could the Apostle Paul have been among them?] These were the same people and their descendants who had orchestrated the murder of his father, Zechariah, about 30 years earlier. To them, John said, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matthew 3:7) John went on to tell them to bring forth fruit in keeping with their supposed repentance and that the ax is already laid to the root of the trees that don't bear fruit. They will be cut down and thrown in the unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:8-12). And John refused to baptize them (Luke 7:30).

In iconography, John is pictured as having wings like an angel. This is a reference to Malachi 3:1 (quoted in Matthew 11:10, Mark 1:2, Luke 7:27) "Behold, I am going to send my messenger (literally angel), and he will clear the way before Me."

**John's Methods:** John was a very humble man who knew his place. He stated, concerning Jesus, that he was not worthy even to carry or untie Jesus' sandals (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16). John stated that while he baptized with water, the One coming after him who was mightier than him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7-8, Luke 3:16-17, Acts 2:2-4). John stated that he is but the friend of the Bridegroom (i.e. Jesus) who stands by and hears Him and greatly rejoices because of the Bridegroom's voice. This was John's joy and he stated "He must increase but I must decrease" (John 3:29-30).

In this regard, John pointed out Jesus, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, 36). When John did this, some of his devoted followers began to follow Jesus instead. Among those doing so were Peter, Andrew, James and John Zebedee, Philip and Nathanael from among the Twelve, plus many others (John 1:36-45).

Jesus' relationship with many of His Apostles developed out of their relationship to John the Baptist. For example, from John 1:35-40, two of John the Baptist's disciples was Andrew and the Apostle John. By implication, Peter and James were John's disciples also. When John the Baptist pointed out Jesus as "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29, 36), Andrew and John got their brothers and began following Jesus (John 1:37-41). At this point, they recognized Jesus as

Messiah (John 1:41), but Jesus had not called them as Apostles yet. That didn't occur until several months after they had left following John the Baptist.

At the time of Jesus' calling of the above four Apostles, John the Baptist had just been put in prison by Herod (Matthew 4:12). John spent over a year in prison before being beheaded (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9). During John's imprisonment, Jesus' public ministry began to grow considerably and John even inquired about the details from prison (Matthew 11:2-6, Luke 7:18-23). John the Baptist's message, however, continued to spread due to the zeal of his other followers. For example, John the Baptist was imprisoned in 27 AD. Yet twenty six years later (in 53 AD), at the beginning of Paul's Third Missionary Journey, Apollos came to Corinth preaching the baptism of John the Baptist (Acts 18:23-28). Paul came across twelve other followers of John in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7). Apollos had been one of the original Seventy sent out by the Lord (Luke 10:1-24). But he had apparently gone back home to Alexandria before Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given. He hadn't yet heard of the Holy Spirit (along with the 12 others) in 53 AD when Paul, Aquila and Priscilla updated them. This indicates that John the Baptist's impact was substantial in order for his message to continue 25 years after his death.

John Chrysostom noted that Jesus did not begin His public ministry in earnest until John the Baptist was put in prison by Herod (Matthew 4:12-17; John 4:1). The importance of this was to defuse the criticism of the Pharisees who said that Jesus bore witness only of Himself (John 8:13). This was not true; John had borne witness to Him earlier (John 1:29, 36; 3:26-36). While John did not perform any miracles (John 10:41), Jesus did many, thus confirming John's words (John 5:36, 10:25, 10:38). Jesus began preaching the good news (i.e. Gospel), not mentioning the ax and a tree cut down (Matthew 3:9-10), the sitting (Matthew 25:31), the threshing floor and unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:12) until later (Homily XIV on Matthew 4).

John most likely had a loud voice that carried well outdoors. Not everyone can speak to 5000 men plus women and children outdoors and still be heard over the disruptive noise of squirming children as Jesus did (Matthew 14:13-21). John probably had a similar kind of "presence" when he spoke.

John was also very outspoken. To call the religious leaders of his day a bunch of snakes and tell them they were going to hell took courage (Matthew 3:7-12, Luke 3:7-9). John did not confine his outspokenness to religious leaders. He also publicly criticized Herod Antipas the Tetrarch (the son of his father's murderer) for the incest of marrying his brother Philip's wife Herodias (Matthew 14:3-4). This landed John in prison where Herodias later arranged to have John beheaded and his head brought to her party on a platter (Matthew 14:6-11). According to tradition, John then continued his announcement of the coming of Messiah to souls in Hades, and John is considered a forerunner there as well as on earth. After John was beheaded, his disciples buried his body (Matthew 14:12) while Herod had his head thrown in the local garbage dump outside the city. Joanna (the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward) who was later one of the Myrrh-Bearing women and who contributed to the support of Jesus' ministry, retrieved John's head during the night and secretly buried it in the Garden of Gethsemane (Velimirovic, Prologue, June 27).

To the people of his day, John was considered to be a prophet, and very much so. This is illustrated in the questions the chief priests and scribes posed to Jesus during the week before His



crucifixion: “By what authority do you do all these things? Who is He who gave you this authority?” Jesus returned a question to them: “The baptism of John - was it from heaven or from man?” They reasoned among themselves that if they said “from heaven”, Jesus would ask why they didn’t believe him. But if they answered “from men, all the people will stone us, for they are persuaded that John was a prophet” (Luke 20:1-6). Not only did the people consider John to be a prophet, but also this belief was so strongly held that they would have stoned their religious leaders for blasphemy if they denied it.

Jesus confirmed what the people felt. He stated flatly that John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets (Luke 7:24-28, Matthew 11:8-14). Yet Jesus went on to say that the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John (Luke 7:28). How is this so? Does this mean that Joe Nominal Christian, who may attend Church on Christmas and Easter, is greater than John the Baptist? Cyril of Alexandria had some things to say about this. “John, together with as many as preceded him, was born of woman; but they who have received the Faith are no more called the sons of women, but as the wise Evangelist says, are born of God. For to all that received Him (that is, Christ), He gave power to become the sons of God, even to those who believe on His Name. They have been born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13). For we have been born again to the adoption of sons, not of corruptible seed, but by the living and abiding Word of God (1 Peter 1:23). Those then who are not of corruptible seed, but on the contrary have been born of God, are superior to anyone born of woman (Commentary on Luke, Chapter 7).

Cyril also said that those born of women have earthly fathers, but we have Him who is above in heaven as our Father. And so we say in the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father, who art in heaven...” (Matthew 6:9-13, Luke 11:2-4). We have become partakers of the Divine Nature by being richly endowed with that Lordly and all-governing Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:15-20, 2 Corinthians 3:18). Even though we are inferior to those who have fulfilled the righteousness that is by the Law (inferior, that is, in righteousness of life), yet we who have received faith in Him are endowed with greater privileges. Although the blessed Baptist was thus great in virtue, yet he plainly confessed that he stood in need of holy baptism. For he said, speaking to Christ, “I need to be baptized by You” (Matthew 3:14). John would have had no need of holy baptism, nor would he have requested it, if there had not been in it something more and better than the righteousness that is by the Law.

“Christ, therefore, does not contend against the honors of the saints; nor is it His purpose to diminish and strip of their renown those holy men who had before attained victory. It is rather to prove that the Gospel mode of life is superior to the legal worship. And it is to crown with surpassing honors the glory of faith that we all may believe in Him” (Ibid.) To this we may add, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

John Chrysostom had additional insight into Christ’s statement “The least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John”. Because of John’s exceeding greatness, there was a tendency for the multitudes to honor John above Christ. For the prophets had referred to John as an angel (Malachi 4:1), while the multitudes made light of Christ on numerous occasions, saying, “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” (Matthew 13:55). They even called Him a glutton and a winebibber (Luke 7:34). While Chrysostom acknowledged Christ’s words, “Among those born of women there has not arisen one greater than John” (Matthew 11:11), yet he pointed out that the least among the bodiless powers in heaven is greater than John (Hebrews 2:9). On the other

hand, Christ is the object of worship of all the angels in heaven (Hebrews 1:6, Deuteronomy 32:43 LXX), and it was He who laid the foundation of the earth (Hebrews 1:10). So there can be no real comparison between the servants and the Master (Matthew 3:11), as John, himself, was quick to point out (Homily xxxvii on Matthew 11). Thus Chrysostom stated that the comparison between John and the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is between John and the angels, not between John and Joe Nominal Christian.

## **THE BAPTISM OF JOHN**

John the Baptist was referred to by the Lord as the greatest of the Old Testament Prophets (Luke 7:28). As such, he came in the spirit and power of Elijah to “restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers lest I come and smite the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:5, Luke 1:17). In this context, “fathers” implies forefathers and “children” implies descendants, thus bringing the Faith back to what it was as received by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

John preached a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Luke 3:3). All the Old Testament Prophets also issued calls for repentance. But their calls for repentance focused people back to the Old Testament rituals where remission of sins was by blood sacrifice, not by water (Leviticus 4:20, Deuteronomy 21:8). Old Testament purification rites required those who offered sacrifices to wash in clean water beforehand; but water just cleaned up the person to qualify him to offer the sacrifice (Exodus 29:4, Leviticus 8:6, Exodus 19:10-15, Exodus 30:18-21).

Jesus later spoke about how true worshipers must worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24). Later in 70 AD, with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, people had no alternative. John alluded to this during his baptisms when he said, “Even now, the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:8-9).

In iconography, John is pictured as having wings like an angel. This is a reference to Malachi 3:1 (quoted in Matthew 11:10, Mark 1:2, Luke 7:27): “Behold, I am going to send my messenger (literally angel), and he will clear the way before Me”.

To understand the impact of John’s baptisms, one can look at the effects a generation after his death. In the Epistle lesson for Epiphany (Acts 19:1-8), Luke tells us about Apollos and twelve others in and around Ephesus that were “fervent in spirit” and who taught accurately the things of the Lord even though they knew only the baptism of John (Acts 18:24, 25; 19:1-3). This occurred at the beginning of Paul’s Third Missionary Journey, or c. 53 AD, which was 25 years after the death of John. According to tradition (N. Velimirovic, Prologue, Sept. 10), Apollos of Alexandria had been a member of the Seventy that Jesus sent out two by two to heal the sick and cast out demons (Luke 10:1-20). He had been instructed in the way of the Lord (by John) and was an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures (Acts 18:24-25).

After Apollos spoke boldly in the synagogue, Aquila and Priscilla (also of the Seventy) “took him aside and explained the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). A similar situation occurred with the other twelve; they hadn’t heard that there was a Holy Spirit (Acts 19:2). Apollos and his twelve co-workers had apparently been out of town at Pentecost and had

missed the giving of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4, 38)! For John's followers to be this zealous long after his death indicates the enormous impact of his life.

To the people of his day, John was more than just a baptizer and was considered to be a prophet, and very much so. This is illustrated in the questions the chief priests and scribes posed to Jesus during the week before His crucifixion. They asked, "By what authority do you do all these things? Who is He who gave you this authority?" Jesus returned a question to them: "The baptism of John - was it from heaven or from man?" They reasoned among themselves that if they said "from heaven", Jesus would ask why they didn't believe him. But if they answered "from men, all the people will stone us, for they are persuaded that John was a prophet" (Luke 20:1-6). Not only did the people consider John to be a prophet, but also this belief was so strongly held that they would have stoned their religious leaders for blasphemy if they denied it.

Jesus confirmed what the people felt. He stated flatly that John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets (Luke 7:24-28, Matthew 11:8-14). John was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). And just as John prepared the people of his day with baptism, so the spirit of his message prepares us for baptism today. We all need to keep coming back to the four points of his message illustrated earlier, especially new comers to the faith:

- Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand
- Be baptized with confession of sins
- Clean up our lives
- Messiah is coming.

But the baptism of John was incomplete. In Paul's words: "John baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him; that is, on Christ Jesus (Acts 19:4). John said the same thing: "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16).

Hippolytus, referring to John's statement, "I am not the Christ" (John 1:20) said that John was saying: "I am the servant, and not the Lord; I am the subject, and not the King; I am the sheep, and not the shepherd; I am a man, and not God. By my birth, I loosed the barrenness of my mother; I did not make virginity a mother. I was brought up from beneath; I did not come down from above. I bound the tongue of my father (Luke 1:20); I did not unfold Divine Grace. I was known by my mother, and I was not announced by a star (Matthew 2:9). I am worthless, and the least; but "after me there comes One who is before Me" (John 1:27). He is after me, indeed, in time, but before me by reason of the inaccessible and unutterable light of Divinity. "There comes One mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear. He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:2). I am subject to authority, but He has authority in Himself. I am bound by sins, but He is the Remover of sins. I apply the Law, but He brings Grace to light. I teach as a slave, but He judges as the Master. I have the earth as my couch, but He possesses heaven. I baptize with the baptism of repentance, but He confers the gift of adoption. Why do you give attention to me? I am not the Christ" (Discourse on the Theophany, 3).

## **The Baptisms Performed by Jesus**

Following Jesus' baptism by John, both Jesus and John were performing baptisms at the same time (John 3:22-23). Some of John's disciples were concerned that Jesus was baptizing more people than John (John 3:25-26, 4:1-2). John considered himself "the friend of the bridegroom who rejoices because of the bridegroom's voice" (John 3:29). "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

John testified of Jesus: "He who comes from heaven is above all. He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure" (John 3:31-34). John said this following his baptism of Jesus after having seen heaven opened, having seen the Spirit descend as a dove and having heard the Father's voice (Matthew 3:16-17).

These early baptisms that Jesus performed, or rather that Jesus' disciples performed (John 4:1-2), were different than baptisms that the same disciples performed after Pentecost. The difference being that the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:39). After Pentecost, when the 3,000 were converted as a result of Peter's preaching, they were baptized and received the gift of the Holy Spirit with the baptism (Acts 2:38-41). For more details on this subject, see the study for Epiphany.

## **JOHN'S BAPTISM OF JESUS**

If the Baptism of John was incomplete and intended just to prepare the way for the Messiah as John said (Matthew 3:11-12), why did Jesus need to be baptized at all by John? John actually tried to prevent Jesus from baptism saying that he needed to be baptized by Jesus, not vice versa (Matthew 3:14). Jesus stated, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). So John allowed Him to be baptized and the Uncreated accepted the laying on of hands by His own creation.

Hippolytus commented on this as follows: "As John said that he was not the Christ to the multitude, and as the people watched in eager expectation of seeing some strange spectacle with their bodily eyes, the devil was struck with amazement at such a testimony from John. Then lo, the Lord appeared, plain, solitary, poorly clothed, without escort, having on Him the body of man like a garment, and hiding the dignity of the Divinity, that He may elude the snares of the dragon. And not only did He approach John as Lord without royal retinue; but even like a mere man, and one involved in sin, He bent His head to be baptized by John. Wherefore John, on seeing so great a humbling of Himself, was struck with astonishment at the affair, and began to prevent Him, saying, as you have just heard, 'I have need to be baptized of You, and do You come to me?' What are You doing, O Lord? You teach things not according to custom. I have preached one thing (i.e. regarding You), and You perform another; the devil has heard one thing, and perceives another. Baptize me with the fire of Divinity! Why do You wait for water? Enlighten me with the Spirit! Why do You attend upon a creature? Baptize me, the Baptist, that Your preeminence may be known. I, O Lord, baptize with the baptism of repentance, and I cannot baptize those who come to me unless they first confess fully their sins. Be it so then that I baptize You, what have You to confess? You are the Remover of sins, and will You be baptized with the baptism of repentance? Though I should venture to baptize You, the Jordan dares not to come near You. 'I have need to be baptized of You, and do You come to me?'"

And what did the Lord say to him? “Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). Permit it to be so now, John; you are not wiser than I am. You see as man; I foreknow as God. It becomes me to do this first, and thus to teach. I engage in nothing unbecoming, for I am invested with honor. Do you marvel, O John, that I am not come in my dignity? The purple robe of kings suits not one in private station, but military splendor suits a king: am I come to a prince, and not to a friend? I am the Fulfiller of the law; I seek to leave nothing wanting to its whole fulfillment, that so after me Paul may exclaim, ‘Christ is the fulfilling of the law for righteousness to every one that believes’ (Romans 10:4). Baptize Me, John, in order that no one may despise baptism. You, the servant baptize me, in order that no one among kings or dignitaries may scorn to be baptized by the hand of a poor priest. Permit Me to go down into the Jordan, in order that they may hear my Father’s testimony, and recognize the power of the Son (Discourse on the Theophany, 4, 5).

The Gospel reading for Epiphany from John 1 gives us more details of this encounter. As Jesus was coming toward John to be baptized, Jesus’ identity was revealed to John and John stated: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who ranks higher than I, for He was before me.’ I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I come baptizing with water” (John 1:29-31). John also stated, “He who sent me to baptize with water said to me: ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’ “ (John 1:33). The Baptism of the Holy Spirit was something important to John, because John had been filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15). Therefore it was the Holy Spirit within John that alerted John to Jesus’ identity. John realized that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16, Matthew 3:11); this occurred on Pentecost, 30 AD (Acts 2:1-4).

As Jesus came up from the water of the Jordan River, what had been revealed to John about Jesus was confirmed. The heavens were opened; the Spirit of God descended like a dove and alighted on Him; and the Father’s voice came from heaven saying: “This is My Beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:16-17). Thus the Son of God was revealed to all humanity and made His appearance or Epiphany. In the Eastern Church this is also called Theophany (instead of Epiphany) meaning a manifestation of God.

But what did this manifestation of God mean in terms of “fulfilling all righteousness”? Jesus said later “He came not to destroy the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). Also, “till heaven and earth pass away nothing will pass from the Law till all is fulfilled” (Matthew 5:18). Jesus also defined the gist of the Law as being summarized in the Greatest Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-40, Mark 12:29-34). Jesus quantified this love for neighbors as a sacrificial love just like His love for man: “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another: **as I have loved you, so you also love one another**” (John 13:34). By loving one another like this, true righteousness is generated.

James, the Lord’s brother, wrote that loving one’s neighbor fulfilled the royal Law according to the Scripture (James 2:8). Paul wrote that the Law is a tutor to bring us to Christ (Galatians 3:24) and that Christ is the end of the Law for all who believe (Romans 10:4) because

His Law is written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). By bearing one another's burdens, we fulfill the Law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

Another aspect of fulfilling all righteousness involved Jesus' offering up Himself as the spotless Lamb of God (Hebrews 9:14, 1 Peter 1:19). He needed to keep the Law perfectly in order to do this, and thus He observed all the requirements of the Law (Luke 2:39, 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 John 3:5, Hebrews 4:15) including aspects of the Law that weren't necessary but which may offend some (Matthew 17:24-27). As a result of all this, the Church is able to be holy and spotless as the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:27, Colossians 1:22, 1 Timothy 6:14).

Jesus did not need to be baptized by John; John recognized this. But Jesus' purpose in becoming incarnate of the Virgin Mary and in His whole 33 years was to redeem a fallen creation. Jesus did not need purification. But by making the purification of humanity His own mission, He would wash away the sin of humanity, grant regeneration, and reveal the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Thus, His baptism was necessary for the fulfillment of all God's righteousness. Gregory of Nyssa said, "Jesus entered the filthy (i.e. sinful) waters of the world and when He came out, brought up (i.e. purified) the entire world with Him". If the Master, the Uncreated Son of God, can be baptized to fulfill all righteousness, how much more can we walk in newness of life. For more details on the effect Christ's baptism had on creation itself, see the section of the Epiphany study titled The Blessing of the Waters.

The hymns of the Church have a lot to say of Christ's baptism during Epiphany. Behold the marvel: the One who drew the curve of the heaven bows His head to the Forerunner, to the one made of clay. The vessel cries out to the potter, his Maker, "Why do You order me to do things beyond my worth? It is I who need to be baptized by You! How shall I stretch forth my hand and touch the head of Him who rules all things? Though You are the Son of Mary, yet I know You to be the pre-eternal God. You who are praised by the Seraphim now walk upon the earth. I am only a servant; I do not know how to baptize the Master!"

John the Forerunner was amazed. As a faithful servant, he cried out in fear, "What is this humility, O Savior? What is this poverty that You have put on? In the wealth of Your goodness and compassion, You have raised up man from his humiliation by clothing Yourself in him." The Savior of all replied to the Forerunner, "Come to Me this day, for I bring to pass a mystery. Serve Me with trembling, yet do not draw back in fear. For I, by nature undefiled, stand now before you in the waters of the Jordan and am baptized as man. For I make Adam new, who had been shattered by sin." John replied, "Who has ever seen the sun being cleansed? Who has ever seen the One, who clothed the heavens with clouds, stripped naked? Who has seen the Maker of the springs and rivers Himself enter the waters? I stand amazed at Your ineffable dispensation, O Master! Do not burden Your servant with awesome commands!"

As Christ was baptized in the Jordan, He sanctified the waters. He brought sanctification to the water and it becomes cleansing for our souls. Salvation comes through washing and through water the Spirit. By descending into the water, we ascend to God. He who covers the heavens with clouds was Himself covered by the streams of the Jordan. He who takes away the sins of the world was cleansed that I may be made clean. That which is outward and visible is earthly; that which is inwardly understood is higher than heaven. Accepting a servant's hand upon His head, He healed the passions of the world.

Having released your parents from the curse of childlessness, you acknowledged the Divine Offspring of the Virgin by leaping with great joy in the womb of your mother (Luke 1:41). O Forerunner of Christ, who are praised throughout the whole world, you are a companion of and equal to the angels, and you are a sharer in the mysteries of Grace. Following a way of life that was strange and untrodden by men, you came to the waters of the Jordan and heard the voice of the Father and saw the coming of the Spirit, thus revealing the Trinity. Since your appointed task was to baptize the pure and undefiled Light, you yourself were made a vessel of purity. As a lamp that gives light to all, you have revealed through the waters of baptism the Brightness of the Father's glory (Hebrews 1:3), who is made manifest in the flesh. You shone forth like the dawn, revealing the Sun of Justice (Malachi 4:2, Luke 1:78) to those in darkness. For you have become a preacher and a Forerunner of the salvation of all.

### **THE BEHEADING OF JOHN**

John was very outspoken. To call the religious leaders of his day a bunch of snakes and tell them they were going to hell took courage (Matthew 3:7-12, Luke 3:7-9). John did not confine his outspokenness to religious leaders. He also publicly criticized Herod the Tetrarch (the son of his father's murderer) for the incest of marrying his brother Philip's wife Herodias (Matthew 14:3-4). This landed John in prison where Herodias later arranged to have John beheaded and to have his head brought to her party on a platter (Matthew 14:6-11). According to tradition, John then continued his announcement of the coming of Messiah to souls in Hades, and John is considered a forerunner there as well as on earth.

John languished in prison for about a year before his death. During John's imprisonment, John's disciples continued to report to John some of the miracles that Jesus was performing (Matthew 11:2, Luke 7:18). John's disciples, especially, were puzzled about why Jesus was doing these works and how all this fit with the Scriptures. John knew his place and he expected that the One he announced would be like a refiner's fire (Malachi 3:1-2, Matthew 3:10-12). Jesus wasn't obviously doing this and John's disciples were concerned. What about the One who would go forth from Bethlehem as a Ruler in Israel? (Micah 5:2) What about the King coming to Jerusalem riding on a donkey's colt? (Zechariah 9:9)

To satisfy John's disciples, Jesus sent a coded message back to John that he would understand, but that his disciples may not understand. He said to them, "Go and tell John the things that you have seen and heard. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the Gospel preached to them, and blessed is he who is not offended because of Me" (Luke 7:22-23). John knew what this meant. Connected with the Day of God's vengeance at the coming of Messiah, all these things were supposed to happen (Isaiah 35:4-6, 61:1-3). John's disciples had been witnessing Jesus do all these things, but they may not have made the connection to what the prophets had said. The coded message for John was simply that all things were proceeding on track and for his disciples not to be concerned about the sequence.

King Herod (i.e. Antipas) had a lot of respect for John, and used to enjoy hearing him speak. However, when John spoke out against the incest of Herod taking his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, John incurred the wrath of Herodias. Since Herodias was the granddaughter of Simeon, the High Priest, her incest with Herod Antipas created a national scandal. John's criticism painted Herodias as a 1<sup>st</sup> Century "Jezebel", and Herodias held it against him and

wanted to kill him. Herod considered John a just and holy man, and even protected him from Herodias. To please Herodias, Herod had John imprisoned (Mark 6:17-20).

The background for Herod's marriage to Herodias goes back a generation. The mother of Herod the Great (Herod Antipas' father) came from an eminent Nabatean family, but he later fought the Nabateans in a war that he won only after suffering heavy losses. The Nabateans, in return, enthusiastically provided auxiliary troops to aid the Roman governor of Syria in brutally suppressing the Jewish revolt that followed Herod the Great's death (about 4 BC).

In order to calm the tensions between the two peoples, Herod Antipas married the daughter of the Nabatean king (Aretas IV). However, in about 23 AD he divorced her in order to marry Herodias, the wife of his half-brother Philip. John the Baptist criticized this marriage as being incest, as reported both by Josephus and the Gospels, with the result that John was imprisoned and later beheaded (Matthew 14:3-12; Mark 6:17-29; Luke 4:19-20). Using a disputed border as an excuse, the Nabatean king attacked Galilee to avenge the insult to his daughter (Antiquities XVIII, v, 1-4).

The Emperor Tiberius did not tolerate war between his vassal states and later sent an army to punish Aretas. Before the army commanded by Vitellius reached Nabatea, Tiberius died and Caius Caligula became Emperor. Vitellius was unsure of Caligula's feelings on this issue and called off the campaign. Caligula did not send him back, and Aretas was never "punished". According to Josephus, many Jews felt that Aretas' destruction of Herod's army was the hand of God as just punishment for Herod's murder of John (Antiquities, XVIII, v, 2).

John's criticism of Herod and Herodias seethed with Herodias and she sought an opportunity for revenge. An opportune time came for Herodias when Herod gave a feast on his birthday for his nobles, high officers and chief men of Galilee. Herodias had her daughter, named Salome according to Josephus (Ibid), perform a dance for Herod, where the type of dance was most likely explicit and lewd. The dance pleased Herod and those with him, and, in his drunkenness, Herod made an oath that he may not have made otherwise. He said, "Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you, up to half my kingdom" (Mark 6:21-23).

Salome went to ask her mother what she should ask for, and Herodias told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist, at once, on a platter. Herod was exceedingly sorry that he had made those oaths, but because of his guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately Herod sent an executioner to the prison to behead John and to bring the head to the daughter on a platter. According to Josephus, the banquet was being held at the castle of Machaerus, which was located Northeast of the Dead Sea, and the dungeon where John was being kept was a rock-hewn cell in the cliffs below the banquet hall (Ibid). The daughter then gave John's head to her mother. (Mark 6:24-28).

After John was beheaded, his disciples buried his body (Matthew 14:12) while Herodias had his head buried at the local garbage dump outside the city. Joanna (the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward) who was later one of the Myrrh-Bearing women and who contributed to the support of Jesus' ministry, retrieved John's head during the night and secretly buried it in the Garden of Gethsemane (Velimirovic, Prologue, June 27).



After John's death, Herod heard of all the miracles that Jesus and His disciples were performing. Since Jesus' disciples were formerly John's disciples, Herod thought that John had risen from the dead and that this was where the unusual power came from (Mark 6:14-16). The power of these miracles seemed all the more striking because of their contrast with John, who performed no miracles that we know of (John 10:41). So Herod sought to see Him (Luke 9:9), but never did until the Crucifixion, when he treated Him with contempt (Luke 23:5-12).

The Epistle lesson for the Feast Day of the Beheading of John (Acts 13:25-33) has more to say about this. "Those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him (nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath) have fulfilled them in condemning Him" (Acts 13:27). Herod Antipas was one of the "rulers" at Christ's trial. Herod neither knew who he was dealing with when he sent Christ back to Pilate (Luke 23:11), nor did he know who John was when he had him beheaded. John, on the other hand, recognized who he was, but still kept a very humble attitude toward his Master. Even as people were clamoring to exalt him, he maintained that he was not even worthy to loose the sandals of the Master (Acts 13:25).

Herod Antipas was eventually exiled as a result of the greed of his wife, Herodias. Over the years, Herodias had grown jealous over the honors bestowed on her brother, Herod Agrippa. By 39 AD, she finally persuaded her husband to undertake a journey to Rome in order to persuade the Emperor Caius Caligula to bestow similar honors on him. Herod Agrippa heard of these plans, and set out for Rome himself with papers that showed, among other things, Herod Antipas' stockpile of weapons suggesting plans for revolt against Rome. Herod Antipas and Herodias could not defend themselves, and were banished to Gaul for the rest of their lives. All their wealth and property was given to Herod Agrippa (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII, vii, 1-2). Thus Herod Antipas, who Christ called a fox (Luke 13:32), and who was known for his cunning, manipulating and lack of morals, was outfoxed by his brother-in-law and died impoverished.

Salome also met an unusual and fitting end<sup>1</sup> while crossing the frozen river Sikoris. As she crossed, the ice cracked beneath her feet, but closed up as her body slipped into the water, leaving only her head above the ice. She thrashed about beneath the ice just as her frenzied feet had danced for Herod Antipas; after a while the ice shifted and severed her head. Her severed head was brought back to Herodias and Herod, but her body was never recovered.

The hymns of the Church have had much to say about the beheading of John. On the one hand, Christ had some harsh things to say to the religious leaders of His day. He accused them of being murderers of the prophets (Matthew 23:29-35), where His own uncle, Zechariah, the father of John, was one (Matthew 23:35). On the other hand, Herod's murder of John, the greatest of the prophets (Matthew 11:11, Luke 7:28), had some very dire significance.

Some excerpts from hymns attributed to John of Damascus are as follows: "The disciple of Satan danced and removed your head, O Forerunner, as a hire. O iniquitous Herod, son of lies and violator of the Law, would that you had not made that vow. Having sworn and given your oath, would that you had not carried it out. For it were better to have gone back on your word and received life than to remain true to your oath and cut off the head of the Forerunner. It was not worthy of you to condemn to death because of a satanic passion, him that was divinely

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<sup>1</sup> The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church, August 29, Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista, CO, p. 1291.

inspired to reproach you for your adultery. How dare you accomplish such murder, delivering John's all-honored head to a transgressing woman for the sake of a vow made to a dancer? And how was it that this adulterous dancer was not consumed by Divine fire in the midst of the banquet as she carried that head on the platter? At times Herodias is calm; at times she is troubled. By a treacherous dance and treachery of drunkenness, the Baptist had his head cut off while the head of Herod was troubled! John was a sower of purity, and the prophet of the Coming of Christ did not cease to reprove Herod even in death. For when Herod tried to escape the reproaches deserved by his unjust conduct and brought your head in on a platter, he was accusing himself. Herod conceived drunkenness, the mother of lust, and gave birth to a terrible iniquity".

"How strange a wonder! Your noble head, respected by angels and reproaching the Law-transgressing tongue, an adulterous dancing maid carried and offered to her immoral mother. As a cub surpassing the lioness in cruelty, she demanded as the reward for her demonic dance that which had commanded the respect of all the wild beasts in the wilderness. How strange a wonder! Foolish Herod offered as a toy to a lewd woman the man who in the flesh was equal to the angels! How strange a wonder! The lewd daughter brought to her adulterous mother the very tongue that rebuked her for her evil. How strange a wonder! The heart of Herod was so hardened that he despised God by ignoring His Law, yet he honored the word he had treacherously given. Not content with adultery, he became a murderer, and yet he pretended to be saddened. Your patience is beyond our understanding, O Lover of Mankind"!

"Holy John, your head was cut off for the Law of the Lord. For in blameless privilege you reproached the infidel king when he disobeyed the Law. The milk of the Law nourished you, and as a seal of the Law, you sanctioned the laws of lawful marriage, even though you drew upon yourself the hatred of those in adultery. In making plain and clear to believers the Law of God and in abolishing disobedience to the Law, you sanctified the earth when your head was cut off".

"You were the mediator between Law and Grace. For you came before Grace and preached to us repentance, boldly and openly exposing Herod. You strove for the Truth happily. You proclaimed to those in Hades that God, who appeared in the flesh, has taken away the sins of the world. Your beheading was by Divine providence that the coming of the Savior might be preached to those in Hades. Let Herodias now mourn, she who sought unlawful murder. She has not affected the Law of God, nor has she sought eternal life. Instead she has preferred the present life and its pleasures".

"What shall we call you, O Prophet? Filled with the Spirit from your mother's womb, you revealed the Lamb of God. Shall we call you an angel? For you lived like the bodiless powers in ruling over your passions and the angels stand in awe of you. Before your death, you had already been united to the choirs of angels. Shall we call you a lamp stand? For you went before the Light. Shall we call you an apostle? For you taught the nations and kept the laws of holiness, not fearing the bold impiety of the king and queen. Shall we call you a martyr? You were beheaded by the sword so that you might announce the coming of Christ to the dead in Hades. You preceded Christ in your birth, in your sufferings, and have also preceded Him as a prophet and a messenger of His descent into Hades"!

## THE FINDING OF JOHN'S HEAD

As mentioned earlier, Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward retrieved the severed head of John the Baptist by night from where Herodias had buried it in the local garbage dump. According to tradition, Herodias was afraid that John would rise from the dead if his head were buried with his body. Joanna, who was Herodias' lady-in-waiting, disinterred John's head secretly, took it to Jerusalem, and reburied John's head in an earthen vessel on the Mount of Olives (Prologue, Feb. 24). John's disciples, on the other hand, had buried John's body elsewhere (Mark 6:29).

Centuries later, a well-known government official left his position in the world to become a monk. He took the name "Innocent", and settled on the Mount of Olives at the spot where Joanna had buried John's head. As he was digging down to build himself a cell, he found the earthen vessel containing John's head. It was revealed to him at that time what this discovery meant, and John's head was later taken to Constantinople in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. According to tradition, many miracles have been attributed to John's head (Ibid), while no miracles were attributed to John while he was alive (John 10:41).

In the Orthodox Church, there are several Feast Days that commemorate the finding of John's head. These Feast Days address the legacy of John the Baptist and teach us some things about overcoming our own sinfulness and living as citizens of heaven. The Epistle lesson for the Finding of the Head of John is 2 Corinthians 4:6-15, which is also used in the Orthodox lectionary for the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. In this lesson, Paul wrote of the members of the Body of Christ as having treasure contained within earthen vessels. The treasure is the image of God energized by the Holy Spirit, while the earthen vessel is our fleshly body. This has implications from the life of John the Baptist regarding what we can do by Grace.

Paul also compared this treasure to gold, silver and precious stones (1 Corinthians 3:12). In this light gold, silver and precious stones are mentioned throughout the Scriptures in connection with the people of God. Some examples are:

**The Garden of Eden.** In and around the Garden of Eden gold and some precious stones are mentioned such as bdellium and onyx (Genesis 2:10-13). The implication is that they are just raw materials, however.

**The Ephod.** As part of the ephod or garment worn by Aaron the high priest, there were two large onyx gem stones with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel engraved on them (Exodus 28:9-12).

**The Breastpiece.** The breastpiece of judgment, actually a pocket or pouch, that contained the Urim and Thummin (meaning "lights and truth") was embroidered to hold 12 large gems representing the 12 tribes of Israel (Exodus 28:15-21). Aaron continually carried the verdict or judgment of the sons of Israel before the Lord. This verdict was already given on the Altar of Burnt Offering as part of Aaron's preparation (Exodus 28:29-30).

**The New Jerusalem.** The light of the New Jerusalem was like a precious stone. The gates were twelve pearls, on which were inscribed the names of the 12 tribes of Israel. The foundations were 12 precious stones on which are written the names of the Twelve Apostles (Revelation 21:10-21).

The message here is that we have a treasure in earthen (i.e. dirt or clay) vessels (2 Corinthians 4:6-9). The treasure is like the proverbial sword that becomes heated when placed in

a fire. As we take up and carry our cross, the sword heats up and we begin to take on the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4), which is the fire. The sword never becomes fire (and the fire never becomes sword), but after a while, the sword begins to glow at the same temperature as the fire. This process is referred to in the Orthodox Church as “deification” where we begin to become God-like. The treasure is called the light of the knowledge of the Glory of God in the face of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:6). A statement attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria reflects this: God became man that man might become god. That is to say, we can become by Grace what God is by nature.

John the Baptist is an important example of how this is possible for us. We are encouraged to deny the lusts of the flesh and walk in the Spirit, since the two modes of living are contrary to each other (Galatians 5:16-17). One can live as if he were seated in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:4-6). The Apostle Peter stated it this way: “Since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind. For he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh, but for the will of God” (1 Peter 4:1-2).

There will be tribulations and suffering in our lives, but this is just part of the process that refines the gold and polishes the precious stones. As we go on, we die a little more each day to our self-centeredness and death is working in us. The more this happens, the more we are aware of the will of God and grace and thanksgiving abound to the glory of God (2 Corinthians 4:8-15). In other words, when we get serious to the point of suffering, we can overcome our sins.

The result is that Christians have been a unique people. Consider the 1<sup>st</sup> Century writing of an unknown author describing Christians of his day: “For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor customs that they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor [are they] the advocates of merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives as to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking manner of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry and beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring [literally, “cast away fetuses”]. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time, surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless [2 Corinthians 4:12]; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as though quickened to life; they are assigned by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred” (“The Epistle to Diognetus”, Chapter 5, The Ante-Nicene Fathers).

For more discussion on what happens to the earthenware vessel and the proper role of the earthenware vessel, see Epistle lesson for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost.

Another aspect of the legacy of John the Baptist is illustrated by the Gospel lesson for the Finding of the Head of John (Luke 7:17-30). In this lesson, first some disciples of John came to Jesus with a question from John. From this aspect of John's life, we can see how he lived as a citizen of heaven.

Let us look first at Jesus' comments to His disciples after John's disciples left. After they left, Jesus made some statements about who John was. He compared John to a "reed shaken by the wind" (Luke 7:24). A reed shaken by the wind is tossed about to and fro, and is reeled and shaken by even small breezes. John was hardly that! Neither was he a man clothed in soft garments, living in luxury (Luke 7:25, Mark 1:6). Instead Jesus pointed out that John's stature was greater than that of the prophets and he was the greatest of those born of women (Luke 7:26-28). He lived a life of fasting and prayer (Matthew 9:14) that became the model for many thousands of monks in later centuries who also lived in the Judean wilderness. In the following centuries, many monasteries were constructed in the Wilderness of Judea where John lived and farther south into the Sinai Peninsula, especially near Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai. Many of these were destroyed during the Moslem conquest of the 6th and 7th centuries, but some survived intact; others have been rebuilt and others are currently being excavated. The entire issue of Biblical Archaeology Review, Sept./Oct. 1995 is devoted to these desert monasteries. From this aspect of John's life we can see that we don't have to follow the world's concept of the good life.

Another aspect of John's life was his humility. Cyril of Alexandria brought out some interesting points in commenting on Luke 7. His comments teach us how the life of John can help us today. To begin, Cyril pointed out an aspect of this passage that is easily misunderstood. When John sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" (Luke 7:20), many people think that John didn't know. John had pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He had also testified that Jesus is the Son of God (John 1:34). What happened? When John was put in prison, did he forget, or was something deeper involved?

Cyril pointed out all that was happening at the time. Jesus had been performing a great deal of miracles including raising the son of the widow of Nain. All Judea knew about this too! (Luke 7:11-17). John's disciples, however, were a little upset about all the attention that Jesus was receiving (John 3:26). John stated that Jesus was the bridegroom, while he was just the friend of the bridegroom. John further stated that his joy was fulfilled in seeing Jesus receiving His due glory. After all, He who comes from heaven is above all, and John felt that Jesus must increase while he must decrease (John 3:28-31).

Yet Cyril stated that John put on the appearance of ignorance purposely so that his disciples might be convinced of Jesus' superiority. John, being the Forerunner, knew the mystery of God being clothed in the flesh; he knew that Jesus was the One to come and that all the rest, including the prophets, were servants who were sent before the Master. But still, John asked his disciples to ask of Jesus, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" This question forced John's disciples to come to grips with the incredible impact of all of Jesus' miracles. They had heard what John had said about himself, that he was not the Christ (John 3:28). And they knew that John had not performed any miracles (John 10:41). By placing them

in a position to be eyewitnesses to Jesus' miracles, John arranged for them to prove to themselves that Jesus was the Coming One! This would prove to be important for John's disciples, since John would not be around much longer and his disciples needed to make the transition from Law to Grace (Commentary on Luke, Chap 7). This also illustrates the depth of John's humility, which we would do well to imitate.

Jesus was aware of John's purpose in sending his disciples with that question. And in response to their question, Jesus gave a demonstration. "And that very hour Jesus cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight" (Luke 7:21). After finishing this demonstration, Jesus said to John's disciples, "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the Gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me" (Luke 7:22-23). This last part was aimed at John's disciples in order that they might elevate their understanding to that of John. He didn't want them to stumble against Him as against the Rock of Offense (Isaiah 8:14) and be ground to powder. The Scribes and Pharisees, on the other hand, were very offended and tried to stone Jesus, saying, "Why do You, being a Man, make Yourself God?" (John 10:33) Referring to His many miracles, Jesus replied, "For which of those works are you stoning Me?" "Though you do not believe Me, believe the works that I do, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him" (John 10:32, 37-38). Thus both John and Jesus were trying to prevent John's disciples from ending up in the place where the Scribes and Pharisees were; that is, offended and hardened against the Truth.

It is important for us all to know Christ. In our culture, it is possible to call oneself a Christian, to attend Church, and even to be involved with Church activities, without ever knowing Christ. Like John's disciples, it is possible to only see Christ from a distance and never get to know Him. From such a vantagepoint, it is easy to be offended by something that happens that may very well be the Will of God for our lives. The solution to this is to imitate John the Baptist in his humility. John did not seek personal recognition for himself but proclaimed Christ, in Cyril's words, as the morning star proclaims the sun. We can do this also. In his humility, John "wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented, of whom the world was not worthy. He wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth" (Hebrews 11:37-38). As we humble ourselves and take up our Cross, we may suffer in the flesh, but as we do, we will also cease from sin (1 Peter 4:1) and we will come to know Christ.

# FAMILY TREE OF JESUS

