

John the Forerunner

F.F. Bruce

[p.182]

Many of 'the speakers who have addressed the VICTORIA INSTITUTE during the hundred years of its existence have dealt with various beginnings and their problems—the beginning of the material universe, the beginning of life, the beginning of the human race. Most of the papers which I have read to the INSTITUTE since my first communication on 'The Sources of the Gospels' in 1943 have been concerned with a much more recent beginning—the beginning of Christianity. For a Society which, according to its constitution, is committed to 'the Christian religion as revealed in Holy Scripture', this is not an irrelevant field of study. It seems quite proper, therefore, that in this centenary paper I should look at a phase of Christian origins to which I have not previously invited the attention of the INSTITUTE.

Of all the religious movements in Palestine on the eve of the coming of Christianity none is more directly related to Christianity itself than the ministry of John the Baptist. All four Gospels preface their narrative of the ministry of Jesus with a brief summary of the ministry of John, and the evidence of Acts suggests that this reflects primitive Christian preaching. In Acts both Peter and Paul are represented as introducing their accounts of Jesus' activity with a reference to the baptism of John; and when the question arises of filling the vacancy in the apostolic college created by the defection of Judas Iscariot, it is laid down that the man to be chosen must be one of those 'who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John' (Acts i. 21 f.).

John's place in the Gospels and Acts is due to the part that he played as Jesus' forerunner; but his ministry made a deep, if short-lived, impression in its own right on many of the Palestinian Jews.

Outside the New Testament, our only reliable source of information about John is a passage in the *Antiquities* of Josephus, where he narrates the defeat of Herod Antipas by his outraged father-in-law, the Nabataean king Aretas IV, whose daughter Antipas had divorced in order to marry Herodias. Josephus goes on:

Now some of the Jews thought that it was God who had destroyed Herod's army, and that it was a very just punishment to avenge John, surnamed the Baptist. John had been put to death by Herod, although he was a good man, who

[p.183]

exhorted the Jews to practise virtue, to be just one to another, and pious towards God, and to come together by baptism. Baptism, he taught, was acceptable to God provided that they underwent it not to procure remission of certain sins but for the purification of the body, if the soul had already been purified by righteousness. When the others gathered round John, greatly moved as they listened to his words, Herod was afraid that this great persuasive power over men might lead to a rising, for they seemed ready to follow his counsel in everything. Accordingly he thought the best course was to arrest him and put him to death before he caused a riot, rather than wait until a revolt broke out and then have to repent of permitting such trouble to arise. Because of this suspicion on Herod's part, John was sent in chains to the fortress of Machaerus... and there put to death. The Jews therefore thought

that the destruction of Herod's army was the punishment deliberately sent upon him by God to avenge John.¹

According to Luke, John was a 'wonder-child', born to a priestly couple in their old age, who spent the years before he began his public ministry 'in the wilderness' (Luke i. 80)—presumably the wilderness of Judaea, since his parents' home was in the Judaeian hill-country. Whether his wilderness life was solitary or spent in community with others we are not told. More especially since the discovery of the Qumran texts it has been frequently suggested that he was brought up in the Qumran community or in some similar Essene group. This can be neither proved nor disproved. John's wilderness retreat would not have been far from Qumran, and a young man of priestly birth might have found something specially congenial in a movement which attached such importance to the maintenance of a pure priesthood.

But, whatever substance there may be in these speculations, the ministry by which John made his mark cannot be brought within an Essene framework. His ministry was distinctively a prophetic ministry. When 'the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness' (Luke iii. 2), as it had come to many a prophet in earlier days, that word proclaimed the necessity for something different from the teaching or practice of Qumran.

To John as to the men of Qumran and other Essenes and related groups, the wilderness was the expected place of the divine epiphany. But John chose for the inauguration of his ministry the most public part of the wilderness of Judaea, the crossing of the Jordan north of the Dead Sea, where traffic between Judaea and Peraea passed this way and that; and he addressed his message to all who would hear, including the 'men of the pit' from whom the pious sectaries of Qumran swore to keep aloof. If John had previously been associated with a community

[p.184]

like that of Qumran, now was the time to break with his former associates and follow a new path. The multitudes which flocked to the Jordan valley to hear him from all parts of Palestine did so because men recognised in his preaching a note of authority the like of which had not been heard in Israel for centuries: 'all held that John was a real prophet' (Mark xi. 32). It is not as a disciple of any other Teacher of Righteousness, but as a new teacher of righteousness with his own following of disciples, that we know the historical John the Baptist.

John's preaching was eschatologically based. The day of judgment, he proclaimed, was about to dawn. The judgment would be executed by the 'Coming One', for whom John was preparing the way. The Coming One fulfils the function assigned to Daniel's 'one like a son of man' (Dan. vii. 13 ff.), although John is not recorded as using the designation Son of Man. Yet, when the Fourth Evangelist records John as speaking of the pre-existence of the Coming One—'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me' (John i. 15, 30)—there may be some contact with the Son of Man of the *Similitudes of Enoch*, whose name was named in the presence of the Lord of Spirits before the sun and the stars were made (I Enoch xlvi. 3).

The Coming One would hew down all the fruitless trees—all those whose lives did not produce the fruits of righteousness. Or, to change the figure, he would treat the world as his threshing-floor, winnowing the wheat from the chaff. The wheat—the righteous—would be

¹ *Antiquities*, xviii, 116-119.

gathered into his granary, but the chaff, blown away by the wind, would be swept up and burned. Therefore, let Israel repent. Before this coming judge the merits of the fathers would not avail: descent from Abraham was irrelevant. Nothing would meet the challenge of the hour, nothing would avert the wrath to come, but sincere repentance. And this repentance, to be effective, must be expressed by baptism.

John's picture of the Coming One has also been compared with the Qumran expectation that at the end-time a man would appear in whom some of the community's most characteristic functions would be embodied—a man who in several respects resembles the Isaianic Servant of Yahweh:

At that time God will purify by His truth all the deeds of a man, and will refine him for Himself more than the sons of men, in order to destroy every evil spirit from the midst of his flesh and to cleanse him through the Spirit of holiness from all evil practices. He will sprinkle upon him the Spirit of truth as purifying water, so as to cleanse him from every false abomination and from being contaminated with the spirit of impurity, so that he may give to the upright insight

[p.185]

into the knowledge of the Most High and into the wisdom of the sons of heaven, in order to make wise the perfect of way.²

This passage does not teach that the man who receives this special endowment of the Holy Spirit will himself baptize others with the Spirit, as John says the Coming One will do; but this is not the only respect in which John's prophetic insight goes beyond anything that was envisaged at Qumran.

The baptism of John was a new thing in Israel, although it had antecedents in some degree. Cleansing lustrations, by means of the water of purification and otherwise, were prescribed in the Law, and in some pious communities the observance of such rites was intensified. The Pharisees attached great importance to frequent ablutions, and some smaller and even more radical groups insisted on them to a point where they were characterised as 'daily bathers', 'morning bathers' and the like.

A further analogy to John's baptism may be sought in the practice of Jewish proselyte baptism. A Gentile who was converted to Judaism had to be circumcised (if he was a male) and to offer a special sacrifice in the Temple (while it stood), and also to undergo a ceremonial bath. The date when this bath or self-baptism was instituted is disputed, but as it was a matter of debate between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel it must have antedated the fall of Jerusalem and goes back at least to the beginning of the Christian era.³ Some members of the school of Hillel went so far as to maintain—for the sake of the argument, but hardly in practice—that it was by this baptism rather than by circumcision that a Gentile became a Jew.

In so far as proselyte baptism provides an analogy to John's baptism, John was saying in effect to true-born Jews, proudly conscious of their descent from Abraham: 'Your impeccable

² 1QS iv. 20-22. Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London, 1962), pp. 23 ff.

³ Cf. H. H. Rowley, 'Jewish Proselyte Baptism and the Baptism of John', *From Moses to Qumran* (London, 1963), pp. 211 f.

pedigree is irrelevant in God's sight; if you wish to be enrolled in the new Israel of the age that is about to dawn, you must take the outside place, acknowledging that you are no better in His eyes than Gentiles, and you must enter the end-time community of His people by baptism, as they have to do'.

But John's baptism was distinctive in that he administered it to others, and in its eschatological significance. Ezekiel promised that, at the dawn of the new age, the God of Israel would purify His people from their uncleanness with clean water and give them a new heart and a

[p.186]

new spirit—His own Spirit. It is probably this promise that underlies the words in John iii. 5 about the new birth 'of water and spirit'—words which in their original context may have borne some relation to John's baptism. Those who heeded John's call to repentance and accepted baptism at his hands would form the righteous remnant of the end-time, the 'people prepared' whom John was charged 'to make ready for the Lord' (Luke i. 17). This is probably the point of Josephus's statement that John called upon his hearers 'to come together by baptism'. When, however, Josephus says that John's baptism procured bodily cleansing for those whose souls had already been purified by righteousness, he may be influenced by what he knew of the significance of the Essene washings: at Qumran it was emphasised that all the washings in the world would never convey cleansing to a man whose heart remained stubborn against God. John indeed would have cordially agreed that the baptism which he administered availed nothing for any who accepted it without heart-repentance, but Mark's description of his baptism as 'a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins' (Mark i. 4) is consistent with all the evidence we have for John's ministry.

Those who confessed their sins and received John's baptism in token of their repentance were required to 'bear fruits that befit repentance' (Luke iii. 8)—to live lives which accorded with the 'way of righteousness' inculcated by John (Matt. xxi. 32).

This way of righteousness did not differ essentially from that on which the earlier prophets insisted—to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. He taught his hearers to share their food and clothes with those in greater need than themselves; he did not command tax-collectors to abandon their calling but forbade them to exact a little extra for themselves over and above the appointed taxes; he did not command soldiers to give up their military career but told them to be content with their rations and pay and not to extort money from civilians by violence or by threats of denunciation. (These soldiers were probably auxiliary forces under the command of the procurator of Judaea; the suggestion that they were members of Jewish zealot bands, to whom John acted as field-chaplain,⁴ involves a wholesale reading into our basic texts of something that is not there; Josephus, moreover, would not have described an insurgent field-chaplain as 'a good man'!)

While the common people, and even some who were classed as social outcasts, were greatly moved by his preaching, and sought baptism at

[p.187]

⁴ Cf. R. Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist* (London, 1931), pp. 245 ff.

his hands in great numbers, the religious leaders of the nation, the teachers of the law and especially the Pharisees, remained unimpressed.

They had their own ideas of what constituted the way of righteousness, and would not recognise in John's baptism any improvement on their own ritual washings.

Most of John's hearers went home after listening to him, to await the advent of the Coming One. But some stayed with him and became his disciples. How numerous John's disciples were we cannot be sure, but they formed a recognisable community, comparable in this respect to the disciples of the great Pharisaic teachers and, later, to the disciples of Jesus. John taught them a form of prayer in which, we may be sure, the eschatological note of his preaching was struck, and evidently imposed a regime of fasting on them as a periodic duty. But it is unlikely that he required them to share the full rigour of his own asceticism, for he wore a coat of camel's hair, and, eschewing bread and wine, ate such food as the wilderness provided—locusts and the honey of wild bees. The fact that he had no objection to eating locusts shows that his asceticism did not involve vegetarianism as a principle of life, although the Ebionites in the second century made him a vegetarian by emending the locusts (Gk. *akrides*) to pancakes (Gk. *enkrides*).⁵

From the New Testament writers' point of view, the climax of John's ministry was his baptism of Jesus, who came from His Galilaean home at Nazareth to the Jordan valley and asked John to baptize Him. This event marks also the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Why Jesus should have sought baptism at John's hands was a problem which some early Christian writers found difficulty in explaining. It is most probable that Jesus recognised John as a prophet and acknowledged his baptismal ministry as a work of God. We may go further and say that He knew that with John's preaching the hour had struck for His own mission; hence He associated Himself in the most public and unmistakable way with John's ministry by accepting baptism at his hands 'we do well to conform in this way with all that God requires' (Matt. iii. 15, N.E.B.).

If such was Jesus' conviction, it was more than confirmed by what He experienced as He came up out of the river. Nor is there any good reason to doubt that John for his part thenceforth recognised in Jesus the Coming One of whom he had spoken. The message which he later sent to Jesus from prison, 'Are you the Coming One, or are we to look

[p.188]

for another?' (Matt. xi. 3; Luke vii. 20), does not suggest that he had not previously looked on Jesus as the Coming One. It suggests rather that, having once acknowledged Him as such, he was now beginning to entertain doubts, because the reports brought to him about Jesus' Galilaean activity bore but little resemblance to his own description of the ministry of judgment which the Coming One would discharge.

John continued his ministry after the baptism of Jesus not only in the Jordan valley but in other parts of the country. The Fourth Evangelist preserves a brief but valuable record of a phase of John's baptismal ministry 'at Aenon near Salim', which is most probably to be identified with the Wadi Far'ah, east of Shechem, for, in the Evangelist's words, there is 'much water there' (John iii. 23). This means that he preached and baptized in the region of

⁵ Tatian's *Diatessaron* reflects the outlook of the Encratite sect by giving John a diet of 'milk and honey'.

Samaria. Even if the Samaritans were ceremonially unclean from the viewpoint of 'normative Judaism', it would not follow that Jewish nonconformists took the same line; and in fact recent discovery and research have pointed to a considerable degree of affinity between certain aspects of Samaritan teaching and of Jewish nonconformity.

While John was active there, Jesus remained in Judaea and carried on a brief baptismal ministry of His own. Some young men who had formerly been John's disciples had by now attached themselves to Jesus, and a not unnatural tension developed between them and their former associates who still regarded themselves as disciples of John. Learning that this tension was being exploited by the Pharisees to drive a wedge between Himself and John, Jesus withdrew to the north.

John's Samaritan ministry probably did not last long, but it laid the foundation for further important developments in that area in the next few decades, of which we are given hints in the brief accounts of the ministries there of Jesus (John iv. 30ff.) and Philip (Acts viii. 5ff.), not to speak of later patristic evidence.

One part of Palestine which John does not appear to have visited was Galilee. Yet it was at the hands of Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, that he met his death. Antipas's tetrarchy included not only Galilee but Peraea, and John's ministry in the Jordan valley was carried on on the Peraean bank of the river as well as on the west bank (John i. 28). John returned from Aenon to Peraea, and there he was arrested by the tetrarch's orders. Antipas might well be afraid, as Josephus says, that John's ability to gather multitudes around him might lead to a revolt; the Synoptic Evangelists add more precisely that John denounced Antipas's marriage to his sister-in-law Herodias. The law of Leviticus

[p.189]

xviii. 16 and xx. 21 forbade a man to marry his brother's wife. The law applied even when the brother had died; there was deep disapproval several years earlier when Antipas's elder brother Archelaus had married Glaphyra, widow of the ill-starred Alexander, son of Herod the Great and Marianne. (The levirate law of Deut. xxv. 5-10 was an exception, which covered only the case where the deceased brother had left no children.) It was an even more blatant breach of the law when the brother whose wife the woman had formerly been was still alive.

John's denunciation of the marriage did not simply affect the private life of Antipas and Herodias; it had political implications. The allegiance of Antipas's subjects could well be alienated from a ruler who was denounced by a prophet for a flagrant breach of the holy law. It was unsafe to leave John at large, so he was seized and imprisoned at the Peraean fortress of Machaerus. Antipas was unwilling to proceed to more extreme measures, and for a time John was able to communicate with the outside world through his disciples, as when he sent two of them to interview Jesus and report on His activity in Galilee. According to Mark, it was Herodias who ultimately encompassed John's death, against the better judgment of her husband, who 'went in awe of John' and 'liked to listen to him, although the listening left him greatly perplexed' (Mark vi. 20, N.E.B.).

According to Jesus, it was with John that the era of the law and the prophets came to an end; there followed the new era of the kingdom of God of which John was the last herald (Luke xvi. 16). T. W. Manson sums up John's achievement thus:

Negatively he had to destroy the confidence that the Messianic hope was a gilt-edged security from which every reasonably good Jew might expect to draw a dividend. Positively—and it is here that the real greatness of John lies—be set out to create a New Israel to meet the coming Stronger One. He did not know—how could he?—that it would need something thicker than Jordan water to bind the New Israel together, that the New Covenant that would create the New Israel must be sealed in Messianic blood.⁶

The memory of John remained for many years with those who had heard him; a quarter of a century after his death we learn of a group of people as far away as Ephesus who claimed to have been baptized with John's baptism. Later still in the same area it has been inferred that there was a 'Johannite' group against whom the Fourth Evangelist polemicised, but there is no independent evidence for its existence. His disciples probably survived as a self-conscious community for a

[p.190]

generation or two, apart from those who, recognizing in Jesus the Coming One of whom John spoke, became disciples of Jesus. The connection between John's disciples and various schismatic Jewish groups of which some information is preserved by Christian writers such as Justin, Hegesippus, Hippolytus and Epiphanius, is difficult to establish. Still more problematical is the historic connection between John's followers and the Gnostic sect of Mandaean, surviving to this day in Iraq. The Mandaeans hold John in high veneration, but all the information about him contained in their literature seems to be derived from the Gospels, more particularly from Luke, mediated through some form of Syriac speaking Christianity which had been influenced by Marcionism and Manichaeism.

But the last word about John may safely be left with the Coming One whose way he prepared. 'What did you go out into the wilderness to behold?' Jesus asked the crowds. 'A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? ... What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.... I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he' (Luke vii. 24-28).

© 1965 *The Victoria Institute* and F.F. Bruce. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in July 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁶ *The Servant-Messiah* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 47.