

JESUS, A FOLLOWER OF JOHN



The Gospel of Luke 3:15 "As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming.'"

The story of Christianity really begins, not with Jesus and his birth in Bethlehem, that which we've just celebrated at Christmastide. The story of Christianity really begins with John the Baptist, with that voice crying out on the banks of the Jordan and drawing a huge crowds from Jerusalem, and all the

regions of Judea. Three of the four Gospel accounts begin with stories not about Jesus, but about John the Baptist. And all of the Gospels agree that Jesus' baptism by John was the start of his public life and his public ministry. What actually happened *before* Jesus' baptism by John is generally unknown and generally unremembered. The two stories of his birth that we do have from Luke and Matthew, differ almost entirely with each other in the events they present, and disagree with each other in some important details, and none of these stories are attested to elsewhere in their Gospels, or even elsewhere in the New Testament. There seems to have been little interest, or information, or concern about Jesus' earlier life in the early Church. This is where Jesus' story really began, when he walked out of obscurity and into the river Jordan as a young religious zealot joining with the throngs that followed John. Jesus' public ministry began then, one might say, as a disciple of John the Baptist.

Jesus then distinguished himself among the many followers of John by beginning to put into action the message of John. For instance, in the Fourth Gospel it is during Jesus' first appearance in Jerusalem shortly after his baptism by John that Jesus violently cleansed the Temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers and chasing them all out with a whip. Yes, the other Gospels record this event at the end of Jesus' life, during that last week in Jerusalem, they have to put it there as that is

the only time they record Jesus ever being in Jerusalem. And though many have thought of the cleansing of the temple as a provocation of the temple authorities by Jesus there at the end of his ministry, I now tend to suspect that the Fourth Gospel has it right, that this action was at the beginning, not the end, of Jesus' public career. For I see it now rather as a prophetic acting out of John the Baptist's message, of cleansing the defiled temple and calling the people to repentance and prayer.

I view in the same way the harsh criticism that Jesus voiced against the scribes and Pharisees in the Temple Courtyard, that long series of 'woes to you; like "Woe to you who clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of extortion and wickedness (Lk. 20.39) . . . Woe to you who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers" (Lk. 20.47). These harsh judgments of Jesus are not dissimilar at all to John's denouncement of the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to him by the Jordan earlier in the Gospels. "You brood of vipers!", John said, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance. . ." (Lk. 3.7-9). The difference here is that Jesus actually took John's message into the Temple courtyard, confronting face to face the people concerned, like the prophets of old.

And it should be noted that after cleansing of the Temple, and perhaps also publicly denouncing the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus with his disciples (two of whom were first identified as

followers of John) returned into the land of Judea and baptized for some time in the Jordan River near where John was baptizing, so much so that Jesus began to draw the crowd away from John. For John's disciples came to him, saying, 'Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan . . . here he is baptizing, and *all* are to going to him" (Jn. 3.22-6).

According to Matthew's Gospel (4.12, 17), Jesus began to preach only after he heard that John had been arrested, and the message which he preached, according to Matthew (4.17), was the exact same one that Matthew records John had been preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (cf. 3.2). Jesus appears to have taken up preaching John's message for him after his arrest, and John, as a result, sent word from his prison cell asking whether Jesus "was the one who is to come or shall (they) look for another?" (Lk. 7:20). For this young disciple of John now appeared poised to assume the mantle of John the Baptist, and well might be the one long expected.

"When Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was making and baptizing more disciples than John . . . he left Judea and departed again to Galilee," we are told (Jn. 4.1). "So when Jesus came to Galilee," the Scriptures record, "the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast" (Jn. 4.45). When Jesus soon afterwards heard that King Herod had actually killed John the Baptist, "(Jesus) withdrew . . . to a lonely place apart." Jesus had greatly loved his cousin

John and always spoken highly of him, as when he said that "among those born of women, not one was greater than John" (Lk. 7:28). Remember Jesus' mother had fled Galilee to visit John's mother in Judea when news of her unexpected pregnancy became known. I think that Jesus went off by himself to grieve and to consider what this all meant for him. "But when the crowds heard (that Jesus had withdrawn) they followed him . . . and he had compassion on them" (Mt. 14:13-4). According to Mark's account, "they were (now) like sheep without a shepherd and he began to teach them many things" (Mk. 6:34). There follows the familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand.

Now it is interesting to note that one interpretation of this story suggests that all or at least most of the people there actually had something to eat with them, but they had not brought it out into the open for fear that they would then have to share it with all the others and that there would then not be enough to go around. In this interpretation the willingness of Jesus and his disciples to share their five meager loaves and two fishes among so many thousands moved the others to bring out their supplies as well, and as a result all thus ate and were satisfied and there was food aplenty. This is a particularly telling account of the story if one remembers that when the crowds on the banks of the Jordan in an earlier part of the Gospel asked John the Baptist, "What then shall we do (to be bearing good fruit worthy of repentance)?" (Lk. 3:10), John replied "Whoever has two

coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." Thus, Jesus and his disciples appear again to be prophetically acting out John's message, bringing it to fulfillment, making it real. Perhaps it is no wonder that the Fourth Gospel then records that "When the people saw the sign that (Jesus) had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'" (and) When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to anoint him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself." (Jn. 6:14-5).

Why did Jesus flee from the crowd that would have made him the anointed one, a Messiah, a Christ. I suspect that it was partly out of fear, and partly perhaps because Jesus knew that they were mistaken about him, that he was **not** like John the Baptist in the end. For whether or not Jesus began as a disciple of John, Jesus' message was, in the end, radically different from John's, and that may have been the cause of the division between some of the followers of John and those of Jesus later on. John preached repentance and the wrath of God; but he said nothing that we know of about the love of God. John's was a God of anger and punishment and earthly power, a God reflected perhaps in many of Jesus' parables of judgment. But Jesus began to speak less and less of God's wrath and judgment, and more and more about God's mercy and forgiveness. Other than for the Pharisees, Jesus did not speak harshly of the people. Jesus preached more about a God

of love and forgiveness and spiritual power. John's was an image of an outraged deity for the people to fear, while Jesus cast an image of a parent who comes himself to experience the sorrows and pains of his children. His teachings and other parables are full of stories of God's great love and joy for the common people, for the poor and the forgotten, for the outcast and the Samaritan.

Moreover, Jesus did not seek to separate himself from the sinners and tax-collectors as John had done. For John and his followers were out there in the wilderness to isolate themselves from the sinners and foreigners of the cities, places they believed had become defiled and unclean. Jesus instead sought to go into those places to dine with the outcast and assure them of God's love and mercy, and to bring that good news of God's love and forgiveness to them, there where they were. "For those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk. 2.17). Nor did Jesus not seek to cast judgment or revenge upon his enemies as John had done with those who refused to repent. Jesus instead sought to love them, and to teach us to love them as well. "You have heard that it is said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt. 5.43). "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5.10).

That was the love which Jesus made known, and we are called to make it known in our lives as well. We are called to be like Jesus, not in our judgments, but in our love and mercy and forgiveness. For we are his disciples, because we are baptized in His Name. Amen.