

Some Reflections on John the Baptist¹

Everyone knows the story of how John had baptized Jesus Christ in the Jordan River after which Jesus headed off to the mountains and disappeared from sight as quickly as he came on the scene. After this brief encounter between two cousins, however, John must have continued his baptizing and proclaiming his message of repentance for a short time but in a half-hearted sort of way. Immediately when he caught sight of Jesus, John realized that his ministry had both been fulfilled as well as terminated. People continued to see John, of course, and even they sensed that something changed. There was something in his demeanor that gave it away though nobody could pinpoint the reason. John had lost some of his old magic and hence appeal. When at last he packed up and walked off the scene, those who had trekked out into the desert to see him simply dissolved.

Once again the desert became silent as it always had been. Was this just another half-crazed prophet? And who was this Jesus? He came out of nowhere and walked off, possibly never to be seen again. Some who came out to see John must have recognized Jesus as a carpenter from Nazareth who likewise came out to visit his cousin. The least Jesus could do is go along and be baptized which would make his cousin feel good. Besides, no harm would be done. Distances were short in that area so all sorts of stories were bound to spread quickly. If Jesus hung around, the rumors would have magnified until they reached the Roman authorities which is why Jesus didn't want to tarry and give the wrong impression. That would be detracting from his cousin's work.

Until John had met Jesus he proclaimed loudly to the crowds, "You brood of vipers [Lk 3.7]! He still did it but with much less enthusiasm, perhaps even being embarrassed by his meeker cousin who never would take that approach. *Ochlos* is the Greek word for "crowds" which connotes an undisciplined mass of people and is a synonym for annoyance or trouble. Among the people were the Pharisees and Sadducees, religious leaders who didn't escape being labeled directly a "brood of vipers" as found in Matthew's Gospel. Despite John's harsh words, most of those who came out into the desert him were curiosity seekers or people desperately hoping they'd meet a prophetic leader who would throw off the Roman yoke of oppression. Chances are John's message of repentance fell on deaf ears; people were turned off but couldn't help but keep their eyes fixed upon this wild looking man. The journey, say from Jerusalem to the Jordan River, was less strenuous than imagined, distances being relatively short. Besides, the Jordan was a source of refreshment both with regard to water and lush vegetation growing along its banks. Some found John an excuse to go there on vacation, if you will, he being a secondary attraction. Even if the people were disappointed with John, they would enjoy a lovely park-like atmosphere away from the hustle and bustle of their native towns and hamlets.

1 NB: what is offered here is an expansion on facts surrounding John the Baptist, not so much historical data. By playing out some elements as related to his identity we might gain some insight into his role concerning the larger relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

When the *ochoi* came across John they knew they were about to be slammed with a series of insults and curses, having gotten reports from people on the way home. John knew most were curiosity seekers enjoying an outing, not on a pilgrimage, where they could enjoy listening to a dis-shoveled man in a relaxing place by running water. How could such a person be identified as “a voice of one calling in the desert” [Mt 3.2]? Yet some who saw through his roughness knew he had an association with the prophet Isaiah. The religious personages did too but were afraid to admit it, at least out loud. Thus the people who thronged to see John were divided into two general categories: the larger one more interested to enjoy the natural beauty of the Jordan River and surroundings and the smaller one eager to learn more about the repentance John was claiming to offer in the name of Isaiah. John strangely echoed Isaiah for anyone familiar with that prophet because he was esteemed highly in Jewish tradition.

Both groups took up separate places or camps without mingling. Only if they decided to listen to John would they assemble together but nevertheless preferred staying apart. John was addressing two distinct audiences and knew it. Although a few devotees stood by him, John was accustomed to extended isolation before taking up this ministry of baptism. Chances are that once having finished his preaching and having made an occasional baptism, he didn't mingle with the crowds, keeping a healthy distance from the Pharisees and Sadducees, spies for the authorities in Jerusalem. John always preferred living alone. Besides, he wasn't long in the public eye, just enough to set the stage for Jesus to meet him. It could have been in a private place, but being among the crowds was necessary that at least someone might know what was really transpiring. Instinctively John knew Jesus would appear any moment, so he had to be ready. Even his abrasive treatment of people had this in mind, for he hoped it would serve to shift their attention away from him to the one who really matters.

John's message of repentance and baptism takes place “in those days,” words which open a new chapter in Matthew's Gospel. That is to say, Chapter Three begins after Jesus and his parents had made Nazareth their home, so a considerable amount of time has transpired. “In those days” makes no distinction time-wise and is not unlike an event along the lines of a *kairos* event, a particular situation outside space and time but embracing both. In a discreet manner “in those days” includes the bulk of Jesus' life which goes unrecorded. Yet the very last words of Chapter Two say that “He shall be called a Nazarene.”² This is lifted from Is 11.11 which reads “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” So when John comes on the scene “in those days,” he emerged at the precise time Jesus was growing out of Jesse's roots, if you will, or about to make himself public. As for Jesse, he was the father of King David as well as eleven brothers. His extended time of obscurity, so necessary for his message, therefore parallels that of Jesus. We can't help but wonder what each man had been doing for this, the bulk of their lifetimes. Going public clearly was against their nature. Besides, the last contact between both was before they had been born, in the womb: “For behold, when the voice of your (Mary) greeting came to my ears

2 A footnote in the **RSV** says that “there is a similarity in sound and possibly in meaning between the Aramaic word for Nazareth and the Hebrew word translated branch.”

(Elizabeth), the babe in my womb leaped for joy” [Lk 1.41]. The verb for “leaped” is *skirtao*³ which pertains to young animals.

As will be pointed out shortly, this *skirtao* is destined to dominate the rest of John's life, haunt him, if you will. The leaping of John in his mother's womb, triggered by the voice of Jesus' mother (note that Jesus gives no response in the womb), must have been quite powerful, enough to astonish Mary as much as Elizabeth. Straightaway Mary knew what this was about which is why she uttered her song of praise or *Magnificat*. So we have Mary breaking out into praise of God with Elizabeth looking on or even accompanying her. Obviously John must have continued, if not intensified, his *skirtao*, the only recorded person to have had such an experience before being born. To top this off, Mary remained with Elizabeth approximately three months during which they repeated the *Magnificat* on a daily basis. Nothing is said whether she was present at John's birth but presumably was not. Instinctively Mary knew she had to keep her yet to be born son apart from John, a distance which remained throughout their lives broken only by the occasion of Jesus' baptism. A distance between two dispensations, if you will, was necessary. John represented the older one and Jesus, the new. However, both came together in the waters of the Jordan River.

While we have knowledge about Jesus being raised as a carpenter's son, nothing is said about John. His father Zechariah was a priest, so he may have had more formal training than Jesus. He was in a unique position to capitalize on this education in the Torah by reason of his *skirtao* which became so strong that later as an adult he went off to the desert to deal with it. Zechariah may have objected, but his mother Elizabeth sympathized with the decision. As soon as John found a suitable spot to settle down, he scoured the scriptures, especially the prophets, who could shed some light on his predicament. Jesus, too, must have felt the echos of John's *skirtao* as he grew into manhood. Mary and Elizabeth made a tacit agreement of sorts not to have their sons meet each other by reason of this recognition in the latter's womb. In fact, as the day of John's departure approached, he could feel the same *skirtao* within himself become stronger until he could take it no longer. Finally with the appearance of Jesus John had given birth, as it were, to his mission and knew he had nothing further to do. This, of course, soon proved to be true with his arrest.

So the *skirtao* which had begun in the womb continued for John's entire life, a distant echo of sorts of the Holy Spirit. No wonder Jesus exclaimed, “Truly I say to you among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist” [Mt 11.11]. While growing up as a child, John must have discussed this *skirtao* with his mother. The two, in fact, didn't have to share many words about it but allowed echos of this leaping permeate their lives. Then there was Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah. He had been struck dumb by the angel Gabriel for not having believed the prophecy concerning his yet to be born (and named) son.

3 Two biblical references to *skirtao* but with opposite meanings: 1) “The children (Jacob and Esau) struggled together within her (Rebekah)” [Gen 25.22]. 2) “The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs” [Ps 114.4].

From the time until just before he had uttered his *Benedictus* or words of praise (Lk 1.68-79) Zechariah never forgot his prolonged experience of not being able to speak, that is, during Elizabeth's pregnancy. To top it off, Zechariah clearly remembered that the same angel (Gabriel) who struck him with dumbness not long afterward having appeared to Mary. Obviously Zechariah became aware of this encounter well before Elizabeth or anyone else. Despite no overt contact between Zechariah and Mary, their mutual experience with the angel Gabriel united them as no human being could, even more than his marriage with Elizabeth and their special son, John. If Zechariah hadn't been struck dumb, he would have messed things up by his words...not maliciously, of course, but due to ignorance of the incredible events that were transpiring, all done in secret and obscurity. Indeed, people knew bits and pieces of these events but never could fathom the depth of what was really going on.

So John grew up in a household whose father had been visited by an angel, the same angel who visited his mother's cousin. Elizabeth had given birth to John before Mary did to Jesus which makes both mother and son precursors to Jesus. Later as a youth while learning the Torah from his father the priest, John was on the lookout for a correspondence between his recollection of this leaping or *skirtao* and scriptural instances which could back up his experience. Expectation for a fuller revelation of God permeates the Bible. However, John was driven to see more specific instances as in the wisdom books and the prophets, chief of which was Isaiah. On top of this, John heard his father recount the time when he had been struck dumb from his encounter with the angel Gabriel who also appeared to Mary. Knowledge of this very intimate contact and a sense that something very important was transpiring, much larger than the individual involved, provided an additional impetus to focus his search of the Torah which had begun under the guidance of his father.

If Gabriel was so important in the foretelling of the birth first John and then Jesus, automatically you want to search out his identity which boils down to just two verses from the Book of Daniel⁴. Both references speak of “vision” or *chazon* which derives from a verbal root meaning to behold⁵. It is a word we associate with the very role of a prophet who is able to behold things the rest of us cannot but at the same time attempts to have us see what he can. The second verse is significant insofar as it relates to Zechariah who “was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty” [Lk 1.8]. In a way, this resembles the experience of the young Samuel who “was ministering before the Lord” [1Sam 2.18]. In his youth John must have pondered deeply over Samuel's role whose story details what it means to be a prophet. What applied to Samuel surely applied to John: “And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision” [3.1].

4 1) “And I heard a man's voice between the banks of the Ulai and it called, 'Gabriel, make this man understand the vision’” [8.16]. 2) “While I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice” [9.21].

5 The noun *chozeh* derives from it meaning a seer or prophet.

As for Gabriel's relationship with Daniel, note that he came to him "in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice." This manner of flight is rendered by the noun *yephaph* and essentially means weariness, thereby conveying the idea that being swift makes one tired quickly. "None who seek her need weary themselves" [Is 2.24]. Gabriel flies to Daniel at a special time, that of the "sacrifice" (*minchah*) which takes place at evening and is the only use of the phrase in the Book of Daniel. It provided a perfect cover against any prying eyes. People would tend to mistake Gabriel as a bird in the evening twilight and think nothing more. Also smoke from the sacrifice added to this cover. While the sacrifice at hand hearkens back to those in the temple at Jerusalem, perhaps this tradition was carried on in modified form in Babylon where Daniel has been led into exile. After having made himself known to Daniel, Gabriel can't help but blurt out, "you are greatly beloved," words with which John could identify. *Chamudoth* is a noun in the plural meaning desires—"you are desires"—or desire in the more intense sense of covetousness. Of course, the same can be applied to Zechariah. Now John had all the pieces put together yet still lacked clear vision. That, of course, would come with Jesus at the Jordan River.

This emphasis upon *skirtao* or John leaping in his mother's womb ties in with John following the example of Isaiah. It acts as an echo throughout his life and must have spent long days and nights...again, applying the number sacred forty as in the case of Moses and Jesus...pouring over the prophet Isaiah to see how the two might tie in together. John was keenly aware of other prophetic books, but Isaiah stood out among them all followed by Daniel. And so John gave himself over to intense study of the scriptures like no other Jew having been rooted firmly in that tradition through his father Zechariah. By reason of being son of a priest, he had considerable training in this regard which may be described as a kind of *lectio divina*. John had to pay very close attention to how Isaiah himself related to the Lord, picking out those passages where actual contact with the divine was made which chiefly consisted in a "vision" or *chazon*, actually the very first word of that book. *Chazon*, prophecy and the person of Gabriel in the Book of Daniel therefore all tie in together.

Related to John's struggle to find his identity is the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading the prophet Isaiah but unable to discern the identity of, let alone the meaning of, the suffering servant in 53.7-8. The apostle Philip had become the agent for revealing this unidentified person as Jesus Christ who recently had been put to death but was raised from the dead. Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading" [Acts 8.30]? The verb "understand" is *gignosko* used along with "reading" or *anagignosko*. In other words, Philip said, "Do you *gignosko* what you are *ana-gignosko*?" John must have encountered many such obstacles in his reading of Isaiah. Although he may not have been able to grasp them as related to someone who was about to manifest himself he, like Isaiah, saw in his *chazon* the essence of all these references. By reason of his proximity and relationship to Jesus, John saw the essence of what was to come "and greeted it from afar, having acknowledged that they (he) were strangers and exiles on the earth" [Heb 11.13].

All this talk about *skirtao* is vital to comprehend since John follows its lead throughout his life. However, there remains a practical question. What, in fact, did John do in the desert? Despite romantic ideas we might have of him and people like him, in reality they can't be praying all the time. The same applies to Jesus and Moses. While we know these two had experienced solitude, it doesn't seem to be as long as John. Nevertheless, they are singled out as having been alone "forty days and forty nights" which in many instances can be more significant than an extended period of time. While living apart (regardless of the length of time) you have to put some effort into procuring food even if it's minimal.

Since we're more concerned with John the Baptist...his food was locusts and honey which still required some effort to procure..he must have brought out to the desert (or had someone bring him) scrolls of the Torah and commentaries on it. He couldn't sit in a cave day and night as we might think of some Buddhist monks who had passed extended hours in meditation. It just doesn't fit the tradition. And while John did meditate in the sense of stilling his mind, he went about it in a Jewish fashion.⁶ That means pouring over the Torah scrolls and perhaps even with several disciples who looked after him. This can be a fairly continual process. You read (always slowly, never in haste) a bit, put down the text and if someone else is present, discuss it or better, argue over the text. The process is endless. It engages the whole person on multiple levels following a path along the lines of *lectio divina* and interaction with like-minded people. Really, what better way to spend one's time? It passes so quickly that you're little aware of other things, that is, except for some external intervention which is perfectly fine.

John's quasi-permanent stay in the desert stands out from among other notable examples, however. While there he strove to become as close as possible to Isaiah's example of being a prophet. Even if we have a cursory acquaintance with the story of John, chances are we've heard him as that "voice of one crying in the wilderness" [Mk 1.3]. The Hebrew word for "wilderness" is *midbar* which also can apply to a place for feeding flocks of sheep, in other words, a pasture. The verbal root is interesting, *davar*. It means to speak from which is derived the noun *davar* (same spelling) or "word" pretty much along the lines of the Greek *logos*. *Logos*, of course, means expression and applies to the person of Jesus Christ. This definition of desert as a place of speaking can tie into the identity of John who spent his years there doing the Torah as already explained. As he grew in facility of expression...*davar* or *logos*..John eventually became the voice (*qol*) crying out (*qara*) in the desert, that is, in the place of speaking or in the *midbar*. Now the notion of desert takes on a wholly different meaning rather than its usual stark character. It so happens that the *midbar* turns out to be a very busy place, a place where God can work freely minus human intervention. John's activity in the *midbar* becomes so constant that it's *qara*' or cry reaches into populated areas. People didn't get word of John residing in the *midbar* from visitors or the like but heard his *davar* reaching out from there. This was true especially at night when sound travels further. After all, ancient

6 You don't hear much, if anything, about Jewish hermits. Always they've been associated with close family ties compared with living alone. All the more an attractive way and more sane way of comporting oneself religiously speaking.

times lacked any background noise to which we're so accustomed, even in isolated areas. Because most Jews were familiar with Isaiah, they figured the prophet himself had come back to life and rushed out to see if this were true. John's voice was one-way. Its reception depended upon the quality of the listener's life, if he or she could pick it up.

In brief, John's message is as follows: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." The Hebrew reads "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Both "way and highway" or *derek* and *mesilah* primarily apply to passage on foot and sometimes by horse or wagon. The former term is more common and can apply to a way of life. The latter is an embanked highway, that is, raised somewhat from the land through which it runs to provide a straighter passage. John's summons is good enough, but when the people come out to meet John face to face, they're hit with the less welcoming words "you brood of vipers!" John addresses what he saw as an *ochlos* or multitude which, as noted earlier is a less than desirable term. Those hearing it could either be turned off or be moved straightaway to become baptized. Given John's formidable presence and words, it was a choice that had to be made on the spot, no lingering permitted.

Let's say some followed through on what John had to proclaim. What then? Would they hang around with John or return home? John doesn't seem inclined to assemble a following. Later when Jesus came on the scene, those present were both moved at the sight and were confused. Talk about two completely different men as far as demeanor goes. Perhaps the people should follow this "lamb of God," but he disappeared from the scene immediately. They were left holding the bag, all in all a confusing situation. Even though the people may have had a certain hostility toward their religious leaders who came check on John...the Pharisees and Sadducees stood off while jeering at John and giving him dirty looks...perhaps these men were right all along. They knew that John was the son of a respected priest now long dead, that is, Zechariah, and heard stories about his supposed visitation by an angel. Now they saw John who to them went against everything they and his father stood for. Admittedly John found it difficult to respond adequately and knew that their scorn contained an element of truth.

All this is speculation, of course, but isn't far off the mark of how John would spend his days right up to his fateful encounter with Jesus. Throughout that extended period of isolation which must have been punctuated by contact with disciples and hence study of Torah, John's prenatal *skirtao* pursued him into adulthood. Never could he escape its echo which became part and parcel of him being a voice in the wilderness. Actually the cause of this echo, if you will, wasn't terribly far away or in Nazareth where Jesus was growing up in his own particular way. Jesus must have gotten word about his cousin out in the desert and easily could have visited him. However, both knew instinctively that they had to remain separate until the proper time. Mary reenforced this for her son as well as Elizabeth for hers, knowing full well that John's *skirtao* is intimately bound up with the relationship between these two women. With this in mind, John felt an inner stirring to commence his mission in order to prepare for the eventual baptism of Jesus. That means Jesus felt a communication from John, if you will,

to go to the Jordan. He was especially sensitive to that voice crying in the wilderness, the *davar* in the *midbar* reaching the ears of him as *Logos*. So when the two finally met, John exclaimed “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” [Jn 1.29], the verb being *horao* which is more along the lines of behold.

We could say that at this juncture *skirtao* and *horao* were fulfilled through the image of Jesus as lamb, and for all those present at the Jordan this at once conjured up images of lambs used for sacrifice as in the Jerusalem temple. While saying these words, John hearkened back to his father Zechariah as he had offered sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple. Zechariah must have had an intimation that one day a lamb in human form, if you will, would offer himself for the people. So in the long run it was Zechariah who prepared his son for this particular part of his mission. If we stretch the meaning of *skirtao* a bit while harkening back to footnote #1, it does refer to the leaping and bounding of lambs.

John's Gospel is the only one where there's mutual recognition between the two cousins at the Jordan River. The other three have Jesus present more or less indistinguishable from other people as he steps forward for baptism. The deed is done quickly and expediently. You have to pay close attention else you'll miss the actual event. After being baptized, Jesus heads off to the mountains while John continues with his work but not for long. No one had to tell John to stop; he instinctively he knew when to wind down his activity but continued a bit more as not to disappoint well intentioned people who came to him. As Jesus ascended the hills not far from the Jordan, he looked back on occasion at John, knowing that the end of an era had come. John did the same, glancing up even as he continued his baptizing. Finally when Jesus got high enough and lost sight of John standing in the middle of the Jordan he knew he was now in uncharted territory. That is to say, Jesus realized a mission of preaching and healing lay ahead of him, but he had to withdraw to ponder the significance of what just occurred. Jesus also knew that up to that point throughout his life and that of John their interaction had been brief but meaningful. Something new was about to come to birth which only John and Jesus recognized. Rarely do two people have the ability to relate on such a profound level which why we can insert again the quote from Mt 11.11 used above in another context: “Truly I say to you among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist.” However, now comes the clincher which belays the real distinction between the two men: “yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

John had his band of disciples just like Jesus or any Jew who engaged in teaching. While we don't have information about John's, we have plenty concerning those whom Jesus had chosen. This includes not only his immediate disciples but their successors which the Church holds to be an unbroken line. In what perhaps was a rare contact between the two groups, John's disciples approached those of Jesus with a question about fasting (cf. Mt 9.14+). They follow the Mosaic Torah and fast according to specific times and occasions. The disciples of Jesus do not which is in accord with their master's apparent disregard for such observances. Right away we get the superficial impression that Jesus didn't care about the Torah but as he said, he came

to fulfill it. This quickly became public knowledge and doesn't seem to pose any difficulty. However, later a real problem arises when Christianity starts to have strained relationships with its Jewish identity. Christians became more conscious of the legalism of Jewish tradition as a stumbling block, and they had a point. However, focus upon this issue ignores the far richer way some Jews (usually today called orthodox or Hasidic) devote themselves to study of the Torah.

If John and Jesus could have a conversation, each representing what has diverged to become two religions instead of two sides of one religion, imagine how fascinating it would be. Yet their contact was minimal throughout suggesting that real conversation doesn't have to be prolonged. Easily we could imagine John on the mount of transfiguration not as a disciple but with Moses and Elijah (cf. Mt 17.3). This imagined conversation works to our benefit because it allows plenty of room not so much to read into the situation but to allow the facts we know to blossom out to what we know, albeit in mystery. Christianity's divergence from Judaism took precedent because despite valuable elements it would offer Christianity, failure to adopt a Gentile-oriented world view early on could have been fatal after a generation or two. Nevertheless it's fun to speculate what might have developed if the Semitic roots of Christianity were passed on to the Gentiles more whole and entire as, for example, through diligent study of the Torah.

Lack of this seems to be the major defect in Christianity which today stands out more than ever in a multi-cultural, multi-religious world. Yet the defect which had been present from the beginning can serve as a reminder that a restoration of sorts is possible. The two sides of one religion, if you will, can be retained as represented by John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Obviously this is putting the matter in an awkward fashion. Yet the riches that could flow from this are immense. It would be not unlike Christians sitting down in a yeshiva and pouring over the Torah day and night. If the example put forward here is lacking, desiring this to happen is not beyond reach even if a small number people were involved. Apparently when Christians are told it is within their means...not that they are to rush off to the nearest yeshiva...they are thrilled. At last something more meaty can be within their grasp.

Finally John is cast into prison which turns out to be the ultimate test of the relationship between him and Jesus.⁷ Even before this word must have gotten back to Herod through the Pharisees and Sadducees about John's baptizing as well as his connection with Jesus. Thus the two religious groups were in collusion with Herod without their knowing it. If John were eliminated, those who had come under his sway would melt away. Even though Jesus speaks at some length of his cousin's role (that is, Mt 11.2-19), there doesn't seem to be any feeling for him...not just here but elsewhere. The relationship was on a much deeper level which as noted above, could be put as a relationship between two sides of one religion which for better or for worse developed into Judaism and Christianity. Jesus is clear about John being a herald

⁷ The reason for his imprisonment: "Now Herod has arrested John...because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: 'It is not lawful for you to have her'" [Mt 14.3-4].

though in an indirect sort of way. He doesn't come right out and say that he is the subject of John's preaching. Despite its truth, taking such a direct stance would cause more harm than good.

So here we have John languishing in prison knowing that he won't be freed. Jesus doesn't dare visit him else he'd end up there as well. It was too early for him to be imprisoned; the essential distinction between him and John had been made yet must be played out some more though time was running short. As for John, he rejoiced at the news of hearing of Jesus' activity.⁸ This is exactly what John longed to hear and once he did, he knew that death was just around the corner. Still, John must have created his own space in prison while at the same time feeling some abandonment. There was no other choice, really. At least John has many years of preparation by living in the desert. He was now faced with no further confirmation of his mission which had come to be identified with the prophet Isaiah.

Now that identification switched over to Jesus in a more significant way, one which had puzzled the Ethiopian eunuch as discussed earlier. The eunuch was captivated by the figure of Isaiah's suffering servant. He also could have gotten word about John and wondered how he fit into all this, being familiar at this point with only sketchy details. In a way, John's isolation with little or no input from either reading material or from friends put him in a space that could be quite threatening. John managed not to go crazy and after a while entered a space where we became conscious of remaining in existence, pure and simple. There's no need for discernment here, for it doesn't apply. John doesn't have to worry about the right thing to do, of how to comport himself. He has transcended discernment, as it were, and has become indifferent to death. Not long after his imprisonment word comes down from King Herod to behead John (cf. Mt 14.5+). When the executioner entered the cell, immediately John knew that what had begun in the womb with his *skirtao* at recognizing Jesus would be fulfilled. There is no report of Jesus' reaction when his disciples informed him. They thought it appropriate to first bury John and then tell their master (cf. vs. 12) after which he withdrew "to a lonely place" (cf. vs. 13). We can only imagine what Jesus had pondered while there, for the voice crying in the wilderness had fallen silent and a new voice was about to become stronger and go forth throughout the world.

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8 "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them" [Lk 7.22].