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John the Baptist

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JOHN THE BAPTIST

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John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a pious but childless old couple of priestly stock (only Luke 1:5-25, 57-80), was a teacher of renown in Judea who was executed by Herod Antipas (Matthew 14:1-2; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9; Josephus, *Antiquities* XVIII. 5.2 #116-119). All these sources describe him as baptizer of people seeking repentance for sins; he challenged them to reform their lives in practical ways to prepare for impending judgement (Matt 4:11-12; Luke 3:3-17). The fourfold Gospel presents John as forerunner of the Messiah, fulfilling the role of Elijah the prophet according to Malachi 3:23-24 (Matt 17:10-13; Luke 1:16-17). However, some pilgrims to the festivals in Jerusalem carried his message to Alexandria (Acts 18:25) and Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7) and in remote places adherents held on to his message for several generations.

Perspectives in the Qumran scrolls concerning the proximity of the final days and the symbolic use of ablutions to depict turning from sin are found in John's message, but direct dependence on this group (Essenes?) need not be postulated. The baptism of Jesus by John is interpreted by the evangelists as the Messiah declaring solidarity with sinners because he had come to serve them, to reconcile them with God (Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; John 1:24-34).

In prison, John sent disciples to challenge Jesus concerning the Messianic role of bringing final Judgement (Matt 11:2-6); Jesus praised him as "more than a prophet" (11:7-19). John's witness to the commandments, specifically fidelity to marriage vows, led to his execution. The Preface for the feasts of John in the Roman rite declares: "You found John worthy of a martyr's death, his last and greatest witness to your Son."

Since the late fourth century the Church calendar has celebrated the birth of John on June 24th (see Matt 11:11) and from the fifth century his martyrdom on August 29th. These feasts (especially the first, more solemn and pointing to Christmas) were the context for numerous homilies throughout the ages. His life of mortification (Matt 3:4, 11:7-19; Mark 1:6) and his preaching constituted the basis for admonitory critiques of worldly ways, epitomized by Herod Antipas and Herodias.

"John was like a cornerstone, joining the Old and New Testaments...; he was a mediator between the Testaments because he was the end of the Old and the beginning of the New Testament, for 'all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John' (Matt 11:13)..." (William Durand, *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* Book VII chapter 14, the great liturgical commentary of the 13th century.). The supersessionist statement is typical of the age. Following the Second Vatican Council Catholics should recall that "from the Jewish people sprang the apostles" (*Nostra Aetate* #4) and John the Baptist who lived and died a faithful witness to the God of Israel.

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