

Contemporary Mystic Christianity **Bible Self-Study Supplement**

John the Forerunner

John was the highest in spiritual attainment who had been sent to earth prior to the coming of Jesus. John formed the first inner School dealing with the deeper interpretations of the Christian Mysteries to prepare the pioneers for the Piscean era. Hence the words of the Christ: "The kingdom of heaven is seized by invaders," that is by those who find heaven and enter therein through the portals of Initiation as taught in the inner Piscean School established by John.

Like Jesus, as previously observed, John was born of Initiate parents. His was also an angelic annunciation by Gabriel, an immaculate conception and a holy birth.

Zacharias, the father of John, was a priest in the service of the Temple in Jerusalem. He and his wife lived in the little town of Jutta situated not far from the city, in the hill country and overlooking the vast reaches and brilliant shifting colors of the desert.

The priests were chosen by lot for the privilege of entering into the Holy Place to sprinkle incense upon the altar. From the years of youth until old age had bowed his head and whitened his hair, Zacharias had prayed that this

task might fall to him. At last after fifty years of Temple service the momentous time arrived, and it was while he stood within the Holy Place that the Angel appeared with the glad tidings of the coming of John.

The quiet and peace of the home of his early years, companioned only by his holy mother, the majesty of the hills and the glory of the desert, had aged John far beyond his years. The Angel's promise that he should be "filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb" was verily in process of fulfillment.

At the age of twelve he made his first visit to the Temple with its shimmering columns, stairways and altars of whitest marble, its porches of gleaming bronze, floors and courts inlaid with mosaics, its retinue of elaborately garbed priests and its magnificent rituals. John was quick to discern, despite all this outer magnificence, the utter lack of the spirit which alone imparts life and meaning to form.

Already he was familiar with the desert where he could know a silence reminiscent of the Eternal, where the inner and the outer consciousness could become one. Here he could think his way inward to the Divine Fact.

The Roman government sold the office of priest to the highest bidder. In this way Annas, the wealthiest and most powerful of the Sadducees, held this office during the

ministry of John and Jesus. It had been estimated that Annas paid the equivalent of a million dollars for the privilege of obtaining this office. The Temple with its rapidly increasing revenue amassed through the robbery of exorbitant taxation, soon reimbursed Annas and he became the economic dictator of Palestine.

The Roman law permitted the taxation of each province in proportion to the financial assets of its population and in addition thereto a further levy, the result being that the vast majority were unable to meet the taxes, sold their land to the Temple, and became slave workers for Annas. Thus his wealth and power increased and the morals of the people were correspondingly lowered. The tax collectors were recruited from among renegade Jews who were willing to amass fortunes for themselves at the expense of the contempt and hatred of their own people. It was from this abhorred class that Matthew was called into discipleship by his Lord.

As John journeyed to and from his home in Jutta to receive instruction in Jerusalem for the priesthood, he saw on every side the ruthless cruelty of the Roman soldiers, the heartless greed of the tax collectors, the travesty of the Temple services and the dire peril to all things really holy. This, together with the horrible oppression of the people, filled the mind and heart of the young John with a burning

indignation against the social injustices and religious hypocrisies of his time, which later found utterance in the challenging invectives he hurled at both State and Church.

From infancy John had been set apart from his generation; his angelic annunciation and the Nazarite vow caused other children to look upon him as belonging to another world. The solitude of the desert, the companionship and instruction of his holy parents, had prepared him for his unique destiny.

Although he easily passed the rigid physical and scholastic examinations which made him eligible for the Temple novitiate, his mind and his spirit were elsewhere. Already higher voices were speaking to him and angelic forms were beckoning. His was not to be mere routine work. His was the destiny mission. Nothing less could satisfy his soaring aspiration.

At the death of his parents, John was faced with the task which confronts every aspirant who seeks to make a full and complete dedication to the spiritual life. He must balance the costs of spirit against the things of the world. In John's case, an easy life as a Temple priest was already his by training and hereditary right. Only two weeks of the year was a priest required for Temple duties, the remainder of the time his life was his own, with luxury and a princely salary at his command. The human side of John weighed

those things against a life of deprivation and hardship, a social, if not a spiritual, outcast.

Yet he knew that he could never find peace and soul satisfaction in a legalistic religion which had stifled its conscience and buried its honor in an unworthy alliance with the "prince of this world," Rome. An Essene, already his spirit revolted against the excess of sacrificial animals, endless purificatory rites performed by hands technically clean, perhaps, but in heart wicked and cruel. All about him rose up the widow's pleas and the orphan's cries, while the publicans offered their unending prayers with no vestige of spiritual living to vivify them.

The desert, with no compromise but an entire dedication of himself to the highest, won. John's renunciation of the world was complete. For almost twenty years he lived amid the solitudes which he had known centuries before in another embodiment, when, as the rugged prophet, Elijah, they had been his trysting place with Spirit. Here once more, as John, he found his answer to the problem of social injustice. Here he learned from celestial visitors of the Great One who was to come, and here he was prepared and inspired to serve as the forerunner who should clear the way for the coming of the Light of the World.

The Galilee of John's time was the crossroads of the world, populated by a mixed race who were reckless, daring

and filled with the spirit of adventure. It was also the most densely populated section of Palestine. Every available inch of ground was cultivated so closely that it was necessary to use spades instead of plows.

The population was inevitably cosmopolitan, aggressive, and ever changing. One of the greatest of the commercial highways from Egypt passed through Galilee, hence Phoenicians, Greeks, Syrians and men from the Far East were familiar figures upon the streets of Galilean cities. John was thus brought into contact with many alien peoples and this liberalizing influence on his thought made it less bound to the established conventions than that of most of his fellow countrymen. Galileans were particularly abhorred by the more orthodox class of Sadducees, from whom the Temple priests were largely recruited. The very term "Jesus of Galilee" was anathema to the priests. The unsavory reputation of this province was the cause of Nathanael's question: "Can anything good come out of Galilee?"

It was also from Galilee that the Zealots (to whom Simon belonged) gathered their most daring members. Their close contact with the outer world brought knowledge of oppressions beyond their own borders, and this added to the realization of their own sufferings under the Romans, made them more ardent in their expectations of the Messiah and more eager to champion the cause of one who

comes as His Forerunner, as prophesied in the secret books. Hence the most advanced pupils in John's School — Peter, Andrew, James, John and Phillip — were the first disciples of the Supreme Master. (It is also significant that all of the Twelve, with the exception of Judas Iscariot, were from Galilee.)

After his long term of probation in the desert, John, the holy flaming prophet of the New Age and its Great Teacher, came forth from his years of seclusion. His protracted and continuous communion with nature enabled him instantly to detect the true from the false, the real from the unreal. In his rough mantle, physically majestic, with long flowing black hair and glorious dark eyes ablaze with the light which pierces the barriers of the unseen, his was an impressive presence. His resonant and impassioned speech, challenging and vibrant, marked him truly as the "Voice crying in the wilderness," foreknown to the esoteric tradition of Israel.

He established his preparatory School, in which to train disciples for the coming Messiah, upon the banks of the Jordan at the desert's edge. One of the most important of the Initiations in this School was the Rite of Baptism. As described elsewhere in this volume, Baptism in esoteric Christianity did not consist of mere immersion but was a rite conferring definite powers of clairvoyance and the

ability to function as soul apart from body without suffering death, which was — and still is — the pioneer achievement of a New Age; the Piscean then, the Aquarian now; for the few then, for the masses now. It was for this reason that Christ Jesus, the Supreme Way-Shower of that New Age, came to John to pass through the Rite of Baptism in Jordan, thus to inaugurate His three years' ministry.

It is written that John lived upon locusts and honey while in the desert; but that we are to read into this more than that conveyed by a literal rendering is made plain in these words of Paracelsus: "That which grows in the form and flowers of locusts is concerned in the form and appearance of honey. It does not yet dwell in the ultimate matter (except for the Illumined Ones), being perfected by the Sun and Moon. These can bring nothing to its final perfection, however, without the assistance of a celestial operation, which in the case of planets, is the summer star." (Sirius)

It is significant in this connection to note that in masonic symbolism, John the Baptist represents the season of the Summer Solstice; also that the holy rite of his nativity occurred at this same season. There is a divine analogy between heaven and earth which forms one of the most important keys to Initiation. Under angelic guidance, John spent his days in prayer, meditation, and the attainment of wisdom. He affirms: "There I learned the whole of my

wisdom and made fully my own the whole of my discourse. They clothed me with vestures of glory and veiled me with cloudlike veils. They wound me around with a girdle of living water which shone beyond measure and glistened." John is here describing the effulgence of his radiant aura, his glorious soul body. "And the child grew and waxed strong in spirit and was in the deserts until the day of his shewing unto Israel." (Luke 1:80)

This soul spent thirty years in preparation for a mission that lasted only six months. When he was prepared, he came as a cloud of splendor into the vicinity of Jerusalem, heralding the coming of a new age. He was a voice from the wilderness crying, "Make straight ye the path for the coming of the Lord."

Matthew 14:1-12

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard of the fame of Jesus.

And said unto his servants, This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him...

For Herod had laid hold on John, and bound him, and put him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife.

For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her. And when he would have put him to death, he

feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet.

But when Herod's birthday was kept the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod.

Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask.

And she, being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John the Baptist's head in a charger.

And the king was sorry. Nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them that sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her.

And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison.

And his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel; and she brought it to her mother.

John, who had spent years in extreme austerity amid the deep solitudes of the desert, had been filled with consternation at the lasciviousness and voluptuousness which he found in the world. Like the youthful Jesus, he could see the utter dearth of spiritual power in the Temple, attended though it was by innumerable companies of priests, scribes and Pharisees. In the Memory of Nature he was able to read the impending doom of the people. He knew the true meaning of the mission of the Christ, hence the theme of his ministry: "Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." In the brief six months of his ministry he had become the central figure of the time, and was

surrounded by multitudes who gathered from among the rich and poor, the lofty and the lowly to see and to hear him.

Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee; and Annas and his son-in-law, Caiaphas, were the high priests. John the Baptist labored during the day, and at night he slept in caves. His principal nourishment consisted of honey and wild locust, previously mentioned. His food was a mystic sacrament. With the Christ he could say: "I have bread that ye know not of."

His is the most exquisite humility described throughout the entire Bible. His was a complete selflessness not equalled by any of the disciples. "Among them that are born of woman there hath not arisen a greater," was the statement of the Christ. He always declared himself to be, not a, light, but only a witness of the Light.

Persecuted by the Sanhedrin and priests, driven from place to place, followed only by a few faithful disciples (among whom were some of the original Twelve), he continued to, herald the Way for the coming of the Saviour.

Herod was the son of King Herod the Great. Herod's wife, a daughter of the king of Arabia, was still living but had been put away because of the king's infatuation for his brother Philip's wife, the beautiful and wicked Herodias,

with whom he now lived in a court of unrivalled luxury and splendor. All the sensuous and refined vices of the ancient Taurean practices in their lowest forms of degradation had been introduced into the life of the palace, veiled beneath the most enticing and subtle forms of beauty and elegance. Herod built the great castle of Machaerus with its turrets and imposing towers; its banquet halls and marble baths, in duplication of the luxury and magnificence of Rome.

It was in an underground dungeon of the palace that John was imprisoned. Herod dared not kill him because of his influence with the people. He permitted him many liberties and allowed his disciples to visit him. Had he not denounced Herodias and her life with Herod, he could have gone free, but his denunciations aroused the intense hatred of Herodias. Purposely she planned the birthday fete of Herod in order to plot the destruction of John. The guests reclined upon couches set in a semicircle about the great banquet hall. When their senses had been inflamed by rich food and highly spiced wines, the sensuous orgy was continued by dancers who depicted scenes from ancient phallic Temple worship. As the atmosphere was heavy with the voluptuousness of suggestive motion, at the witching hour of midnight, Salome appeared, beautiful, young, seductive. Overwhelmed by emotion, Herod made the rash promise, and under the instructions of the evil Herodias, Salome demanded the head of the pure and holy John.

Because of her deep knowledge of the black arts which she had acquired in an Egyptian school of magic, Herodias desired a death in which the blood should flow, hence the beheading. Blood is the principal vehicle of the spirit. Herodias wished to procure the blood of one so pure and holy as John because of the tremendous forces contained in it and usable by one skilled in evil magic. This power she used, as do all practitioners of the black arts, to magnetize, revivify, and retain the youth of her body.

Light is always in opposition to shadow. Set over against John, the herald of the great Light of the World, was Herodias, a disciple of the Brothers of the Shadow. Since the fall from Eden, man has known the cycle of alternation of good and evil, light and shadow, day and night, spirit and matter. Endlessly the conflict goes on. The herald of the Light was murdered, the Light of the World was crucified; but the way was made plain and whosoever will may walk in the light which is "the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world."

A logical and satisfactory working hypothesis for the understanding of the apparent injustices, the seeming inequalities, and the many otherwise inexplicable problems of life can only be formulated upon the twin laws of rebirth and causation. Paul comprehended and enunciated these laws in the words: "Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for

whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." The teachings of rebirth are found in the words of the supreme Teacher Himself.

— ***Corinne Heline***