



The Angel of the Wilderness

St. John the Baptist in the Writings of the Early Church Fathers



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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit
One God Amen.

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1

The Institutes That Prepared St. John the Baptist

Is he the greatest among those born of women?

St. Jacob of Serugh writes about St. John the Baptist saying:

* Speaking of John, the Baptist is so fearful, and it does not have one trait of beauty that we can describe for he is full of beauties!

How do I dare to describe this beauty? Words cannot tell.

What words or what homilies could speak of this great man? Words are lacking and the tongue trembles when I speak of him.

Do I call him a prophet? His story is likened to the apostles, should I consider him an apostle then? Is his rank among the prophets? He is the high priest by which the law was perfected, and a Levi, who never practiced priesthood.

This is he, who was born, according to the flesh, to the daughter of Aron, but offers spiritual sacrifices like Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18). He is the circumcised according to the Law of the Old Testament, yet he reveals the spiritual circumcision, in the baptism of the New Testament.

He is the one, who became the mediator of the two testaments, concluding one, and starting the other for he was truthful...

This is he, who accepted the Holy Spirit, in his mother's womb, and declared the conception of the blessed (Virgin Mary).

This is the beloved, who leaped as a baby in his mother's womb, in front the One who is eternal according to His divinity, who came to the womb of the Virgin...

This is he, who kicked his mother with a leap to bless the young mother, who carries the Ancient of the Days.

This is he, who started his ministry in the womb, and did not stop until the sword silenced him.

This is he, who ran to the river as a fisherman and there, he threw his net and caught a spiritual catch,

This is he, who became the voice crying in the wilderness, to prepare the

way for the nations to come to the Lord.

He is the one who touched the Son, heard the Father, saw the Holy Spirit, and preached the Holy trinity...

The Word of God, saw his beauty and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist." (Matthew 11:11)

Did he join any institutes to prepare him for ministry?

1- The First Institute; The Institute of the Divine Prophecies: Before John was even born, God granted Malachi the prophet to announce by the spirit of prophecy: "**Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me.** And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts." (Malachi 3:1).

According to the foreknowledge of God, He chose John before his creation to prepare the way before the incarnated Word of God, and He called him, "His messenger". He came to deliver the message of God, which he received from heaven and not from man. He did not start his preparation in an earthly school, but from the prophecies, we understand that his mission was from God Himself. This is the hidden institute which John joined, through God's foreknowledge.

This institute teaches every man to raise his heart to God and ask Him, "You, O Lord, who searches the heart, reveal to me the way of service that fits me. I am not waiting for a human invitation for consecration or to serve your Kingdom.

Do not let me be confused in choosing the way of my life. Do I witness to You, while I am working in the world and have a blessed family? Or do I consecrate myself for a life of virginity or service? Do I witness to your Bible in my homeland or do you desire me to do so in a different country? Do I dedicate myself to theological studies or invest all my efforts in shepherding your flock? Or in life of meditation and solitude in the desert?"

Poor is he, who relies in his choices on someone else to take it for him, whatever his church rank is, or rely on his own personal decisions, without leaning back on the Savior's breast.

2- The Institute of the Blessed Home: The second institute in the life of St. John the Baptist, before his birth, was his blessed family; his righteous parents; Zacharias and Elizabeth. They might have been prayed since they got married to have a child who would inherit the priesthood and excel in it, to attain what his parents were unable to attain. God answered their prayers and gave them, His messenger, who prepares the way for the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

This blessed couple provide us with a model, not only to the married but even to the virgins – whatever their age may be – that God sanctifies the new generation spiritually, and enkindles their hearts to know the mysteries of God and witness to the Gospel, to renew and build the Kingdom of God. The true believer prays and works for the next generation to be more holy, more knowledgeable, and more loving than the current generation.

3- The Institute of Seeking the Lord diligently: Jacob, the son of Isaac, met the Lord when he was a baby in his mother's womb, so it was said, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." (Romans 9:13). John the Baptist met Him, when he was a baby in in his mother's womb, so he leaped joyfully, when St. Mary entered the house of Elizabeth and Zacharias and he even preached to his mother, so she said, "But why *is* this *granted* to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43).

The baby, John the Baptist, did not wait for the day of his birth, but joined the heavenly multitudes in their joy, so he leaped joyfully and witnessed to his mother about the incarnate Messiah, while He was still in the womb of the virgin, before he even spoke a human language. Why can we not hurry to share in the heavenly praises and prayers with the angles, and witness to the Bible, since our childhood?

St. Jacob of Serugh warns us from postponing our meeting with God from day to day, lest we become a toy in the hands of Satan and lose the fervency of our spirits.

4- The Institute of the Holy Wilderness: The baby, John the Baptist, was prepared in the holy wilderness, at the hands of angels for almost thirty years, till the day he started his ministry at the Jordan river. His father, the priest, did not hide him in a place in the Temple or in one of its chambers. John did not meet any of the Levites or priests, to teach him the mysteries of the Old Testament, including the commandments of the Law, the rites of worship or

the prophecies, but he enjoyed all this, during his time in the wilderness.

We should not be surprised that St. Mary of Egypt, who lived in corruption since her youth, and offered her body, mind and emotions to fornication and corruption. When she repented in Jerusalem, she did not return to Egypt to sit with one of the spiritual teachers, but went into the wilderness to struggle against Satan and all his powers, supported by the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. St. Zosimas, the priest, was surprised when he met her and found that she memorized many verses from Scripture, even though she never had a Bible or was taught by anyone.

We are in desperate need of quiet times with the Lord, enjoying his love and listening to His voice inside our hearts, praying that He would shine His face upon us and prepare us to partake of His Holy Body and His precious Blood joyfully and with the fear of God.

5- The Institute of Experiencing the Holy Trinity: Who can describe his feelings when he saw the heavens parting, hearing the voice of the Father and seeing the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, while he places his hands on the head of his Master, about whom he said, that he is not worthy to stoop down and loose His sandal strap. (Mark 1:7)

The real school that prepares the believer or servant is experiencing the Holy Trinity, to receive His grace, which sanctifies his mind, heart, emotions, and body, grows in the Divine knowledge, and becomes the “Man of God.”

2

The Greatest Among those Born of women

A Prophet or an Apostle?

The church begins its calendar by a procession for the martyrs, the Cross-bearers. The following day, we celebrate the martyrdom of St. John the Baptist, who was a unique personality in many aspects, and his uniqueness made him a wonderful model for all believers. He is considered one of the righteous men of the Old Testament, as he prophesied about the coming of Our lord Jesus Christ, just before Our Lord started His service. At the same time, he is considered one of the righteous men of the New Testament, as he was witnessing the beginning of Christ's ministry and baptized Him!

St. Cyril the Great, says on the tongue of Christ: [A Prophet? Yes, I also say as well as you. For he is a saint and a prophet: no, he even surpasses the dignity of a prophet; for not only did he announce before that I am coming, but pointed Me out close at hand, saying? " Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

St. John considers himself blessed because the holy men of the Old Testament consider him one of them, as he prophesied about the Lamb of God, and the holy men of the New Testament accept him among them, as he saw the Incarnate Son of God, spoke to him and believed in Him.

* The prophet is the one, who prophesizes about what is coming, but the apostle is the one who announces what had already happened. St. John prophesied and at the same time, he saw the Lamb of God, so he became the greatest of all prophets.

St. Jacob of Serugh

St. John does not need a testimony from a human or an angel, as the Lord Himself testified that he was the greatest among those born of women (Matthew 11:11), He also called him, the burning and shining lamp, that witnesses to the truth. David the prophet called him: "I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed." (Psalm 132:17).

Comparing him to the Fathers of the Old Testament

He is righteous like Noah, and loved by God like Abraham, slaughtered like Abel, and has the beauty of Enoch.

He is beloved like Isaac, and meek and chaste like Jacob. Imprisoned like Joseph and zealous like Elijah.

Great like Moses and is not less than Elisha. He is a priest like the famous Melchizedek. A priest greater than Aron, Eliezer, and Samuel. He is a Nazirite of the Lord better than Samson. Selected and sanctified in the womb like Jeremiah. Glorious and great in prophecy like Isaiah.

Chosen like David and more beautiful than Josiah. Pure like Hosea and rebukes the kings more than Micah.

He understands the mysteries like Ezekiel and Daniel, his fasting was accepted like the fasting of the sons of Ananias.

He resembles all of them, because all beauty was in him, and he was the greatest of them all.

He is righteous like one of them and saintly like another, meek as the third, honorable like the fourth, a virgin like the fifth and pure as the sixth.

From one of them, he learnt fasting and ascetism and from another, he learnt humility and perfection.

Resembles one in prophecy and ascetism and resembles the other in zeal and poverty. You see his beauty in all the victorious ones, and there is no one greater than him among them. (Matthew 11:11).

Look to the heavens when Elijah ascended and to the sea when Jonah descended.

Whether they ascended or descended, none of them is highly esteemed as John the Baptist.

It was said: There was no one greater than him, search now and compare him with every great one.

St. Jacob of Serugh

John Did Not Do Visible Miracles

St. Jacob of Serugh, highlighted two points in the life of St. John the Baptist:

Firstly: Since his childhood and till the age of thirty, he was hiding in the wilderness; the Spirit was raising him away from family affairs or the Jewish community affairs, even those related to the service in the temple, as he was the son of Zacharias the high priest. This justified by the fact that the Spirit, since his childhood, guided him to his inner being. During this period, he never visited Jerusalem or the Temple, not even once!

Secondly: He did not do a single miracle, yet when he left the wilderness people hastened to him from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the regions around the Jordan. (Matthew 3:5).

John's rank was not known to our world, because he did no miracles or any earthly acts.

His goal was to heal the spirit, and by his hidden beauty, he resembled Melchizedek.

He did not want to have any visible powers, as he was focused on clothing souls with light.

He had hidden beauty, and the world did not know who he is until it heard that he is the greatest among all born of women.

* The Spirit brought him up, since his childhood in the new life, and all the beauty he had, came from inside.

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Lord Jesus Christ came to build His kingdom within us, He desired to make John the Baptist, a voice crying in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3), and the angel that prepares the way before him (Malachi 3:1). This preparation requires that John would not be bothered by any of his surroundings but focuses on his inner self. The second thing is that he should not boast about miracles but rather invites people to discover the need for renewal of the human nature and its sanctification through the Cross to prepare it for the eternal wedding.

His stay in the wilderness was not a waste of time, nor was his lack of doing miracles, a weakness.

God completed the salvation on the Cross, He resurrected and ascended to the heavens and invites us not to bother with our belongings, but rather to focus on our spirits, not asking for miracles, but for the work of god within us.

We should not marvel when the apostle says, "Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe." (1 Corinthians 14:22).

St. basil the Great, talked several times about: "Look after yourself", and in one of his sermons, "Know Yourself," he says, "We ourselves are something, but what we have or surround us, is something else."

3

The Son of the Holy Wilderness

John the Baptist owes his greatness to his righteous parents, and when the Herod's soldiers wanted to kill him, his father put him in the temple, probably on the altar of incense, so the angel came and took him to the wilderness. He is the son of wilderness, served by the angels, and raised by the Spirit. Not a man was around to serve or comfort him in his loneliness, but his solitude made him taste the heavenly life. His experience with God's care for him as a baby, made him enjoy a taste of heaven. The Bible says about him, "So the child grew and became strong in spirit and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel." (Luke 1:80).

* So I suppose that Zechariah hastened to speak to the infant because he knew John would soon be living in the desert, and he would no longer enjoy John's presence. "For, the boy was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel." Moses, too, dwelt in the desert. After he completed the fortieth year of his age, he fled from Egypt and, for another forty years, pastured Jethro's herds. But John went out to the wilderness as soon as he was born. "Greatest among those born of women," he was evidently worthy of a greater upbringing.¹

Origen

* But some may find it unreasonable and extravagant to speak to an eight-day-old child. Yet, on reflection, we fully understand that he could, once born, hear the voice of his father, having heard the salvation of Mary before being born. Prophet (Zechariah) knew that there are other ears for a prophet, those opened by the Spirit of God, and not the growth of the body; he (John the Baptist) had the sense to understand, having felt to flinch.

St. Ambrose

In Luc. Hom 10: 6, 7¹

4

I am not worthy to loose His sandal's strap

John confessed that he is not worthy to loose the sandals straps of Christ, but he submitted to the Lord's command, to place his hand on him and baptize him, He, whom the heavenly multitudes do not dare to stare at Him.

St. Cyril of Alexandria says:

[For he knew that He is faithful unto those that serve Him. And what he acknowledges is in very deed the truth: for between God and man the distance is immeasurable. "Ye yourselves, therefore," he says, "bear me witness that I said I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before Him."(John 3:28), Great therefore and admirable in very deed is the forerunner, who was the dawning before the Savior's meridian splendor, the precursor of the spiritual daylight, beautiful as the morning star, and called of God the Father a torch. Having therefore thus declared himself not to be the Christ, he now brings forward proofs, which we must necessarily consider, and by which we may learn how immeasurable the distance evidently is between God and man, between the slave and the Master, between the minister and Him Who is ministered unto, between him who goes before as a servant, and Him Who shines forth with divine dignity. What, therefore, is the proof? "I indeed baptize in water. After me shall come He Who is mightier than I, Whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose." As I said, therefore, the difference is incomparable, the superiority immeasurable, if, as is the case, the blessed Baptist, being so great in virtue, declares that he is not worthy even, as it were, to touch His shoes. And his declaration is true: for if the rational powers above, principalities, and thrones, and lordships, and the holy Seraphim themselves, who stand around His godlike throne, holding the rank of ministers, unceasingly crown Him with praises as the Lord of all, what dweller upon earth is worthy even to be nigh unto God? For though He be loving unto man, and gentle, and mild, yet must we, as being of slight account, and children of earth, confess the weakness of our nature.]¹

No one can loose the straps of His sandals, meaning; No one can understand the mysteries of His incarnation. John was really filled with the Holy Spirit, and thus he became worthy to become a friend, and not only a servant, but he

Catena Aurea (John 1) .¹

was still incapable of understanding the mysteries of His divine nature.

St. Jerome provides another commentary, which is that St. John the Baptist did not dare to loose the sandal's straps of His Master, because the Master wants His widowed bride and does not want to reject her as stated in the Law, that the close relative, who refuses to marry the widow to perpetuate the name of the dead through his inheritance, would take off his sandal, in front of the elders, and give it, to the one who accepts marrying her. As the close relative of Ruth did. (Ruth 4:7-8). Our Christ will not take off His sandals, to give them to anyone, as He wants to have us as His bride, and purchase us by his own love and own blood.¹

*In Matt .8:11.*¹

5

A Crying Voice

Isaiah saw him 700 years before his birth and said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD,’” (Isaiah 40:3).

He is the voice crying in the wilderness of this world, but the Lord Jesus Christ, is the savior of the world.

“I am, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness:” (John 1:23)

Isaiah described him saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert, A highway for our God.” (Isaiah 40:3).

He is the voice preceding the Word of God, as Pope Gregory the Great said: *“You know, dear brothers, that the only-begotten Son is called the Word of the Father, as John testifies, saying, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (Jn 1, 1). You know, for having spoken to yourself, that the voice must begin to sound so that the word can be heard. John therefore affirms to be the voice because he precedes the Word. Anticipating the coming of the Lord, John is called the voice, because by his ministry, the Word of the Father is understood by men. He cries in the desert since he announces to the abandoned and deserted Judea that the Redeemer is going to console her.*

Whosoever puffs up his spirit of glory, whoever is stifled by the ardor of avarice, whoever defiles himself with the degradation of lust, closes the door of his heart to the truth; he entrenches himself in his soul by the bolts of his vices in order to prevent the Lord from coming to him.]¹

Origen Of Alexandria said that the voice, testified for the Logos, presenting six testimonies:

1- He testified for His greatness, as He who comes after him, is preferred before him, for He was before him, He is the grace-giver, and the One who declared the Father. (John 1:15-18). These statements were all said by John the Baptist, and not as some think, said by John the evangelist.

2- His testimony before the Priests and Levites coming from Jerusalem. (John 1:19-27)

3- His testimony on the greatness of Christ, when he said that he is not worthy to loose his sandal straps (John 1:26-27), and that He is standing among

PL 1099 – 1103.¹

them, but they do not know Him.

4- His testimony the following day, that He is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

5- His testimony when he saw the Spirit, descending from heaven like a dove and remained on Him. (John 1:32-33)

6- For the sixth time, he testified for his two disciples that He is the Lamb of God. (John 1:35-36).

This voice crying in the wilderness is the voice of the heart not the physical voice, as Origen says, “And the LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry to Me?” (Exodus 14:15), Moses did not cry with a loud voice, but he cried in prayer loudly, with his voice only heard by God, that is why David the prophet says: “In my distress I cried to the LORD, And He heard me.” (Psalm 120:1)”¹

St. Gregory of Nyssa says,

“The blessed Paul gave proof of the Christ speaking in him (cf. 2 Cor 13:3), and, having lent Christ his own voice, he gave voice to sweetness. Further, all the prophets, in handing over their organs of speech to the Spirit that sounded within them, became sweetness as they poured the divine honey forth through their throat. Kings and common folk alike consumed it to their benefit. The pleasure of it did not check desire through surfeit; rather did it nourish longing by affording a taste of what desire seeks”

Lord, Grant us to be Your crying voice, that You may hear it and be delighted with it, people hear it and get to know you!

John The Voice and Christ the Logos

Just as there is no way of comparing the voice heard by ear and the word hidden in mind, there is no way of comparing St. John the Baptist with the Lord Jesus Christ.

1- The function of the voice is to express the word begotten from the human mind. Origen presented six testimonies, by which St. John the Baptist witnessed for the Logos, the Lamb of God, as we mentioned.

2- Voice is limited to the words spoken by the tongue and heard by the ear.

3- Voice diminishes, but the word stays in the mind. John has a beginning and an end, he began in the womb of his mother, and ended by his slaughter.

4- John did not dwell in the virgin, while the Logos was incarnate from the

*Commentary on John, Book 6:101.*¹

virgin, while her virginity is sealed.

5- The “voice” came as a fruit of marriage, while the Logos came without the seed of man.

* The voice is limited between the tongue and ear and vanishes because it is not present in the essence of the Logos. Thus, the beginning and the end of John the Baptist are known, and also his lifetime.

His beginning was from Elizabeth from the tribe of Levi, and his end was when Herodias’ daughter danced. The Holy Spirit raised him, he leaped, began, ended and his time passed.

Just as the voice begins from the lips and ends in the ears, so does the word on paper kept sealed in documents.

No one can limit a voice to a paper; and in the same way, John did not dwell in the virgin as she was sealed.

Our Lord the Logos the Son of God, dwelt in the virgin, and His news were kept under the seals of virginity.

The voice came from marriage, meaning the son of Levites, and was sent before Him to the wilderness of Judah.

Just as the place of the voice is empty, so is John is in the wilderness.

St. Jacob of Serugh

“He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light”

Our Lord Jesus Christ did not need the testimony of John the Baptist because his testimony would not add to His glory.

John was not the True Light, as it is not the nature of the lamp to shine, but is the nature of Christ, the Light of the world.

Saints do not shine by themselves, but by Christ who works in them. Thus, the believer must be a lamp that shines forth by the Sun of Righteousness dwelling in him. He should not talk for himself but for the One who sent him.

* What is this, perhaps one may say, the servant bear witness to his Master? I will say to him too what he said to the Jews, “Yet I do not receive testimony from man,” (John 5:34). If now he needs not this witness, why was John sent from God? Not as though He required his testimony — this were a dangerous blasphemy. Why then? John himself informs us, when he says, “that all through him, might believe.” For by reason of the groveling nature and infirmity of the Jews, the faith in Him would in this way be more easily received, and more

palatable.”¹

St. John Chrysostom

* The virtue of John the Baptist is that he lived in the wilderness away from the luxury of the cities, with a firm determination in practicing virtues, he was promoted to the peak of righteousness that a man can ever reach, which caused some to marvel from his mode of life, and even some thought he was Christ while other thought that he was the Light himself.

** It is said on John the Baptist: “I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed.” (Psalm 132:17), the saints are called lights... but we cannot ignore the grace they received from the Light. The light is in the lamp, but not originating from the lamp. Thus, the light of the saints are not from the saints themselves, but it is the Light of Truth who made them become the light of the world, holding fast the word of life. (Philippians 2:15-16)*

St. Cyril of Alexandria

The Angel that prepares the way before Him

Malachi the prophet saw him and said on behalf of the Lord: “Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me.” (Malachi 3:1).

* Wherefore he is called “messenger”, for the excellence of a messenger is, that he say nothing of his own.²

St. John Chrysostom

* There were rumors that John the Baptist was not a real human, but an angel, who took flesh, and was sent by God to preach to the people. This myth comes from lack of understanding of the word of God, “Behold, I send My messenger [angel], And he will prepare the way before Me.” (Malachi 3:1). The mistake of those who deviated from truth is their lack of understanding for the word of “Angel”, which means servant or messenger, without mentioning the reality of this servant.

St. Cyril of Alexandria

¹*Homilies on St. John, Hom. 6:1.*

²*Homilies on St. John, Hom. 6:1.*

* “Thus, therefore, John was a light, but not the true light; because, if not enlightened, he would have been darkness; but, by enlightenment, he became a light.”

St. Augustine

6

“He is Elijah who is to come.” (Matthew 11:14)

Origen of Alexandria says, “*He is John and not Elijah himself, for he did not have a personal life before. Thus, he emphasizes his refusal of the idea of the re-incarnation, but he had the same thought and direction as Elijah the prophet.*”

Pope Gregory the Great says, “*The angel tells Zacharias concerning John, “He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah.” (Luke 1:17). Elijah will come before the second coming, John came before the first coming, as Elijah will precede the coming judgement, so John preceded the coming of the savior, and thus John resembles Elijah in his spirit and not in person.*”¹

* “The second Elijah came to prepare the way, and he protested angrily against Jezebel, For he could not see evilness and remain silent.

His boldness caused him to blame the sinners and was quick to rebuke the evildoers

He called the Pharisees and Sadducees “a brood of vipers” and in His firmness, He guided them to repentance

He did not favor the rulers or the authorities for he could not see wickedness and remain silent

He threatened the evil ones with fire like Elijah, and terrified them with the flames’ vengeance

He urged them to bear fruits worthy of repentance, lest they be burnt like wood through justice.

His mouth was open and his voice was strong in reprimand, rebuking the wicked to abandon their wickedness

He was clothed in zeal against every evilness in all its forms. He guided and powerfully rebuked all the ranks

He rebuked kings face to face like Elijah, and with his intelligence, he ridiculed them and caused them to be ashamed

Through his teachings, he rebuked kings and priests, and he equally taught the high ranks and low ranks for they were both equal in his eyes.”

PL 1099 – 1103.¹

“He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30)

John saw the mystery of the Holy Trinity, when the Lord asked to be baptized by Him saying, “Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting, for us to fulfill all righteousness.” (Matthew 3:15) Faced with everything that John has seen during the baptism of the Lord, he felt as though he never knew Him before (John 1:31). The voice of the Father, the descent of the Holy Spirit and the works of the Incarnate Son, who demolished the head of the dragon upon the waters of the Jordan. It was an amazing sight even to the heavenly. He felt as if they were chanting together, "Behold, all things have become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

He was always concerned with making everyone a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. On the day following the Lord's baptism, he was standing with two of his disciples, and their conversation was about God who declares His divine mysteries. He saw Jesus walking and said to them, "Behold the Lamb of God." (John 1:36)

How thrilled he was, when he offered all his disciples to Him that they may become disciples of His own and that they may experience His miraculous salvation! He was never concerned about gathering the thousands around him, but as he explained to his disciples "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 1:30)

St. Ambrose says, “John didn't intend with this comparison to prove that Christ is greater than him, because there is no comparison between God and a mere human. John did not want to compare himself to Christ, as he described Him, “whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.” It is possible that St. John wanted to lower the status of the Jewish people when he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease.” The Jewish people had to decrease for the Christian people to increase in Christ.”

St. Cyril of Alexandria comments on this verse saying,

“We do not however say that the blessed Baptist in any respect whatsoever decreased in dignity, himself of himself, during the time that Christ's glory was

constantly receiving addition from those that believed in Him: but inasmuch as the blessed John continued in the measure of human nature – for it was not possible for him ever to advance to anything beyond – but the incarnate Word, being in His nature God, and ineffably begotten of God the Father, advancing continually to His proper glory, was admired of all men; for this reason it was he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

For he who remains in exactly the same state seems to decrease, in comparison with one who is continually increasing. But that it was right that as being by nature God, He should surpass in might and glory human things, he explained to them saying: " He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all."(John 3:31). Who then is He Who comes from above, and is above all as being God? Plainly the only begotten Word of the Father, Who was in His likeness, and on an equality with Him: but for the love He had unto the world, humbled Himself to our estate.

As being such therefore, He must necessarily surpass one who was of the earth: one, that is to say, numbered among the things of earth, and their like in nature, such as was the Baptist. For he was indeed praiseworthy in virtue, and incomparable in piety, and had attained to the perfection of all righteousness, and was honorable and worthy of admiration: for the Lord bore him witness saying, "Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist." (John 11:11) But he was not from above; not of the Essence, I mean, that is set above all: rather he was from below, a son of earth, and one of us."¹

8

The Baptism of John

John baptized with water to preach repentance, but the Lord baptizes to gift us sonship to the Father (John 1:26, Matt 3:11)

John, the Son of a priest, used to offer animal offerings, the Other is the Heavenly High Priest, the Lamb of God, who carries the sins of the world.

John is the friend of the bride (the church) who is betrothed with water and Spirit like Rebecca the daughter of Haran.

St. Ambrose says: “Many apply to St. John the figure of the Law, because the Law was able to denounce sin, it could not forgive”¹

John's baptism prepared the way for Christ's baptism

St. John is often called, “the forerunner,” because he preceded the Messiah preparing the way for Him.

1- He was conceived before St. Mary conceived the Messiah, who was incarnate from her. He was conceived before Christ to testify of Him while still in his mother's womb.

2- He preceded Him in baptism as well, but he baptized the repentant with water to prepare the path for Christ's baptism with water and Spirit (John 3:5)

* “John baptized with water and not the Holy Spirit, for water is incapable to forgive sins, it cleanses the bodies of those who are immersed in it, but it cannot cleanse their souls. Then, why did John even baptize?... In his birth, he preceded the One to be born, similarly his baptism preceded the Lord's, and his preaching also preceded Christ's!

Pope Gregory the Great

*Catena Aurea (Luke 3).*¹

Different Types of Baptism

* Let us briefly discuss the different types of baptism:

Moses's baptism: He baptized in water, in the sea under the cloud (1 Cor 10:2) he did this figuratively.

John also baptized, in truth not according to the Jewish rituals, and not just in the water, but for repentance and the forgiveness of sins, (Mark 1:4) It was not in a perfectly spiritual way, as he did not add that it is "in the Spirit".

Christ baptized with the Spirit, and this is perfection!

There is also a fourth type of baptism, which is achieved through martyrdom and blood, and it is highly revered over the rest...

"I know also a Fourth Baptism — that by Martyrdom and blood, which also Christ himself underwent:— and this one is far more august than all the others, inasmuch as it cannot be defiled by after-stains. Yes, and I know of a Fifth also, which is that of tears, and is much more laborious, received by him who washes his bed every night and his couch with tears"¹

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus

"He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matt 11:11)

The only begotten Son of God was incarnate and became man, so that He can transform us from our sonship of Adam to the sonship of God the Father. This is what gave St. Paul the boldness to say, "For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.'" (Rom 8:15) With all the wonderful gifts that we received in the New Testament, each one of us is regarded as "the least in the kingdom of heaven". These gifts were not enjoyed by the people of the Old Testament, not even St. John the Baptist himself, for the salvation of the Cross was not yet completed.

St. Augustine has a different opinion; which is that the least among the

heavenly orders in the kingdom of heaven is an angel, and he's still considered greater than John, which is despite what Christ Himself declared about the sublimity of St. John the Baptist's character. Therefore, the angels, being the least among the heavenly orders, are greater than him. And by this God, enkindles our hearts' yearning to meet the heavenly hosts, so we can enjoy this wondrous splendor!

* “The blessed John, together with as many as preceded him, was born of woman: but they who have received the faith, are no more called the sons of women, but as the wise Evangelist said, "are born of God." “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”(John 1:11-13)... For when Christ rose, and spoiled hell, the spirit of adoption was then given to them that believed on Him, and first of all to the holy disciples...He by no means downgrades the rank of the prophets, but He wanted to show the supremacy of the evangelical mode of life in comparison to that of the Law”

- **Saint Cyril the Great**

9

The Devil's Temptation

The Devil was feared this infant that leaped and joyfully danced in the old lady's womb as he declared to her the coming of the Messiah, the Lord of glory, in the womb of St. Mary and thus, she cried out, "But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:13) Truly, we have never heard of any prophet, disciple, apostle, or saint ever preaching while still a fetus! It is the grace of God which was at work in him, still working and will forever work in him, even if he is in heaven.

A Devilish Plan for the Sake of Herodias:

Satan whispered in Herodias' heart saying, "Along with my fellow dark powers, I sneaked into Herod's banquet, as he gathered his nobles, high officers, and chief men and caused them to drink wine excessively. I struck them with the arrows of evil and lust. It is now the time to shut the mouth of this Hebrew John who rebukes your adultery with King Herod (your husband's brother). It is time for revenge from him who ridiculed you in all Galilee. Let your daughter dance and ask for the head of this Hebrew who disturbed the King with his reprimand."

Saint John in Prison Resembles the Chains of the Law

Among all the prophets, St. John the Baptist is unique in the following:

1. He prophesied about Christ joyfully as he leaped for joy, declaring to his mother, Elizabeth, that St. Mary is the Theotokos (Mother of God).
2. John resembles the aim of the Law, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness," (Romans 10:4) that those who are under the Law might believe and partake in the covenant of grace. Thus, John sent two of his disciples to Christ to ask Him whether He is the Messiah or they should look for another, (Luke 7:19) not because he doubted Christ but so that his disciples may listen to Christ Himself and become His disciples after the martyrdom of John.
3. John was imprisoned so that he may not speak, and many imprisoned the Law that they may no longer listen and recognize the Messiah the Savior.
4. As a prophet, he resembled the silent (or imprisoned) Law by his own imprisonment

The Law spoke about Christ and the forgiveness of sins, promising eternal life to all humanity, and this is the same message John declared. However, the

Law (impersonated in John) was silent, when he was imprisoned by the wicked and was chained that no one may know Christ...

*“The Law (resembled by John) sent his disciples to see the works of the Gospel and meditate on the truth of the faith through these miracles. By this, the Law, which was surrounded with the violence of the evildoers, may be justified through the knowledge of the freedom with which Christ has set us free (Galatians 4:31). Thus, John’s intention was not to treat his own ignorance but his disciples’, for he has already declared that Christ has come to forgive sins. Now, he sends two of his disciples to Christ to see His works that they may confirm for themselves the truth of Christ’s teachings so that they may look for any other messiah but Him.”*¹

St. Hilary of Poitiers

*“John is the type of the law, which was the foreteller of Christ, the law which was held confined in the hearts of the unbelievers as if in prisons⁴ devoid of eternal light. The fruitful inner workings of punishment and the doors of malice restrained their hearts. The law rightly cannot achieve an outcome full of evidence of the divine dispensation without the assent of the gospel.”*²

St. Ambrose of Milan

“Sin feared the righteous who was chasing her, so she imprisoned him that she may ridicule him

She put on the decoys, buried the traps, and imprisoned him.

She could not hear his loud voice, for she hated him

Adultery sought after him and imprisoned virginity, that he may not listen to her teachings

Herod’s wickedness revealed its face and John’s holiness was covered

All the deceiving spirits were gathered to hide this lamp who was in the wilderness

Storms raged from all directions on the enlightened one, and they imprisoned him to cast him out into the darkness [of prison].

Satan envied the voice of the one crying out in the Judean wilderness, for he exposed the wickedness of the nation and rebukes it”

- **St. Jacob of Serugh**

¹ PL 9: 978.

² EXPOSITION OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 5.94.

A Delegation from Prison to Christ

“And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’” (Matthew 11:2-3) St. John the Baptist realized that his departure is near and his message is about to end, so he sent two of his disciples to ask Him, not because of his doubt but that he may give a chance to his disciples to see by themselves Christ’s works, that they may love Him, follow Him, and encourage the rest of his disciples to follow Him.

“I said then, that he puts on the appearance of ignorance purposely, not so much that he might himself learn - for as being the forerunner he knows the mystery of incarnation - but that his disciples might be convinced, how great is the Savior’s superiority, and that, as the word of the inspired Scripture had announced before, He is God, and the Lord that was to come. All the rest then were servants, sent before a master, preceding Him Who is beyond all, and preparing the way of the Lord, as it is written by the holy prophets therefore the Saviour and Lord of all, as the psalmist declares, "Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord."”¹

St. Cyril of Alexandria

“John had separate disciples of his own...Therefore, because John's disciples highly esteemed their master, they heard from John his record concerning Christ, and marveled; and as he was about to die, it was his wish that they should be confirmed by him. Go then, ask Him; not because I doubt, but that you may be instructed. Go, ask Him, hear from Himself what I am in the habit of telling you; you have heard the herald, be confirmed by the Judge. And for their sakes did Christ say, “The blind see.” You see Me, acknowledge Me then; you see the works, acknowledge the Doer. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.”²

St. Augustine

According to St. John Chrysostom, St. John the Baptist sent his two disciples to Christ because jealousy has found its way among his disciples (John 3:26).³ Matthew the Evangelist tells us that the disciples of John came

¹ *Comm. on Luke, Sermon 37*

² *Ser. on N. T. , hom 16: 3,4*

³ *In Matt. hom 37.*

to the Master saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?” (Matthew 9:14). St. Cyril of Alexandria had the same opinion.¹

Christ’s Testimony of John (Matthew 11:7-8)

Christ did not speak of John the Baptist until the disciples of John had left, that He may not seem as though He is flattering him.

Was John a reed shaken by the wind?

St. Augustine says, “*Surely not; for John was not blown about by every wind of doctrine.*”²

“But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses,” (Matthew 11:8) for John was clothed in camel’s hair.

“But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet.” The Prophets foretold that the Lord would come, whom they desired to see, and saw not; but to him was vouchsafed what they sought. John saw the Lord; he saw Him, pointed his finger toward Him, and said, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world;” behold, here He is. And he gave a true testimony to the Lord, and the Lord to him. “Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Matthew 11:11) This He said, meaning Himself to be understood. Now exceedingly great among men is John the Baptist, than whom among men Christ alone is greater.

“He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” By the kingdom of heaven, he meant where the Angels are; he then that is least among the Angels, is greater than John. Thus He set forth to us the excellence of that kingdom which we should long for; set before us a city, of

¹ *Com. on Luke, Ser 37.*

² *Ser. on N. T. 16:2.*

which we should desire to be citizens.”¹

- **St. Augustine**

“What does it mean, if not the carnal mind, which bows to one side or the other as soon as it is touched by flattery or criticism? Indeed, a human mouth comes to blow on him the breeze of flattery, and here it is that rejoices, prides itself and bends all over by complacency. But a breath of criticism springs from the very mouth from which the breeze of praise came, and he immediately bows to the other side in a fit of rage. John was not a wind-blown reed; neither favor made him caressing him, nor criticism, from whence it came, made him violent by angering him...Let us learn, dear brothers, not to be reeds agitated by the wind. Let us strengthen our soul exposed to the bursts of words; remain in our mind of unyielding stability. Let us never be angered by criticism or inclined by flattery to exaggerated complacency and indulgence. Let us not rise in prosperity, do not trouble us in adversity, so that fixed in the solidity of faith, we do not let ourselves be shaken by the mobility of things that pass.”²

- **Pope Gregory the Great**

Those who wear soft clothing:

Christ said, “Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses.” (Matthew 11:8)

If the body is a garment in which the soul is clothed and hidden, the “soft body” is the flattered body which only focuses on eating and drinking, without paying attention to the eternal glory in which it will be clothed with at the resurrection as the apostle says, “And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man.” (1Cor 15:49)

“He indicates that the soul is clothed by the garment of the body which envelops it, and which is softened by luxury and lusts. Those who are dressed in fine clothes are in the kings’ palaces. The word kings is an appellation for the angels who transgressed; for these are the powers of the age, the authorities of the world. Those who dressed in fine clothes are in kings’ palaces, that is, those whose bodies have been softened and weakened through

¹ Ser. on N. T. 16:2.

² PL 76: 1095-99

luxury are the dwelling of demons, who choose a place similar to their intentions and works.”

- **St. Hilary of Poitiers**

“Let it be said that Jean was not dressed in cozy clothes can also be understood in another sense: he was not dressed in cozy clothes, because he did not encourage sinners in their way of life by caresses, but rebuked them with force by harsh invectives, saying, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Mt. 3:7). Solomon also declares on this subject: "The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails" (Ecclesiastes 12:11)”

- **Pope Gregory the Great**

Herod and John’s Fearful Voice:

“At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the report about Jesus and said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him.” (Matthew 14: 1-2)

Herod killed St. John the Baptist to silence the voice, but his voice can never be stopped, for it continued to get louder in Herod’s mind. For this reason, when Herod heard of Christ, he immediately thought that this was John the Baptist risen from the dead. Herod had no peace, for sin deprives man from his inner fulfillment.

The evangelist tells us the story of St. John the Baptist’s martyrdom by Herod, “For Herod had laid hold of John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife. Because John had said to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” (Matthew 14:3-4)

Herod thought he had the authority to silence the voice of truth and chain it as he did with John, desiring to kill him that he may completely abolish the voice, but the prison only made the voice louder. He thought his death would end the voice eternally, but it became an eternal proclamation to all generations. It is as St. John Chrysostom puts it, “John’s voice was heard louder than ever after these events had occurred”¹

A Comparison Between John the Baptist and Herod

Firstly: They were both public figures, but John did his work out of his deep

¹ *In Matt. hom 48:6.*

love to everyone and his desire for their salvation, whereas the latter only inherited the kingdom from his father, Herod the Great, and thus his heart was full of pride and selfishness, wanting everyone to exalt him and his works.

Secondly: They both knew Christ, the first by faith when he was in his mother's womb and he leaped for joy when St. Mary visited Elizabeth (Luke 1:44), while the other sent Him to Pilate for trial and all what he cared about was to see was a miracle from Him. (Luke 23-7-9)

Thirdly: They both believed in the resurrection of the dead. For the hope of the resurrection, the first delivered up his life courageously while the other feared it lest John might rise from the dead.

Fourthly: They both received a message from Christ. The first one received it through his disciples when he sent them to ask Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" (Matthew 11:3), and Christ exalted him (Matthew 11:9-11). On the other hand, Christ sent a different message to Herod, "Go, tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected,'" (Luke 13:32) when some Pharisees asked Him to depart for Herod wants to kill Him.

Fifthly: They both died in prison. The first was martyred in prison for declaring the word of truth, while the other was convinced by his wife to depart to Rome to ask Emperor Caligula to grant him the title, "King" but the Emperor was angered with his request and banished him to Lyon¹, and then Spain² and he died in his exile or his prison.

¹ *Joseph: Sntiq 18: 7.*

² *Josephus: War 2: 9: 6.*

10

The Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist

In the Writings of St. Jacob of Serugh

A Holy Fervent Heart

St. Jacob of Serugh presents us a beautiful homily on St. John the Baptist in his spiritual poetic style, in which he reveals to us his great appreciation to this remarkable character. In this homily, he explores the saint's deep feelings along the lines of the story of his martyrdom and what was really going on in his mind and the minds of the other characters in the story.

Herod's Birthday

The saint's martyrdom was not an impulsive reaction from King Herod, Herodias or her daughter, but was the fruit of a holy fervent heart that cannot stand evil and corruption.

St. Jacob of Serugh highlights the following points:

1. St. John noticed that Herod is breaking even the law of nature, when he desired to marry Herodias, his brother's wife (while his brother is still alive). John could not take a passive stance on this matter, ignore the issue, or even flee the area that his conscience may not rebuke him for his silence. Thus, he despised Herod and rebuked him and described him as careless and unable to lead the people as a king, for he could not control his emotions.
2. It was possible for St. John to warn Herod and then flee, but he insisted to face his corruption on every occasion, even if it is every day or every hour.
3. It is clear that Herod's relationship with his brother's wife was reflected in the corruption of her daughter's thoughts. It seems that John did not ignore their corruption as well for he wished to extinguish their evil lusts with his holy teachings.
4. Wickedness always brings forth more wickedness. The King's corruption as well as his brother's wife's and her daughter's, was reflected on all the nobles and high officers. They all competed in showing off their joy in a lavish celebration on Herod's birthday and they opened the door for the devil to control them as well as all evil

desires and excessive drinking, and thus, they all lost their true inner freedom.

* He (John) saw Herod, and he despised and rebuked him as a commoner
Because of her, he rebuked him in front of many on every occasion, days, and hours

Evil desires were enkindled in Herod and Herodias, and with his teachings, he desired to extinguish them

When it was his birthday, he held a lavish celebration and called all the rulers to the banquet

Everyone seemed happy for the King, to show him that they respected him and were proud of his great feast

The hypocrites showed their love by excessive drinking, to honour the great feast

Satan, evil desires, wine, and all wickedness crept into Herod's family and they lost all their freedom

They counted excessive drinking as a duty, and they all drank for the welfare of the King on the great feast.

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Devil Whispers into Herodias' Heart to Take Revenge

St. Jacob of Serugh viewed the great celebration as the event that transformed the place to an "earth bringing forth thorns and thistles" (Genesis 3:18). It turned the royal palace and its vast chambers into the worst jungles. Since John was great and fearful in the eyes of the people, the devil wanted to ridicule him, so he advised Herodias saying, "It is now the time of revenge from this Hebrew's tongue!" As usual, the devil tries to downgrade sin so he told her, "It is very simple. You kill John and you will be confirmed on your throne as a queen and no one will ever separate you from the king who loves you."

* He planted the thorns in the earth transforming it to the worst jungles and he disturbed the impure with troubling thoughts.

He threw them into her heart and told her: It is time to take away the soul of this righteous.

It is time to shut this offensive mouth with the sword; this mouth which ridiculed you and insulted you.

It is time for this preacher's voice to be silenced from his insults and

mockery, with which he used to throw at you

It is time for this Hebrew's mockery to end, him who made you a joke for all Galileans.

It is time for the sword to take your revenge from this man who mocked you everyday

If John dies, you will be confirmed in the kingdom, for there is no one else to keep the King away from you.

St. Jacob of Serugh

Herodias Shows Off

The devil offered many methods for the "wide pathway" which Herodias can use to get rid of John:

1. When she entered the celebration hall, she counted herself on the battlefield against John. Her weapon was her daughter's beauty and her dances. Her daughter was the sharp sword which she used to strike Herod's heart, that he may be completely weakened in front of her daughter and promise her anything she asks of him, up to half of his kingdom.
2. She taught her daughter to catch her prey, John, like a wild wolf catching a calm lamb chained and imprisoned, unable to flee from her claws.
3. She gave her attractive clothing even up to her shoes, that she may be astonishing to all the guests, and meanwhile she catches the lamb and asks for John's head on a platter.

* She unsheathed her daughter as a chosen sword that she may kill the wilderness' mighty one with the spear.

She taught her daughter what to do with the innocent, chained and imprisoned lamb

She clothed her with all fornication and with shiny shoes

She taught her and sent her to enter in front of the guests so that she may capture them...

St. Jacob of Serugh

Herodias' Daughter Dances

Herodias' daughter entered the celebration, and she focused on revealing her shiny shoes in her dances, so she captured the hearts of the King and his

guests. With her shoelaces, she chained all the guests and captured them with evil desire.

The daughter defeated the weak king and all his guests and ridiculed them, for they became like war captives without any weapon but her dances and her shiny shoes. She battled the King and all his army leaders and was victorious and asked for the precious jewel to be given to her on a platter.

* A great joke were those mighty men of the kingdom, for a young lady was able to chain them and ridicule them

The young lady came in front of the King's guests and with her shoes, she captured all of them without battle

O men, your actions deserve mockery and you are still proud, a young lady captured you with her dances that you may be subjected to her

The young lady warred against your mighty men, and she took away from you the priceless pearl...

St. Jacob of Serugh

Herod Promises Herodias' Daughter What She Wanted

Herodias' daughter truly became a viper, for she listened to the voice of the deceiving serpent.

The devil put the spirit of violence and pride into the Herodias' heart, so she asked for the saint's head to be presented to her, with honor, as though she was the winner. She counted this head as more precious than half of the kingdom, for she thought that this would shut his mouth up forever.

* The King and his rulers were pleased with the dance, so he promised the adulteress' daughter with a good wage.

Because she pleased him so much, he promised her anything even if she would share in half of his kingdom if she wishes.

He told the daughter of the serpent: ask and I will give you. I make an oath to you that I will pay you as much as you would like.

The wicked one said: Give me the head of the preacher here on a platter in front of the guests as I asked.

St. Jacob of Serugh

If Herod had lied, it would have been better for him!

In pride, Herod promised Herodias' daughter to give her half of his kingdom if she wishes, for all the kingdom is under his reign, but she asked for what is not under his reign, she ordered the righteous one, who never killed anyone, to

be killed, so the King broke the law of nature and killed the righteous one.

* He promised to give her half of his kingdom, not the head of this righteous whom he never had authority over.

There is no law that orders the killing of the righteous, for according to Law, whoever never killed should not be killed.

St. Jacob of Serugh

The King's Authority Over His Subordinates

St. Jacob of Serugh thinks that the King did not need to make an oath, for he is captivated by desire for his brother's wife, and thus, he will never refuse any order from her daughter, for he knows that this order came out of Herodias' heart before it came out of her daughter's lips.

The fruit of carelessness is that this birthday celebration was transformed to be the seat of the scornful, and the King became a subject of mockery for all the ignorant and evil

* He was completely consumed with love for her evil mother, and thus he immediately granted the young lady what she asked for.

He was going to give her whether he made an oath or he did not, for his heart was subject to evil lust.

This deceiver revealed that he was uncomfortable because of the people, but so as not to lie, he granted the gift as he promised.

All the liars and evil ones were ashamed, and the King became a subject of great mockery because of the murder he committed.

The young lady ordered him without his consent, so he granted the gift in the presence of the guests because of his oath.

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Roman Herod Ordered John to be Beheaded

How dangerous these moments were when the executioner came and beheaded the saint! He took his head on a platter and presented it to the King, that he may gift it to Herodias's daughter after her dances.

But what did the guests think of this? Did not any of them shed any tears when the chaste one's head was presented as a dancer's wage? Did not the heart of the King tremble when he knows that he has committed a crime as a result of his ugly lust?

* The King sent and beheaded the preacher, and his head was presented on

a platter and he gave it to the young lady that she may present it to her mother

The defiled, sons of hades were not afraid when they saw the chaste one's head

They did not tremble nor did their cups fall off their hands, after they have seen the precious one's blood spilled

None of them wept for this great crime which was committed

The despicable King's heart was not frightened to see the mouth of this teacher shut with his pure blood.

St. Jacob of Serugh

Herodias Joyfully Receives John's Head

Herodias envied John the Baptist and was happy to receive his head on a platter showered with his innocent blood. She probably felt the victory of her revenge, for no one will ever rebuke her for her marriage again. She thought that his mouth will be shut forever, and no one would be there to rebuke the King or disturb his happiness or hers again.

* Maybe the adulteress laughed as she ridiculed the great murdered man and reviled him

She told her daughter: Let us rejoice over this shut mouth that was sealed with blood, for we shall no longer listen to its insults

He turned us into a joke in all Galilee, and stoned us with his insults as though they were stones

This mouth used to breathe over us its flames every day, and scare us from approaching the King's house

This mouth frightened the King with hades and its darkness that he may not approach me

He made me a proverb in the mouths of all the Hebrew women, speaking of me as though I were a prostitute

Let him be silenced now, for he did not wish to be quiet, so I silenced him forcibly and he will no longer ridicule us again.

John: The Golden Lamp Full of Holy Oil

Herodias, her daughter and Herod thought they won the battle and that John's story became a practical lesson for everyone who dares and rebukes the King, even if he defied the law of nature, little did they know, that their evil act became the story of John's martyrdom that became an important section in the Holy Gospel, encouraging many to live the life of purity and chastity throughout the ages.

St. Jacob of Serugh evaluates this unfortunate act this way:

1- Saint John's character shines forth as a righteous who was killed by the wicked. He was oppressed and was justified. As for the murderers, they were counted as criminals.

2- The adulteress thought she killed the virgin and that she got rid of him,

3- He is a golden lamp full of holy oil (or divine grace). If this lady has blown over it and put it out, he is a glorious star in heaven!

4- He is an olive tree, and by crushing its fruits, holy oil is obtained to anoint the baptized

5- They shut the saint's mouth so that he may not speak, but he became a spiritual psaltery playing heavenly hymns.

6- He was unjustly killed by an adulteress, so he became a psaltery that causes the devils to flee

7- The adulteress could not bear his reprimand, so she killed him, yet he became a spiritual psaltery chanting the praise of repentance for all peoples.

8- He is the bride's friend who betrothed her to the heavenly bridegroom, that she may become a queen sitting on the right-hand of the King.

* An evil act was executed by the sinners (Herodias, her daughter and Herod) to an ordinary man (John the Baptist), an oppressed victim to the favoritism of the criminals

A terrible sight: A virgin killed by an adulteress. Great fear: the priest slaughtered without any guilt

A golden lamp full of holy oil and instead of the wind, the young lady blew over it and put it out.

A glorified olive tree planted by the rivers of baptism, and the accursed ones cut it that it may not anoint the head.

A voice preached the Kingdom of God and was silenced by wickedness that it may not speak

A psaltery full of melodies and rich hymns, was envied by the deaf and they broke it that it may no longer chant.

He was a psaltery that expels the devils from humanity, and Herodias broke it that her devil may not flee.

He preached holiness throughout the earth with dignity, but his voice did not please the adulteress, so she cancelled it.

He was a harp awakening the nations to repentance, but to avoid them from repenting, Herod's family silenced it.

He was a tree carrying the fruits of faith, but the wicked ones uprooted it that no one may eat of its fruits.

The friend of the bride betrothed her and offered her to the Bridegroom

King, but they beheaded him so that he may not come into the [wedding] banquet.

St. Jacob of Serugh

A Dance Began and Concluded John's Story

Since he is the greatest among those born of women, he was unique in many aspects:

1- He was unique in his death for he died as a martyr because of his reprimand to a wicked woman. He was unique in his conception, for his mother was barren and his father of old age.

2- He danced (leaped) as a fetus and was beheaded as a wage for Herodias' daughter's dance

3- His head was presented on a platter in a unique way.

4- They desired to ridicule him, yet his head was presented like a precious pearl.

5- The guests in this birthday celebration held a procession for the head on a special platter

6- St. Jacob of Serugh did not know how to describe this saint. He loved the Messiah, the heavenly Bridegroom. He was the friend of the bride (the church). He baptized his Lord, preached the holy life in the wilderness, preached at the Jordan, and preached by shedding his blood. Truly, there is none greater among those born of women!

* If anyone would contemplate his life, he would notice that his death was unique just as his conception in the womb was also unique.

In his mother 's womb, he danced, and he died because of a dance. His story is wonderous for the beginning of this Levi was like his end.

The old lady started his story, and the young lady concluded it and as the young lady danced, she caused his death.

When they thought to insult him, they honored him, and his head was presented as a gift on a great feast.

On the occasion of the King's birthday, they held him on their hands and held a procession for him as though he were a choicest golden prize

They exchanged him between each other as they looked to him and kept him as though he were a precious pearl.

It was a great feast for the King like no other, and on this day, they made a procession for him

His head, of unspeakable beauty, was presented on a platter in front of the guests like a golden apple

The flower that blossomed in the Judean wilderness was brought by the King on his birthday and was placed on a platter as it was taken to the banquet.

A sweet cluster that was crushed into the King's platter, and behold the whole creation enjoys its sweet flavor.

The Bridegroom's beloved, the bride's friend, His Lord's baptizer, the teacher of life, the preacher of truth and the glorious priest.

The great virgin, the famous man, the subtle among all the prophets, the one who mingled with the apostles, the hearer of the Father, and the one who touched the Son.

The Spirit's beholder, the mysteries' learner, the kings' reproach, the pure palace, the choicest incense, and the sweet aroma.

The enemy of the wicked, the awakener of the repentant, the friend of saints, the persecuted by the wicked, the imprisoned because of jealousy, and the murdered because of envy

There is no one greater than he among those born women. Blessed be the Word who made him a voice and sent him before Him.

St. Jacob of Serugh



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Speaking of John the Baptist is so fearful, and it does not have one trait of beauty that we can describe for he is full of beauties! How do I dare to describe this beauty? Words cannot tell. What words or what homilies could speak of this great man? Words are lacking and the tongue trembles when I speak of him. . . . The Bridegroom's beloved, the bride's friend, His Lord's baptizer, the teacher of life, the preacher of truth and the glorious priest. The great virgin, the famous man, the subtle among all the prophets, the one who mingled with the apostles, the hearer of the Father, the one who touched the Son, the Spirit's beholder, the mysteries' learner, the kings' reproach, the pure palace, the choicest incense, and the sweet aroma. The enemy of the wicked, the awakener of the repentant, the friend of saints, the persecuted by the wicked, the imprisoned because of jealousy, and the murdered because of envy. There is no one greater than he among those born women, blessed be the Word who made him a voice and sent him before Him.

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