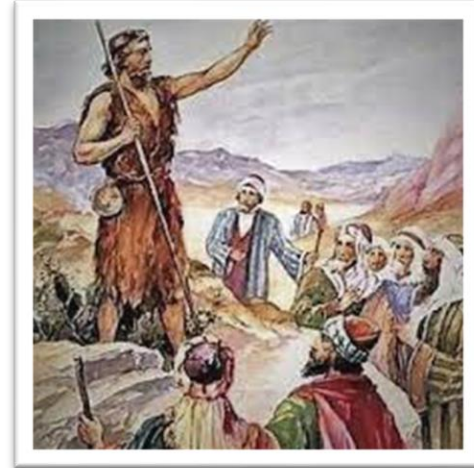


# JOHN PREACHING PENANCE AND BAPTIZING

## John Leaves the Desert

John received from On High a revelation concerning the baptism, in consequence of which shortly before leaving the desert he dug a well within reach of the inhabited districts. I saw him on the western side of a steep precipice. On his left ran a brook, perhaps one of the sources of the Jordan which rises on Libanus in a cave between two ridges. It cannot be seen from a distance. To the right lay a level space in the midst of the wilderness, and there he dug a well. I saw him kneeling on one knee and supporting on the other a long roll of bark upon which he was writing with a reed.



The sun was darting hot beams upon him as he knelt facing Libanus toward the west. While thus engaged, he became like one entranced. I saw him as if in ecstasy, and standing by him was a man who drew plans and wrote upon the roll. When John returned to consciousness, he read what had been written, and at once set vigorously to work at the well. The bark roll lay beside him on the ground, weighted by a stone at either end to prevent it from rolling together. John often examined it. It seemed as if all he had to do was there marked down.

Side by side with his vision of the well, I beheld a scene in the life of Elias. I saw him sitting in the desert, sad and dejected, on account of some fault he had committed. At last he fell asleep, and had a dream, in which it seemed to him that a little boy approached and pushed him with a stick, and that he feared falling into a well nearby. The thrusts he received from the child were so violent as to send him rolling forward some steps. At this stage of the dream an angel awoke him and gave him to drink. This took place on the same spot upon which John now dug the well.

I recognized the signification of every layer of earth through which John dug and of every step in the work until its completion. All had some relation to human obduracy and its other characteristics, which he had to overcome before the grace of the Lord could take effect upon mankind. This work of John's was, like all his actions and his whole life, a symbol, a prefiguration. By it the Holy Spirit not only instructed him what he was to do, but The Holy

Ghost urged John on in his work, as formerly the inspired Prophets. He removed the sod from a wide circumference and dug out of the hard marl a large circular basin, which he very carefully and beautifully lined with stones, excepting in the center where it was dug to a little water. With the excavated earth, he formed around the basin a rim which he divided into five sections. Opposite the openings between four of these sections and at equal distances around the basin, he planted four slender saplings whose tops were covered with luxuriant foliage. These four trees were of different kinds, each bearing its own signification. But in the center of the basin, he set a very choice tree with narrow leaves; its blossoms hung in pyramidal clusters surrounded by a prickly calyx. This tree had long lain partially withered before John's cave. The four little trees were more like slender berry bushes. John protected their roots by little mounds of earth.

When the basin had been excavated down to the well, in which later on the central tree was planted, John hollowed out a channel from the brook near his cave to the basin. Then I saw him gathering reeds in the wilderness, inserting one into the other and, through this conduit (which he covered with earth) conducting the waters of the brook to the basin. The reed pipe could be closed at pleasure.

He had made a path through the bushes down to one of the openings in the basin's rim. It ran all around the basin between it and the four trees I have just described. Before the opening at the entrance there was no tree, and on this side alone was access to the basin free; on all the others the path was hemmed in by bushes and rocks. John planted on the mounds at the foot of the four trees an herb well known to me. I was fond of it when a child and, whenever I found it, I used to transplant it to the neighborhood of my home. It has a tall, succulent stalk and bears brownish-red, globular blossoms. It is a very efficacious remedy for ulcers and such sore throats as that from which I am today suffering. John set around also various other plants and young trees. During his labor, he consulted from time to time the bark roll before him, and measured all off with a stick, for it seemed to me that every step of the work, even to the trees that he had planted, was therein sketched. I remember having seen in it a drawing of the middle tree.

John labored thus for several weeks and when he had finished, there was only a small quantity of water in the bottom of the basin. The middle tree, whose leaves had lately been brown and withered, had now become fresh and green. In a vessel formed of the bark of a large tree and whose sides had

been smeared with pitch, John now brought water from another well and poured it into the basin. This water was from a well near one of the caves in which John had first dwelt. It had gushed from a rock upon which he struck with the end of his standard. I heard that he could not have built the fountain at that earlier dwelling place of his because it was too rocky there, and that, too, had its own signification. After that he let as much water into the basin from the brook as was necessary. If the reservoir became too full, the water could flow off by the channels in the rim and refresh the vegetation of the surrounding surface.

I saw John stepping into the water up to the waist. With one hand he clasped the tree in the center while he struck the water with a little staff to the end of which he had fastened a cross and pennant. Every stroke sent the water in a spray above his head. At the same time, I saw descending upon him from above a cloud of light and, as it were, an effusion from the Holy Spirit, while angels appeared upon the rim of the basin and addressed to him some words. I saw that this was John's last labor in the desert.

That well was in use even after Jesus' death. When the Christians were obliged to flee, the sick and travelers were baptized there; it was frequented also as a place of devotion. It was at that time, that is during Peter's time, protected by a surrounding wall.

Soon after the completion of the baptismal well, John left the desert for the haunts of men. Wher-ever he went, he made a wonderful impression. Tall of stature, strong and muscular, though emaciated by fasting and corporal mortification, he presented an extraordinarily pure and noble appearance, his manner simple, straightforward, and commanding. His face was thin and haggard; his expression, grave and austere; his auburn hair in curls over his head, and his beard short. Around his waist was a tunic that reached to the knee, and his rough brown mantle appeared to be of three pieces. The back part was fastened around the waist by a strap, but in front it was open, leaving the breast uncovered and the arms free. His breast was rough with hair almost the color of his mantle, and in his hand he carried a staff bent like a shepherd's crook.

Coming down from the desert, he built first a little bridge over a brook. He took no notice of the crossing that lay at some distance, for he never turned out of his way, but worked straight on wherever he went. There was an old highway in those regions. He was near Cydessa here, and he instructed the people in the neighborhood. They were the first pagans that afterward went to his baptism. They lived in mud huts entirely neglected. They were the descendants of a mixed multitude who, after the destruction of the Temple,

the last one before Jesus' coming, had settled here. One of the latest of the Prophets had foretold to them that they should remain in these parts until a man should come to them, a man like John, who would tell them what they should do. Later on they removed toward Nazareth.

John allowed nothing to prove an obstacle in his way. He walked boldly up to all he met, and spoke of one thing only, penance and the near coming of the Lord. His presence everywhere excited wonder and made the lightest grave. His voice pierced like a sword. It was loud and strong, though tempered with a tone of kindness. He treated all kinds of people as children. The most remarkable thing about him was the way in which he hurried on straight ahead, deterred by nothing, looking around at nothing, wanting nothing. It was thus I saw him hastening on his way through desert and forest, digging here, rolling away stones there, removing fallen trees, preparing resting places, calling together the people who stood staring at him in amazement, yes, even bringing them out of their huts to help him. I saw their looks of astonishment. He tarried long nowhere, but was soon in another place. He went along the Sea of Galilee, around Tarichea, down to the valley of the Jordan, then past Salem, and on through the desert toward Bethel.

He passed by Jerusalem. He had never been in the Holy City; he gazed sadly upon it, and uttered lamentations over it. Entirely possessed by the thought of his mission, on he went, earnest, grave, simple, full of the Holy Spirit, crying aloud the selfsame words: "Penance! Prepare! The Lord is nigh!" He entered the shepherd valley, and journeyed on to the place of his birth. His parents were dead, but some youths, his relatives on Zachary's side, resided there. They were among the first to join him as disciples. When he passed through Bethsaida, Capharnaum, and Nazareth, the Blessed Virgin did not see him, for since Joseph's death, she seldom went out of the house. But several male relatives of her family were present at his exhortations, and accompanied him some distance on his way.

During the three months immediately preceding the baptism, John twice made the circuit of the country announcing Him who was to come. His progress was made with extraordinary vehemence. He marched on vigorously, his movements quick though unaccompanied by haste. His was no leisurely travelling like that of the Saviour. Where he had nothing to do, I saw him literally running from field to field. He entered houses and schools to teach, and gathered the people around him in the streets and public places. I saw the priests and elders here and there stopping him and questioning his right to teach, but soon, astonished and full of wonder, they

allowed him to proceed on his way.

The expression, "To prepare the way for the Lord," was not wholly figurative, for I saw John begin his mission by actually preparing the way and traversing the roads and different places over which Jesus and His disciples afterward travelled. He cleared them of stones and briars, made paths, laid planks across brooks, cleaned the channels, dug wells and reservoirs, put up seats, resting places, and sheds to afford shade in the various places where later on the Lord rested, taught, and acted. While thus engaged, the earnest, simple-hearted, solitary man—by his rough garments and conspicuous figure— attracted the attention of the people, and excited wonder when he entered the huts sometimes to borrow a tool, sometimes even to claim assistance from the inmates. Everywhere he was soon surrounded by a crowd whom he boldly and earnestly exhorted to penance, and to follow the Messiah of whom he announced himself the precursor. I often saw him pointing in the direction in which Jesus was passing at that moment. But yet I never saw Jesus with him, although they were sometimes scarcely one hour apart. Once I saw him at the most only a short hour's distance from Jesus, crying out to the people that he himself was not the looked-for Redeemer, but only His poor precursor; but that there went the Saviour, and he pointed to Him. John saw the Saviour face to face only three times in his whole life.

The first time that he did so, was in the desert when the Holy Family were journeying from Egypt. He had then been hurried by the Spirit to greet his Master whom, years before while still in his mother's womb, he had saluted. He felt the nearness of his Saviour, and he knew that He thirsted. The boy prayed and thrust his little staff into the ground, whereupon a plentiful stream sprang forth. He then hurried further on the road and took his stand by the running water, to watch Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as they passed by. When they appeared and as long as they remained in sight, he danced about with joy, waving his little standard.

The second time that John saw Jesus was at the baptism; and third was when, at the Jordan, he rendered testimony to Him as He was passing at a distance. I heard the Saviour speaking to His Apostles of John's great self-command; for even at the baptism he had restrained himself within the bounds of solemn contemplation, although his heart was almost bursting with love and desire. After the ceremony, he was more anxious to abase and humble himself than to yield to his love and seek for Jesus.

But John saw the Lord always in spirit, for he was generally in the prophetic state. He saw Jesus as the accomplishment of his own mission, as the

realization of his own prophetic vocation. Jesus was not to John a contemporary, not a man like unto himself. He was to him the Redeemer of the world, the Son of God made man, the Eternal appearing in time, therefore he could in no way dream of associating with Him. John felt also that he himself was not like his fellow men, existing in time, living in the world and connected with it; for even in his mother's womb had the Hand of the Eternal touched him, and by the Holy Spirit had he in a way superior to the relations of time, been brought into communication with his Redeemer. As a little boy he had been snatched from the world and, knowing nothing but what appertained to his Redeemer, had remained in the deepest solitude of the wilderness until, like one born anew, earnest, inspired, ardent, he went forth to begin his wonderful mission, unconcerned about aught else. Judea is now to him the desert; and as formerly he had had for companions the fountains, rocks, trees, and animals, as with them he had lived and communed, so now did he treat with men, with sinners, no thought of self arising in his mind. He sees, he knows, he only Jesus. His word is: "He comes! Prepare ye the ways! Do penance! Receive the baptism! Behold the Lamb of God who beareth the sins of the world!" In the desert, blameless and pure as a babe in the mother's womb, he comes forth from his solitude innocent and spotless as a child at the mother's breast. "He is pure as an angel," I heard the Lord say to the Apostles. "Never has impurity entered into his mouth, still less has an untruth or any other sin issued from it."

John baptized in different places: first, at Aion in the neighborhood of Salem; then at On opposite Bethabara on the west side of the Jordan, and not far from Jericho. That third place was on the east side of the Jordan, a couple of hours further north than the second. The last time he baptized was at Aion, whither he had returned. It was there that he was taken prisoner. The water in which John baptized was an arm of the Jordan formed by a bend of the river to the east, and of about an hour in length. At some places it was so narrow that one could leap over it; at others it was broader. Its course must have changed here and there, for in many places I saw it dry. This bend of the river encircled pools and wells which were fed by its waters. One of these pools, separated by a dam from the arm of the river, formed the baptism place of John at Aion. Under the dam ran pipes, by means of which the pool could be emptied or filled at pleasure. John himself had so arranged it. On one side of the pool, its waters flowed inland like a creek, and into this extended tongues of land. The aspirants for baptism stood in the water up to the waist between two of these tongues, supporting themselves by a railing that ran along before them. On one tongue stood John. He scooped up water

in a shell and poured it on the head of the neophyte, while on the opposite tongue stood one of the baptized with his hand resting on the shoulder of the latter. John himself had laid his hand upon the first. The upper part of the body of the neophytes was not entirely nude; a kind of white scarf was thrown around them, leaving only the shoulders bare. Near the pool was a hut into which they retired for unrobing and dressing. I never saw women baptized here. The Baptist wore a long, white garment during the ceremony. The region in which John baptized was an exceedingly charming and well-watered district called Salem. It lay on both sides of an arm of the Jordan, but Aion was on the opposite side of the river. It was larger than Salem, further north and nearer the river. Around the numerous creeks and pools of this region were pasture grounds for cattle, and droves of asses grazed in the verdant meadows. The country around Salem and Aion was, as it were, free, possessing a kind of privilege established by custom, by virtue of which the inhabitants dared not drive anyone from its borders.

John had built his hut at Aion on the old foundations of what was once a large building, but which had fallen to ruins, and was now covered with moss and overgrown by weeds. Here and there arose a hut. These ruins were the foundations of the tent castle of Melchisedech. Of this place in particular, I have had visions, all kinds of scenes belonging to early times, but I can now recall only this, that Abraham once had a vision here. He pulled two stones in position, one as an altar, and upon the other he knelt. I saw the vision that was shown to him—a City of God like the Heavenly Jerusalem, and streams of water falling from the same. He was commanded to pray more for the coming of the City of God. The water streaming from the City spread around on all sides. Abraham had this vision about five years before Melchisedech built his tent castle on the same spot. This castle was more properly a tent surrounded by galleries and flights of steps similar to Mensor's castle in Arabia. The foundation alone was solid; it was of stone. I think that even in John's time, the four corners where the principal stakes once stood were still to be seen. On this foundation, which now looked like a mount overgrown with vegetation, John had built a little reed hut. The tent castle in Melchisedech's time was a public halting place for travelers, a kind of charming resting place by the pleasant waters. Perhaps Melchisedech, whom I have always seen as the leader and counselor of the wandering races and nations, built his castle here in order to be able to instruct and entertain them. But even in his time, it had some reference to baptism. It was also the place from which he set out to his building near Jerusalem, to Abraham, and elsewhere. Here it was, also, that he assembled the various races and

peoples whom he afterward separated and settled in different districts. Jacob, too, had once lived at Aion a long time with his herds. The cistern of the baptism pool was in existence at that early time, and I saw that Jacob repaired it. The ruins of Melchisedech's castle were near the water and the place of baptism; and I saw that in the early days of Christian Jerusalem a church stood on the spot where John had baptized. I saw this church still standing when Mary of Egypt passed that way when retiring into the desert. Salem was a beautiful city, but it was ruined during a war, I think at the destruction of the Temple before the time of Jesus. The last Prophet, also, dwelt there awhile.

John, perhaps for about two weeks, had been attracting public attention by his teaching and bap-tizing, when some messengers sent by Herod from Callirrhoe came to him. Herod was at that time living in his castle at Callirrhoe, on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. There were numerous baths and warm springs in the vicinity. Herod wanted John to come to him. But John replied to the messengers: "I have much to occupy me. If Herod wishes to confer with me, let him come himself." After that I saw Herod going to a little city about five miles south of Aion. He was riding in a low-wheeled chariot, and surrounded by a guard. From its raised seat he could command a view upon all sides as from a canopied throne. He invited John to meet him in the little city. John went to a man's hut outside the city, and thither Herod repaired alone to meet him. Of their interview, I remember only that Herod asked John why he dwelt in so miserable an abode at Aion, adding that he would have a house built for him there. But to this John replied that he needed no house, that he had all he wanted and that he was accomplishing the will of One greater than he. He spoke earnestly and severely, though briefly, standing the while with his face turned away from Herod.

I saw that Simon, James the Less, and Thaddeus, the sons of Mary Cleophas by her deceased husband Alpheus, and Joses Barsabas, her son by her second marriage with Sabas, were baptized by John at Aion. Andrew and Philip also were baptized by him, after which they returned to their occupations. The other Apostles and many of the disciples had already been baptized. One day many priests and doctors of the Law came to John from the towns around Jerusalem intending to call him to account. They questioned him as to who he was, who had sent him, what he taught, etc. John answered with extraordinary boldness and energy, announced to them the coming of the Messiah and charged them with impenitence and hypocrisy.



**Not long after, multitudes were sent from Nazareth, Jerusalem, and Hebron by the Elders and Pharisees to question John upon his mission. They made his having taken possession of the place chosen for baptism a subject of complaint.**

**Many publicans had come to John. He had baptized them and spoken to them upon the state of their conscience. Among them was the publican Levi, later called Matthew, the son of Alpheus by his first marriage, for he was a widower when he married Mary Cleophas. Levi was deeply touched by John's exhortations, and he amended his life. He was held in low esteem by his relatives. John refused baptism to many of these publicans.**