

John as a Child Growing Up In the Desert

John had already been long in the desert before the Holy Family's return from Egypt. That he had retired there at so young an age was due principally to divine inspiration and partly to his own inclinations, for he was of a meditative nature and loved solitude.

He was never in a school; the Holy Ghost Himself taught him in the desert. He was much talked of even from his childhood, for the wonders attendant on his birth were known

and a light was often seen around the child. Herod soon laid snares for him, and even before the children's massacre, Elizabeth was obliged to flee with him into the desert. He could walk and help himself at the time. He took refuge not far from the first cave of Magdalen, and Elizabeth visited him sometimes.

When in his sixth or seventh year, I saw him again led into the desert by his mother. When Elizabeth left the house with the boy, Zachary was not home. He loved John so much and his grief at losing him was so great that he was obliged to absent himself in order not to witness his departure. He had, however, given him his blessing; for he was in the habit of blessing both mother and child whenever he left home. John wore a garment of skin. It passed from left to right over the shoulder and breast, was fastened under the right arm, and hung down behind. This was his only garment. His hair was brownish and darker than that of Jesus. He bore in his hand a white staff which he had brought with him from home, and which he always kept in the desert.

I saw him as just described hastening across the country by the hand of his mother. Elizabeth was a tall, active, old woman with a small, delicate face, and she was completely enveloped in a large mantle. John often ran on before her, hopping and jumping, perfectly unrestrained and childlike in action, though not distracted in soul. I saw them crossing a river. There was no bridge at that point, and so they crossed on a raft that was floating on the water. Elizabeth was a very resolute person, no difficulty daunted her; she herself rowed the raft across, using for that purpose the branch of a tree. They now turned eastward and entered a ravine, rocky and desolate above,



but lower down covered with bushes and overgrown with strawberries. John now and then ate one. After going some distance into the ravine, Elizabeth took leave of John. She blessed him, pressed him to her heart, kissed him on the cheeks and forehead, and turned away, looking back at him as she retraced her steps, weeping. But the boy appeared wholly unconcerned, and quietly walked on deeper into the ravine. I followed the child with a feeling of uneasiness at his going so far from his mother, and fearing that he would not be able to find his way home again. But just then, a voice said to me, "Be not uneasy. The child knows well what he is about." I went with him and, in several visions, saw his whole after life in the desert. He often told me himself how he denied himself in every way and mortified his senses, his understanding becoming clearer and clearer, learning in an unexplainable way something from everything around him. I saw him when a child playing with flowers and animals. The birds were particularly familiar with him. They lighted upon his head when he was walking or praying, and perched upon his staff when he laid it across the branches. There they sat in numbers, while he watched them and played with them. I saw him also going after other animals, following them into their dens, feeding them, playing with them, or earnestly watching them.

At the opposite extremity of this rocky ravine, the country was somewhat more open, and John pressed on until he reached a little lake with a low shore covered with white sand. I saw him there wading far out into the water. The fish swam up and gathered around him; he seemed quite at home with them. He lived in this region a long time, and I saw that he wove for himself out of branches a sleeping hut among the bushes. It was very low and only large enough to allow him to lie in it.

Both here and afterward in other places, I often saw by him radiant figures, angels, with whom he treated fearlessly and confidently, though most reverently. They appeared to be teaching him, directing his attention to different things. He had fastened a piece of wood to his staff, thus giving it the form of a cross, also a strip of broad grass, or bark, or leaves like a little flag. He often played with it, waving it here and there. While he lived in this part of the desert, I saw his mother visiting him twice, but they did not meet at this spot. He must have known when she was coming, for he always went some distance to meet her. Elizabeth brought him a tablet with a slender reed for writing.

After his father's death, John went secretly to Juttah, to console Elizabeth. He remained concealed with her for some time. She told him many things of Jesus and the Holy Family, some of which he noted down with strokes on his tablet. Elizabeth wanted him to go with her to Nazareth, but he would not.

He returned again to the desert.

Once when Zachary had gone with a herd to the Temple, he was set upon by Herod's soldiers and rudely maltreated in a narrow pass on the side of Jerusalem nearest to Bethlehem, at a spot whence the city could not be seen. The soldiers dragged him into a prison on that side of Mount Zion by which, at a later period, the disciples used to ascend. Zachary was frightfully maltreated, tortured, and at last pierced with a sword, because he would not disclose John's retreat. Elizabeth was at the time in the desert with John. When she returned to Juttah, he accompanied her part of the way, and then went back to the desert. On reaching Juttah, Elizabeth learned of the murder of her husband and great were her lamentations.

Zachary was buried by his friends in the vicinity of the Temple. He is not that Zachary who was slain between the altar and the Temple and whom I saw at the time of the Crucifixion with the other risen dead. He issued from that part of the wall in which the aged Simeon once had his cell for prayer, and walked about the Temple. The last Zachary was murdered in a struggle that had taken place among many at the Temple, concerning the genealogy of the Messiah and certain privileges and places of individual families.

Elizabeth's sorrow was so great that she could no longer bear to remain in Juttah, without John; consequently, she returned to him in the desert. She soon after died there and was buried by an Essenian, a relative of Anna the Prophetess. The house in Juttah, a very handsomely ordered one, was occupied by her sister's daughter. John secretly returned to it once after his mother's death, after which he buried himself still deeper in the desert and thenceforth was altogether alone. I saw him journeying to the south around the Dead Sea, then up the eastern side of the Jordan, from wilderness to wilderness toward Kedar and even toward Gessur. When he passed from one wilderness to another, I saw him running through broad fields by night. He went to that region where long after I saw John the Evangelist sitting and writing under the high trees. Under those trees grew bushes with berries, of which he sometimes ate. I saw him also eating a certain herb that bears a white flower and has five round leaves like clover. We have at home herbs like them, only smaller. They grow under the hedges, and the leaves have a sourish taste. When I was a child I used to love to chew them while minding the cattle off in the solitary fields, because I had seen John eating them. I also saw him drawing forth from holes in the trees and picking out of moss on the ground lumps of some brownish-looking stuff, which he ate. I think it was wild honey, for it was very plentiful there. The skin that he had brought with him from home, he now wore around his loins, and over his shoulders hung a brown, shaggy cover which he had woven himself. There were in the desert

wool-bearing animals which ran tamely around John, and camels with long hair on their neck. They stood most patiently and allowed him to pull it out. I saw him twisting the hair into cords and weaving from them that covering which he wore hanging around him when he appeared among men and baptized.

I saw him in continual and familiar communication with angels, by whom he was instructed. He slept upon the hard rock and under the open sky, ran over rough stones through thorns and briers, disciplined himself with thistles, wore himself out working on trees and stones, and lay prostrate in prayer and contemplation. He leveled roads, made little bridges, and changed the course of well springs. I often saw him writing in the sand with a reed, kneeling and standing motionless in ecstasy, or praying with outstretched arms. His penance and mortification became more and more severe, his prayer longer and more fervent. He saw the Saviour only three times face to face with his bodily eyes. But Jesus was with him in spirit; and John, who was constantly in the prophetic state, saw in spirit the actions of Jesus.

I saw John when full grown. He was a powerful, earnest man. He was standing by a dry well in the desert, and appeared to be in prayer. A light hovered over him like a cloud, and it seemed to me as if it came from on high, from the water above the earth. Then a light, shining stream fell over him into the basin below. While gazing on this torrent, I saw John no longer at the edge of the basin; he was in it, the shining water flowing over him, and the basin filled by the sparkling stream. Then again, I saw him, as at first, standing on the basin's edge; but I did not see him out of it, nor coming out. I think that the whole was perhaps a vision which John himself had had, and by which he was instructed to begin to baptize; or it may have been a spiritual baptism bestowed upon him in vision.