

John the Baptizer: More Than a Prophet
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The beheading of John the Baptizer¹ by order of Herod Antipas, at the urging of his wife Herodias—who was formerly married to Herod’s brother Philip—is surely, next to the crucifixion of Jesus, the most poignant death scene in the New Testament. It has become the stuff of legend, portrayed in countless books, films, dramas, and works of art. John’s brutal and untimely death, along with the scene of him baptizing Jesus as a wild desert prophet are embedded in our cultural memories. Yet as historians we must ask—what do we know about John and how do we know it?

For one to undertake any kind of “quest for the historical John the Baptizer,” some of the same challenges confront the historian as those associated with the quest for the historical Jesus—namely, a plethora of theologically based sources that must be critically sifted according to some agreed upon method. As in the case of Jesus, we have multiple texts dealing with John the Baptizer in all four canonical gospels and the book of Acts, distributed in a complex way throughout all the strata of these sources.² Such a systematic quest is far beyond the scope of this

¹ John is most often referred to in the New Testament as “the Baptist” (ὁ βαπτιστής), which appears to be a kind of formal title. However, twice in Mark he is called “the baptizer” (ὁ βαπτίζων), using the present active participle. The latter form appears to be earlier and is more descriptive of John’s activities and is accordingly preferred in this chapter.

² J. Reumann, “The Quest for the Historical Baptist,” pp. 181-99 in *Understanding the Sacred Text: Essays in Honor of Morton S. Enslin on the Hebrew Bible and Christian Beginnings* (ed. J. Reumann; Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1972).

present chapter; but, even this more limited query regarding John's relationship to the political and social powers of his day presents similar methodological challenges. This chapter will limit itself to a focus on John the Baptizer in the NT and in the 1st century writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, despite the abundance of materials on John in post-biblical traditions.³ Each NT text has its own tendentious perspectives. This is more particularly the case in dealing with John the Baptizer, given that emerging forms of Christianity, centrally focused on Jesus, reflect the need to "diminish" John's significance in contrast with that of Jesus as the main redemptive figure.⁴ The method here will be to sort through our textual sources in a roughly chronological order, correlating the main elements related to the central query—what was John the Baptizer's relationship to and attitude toward the State?

³ See E. Bammel, "John the Baptist in Early Christian Tradition," *NTS* 18 (1971-72) 95-128; S. Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004), 217-328; and the survey of primary texts by J. Poplin, "Post-Biblical Traditions on John the Baptizer," [cited 20 January 2016] Online: <https://clas-pages.uncc.edu/james-tabor/christian-origins-and-the-new-testament/post-biblical-traditions-on-john-the-baptizer>. The main primary texts are conveniently surveyed by W. Barnes Tatum, *John the Baptist and Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1994), 84-104.

⁴ This subordination tendency, ubiquitous in all four gospels and Acts, is outside the scope of this chapter. It is hardly found at all in Q, but is then picked up by Mark and increasingly emphasized in Matthew, Luke, and John—more or less finding its culmination in John's own declaration about Jesus: "He must increase but I must decrease" (John 3:30). The book of Acts takes a different but related strategy, not that Jesus is greater than John, but that John's time has past and has come obsolete, see Acts 19:1-7.

More Than A Prophet

One of our earliest sources are a series of questions and responses attributed to Jesus regarding the role and mission of John the Baptizer, now embedded in Luke, but drawn from the reconstructed Synoptic source Q. The passage aptly sets the stage for John's identification as a Prophet as well as his sharp critique of the governing establishment through his radical message and his counter-cultural, anti-establishment, lifestyle:⁵

What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in kings' courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, more than a prophet (Luke 7:24-26).⁶

According to this section of Q, not only is John "more than a Prophet," he is that final "messenger" (ἡ ἀγγελία/ἄγγελος) referenced by Malachi who prepares the way for the eschatological day of the LORD (Mal 3:1-2).⁷ Indeed, the Q text goes on to make the rather startling

⁵ The literature and debate on the Two Document hypothesis for Synoptic gospel composition that posits Q as a sayings source used by Luke and Matthew is too vast to cite here. For an introductory overview, see J. S. Kloppenborg, *Q, The Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2008).

⁶ Luke 7:24-26. Quotations from the Bible are from the RSV, *Holy Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁷ The MT reads "and he will prepare the way before me," referring to Yahweh of Hosts, equating this "messenger of the covenant" with the Lord (יהוה) who "will suddenly come to his temple," apparently as a single figure. Luke 7:27 reads "who shall prepare your way before you" using the

declaration, “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7:28).⁸ This extravagant evaluation of John (which seemingly makes him greater than Jesus, who is obviously one “born of a woman”) is cast in terms of “salvation history” in Q: “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached and everyone enters it violently” (Luke

2nd person singular pronoun, presumably influenced by Luke’s Christology in which John the Baptist as “the messenger,” is the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah (see Luke 1:17). 4Q76 2:12 (Mal 3:1) interprets the “messenger” and the “Lord” as two separate figures—“they will suddenly come to [his] te[m]ple, the Lor]d, whom you seek and the messenger of the co[venant, whom y]ou desire . . . But] who can endure them; they come?” This notion of “two messiahs,” one of Aaron and one of David, is found several places in the Qumran texts and might well have provided the background for understanding John the Baptist and Jesus as dual redemptive figures or “messiahs,” see J. J. Collins, ed., *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*, (Anchor Bible Reference Library, New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995).

⁸ Ibn Shaprut’s version of Hebrew Matthew preserves an alternative Matthean parallel to this Q saying: “among those born of women none has arisen greater than John the Baptizer,” without any qualifier (Matt 11:11). Similarly, it has “for all the prophets and the law spoke concerning (על) John” rather than “until (עד) John” (Matt 11:13). See G. Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 219-22. Howard argues that this text, independent of our Greek manuscripts, reflects an earlier tradition about John in which his role was more exalted than what later emerged within the Jesus movement.

16:16).⁹ Based on this Q material, John is a pivotal apocalyptic figure situated in the “middle of time,” both culminating an old epoch while initiating a new one. Of all the Prophets he is declared to be the greatest, but his greatness is shadowed by even the “least” in the emerging Kingdom that Jesus inaugurates by his own preaching.

John’s pivotal role in redemptive history is also emphasized in Mark, our earliest gospel. Following the dramatic scene of Jesus’ transfiguration, the inner core of disciples—Peter, James, and John—who had uniquely witnessed this vision of the coming kingdom of God in its glory, ask Jesus “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come” (Mark 9:1-11). Jesus’ reply is cryptic but altogether momentous in its implications:

Elijah does come first to restore all things; and how is it written of the Son of man, that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him (Mark 9:12-13)

The disciples have taken the transfiguration of Jesus as Messiah and the appearances of Moses and Elijah as a sure indicator of the imminence of the Kingdom of God—which they had been

⁹ Compare *Gos. Thom.* 46: “Jesus said: From Adam until John the Baptist there is among those who are born of women none higher than John the Baptist so that his eyes will not be broken. But I have said that whoever among you becomes as a child shall know the Kingdom, and he shall become higher than John.” *Gos. Thom.* 52 “His disciples said to Him: Twenty-four prophets spoke in Israel and they all spoke about you. He said to them: You have dismissed the Living One who is before you and you have spoken about the dead.” Translations throughout from *The Gospel According to Thomas* (trans. A. Guillaumont, C. Ch. Peuch, G. Quispel, et al.; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959).

told would come in their lifetimes (Mark 9:1). Here, Jesus identifies John the Baptizer as Malachi's prophetic messenger—namely, the Elijah who was expected to come before the final judgment:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse (Mal 4:4 [MT 3:23-24])

What is altogether surprising here is that this account in Mark not only makes such an identification, but also states that John the Baptizer was rejected and killed by the establishment “as it is written of him”—a clear reference to prophetic texts. Jesus, in Mark, is interweaving his own role as a Suffering Servant, rejected and killed—emphasized three times in this section of his gospel—with that of John, who suffers the same kind of fate before Jesus does (Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). Since Malachi says nothing of a suffering/rejected “Elijah,” once can assume the Markan tradition, as in the case of Jesus, has a set of texts in mind, whether portions of Isaiah's Servant Songs, or perhaps Zechariah 12-13 that could be taken to refer to the deaths of a Davidic as well as a Levitical “messiah.” It could well be that the writer of Mark has Zech 13:7 in mind as a specific reference to John's beheading by a sword:

“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me,” says the LORD of hosts. (Zech 13:7; cf. Mark 14:27)

The phrase “they did to him whatever they pleased” (Mark 9:13) is a clear reference to the political and religious establishment rather than the people who apparently flocked to John's preaching.

It is noteworthy that later in Mark, when Jesus sharply confronts the chief priests, scribes, and elders associated with Herod's Temple, he makes the matter of whether one accepted the baptism of John or not the pivotal sign of whether one accepted God's authority:

And Jesus said to them: "I will ask you a question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men? Answer me." (Mark 11:29-30).

Jesus' enemies refuse to answer because they had rejected John's baptism and "were afraid of the people, for all held that John was a real prophet" (Mark 11:32).

It is rather remarkable that Q 7:24-28 and these references to John the Baptizer in Mark so closely coincide in theme and emphasis. Strikingly, Luke closes this Q pericope with this parenthetical explanation:

When they heard this, all the people and the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John; but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him (Luke 7:29-30).

It is clear that in our two earliest sources on John the Baptizer that his pivotal role as an eschatological Prophet *par excellence* is affirmed and his acceptance by the crowds and rejection by the establishment is explicitly emphasized.

Returning to the Q source, John's implicit opposition to the political and social establishment is also implied. First he is in the "wilderness" or desert (ἐρημος), separated from both the Roman and Jewish urban centers of power such as Sepphoris, Tiberius, Caesarea, or Jerusalem, but also from the various towns and villages of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. One must leave the "civilized" world of human society and "go out" into the desert to encounter him. According to Luke, who is the only source who offers us any background regarding John's

family or birth, John was the son of Zechariah, an Aaronic priest of the division of Abijah (Luke 1:5). Luke says that from childhood John was “in the wilderness (ἐρήμοις, lit. “desert places”) till the day of his manifestation to Israel” (Luke 1:80), implying that his deliberate isolation and separation from the religious and civil establishment was lifelong (despite his inherited pedigree as a priest who could have taken his place of service in Jerusalem). Whether or not this was the case we have no way of knowing; however, the possibility underscores the radical stance of John as a counter-cultural prophet.

As a prophet, John’s voice or message was no “reed shaken in the wind,” but was firm and unwavering. John’s rough clothing—reflecting his entire counter-cultural lifestyle—is in the sharpest contrast to the luxurious apparel of those who live in “king’s houses.” This appears to be a clear reference to Herod Antipas and his palace at Sepphoris in the Galilee—and by extension to Pontius Pilate, the newly installed Prefect in Judea with his luxurious quarters in Caesarea and Jerusalem.¹⁰

A Radical Counter-Cultural Lifestyle

According to Mark’s gospel John the baptizer appeared in the “wilderness” or desert (ἐρημος), immersing those who responded to his preaching in the Jordan River.¹¹ Mark also

¹⁰ Cf. *Gos. Thom.* 78 Jesus said: “Why did you come out into the desert? To see a reed shaken by the wind? And to see a man clothed in soft garments? See your kings and your great ones are those who are clothed in soft garments and they shall not be able to know the truth.”

¹¹ Mark 1:4. Matt 3:1 specifies that John was preaching in the “wilderness of Judea” whereas Luke 3:3 says he “went about all the region about the Jordan.” John offers precise geographical

portrays John as one who followed a strict ascetic lifestyle reflected most prominently in his austere dress and diet:

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6).¹²

John's clothing appears to be modeled upon that of the prophet Elijah who was said to have worn a "garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather about his loins" (2 Kgs 1:8). The Q source specifies further that John, in contrast to Jesus, came "eating no bread and drinking no wine," implying a stricter asceticism than the more common practice of merely abstaining from meat and wine, as the parallel in Matthew has it (Matt 11:18; cf. Rom 14:1, 21). According to Luke, John's father Zechariah is told:

For he will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15).

details, namely that John was baptizing "at Aenon near Salim," in the Galilee, just south of Beit Shean or Scythopolis when he Jesus came to him for baptism.

¹² See J. A. Kelhoffer, *The Diet of John the Baptist: "Locusts and Wild Honey" in Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005). It has been suggested, in the interest of arguing John's diet was strictly vegetarian, that "locusts" refers to the beans of a carob tree, commonly called "St. John's bread," however the Greek word (ἀκρίδες) clearly refers to the *Acrididae* grasshopper. Epiphanius (*Panarion* 30.13. 4-5) quotes the "Gospel of the Ebionites" which has ἔνκρις, a similar word meaning a "honey cake," perhaps analogous to the "manna" that the Israelites ate in the desert. See M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), 8-10.

Such a description reminds one of Hegesippus's description of the lifestyle of James, the brother of Jesus:

He was holy from his mother's womb. He drank no wine or strong drink, nor did he eat flesh; no razor went upon his head . . . (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.5-6).

James is clearly presented in this text as a Nazirite from birth—but whether Luke understands John in this way, modeled perhaps after Samuel, is unclear (see Num 6:1-4; 1 Sam 1:11).

Regarding diet, the Q source notes a stricter asceticism that avoided even bread since it has to be processed from grain and does not grow of itself (Luke 7:33-34). Slavonic Josephus also has John shunning bread and only eating the roots and fruits of plants.¹³ Such a lifestyle reminds one of the Rechabites mentioned by Jeremiah who drink no wine, avoid cultivation of the ground, and live in tents (Jer 35:8-10).¹⁴ We might also recall that Banus, the desert hermit that Josephus followed as a young man for three years, fed only “on such things as grow of themselves” (Josephus, *Vita* 2.11).

¹³ The Old (Slavonic) Russian version of Josephus's *The Jewish War* offers a similar but even more radical sketch of John's lifestyle: “Now at that time there walked among the Jews a man in wondrous garb, for he had put animals' hair upon his body wherever it was not covered by his (own) hair; and in countenance he was like a savage,” living on “roots and fruits of the tree” (inserted at *Jewish War* 2.110). This text insists that he never touched bread, much less the flesh of a lamb, even at Passover, see H. J. Thackeray, trans. “Appendix: The Principle Additional Passages in the Slavonic Version,” *Josephus: The Jewish War* (LCL 9 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 3:644-45.

¹⁴ Hegesippus notes that a Rechabite priest tried to stop the stoning of James in the Temple (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.17).

The motivations behind such a strict diet seem to go beyond a mere “asceticism” and echo the ideals of the Garden of Eden where humans before their expulsion are given “every plant yielding seed . . . and every tree with seed in its fruit” (Gen 1:29). But perhaps more relevant are the social implications. Clearly such a strictly ascetic diet served to both segregate and alienate John from the ruling classes, making any sort of social exchange unlikely. As a result of his radical diet the charge is made against John that he “has a demon” (Luke 7:33).¹⁵ This is in contrast to the portrait of Jesus in all our sources where he mixes freely with all classes, whether rich or poor, Jew or non-Jew, and male or female, and seems to move comfortably in urban settings—causing controversy by his practice of “eating with tax collectors and sinners” (Mark 2:15-17).

Mark also alludes to a set practice of fasting by John and his disciples:

Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and the people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” (Mark 2:18).¹⁶

Along with fasting, John and his disciples apparently practiced special prayers that he had taught them, as well as rites of purification that were either in contrast to, and in conflict with, those of the Pharisees (Luke (Q) 11:1-4; John 3:25). These particular “halachic” practices and

¹⁵ One is reminded here of Jeremiah’s isolation and declaration “I did not sit in the company of merrymakers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because thy hand was upon me” (Jer 15:17).

¹⁶ Compare *Gos. Thom.* 104: “They said to Him: Come and let us pray today and let us fast. Jesus said: Which then is the sin that I have committed, or in what have I been vanquished? But when the bridegroom comes out of the bridal chamber, then let them fast and let them pray.”

interpretations are consistently presented in our gospels in contrast to the more “libertine” practices of Jesus and his disciples (Mark 2:18; Luke 15:1-2; 19:1-10).

A Message of Imminent Apocalyptic Judgment

John the Baptizer’s message, so far as we can recover it, is every bit as radical as his lifestyle—the one echoing and reinforcing the other. The earliest proclamation we have attributed to John is Q 3:7-9 (cf. Matt 3:7-10):

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourself, “We have Abraham as our father”: for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Luke frames this rather blistering proclamation as directed against the “multitudes that came out to be baptized by him,” whereas Matthew aims it at the presumably hypocritical “Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism.” Neither group fits the content well so it is best to take this as a generic sample of John’s preaching—letting the chips fall as they may. According to Mark, John preached a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; cf. Luke 3:3; Acts 13:24).

The sharp apocalyptic tone is dominant: “who warned you to flee from the wrath to come,” and “even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.” Both reflect John’s mission as an Elijah figure who comes preaching repentance before the impending “great and terrible Day of the LORD” with the threat of utter destruction upon those who do not heed (Mal 4:5-6 [MT 4:23-24]). The rejection of any claim of pedigree with Abraham underlines the radical nature of

John's sweeping call for repentance—even “stones” could be turned to physical descendants of Abraham. Only good deeds done in response to repentance will rescue one from the imminent wrath of God's judgment. Directly after this opening proclamation of Q 3:7-9 Luke has an intriguing example of John's ethical responses to various groups asking him what they need to do:

[And the multitudes asked him,] “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than is appointed you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages” (Luke 3:10-14).

This is the only time we have any sample of the social/ethical teachings of the Baptizer and it was likely part of the Two-Source (Q) tradition but was omitted by Matthew since it echoes too closely the teachings of Jesus—the sharing of clothing and food, the acceptance of tax collectors, and an accommodation even with soldiers—likely Jewish but perhaps even Roman (Luke 7:8; 23:11). There is no good reason to exclude these verses from Q as a valuable glimpse at John's implicit social program based upon his call for repentance.

According to Matthew, both John the Baptizer and Jesus proclaimed an identical message: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matt 1:2; 4:17). Mark expands this call in the mouth of Jesus, linking it in language with John's call for repentance:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14-15).

The clear implication is that following John's arrest, Jesus took up John's mantle as the leader of the Baptizing movement that he had recently joined by being baptized by John.¹⁷

John's execution by Herod Antipas is our best indicator of the threat he posed to the political establishment. We have two different accounts of the circumstances leading up to John's death: one from the gospel of Mark, the other in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*. In Mark, Herod had John arrested at the urging of his wife Herodias as a result of John denouncing the couple for adultery:

For Herod had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because he had married her. For John said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly (Mark 6:17-20)

According to Mark, Herod was intrigued by John and superstitiously fearful. It was Herodias who was behind the plot to have him executed. Her opportunity came when Herod celebrated his

¹⁷ The gospel of John has Jesus baptizing in Judea with great success in parallel with John's work in the north along the Jordan River even before John is arrested, apparently putting his own safety in jeopardy (John 3:22-23; 4:1-3). Since Mark (followed by Matthew and Luke) know nothing of Jesus taking on the mantle of John and administering John's baptism either before or after John's arrest, the reference in John is all the more telling. John realizes the implications for viewing Jesus as subordinate to John and thus qualifies his report—namely, that Jesus himself did not do the baptizing, but his disciples.

birthday and rashly promised Herodias's daughter, who had pleased him by dancing, anything she wanted. Prompted by her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptizer on a platter:

And the king was exceedingly sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard and gave orders to bring his head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb (Mark 6:26-29).

Josephus offers an alternative account. He reports that Herod was alarmed by the large crowds John was drawing by his preaching and the influence he was having on the populace. He feared John could easily lead an uprising and decided to strike first—arresting him for sedition. He had him brought in chains to the desert fortress Machaerus where he was put to death. Josephus notes that some of the Jewish population viewed John with favor and saw the subsequent defeat of Herod's armies by king Aretas of Petra as divine vengeance for his murder of John (*Ant.* 18:116-19).¹⁸

The two accounts are difficult to sort out but they do have some thematic similarities and overlapping differences.¹⁹ That Herod was superstitiously fearful of John as a prophet, and thus was reluctant to have him killed seems unlikely. Herod's fear of a popular uprising, as reported by Josephus, seems much more persuasive, given what we know of the highly ambitious Herod

¹⁸ On the question of the authenticity of Josephus's narrative regarding John the Baptist see R. L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Sociohistorical Study* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 39-41.

¹⁹ The two accounts are at least circumstantially related since king Aretas went to war with Herod when he divorced Aretas's daughter to marry Herodias.

Antipas. Nonetheless, it is entirely possible that part of the grievance the royal family had against John the Baptizer was his denunciation of the couple for adultery. Such a stance is entirely in keeping with what we know about John and his message in our gospel sources.

Taking all our sources together, John the Baptizer fits the typology of an “oracular prophet” as the work of Richard Horsley has shown.²⁰ Whether he would have ended up fulfilling the role of an “action prophet,” such as other such figures mentioned by Josephus (the Samaritan, Theudas, the Egyptian), had he not been arrested and killed remains an open question. Given our sources, with their strong apocalyptic emphasis, it seems more likely that John expected God to intervene and bring about the Day of the LORD, without any need on his part to gather armed followers or overtly make any moves to overthrow the religious or political establishment. Perhaps like Jesus, when threatened with arrest, he no doubt believed he was backed by the proverbial “twelve legions of angels,” and needed only to wait upon God’s dramatic intervention to usher in the Kingdom of God he was preaching.

²⁰ R. Horsley, “Like One of the Prophets of Old: Two Types of Popular Prophets at the Time of Jesus,” *CBQ* 47 (1985) 435-63.

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