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Prepare the way

Roger Karban | Jun. 24, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

As with Jesus, so with John the Baptizer: We must be careful to distinguish the historical person from the Gospel person.

It?s clear from the way the evangelists treat Jesus? baptism that the Baptizer?s inclusion created problems.

Acts 13:22-26
Luke 1:57-66, 80

In the earliest Gospel, Mark, Jesus simply comes up to John and is baptized. But later, when Matthew copies Mark?s account, he adds John?s famous disclaimer, ?I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?? The next evangelist, Luke, only refers to Jesus? baptism in a dependent clause: ?After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying.? John, the last Gospel writer, never mentions the event.

This baptism problem springs from a situation that developed after John?s arrest and execution: Many of his followers didn?t automatically switch their allegiance to Jesus. They continued to be devoted to John, believing he, not Jesus, was the expected Messiah. The Johannine communities that existed in the Middle East for centuries after the birth of Christianity regarded Jesus and his followers as usurping the message and ministry of their (and Jesus?) mentor.

Scripture scholars presume that Jesus originally was John?s disciple, buying into his message and, one day, stepping into the Jordan to receive John?s baptism.

But just who was this John the Baptizer?

Since the late 1940s when the first five Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, we?ve been able to situate this figure in his original historical setting. The people who produced these writings belonged to a Jewish sect that, in the century before Jesus? birth, left Jerusalem when their candidate for high priest was unjustly defeated, and they created a settlement at Qumran near the Dead Sea. They believed that God would eventually come on Earth and personally turn the table on their persecutors. To demonstrate their worthiness for Yahweh?s intervention, they underwent frequent (even daily) baptisms, announcing, ?The Lord is coming.?

The Baptizer fits almost perfectly in the Qumran movement.

John?s eventual martyrdom forces one of his disciples to make a life-changing decision: Does he carry on his mentor?s prophetic ministry, or does he return to Capernaum and continue to occupy himself making chairs and tables?

Jesus chooses the former.

Eventually those who cast their lot with Jesus create an image of John based on his relationship with their leader. Paul proclaims in today?s Acts passage, ?John heralded his [Jesus?] coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.? Mark has John declare, ?I am not he. Behold one is coming after me; I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.?

Presuming that Jesus was the God whose coming John announced, Christians gave John the role of Jesus? precursor. He plows the field for Jesus? planting. That?s why Luke gives so much space to John?s birth in today?s Gospel pericope.

But the question that arises after exploring both John?s historical background and the way he?s treated in our Gospels is this: Did John know he was Jesus? precursor? Or was he in for a big surprise when he got to the pearly gates?

This is where today?s first reading comes in. It?s the second of Deutero-Isaiah?s four reflections on the servant of God?s prophetic ministry. For our purposes, the most significant part of this passage is Yahweh?s assurance, ?You are my servant through whom I show my glory.?

The prophet can?t let God?s statement go unchallenged. ?I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength.? In other words, ?I failed.?

On the night he died, John probably regarded his life and ministry as a failure. Yahweh hadn?t come; practically no one had changed his or her life because of his preaching. Only after his death will a group of people look at John from a different perspective than John himself was allowed to see.

This ought to encourage those of us who based our ministries on the Second Vatican Council?s reforms, and also think our lives have been a failure. We should again and again listen to Deutero-Isaiah?s final words on the subject: ?My reward is with Yahweh, my recompense is with my God.?

None of us can judge our success or failure. We can?t see the whole picture. Fortunately, God sees dimensions we never notice -- until we, like John, arrive at the pearly gates.

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