

The Good Word

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HOLY THEOPHANY--THE MANIFESTATION OF GOD¹

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PREPARATION FOR THE THEOPHANY

The Baptism of Our Lord in the Jordan River is referred to as Holy Theophany or The Holy Manifestation of God. This meeting of St. John the Forerunner with Our Lord was the culmination of approximately forty-five years of preparation that made it possible for Our Savior's mission to the Jews to commence.

This preparation began with the Nativity of Our Lady Theotokos who was miraculously born of her

aged parents, St. Joaquim of the tribe of Judah and St. Anna the daughter of a priest from the tribe of Levi. This birth happened when St. Anna was very advanced in years and long past the ability to bear a child. For many years she had prayed to God in the desperate spirit of Righteous Sarah who did not conceive Righteous Isaac until long after her time for childbearing had passed. After the birth St. Anna dedicated her miraculous daughter to God and vowed to present her at the Temple in Jerusalem at the age of three.

Saint Gregory Palamas has commented in his Homily on the Dormition of the Most Holy that "in a strange manner the Mother of God changed her dwelling from the house of her father to the house of God while still an infant."² Upon arriving at the Temple in Jerusalem with an escort of virgins bearing lamps, her parents placed their young daughter on one of the steps leading up to the temple and Mary, without anyone leading her or lifting her, ascended the steps one after the other.³ Waiting at the top of the steps was the High Priest Zacharias, future father of the Forerunner by St. Anna's niece, Elizabeth, who greeted this young girl with great joy for he understood her divine gifts and was moved to allow her to stay with the Temple virgins and pray as often as she pleased in the very Holy of Holies – a place only visited once a year by the High Priest and no one else – for he understood her to be the Temple of God and the vessel of the Holy Spirit.⁴ The Virgin thus passed her life for the next 9-12 years.

As Mary approached the time of womanhood, the priests of the Temple became concerned that she must be placed with someone and live elsewhere so that the Holy of Holies not be defiled. Through Divine inspiration, Zacharias arranged that the Virgin should be betrothed by lot to an older man who could guard her virginity in peace. All eligible widowers of the tribe of Judah were ordered to present a rod of wood to the temple and these rods were then placed in the Holy of Holies to see who might be chosen to guard the Virgin. The rod of Joseph of Nazareth, an eighty-year old man

1. Note: All Scripture quotations are from Fr. Christopher Stade's translation of The Explanation of the Gospel According to [...] by Blessed Theophylact, Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO.

² The Life of the Virgin Mary, The Theotokos (LOT), Holy Apostles Skete, 1989, p. 25

³ LOT, p. 26

⁴ LOT, p. 31



who had been widowed for only a year after forty years of marriage, budded and flowered as the rod of Aaron had at the time of Moses.⁵ Joseph was quite surprised at being given responsibility for a young virgin who was younger than any of his grandchildren. But he obediently took the Virgin into his care and left her in his home in Nazareth while he worked his trade as carpenter.

BIRTH OF THE FORERUNNER

About this same time, the priest Zacharias was again serving his turn in Temple and offering incense in the holy of holies when the Archangel Gabriel appeared and announced that his wife, Elizabeth, would give birth to a son and that Zacharias should call him John. Elizabeth was known to be barren and Zacharias questioned Gabriel concerning this. His unbelief was answered by being stricken dumb and unable to speak until he should see the prophecy fulfilled. Indeed, the prophecy did come true and upon Zachariah's return from his service in the Temple Elizabeth conceived straight way.

Six months later the Archangel Gabriel made another visit, this time to Nazareth and announced the coming Birth of the Savior to the Theotokos. The Virgin freely allows herself to be over-shadowed by the most High and conceive the Child in a most mysterious way. That this Child is something very different and very special is soon demonstrated by the Forerunner himself. For when the Theotokos traveled with haste to the hill country, into a city of Judah, and entered Zacharias' house to greet Elizabeth, St. John the Forerunner, as an unborn babe of six months, leaped in his mother's womb rejoicing at the coming of his Lord. Here we see that thirty years before the Baptism in the Jordan the Forerunner announced the good tidings to his mother from within his mother's womb and joyfully greeted Christ in spirit.

Three months later the Theotokos departed to Nazareth and St. John the Forerunner was born to Elizabeth shortly afterwards. All this time Zacharias was still struck dumb and unable to speak. On the eighth day after the birth the parents took the Forerunner to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses, and the priest named the child Zacharias for his father. But Elizabeth immediately spoke up *Not so; but he shall be called John.* (Luke 1:60) To settle the matter a writing tablet was given to Zacharias and he immediately wrote *His name is John* (Luke 1:63) for John means *the grace of God.* Zacharias then

prophesied first of Christ and then of his son.⁶ The Gospel of St. Luke states that these events were spoken of throughout all the hill country of Judea. *And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be!* (Luke 1:66). St. John the Forerunner had now been introduced to the people of Judea in a strange and wondrous manner. His ministry had already begun even at his birth.

BIRTH OF THE CHRIST, PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

A couple of months later, Righteous Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem to be taxed by the Romans in his family's town. He was accompanied by the Theotokos "great with child" and the Glorious Nativity of Our Lord took place in Bethlehem. Forty days later they all traveled to Jerusalem to present the Babe to the Lord in accordance with the Law of Moses and the necessary sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves was made. The priest Zacharias greeted the holy couple and stood the Theotokos with the Virgins during the ceremony instead of with the married women. This offended the Pharisees greatly and they reported Zacharias to Herod the king.




PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE, ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPT, KHLUDOV PSALTER, C. AD 850, BYZANTINE

At the ceremony the Christ Child was presented to the Elder Simeon and Anna the daughter of Phanuel, who had both been awaiting this moment for many years. Simeon then said *Lord now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, O Master, according to Thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation* (Luke 2:29-30). Aged Anna, who from her youth had served in the temple with fasting and prayer also recognized the Messiah and proclaimed this to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This was the last time Zacharias would see

⁵ LOT, pp. 64-67

⁶ The Explanation by Blessed Theophylact of the Holy Gospel According to St. Luke (EBTGL) , Chrysostom Press, 1997, pp. 23-24



either the Theotokos or the Christ Child because Herod was already looking for the Child spoken of by the Wise men and Herod assumed that either John or the young Child from Bethlehem might be the Messiah. The Theotokos and righteous Joseph were warned by an angel to flee Jerusalem for Egypt.

As they fled, Zacharias was murdered by Herod's soldiers in the Temple and his blood permanently stained a stone on the floor of the temple. Our Lord later referred to this very stain as a witness against the Priests and Pharisees for their bloodthirsty attitudes. At the time of Zacharias' murder, Elizabeth took the young John and hid in a cave near the desert where she died soon after. The young child John remained alone in the wilderness under the care of God and His angels.⁷ **And the Child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel** (Luke 1:80)

Thus both St. John the Forerunner and Our Lord Jesus Christ were identified with the prophecies surrounding the Messiah at the time of their birth. Both then disappeared for thirty years, until St. John began his ministry at the Jordan River as the voice calling the people of Israel to repentance.

MINISTRY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

In those days came John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, and saying, Repent ye. For the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:1-2). St. John was calling the people to seek a life guided by the law that would be spiritual instead of the carnal life of the Pharisees who set themselves apart as superior to others because of their outward observance instead of seeking God with their heart.

Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all of the region round about Jordan. And they were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins (Matthew 3:5-6). This is a baptism of repentance – not forgiveness. For St. John never claimed to forgive sins. He only asked that people acknowledge their spiritual weakness and offer that to God. He also addressed himself directly to the Pharisees and Sadducees, *O brood of vipers! Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance* (Matthew 3:7-8). The Forerunner is insisting that one must not only flee from wickedness, but bring forth fruits of virtue. One must turn away from evil and do good.

And the multitude asked him, saying, What shall we do then? He answered and saith unto them, He

that hath two coats, let him share with him that hath none; and he that hath food, let him do likewise. Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you. And the soldiers likewise asked of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Extort from no man, neither accuse any falsely, and be content with your wages (Luke 3:10-14). St. John was calling ALL people to repentance, the good and the evil. To the good and simple multitude, he instructs them to give alms and look out for one another in brotherly love. To people assumed to be evil, such as the publicans and soldiers, he merely asked them to do no evil. Publicans were tax collectors with a license to steal—literally. Publicans bought a license from the Roman state, which expected a certain amount of gold from a given licensed area. Anything more the publican could extort was his to keep. Likewise soldiers were often tempted to intimidate and steal from people at will. St. John merely asks them not to. He understands that the publicans and soldiers do not have the capacity to refrain from evil. See how the Forerunner does not assume that he would have the Grace to transform such people into good and loving brothers of their fellow man. That was to be Christ's mission, not his.

And as the people were in expectation, and all men wondered in their hearts concerning John, whether he were the Christ, or not (Luke 3:15). The expectations of the people at that time were caused by the strange events of thirty years prior. The Birth in Bethlehem, the Wise Men from the East following a strange star, Herod's slaughter of the innocents on Bethlehem, the disappearance of both Zacharias' son and the Babe in Bethlehem have passed into collective memory. But the multitude had no way of knowing which babe had grown to be the Forerunner. For all they knew he WAS the Messiah.

In fact, representatives of the Priests and Levites were sent to the Forerunner to determine exactly who he was. *And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not but confessed, I am not the Christ* (John 1:19-20). "The Jews respected John, who was the child of a high priest and whose way of life was angelic, but they considered Christ to be nothing more than a lowly carpenter's son from the wretched village of Nazareth. They hoped that John, whose credibility was irreproachable, would confess that he was the Christ; then they would use his testimony to undermine belief in Jesus. But the opposite occurred, and their plan

⁷ The Prologue of Ochrid Volume 1 January to June, Sebastian Press, 2008, p. 117

turned out to be their undoing. John refused to exalt himself and instead bore witness to Christ.”⁸

And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elijah? And he saith, I am not. Art thou the prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? (John 1:21-22). The Jews wanted to know who John actually was. *Art thou the prophet?* This too he denies, although John was indeed a prophet. Why then does he deny it? Because they did not ask him “*Art thou a prophet?*” but, “*Art thou the prophet?*” (my emphasis) with the definite article, meaning the prophet expected by us, about whom Moses predicted, *The Lord God will raise up for you a Prophet, like me* [see Dt. 18:15]...*He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the Prophet Isaiah* (John 1:23). “What was he crying? *Make straight the way of the Lord.* ‘I am a servant,’ he is saying, ‘and I prepare your hearts for the Lord. Make them straight, you who are twisted and devious; make them smooth, so that the Lord Christ can make His way to your hearts’...It is fitting that John, the Forerunner of Christ, should be called a voice, which precedes the word. The voice of a man begins as inarticulate air coming up from the chest; when it is articulated by the tongue, it becomes speech. First comes the voice, then the word. First came John; then Christ made his appearance in the flesh”⁹ *And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not the Christ, nor Elijah, neither the prophet?* (John 1:24-25). “Unable to win John over by flattery, the Jews threaten him with harsh and menacing words so that he will say that he is the Christ...It seems to me (Blessed Theophylact) they do not want John to appear to be the Christ, so they ask the question out of envy and spite. Accursed are the Jews who accepted baptism at his hands, but afterwards despised him”.¹⁰

John answered them, saying, I baptize you in water: but in your midst there standeth One, Whom you know not. He it is, Who coming after me is preferred before me, the thong of Whose sandal I am not worthy to unloose” (John 1:26-27). “Behold the meekness and truthfulness of this holy man – meekness, in that he did not repay the Jews’ insolence with harshness; truthfulness, in his bold witness to Christ’s glory...the sandal [made of leather], represents the flesh

of sinners, subject to corruption; the thong represents the bond of sins. The people came to John, bound by their sins, When they confessed, John loosed that thong...Because no bond of sin clung to Christ, there was nothing for John to unloose.”¹¹ *He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire: Whose winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly cleanse His threshing floor, and will gather the wheat into His grainary; but the chaff He will burn up with fire unquenchable* (Luke 3: 16-17). Here St. John is revealing the baptism of the Apostles by tongues of fire at Pentecost. The winnowing fan is explained thus by Blessed Theophylact: “Just because he will baptize you, do not think that you are not liable to condemnation. If, after baptism, you do not lead a blameless life, He will burn you with unquenchable fire.”¹²

BAPTISM OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST



FRESCO, MONASTERY OF VATOPEDI, MT. ATHOS

Now when all of the people were baptized (Luke 3:21) *...The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and sayeth, “Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29). “The Lord has no sins that need to be washed away in Baptism--He is so pure that he takes away, He blots out completely, the sins of others...this is the true Lamb, prefigured by Moses and foretold by Isaiah. Christ is called the *Lamb of God* because it is God Who accepts Christ’s death for our salvation, and also because it is God Who delivers Christ to death for our sake”.¹³ *Then cometh Jesus...to be baptized of him. But John forbade Him, saying, It is I that needeth to be baptised of Thee. And comest Thou to me?* (Matthew 3:13-14).

⁸ The Explanation by Blessed Theophylact of the Holy Gospel

According to St. John (EBTGJ), Chrysostom Press, p. 26


⁹ EBTGJ, p. 27

¹⁰ EBTGJ, p. 28

¹¹ EBTGJ, p. 29

¹² EBTGL, p.44

¹³ EBTGJ, pp. 29-30



The Forerunner knew exactly Who he was talking to, for he had sensed Christ to be in the womb of the Theotokos when he was in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth. St. John had awaited this moment his entire life and he craved the Lord's baptism by Fire and the Spirit. The Forerunner knew what a minor shadow his water baptisms were compared to what the One standing before him could perform.

And Jesus answering said unto him, Let it be so now. For thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he permitted him (Matthew 3:15). Blessed Theophylact states that Jesus asked the Forerunner's forbearance in this matter even though this makes the Master seem less than he is. "For there will be a time for us to have the glory that is befitting."¹⁴ By "righteousness" Our Lord meant the law. "Human nature was accursed, Jesus says, because it was not able to fulfill the law. Therefore I have fulfilled all the other requirements of the law. One thing remains for me to do, that I be baptized. When I have fulfilled this, I shall have delivered human nature from the curse. And this is befitting for me to do."¹⁵ The manner of our very salvation is demonstrated and sealed by Our Lord's baptism that showed the way to deification for mankind.

And Jesus, when He was baptized, went up straightway out of the water (Matthew 3:16). Here Blessed Theophylact comments that Jesus chose to be baptized at the age of thirty: "for by this age one experiences all sins. In the first ten years, there is great foolishness; in the second, during adolescence, the great flame of desire and anger; and in the years of adulthood, great avarice. Jesus waited for this age, therefore, so that He could fulfill all the ages of a man, and sanctify us."¹⁶ *And, lo, the heavens were opened unto Him* (Matthew 3:16). Blessed Theophylact then says, "Adam had closed the heavens, but through Christ they are opened, so that you may learn, O reader, that when you are baptized, you, too, open the heavens."¹⁷

...and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him. And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased (Mark 1:10-11). Here is the manifestation of the Holy Trinity. "The evangelist says 'the Spirit', but this is not one of the ministering spirits, but He Who is one in essence with God. Through the witness of the Father and the descent of the Dove, the three hypostases of the Holy

Trinity are revealed. For the Father bore witness from above that while he who baptized (John) was holy, He Who was baptized **was** God, (my emphasis) lest anyone imagine that John was greater than Christ because he baptized Him... when the Father had spoken 'This is My Son' the Spirit descended upon Jesus, showing that those words were spoken concerning Christ. Thus the people who heard the voice would not think that it referred to John".¹⁸

This is an extremely important point. Even after this glorious and miraculous Manifestation (Theophany) just described, John was always at pains to have his disciples follow Jesus. *The next day John again stood, and two of his disciples; and looking upon Jesus as He walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God! And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus* (John 1:35-37). "The purpose of everything John did, as the escort of the Bride, was to lead human nature to the Bridegroom. Christ, the Bridegroom, is silent; for he who arranges the marriage does all the talking. At a wedding the bride does not approach the bridegroom, but the bridegroom the bride, even if he is the son of a king. So it is here, that the Lord as the Bridegroom presents Himself to the multitude. Intending to unite with our human nature as with a bride, the Lord came down to earth, and after the wedding ascended with our humanity to His Father's house."¹⁹

EFFECTS OF THE THEOPHANY

The Theophany of Christ was the beginning of a period of strife between the Forerunner's disciples and Jesus' disciples. That confusion manifested itself in divisions between John's followers and those who followed Jesus. This is shown clearly in the third chapter of St. John's Gospel. After His meeting with Nicodemus, *...came Jesus and His disciples into the land of Judea; and there He tarried with them, and baptized. And John also was baptizing in Enon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came and were baptized. For John was not yet cast into prison* (John 3:22-24). "When you hear that He... baptized, do not think that He Himself did the baptizing, but rather, his disciples. The Evangelist here credits the work of His disciples to their Teacher. A little further on the Evangelist is more direct: *Jesus Himself baptized not, but His disciples* (John 4:2). You may ask, 'Why did he not baptize?' Here is the answer: John had previously said, *He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 3:11). The Holy Spirit was not yet

¹⁴ The Explanation by Blessed Theophylact of the Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew (EBTGM), Chrysostom Press, p. 36

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ EBTGM, p36

¹⁷ EBTGM, p37

¹⁸ The Explanation by Blessed Theophylact of the Holy Gospel

According to St. Mark (EBTGMk), Chrysostom Press, p16

¹⁹ EBTGJ, p32

given because it was not yet the proper time. If the Lord had baptized on this occasion, He would have done so **without** the Holy Spirit (my emphasis). How then would His baptism differ from John's? And if He had imparted the Holy Spirit before it was time, this would have been an action unworthy of God, Who does everything in due season. When was the right time for Him to give the Holy Spirit? After He had ascended (Pentecost)...Only after God was reconciled to us could the Holy Spirit be sent as a rich and lavish gift...While they baptized, John also continued to baptize... Although John constantly proclaimed Christ, yielding first place to him, he could not persuade his own disciples to leave him for Christ. Had he stopped baptizing, it would have further aroused their resentment of Christ. For the same reason, namely to avoid inflaming the envy of the Baptist's disciples, Christ did not preach until John *was...cast into prison*. I (Blessed Theophylact) also believe that God permitted John's beheading to take place quickly so that the devotion of the multitude to John would be transferred to Christ...To sum up, Christ's disciples were baptizing with a baptism no greater than John's. Both were incomplete, neither one imparting the Holy Spirit. But their purpose was the same: to lead to Christ those whom they baptized."²⁰

Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying. And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, He that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him (John 3:25-26). ...After the quarrel about *purifying*, meaning baptism, John's disciples approached their master and attempted to provoke him to indignation...'The man whom you baptized and made famous dares to usurp your place...*All men come to him*, and disdain you.' But John wants to instill the fear of God in them, and teach them that they battle against God when they obstruct the work of Christ and demean Him."²¹ *John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven* (John 3:27). "'Opposing Him you sin in two ways: you resist the will of God, and attempt to do the impossible.' At the same time John gently consoles them: 'Not man, but God gains preeminence over us. What we once had, we too received from heaven...Be not dismayed that Christ's deeds are more glorious than ours--it is the will of God.'"²²

20 EBTGJ, pp. 56-57

21 EBTGJ, p. 57

22 EBTGJ, p. 58

Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before Him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom who standeth and heareth him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled (John 3:28-29). "...the Forerunner is saying...'If you have been attentive to my testimony, you will understand that He ought to be honored more highly than I; it is my joy when others follow Him. If the Bride, that is, the people, did not cleave to the Bridegroom, then I, the escort of the Bride, would grieve. Christ the Bridegroom is calling to His people (the bride) and teaching them, and I rejoice that the Bride comes to Him."²³ *He must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3 :30). "But how can the glory of the Forerunner be diminished? Consider the Morning Star: its light seems to be extinguished when the sun rises, but it is merely hidden by the great light. So too the Forerunner, the Morning Star, is hidden by the noetic Sun and said to decrease. Christ will *increase* when, very shortly, He reveals Himself by miracles."²⁴

The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand. He that believeth in the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him (John 3:35-36). The Forerunner did not say, 'awaiteth Him,' but, *abideth on him*, stressing that God's wrath will never depart from the unbeliever. Lest you imagine the death of a man is a temporary condition, he says plainly that the wrath *abideth on him* and the punishment will be everlasting. By this the Forerunner leads – indeed, compels – his listeners towards faith in Christ...He carefully instructs his own disciples, and all others as well, to put aside any envy or spite they might harbor and listen attentively to Christ, because He is God."²⁵

INITIAL MINISTRY OF CHRIST

After the baptism of Christ in the Jordan, Christ then went immediately into the wilderness for forty days and was tempted by Satan. After this He went to the Sea of Galilee and called the first four of the twelve apostles – Peter, Andrew James and John. *And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the Gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease among the people. And His fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto Him all sick people that were afflicted with various diseases*

23 *ibid*

24 *ibid*

25 EBTGJ, pp. 61-62

and torments, and lunatics, and paralytics, and He healed them (Matthew 4:23-24).

He then went on to give the Sermon on the Mount and called the rest of His disciples, teaching them and commanding them what they should do and how they should comport themselves. He then sent them off to spread the Good News. *And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding His twelve disciples, He departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities* (Matthew 11:1). “When He had sent the disciples, He Himself was quiet, not working miracles, but only teaching in the synagogues. For if He Himself were present healing the sick, no one would have approached the disciples.”²⁶

Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said unto Him, Art Thou He that cometh, or do we look for another? (Matthew 11:2-3). “John did not ask as if he himself did not know Christ. How could this be when he had borne witness to him, saying ‘Behold the Lamb of God’? But because his disciples were jealous of Christ, John sent them to acquire more evidence, so that by seeing the miracles they might believe that Christ is greater than John...Look, then, how Christ answers this question:”²⁷

Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and declare unto John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good tidings. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me (Matthew 11:4-6). “He did not say, ‘Declare unto John that I am He that cometh.’ But knowing that John had sent his disciples to see the miracles, He said, ‘Tell John what you see, and certainly he will use that opportunity to bear witness more fully to you concerning me.’...And to show John’s disciples that the thoughts they were thinking did not escape His notice, He said, ‘Blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in Me,’ for they had many doubts about Him.”²⁸

Our Lord understood perfectly the dilemma that was facing John – who wanted desperately for ALL of his disciples to immediately follow Christ. John wanted no division or confusion of any kind. But human nature being what it is, John’s disciples found it difficult to leave their master. John understood his time was coming to an end, that he must soon die to free his disciples to follow Jesus. Our Lord also understood this

and immediately gave a eulogy to John and his ministry. *And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in king’s houses* (Matthew 11:7-8), knowing that King Herod and his court would shortly be the cause of the Forerunner’s death.



*Fresco, St. John the Baptist,
Nabakhtevi, Georgia, 15th Century*

But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet (Matthew 11:9). “John was more than a prophet because the other prophets only foretold Christ, while he was an eyewitness, indeed a great thing. And the others prophesied after their birth, while he, still in his mother’s womb, recognized Christ and leapt.”²⁹

For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold I send My messenger before Thy face, who shall prepare Thy way before Thee (Matthew 11:10). For this reason, John is often portrayed in icons as an angel with wings.

26 EBTGM, p. 92

27 EBTGM, pp. 92-93

28 EBTGM, p. 93

29 EBTGM, p. 94



THE GOOD WORD


c/o St. Seraphim of Sarov & St. John of Kronstadt Orthodox Church
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The prophecy itself is found in Malachi 3:1: *Verily I say unto you, Among those born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.* “He declares with certainty, that there is no one greater than John. But by saying ‘born of women’ He excludes Himself, for Christ was born of a virgin, not of a woman, that is one who is married. *Notwithstanding, He that is younger is greater than he in the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 11:11)...Since He has extolled the praises of John, lest they think that John is greater than He, He says here more clearly, I am the younger in age and the lesser in your opinion, yet I am greater than he in the kingdom of heaven, that is, in regards to spiritual and heavenly good things.”³⁰ (Please note that the word translated as “younger” above is μικρότερος in Greek and is translated as “lesser, smaller” in Young’s Analytical Concordance. This is rendered as “least” in the King James Version and most other English translations. But here, as is demonstrated by Blessed Theophylact’s commentary, “lesser” can also mean “younger” in that context.)

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elijah, who was to come... “If you are willing, He says, to accept it, that is, if you judge the matter with a good disposition of

mind and not spitefully, he is the one whom the prophet Malachi called Elijah who was to come (‘*And, behold, I will send to you Elijah the Tishbite before the great and glorious day of the Lord comes*’ Malachi 4:5) For both the Forerunner and Elijah have the same ministry. The one was Forerunner of the first coming and Elijah will be the forerunner of the second coming. Then, showing that it is an enigma that John is Elijah, and requires wisdom to understand it, He says: “...*He that hath ears to hear, let him hear*” (Matthew 11-13-15).

And with this eulogy, John is left to his fate in Herod’s dungeon, while Christ begins His three year journey to Golgotha with all of the glorious miracles and teachings that manifest themselves along the way. Their reunion in the next world after Our Lord’s Resurrection must have been joyous indeed. For John the Baptist had the most difficult ministry of any of the prophets. Imagine being mistaken for the Messiah in the true Messiah’s presence.



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³⁰ EBTGM, pp. 94-95