

## JOHN THE BAPTIST NOT SQUELCHED BY DECAPITATION

You'd think that once they sliced off his head and served it up on a platter, that would have been the end of John the Baptist.

But no-o-o-o, as John the Balushi would have put it. The Baptizer's influence wasn't squelched even though they played Samurai Night Cleaver on his neck (if you can recall the old Saturday Night Live shtick).

The figure of John the Baptizer is a tough one to figure out. He is mentioned in the first five documents in the Christian scriptures, the gospels and the book of Acts. But the evidence is such a hodgepodge of stories that no clear picture emerges.

What is clear is that he was an oddball. He played the role of an outspoken prophet to the hilt. His wardrobe consisted of a camel-skin tunic; his diet was heavy on honey and roast grasshoppers; his theatre of operations, the Judean wilds and a ford in the Jordan River.

He must have been quite a spectacle. If he had sold tickets, he could have pocketed a bundle. For the crowds flocked to his services.

There were society folks, establishment officials, military types, and religious hot-shots, as well as a street people, outcasts and neer-dowells. They all heard the same sermon: "Repent!"

Apparently the audience response was terrific. John underscored his pitch for penitence with a washing ceremony. Ritual ablutions were not unusual for Jewish religionists in his day. In fact, there were several baptismal rituals which people could undergo.

The usual practice was for new converts to bathe themselves. So John invented a new twist. Instead of letting the folks wash themselves, he sloshed the water on them himself. That's how he got his nickname, John "the Baptizer."

But mostly he was an outspoken critic of all the hypocrisy and phony baloney going on in the society around him. Finally he went too far. He put the finger on the king, Herod Antipas, who had divorced his Arabian wife to marry his half-brother's spouse Herodias. If that sounds like something out of "As the World Turns," you've got it straight.

John, of course, was indignant. But enough is enough. His carping got under Herod's skin. So he had the prophet arrested and jailed in the basement of his seaside resort. After a few

weeks, they sliced off his noggin and used it as the door prize for Herod's macabre birthday party.

This mini-biography appears relatively clear cut. But appearances can be deceiving. The details have to be patched together from a smorgasbord of stories in the Christian scriptures. The problem is that in every case the anecdotes about John have been subordinated to the story about Jesus.

The impression you get from the Bible is that John the Baptizer was little more than an advance man for Jesus the Christ. That may be quite to the point, as far as Christian theology is concerned. But it tends to ignore the fact that John had a respectable following in his own right.

At least two clues point to this. The first is from the Christian scriptures themselves, at Acts 19:1-7. It's a report of part of Paul's mission work at Ephesus on the east coast of the Aegean Sea. Keep in mind that this was 25 years after John's execution and well over 500 miles away as the buzzard flies.

There in Ephesus Paul discovered a few converts who had never heard of Christian baptism, but who had submitted to John's baptism! That's a rather impressive record for someone who had been killed off a quarter century before.

The second clue is from the Jewish historian Josephus. Josephus wasn't born until 10 years after John's death. Some 50 years later he explained Herod Antipas' eventual defeat as a divine punishment for the murder of John the Baptizer.

Again, the conclusion is impressive. For this piece of evidence proves that John was remembered half a century afterwards in non-Christian circles.

Put it all together, and you suspect that John the Baptizer was an impressive figure. More impressive than you might guess just from reading the Christian scriptures. More impressive than you might guess for a decapitated backwoods prophet.

But then again, the biblical narratives have a surprising way of turning up remarkable figures. Not least among them is John the Baptizer.