

Gospel and Judgment in the preaching of John the Baptist

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I. The Character of John's Message

THE LUKAN ACCOUNT of the Baptist's teaching concludes : 'So, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people' (3:18; this and other quotations are from RSV). There is little to commend H. Conzelmann's view that εὐαγγελίζεσθαι here means simply 'to preach'.¹ Even if Luke 16:16b is limited to the preaching of Jesus (with Conzelmann, *loc. cit.*), there is no sufficient reason for denying that the verb retains its fundamental sense, 'to proclaim glad tidings', in 3 :18. (How the content of John's message relates to that of Jesus, is another matter.) Furthermore, it will not do to restrict the 'evangelizing' to one part only of John's preaching, a facet not prominent, if present at all, in the preceding verses (cf. A. Plummer *in loc.*). Following C. F. D. Moule (*An Idiom-Book of N. T. Greek*, p. 162), μὲν οὖν is 'purely resumptive or transitional', not 'adversative'. ἕτερα is more naturally interpreted as 'other 'things'', than as 'things of a different kind'. Both verb forms describe the total message of John (only part—but the essence—of which is preserved): παρακαλῶν calls attention more to the act of preaching, εὐηγγελίζετο to the message itself.

In Mark 1 the ministry of John is included in the 'beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ'.² In my judgment Luke 16:16b embraces the Baptist's preaching.³ In Acts 13 the preaching of John (verses 24f.) is integral to 'the message of this salvation', verse 26.

1. *The Theology of St. Luke* (London, 1960), p. 23.

2. Cf. *TWNT* II, p. 716; and E. Schweizer, 'Anmerkungen zur Theologie des Markus', *Neotestamentica et Patristica* (Leiden, 1962), pp. 36f.

3. For support of this interpretation, see D. Daube, *The N. T. and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1956), p. 285; W. G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfilment* (London, 1957), p. 523; J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London, 1959), p. 118.

And yet to many, the burden of John's message is anything but gospel. He addresses his audience as a 'brood of vipers',⁴ and warns that failure to repent and perform good works places them in danger of 'the wrath to come' and of being consumed in the fire kindled by the Mightier One (Luke 3:7-17). In view of such expressions, W. Michaelis denies that John declared a message of salvation (*Heilspredigt*). 'The call to repentance is no Gospel; John does not want to awaken joy over the nearness of the Kingdom, but sorrow: in face of the Judgment.'⁵

On the contrary, the message of John as the Synoptists present it, may rightly be called good news. The startling and offensive term of address (vipers) and the threats of doom, are means to an end, calculated to shake the Jews out of a false sense of security (Luke 3:8), and make them aware of their sin, that they might repent, and thus be ready for the advent of the Kingdom. The immediate aim of John's message is that the people, having repented, and received baptism as a sign thereof, might be forgiven of sin (Luke 3:3). The best news, however, is that a Mightier One is coming.

II. *The Role of the Coming One*

A. Baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

According to Mark, this One will baptize πνεύματι ἁγίῳ (1:8). T. W. Manson believes that the original saying (supposedly in Q) spoke only of a baptism with fire (i.e., judgment, and one committed to Messiah), that Mark's reading is to be accounted for by the events of Acts 2, and that Matthew 3:11 and Luke 3:16 represent a conflation of Mark and Q.⁶ Now doubtless Mark had in mind the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and/or the gift of the Spirit in connection with Christian baptism. But that the early Christians were in a position to understand better than John possibly could, the significance of baptism with the Spirit, is not sufficient reason for

4. The term was addressed not only to Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt. 3:7), but to all the people (Lk. 3:7, and note vss. 10-14). Matthew mentions the Pharisees and Sadducees for polemical reasons, and/or because Jesus so addressed them, Mt. 23:33. (The term in 12:34 may not be meant for the groups exclusively, but cf. vss. 24, 38.) ἐχιδνα usually designates a poisonous snake, so here someone given to injurious, even deadly behaviour. Tax-collectors, soldiers, harlots (Mt. 21:32), Pharisees and Sadducees, might all be so addressed, though for different reasons.

5. *Täufer, Jesus, Urgemeinde* (Gutersloh, 1928), p. 14. Cf. Conzelmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 23, 221.

6. 'John the Baptist', *BJRL* 36, p. 404.

denying to the Baptist the saying of Mark 1:8. 1) The bestowal of the Spirit was to be a feature of the last days (Joel 2:28f.; Is. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 36:25-27; 37:14; 39:29), and the promise of such a Spirit-baptism would not be strange on the lips of one announcing that the Kingdom was near, and that Messiah (so Manson) was about to come.⁷ 2) Acts 19:2 is sometimes adduced as evidence that John did not foretell a baptism of the Spirit; but the NEB ('We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit'; likewise AV, RSV) may give the wrong sense, and the RV the correct: 'We did not so much as hear whether the Holy Ghost was *given*.' According to this version, the promise of the Spirit's bestowal had already been given to the men, presumably when they received John's baptism. In favour of this interpretation are: a) the use of ἠκούσαμεν, suggesting the reception of awaited news; ignorance of the very existence of the Spirit might be better expressed by a 'know' verb; b) John 7:39b, where the Grk., literally '(the) Spirit was not yet, . . .', requires the addition of 'given'; c) the absence of the 'baptism of the Spirit' from the explanation of verses 4f. The men appear to understand *that* the Spirit is to be given, but have failed to learn when, and by what means.

It is likely, then, that the original saying is preserved in Matthew (3:11b) and Luke, and that Mark's source lacks the reference to fire and the explanation of its function in the coming judgment (Luke 3:17).

In his reference to fire (verse 16), Luke may intend to allude to the tongues of fire he would be describing in Acts 2:3. But in Acts 2, the fire, like the wind, is intended to signal the divine presence (cf. Ex. 3:2), and the power with which the Spirit is endowing the Church. In Luke 3:17, however, the fire is an instrument of judgment: it *utterly consumes* the chaff. But the emphasis is upon the purification hereby accomplished (cf. Is. 4:4; Mal. 3:2f.). Israel ('his threshing floor') is purified by the removal of the unrepentant ('chaff').⁸ The grain that remains is gathered into the storehouse.

7. Cf. also the Manual of Discipline of the Qumran community (with which John is often linked), esp. 4:2ff.; *Strack-Billerbeck* II, pp. 615-17; J. A. T. Robinson, 'The Baptism of John and the Qumran Community', *Twelve N.T. Studies* (London, 1962), pp. 19f.; W. H. Brownlee, in *The Scrolls and the N.T.* (London, 1958), pp. 43f.

8. Prof. C. F. D. Moule believes that John 'described the working of the Spirit in terms of fire: i.e., he thought of it as purgative and refining' (from a private communication). But in the process of refining, the fire must also consume. Cf. A. Schlatter: Christ purifies his people 'durch die erneuernde Wirkung des Geistes and durch die richtende Wirkung des Feuers. Durch dieses wird die Gemeinde von den Gottlosen befreit' (*Matthäus*, p. 81).

Happy indeed the prospect of being so 'gathered'. Thus John's announcement of the means necessary for attaining this end, and escaping the judgment, is *itself* good news, when one recognizes that without such news, doom is certain.

B. The identity of the coming One as a clue to his role.

According to Matthew 11:2ff., John hears in prison of the works of the Christ, and sends to enquire of Jesus, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?' (verse 3). J. A. T. Robinson explains the Baptist's perplexity thus:⁹ John envisaged the 'coming One' of his prophecy as Elijah *redivivus*, or at least as one embodying Elijah's character and latter-day function. During the first stage of his ministry, Jesus gave indication of fulfilling such a role,¹⁰ but by this time (Mt. 11) there had been a decided change in the spirit and direction of the ministry, causing John to wonder whether, after all, Jesus was the coming One. Jesus' reply to the enquiry, and his remarks in verses 10, 14, say in effect: 'The "coming one" of Elijah's type is the projection of John's own hopes. In fact, if you can accept it, he is himself the embodiment of Elijah's function. I am the "coming one" viewed in a different relation to the final act of God; and, *if you* would understand that role, you must look not to Malachi, but to Isaiah' (p. 38). Because now, continues Robinson, 'Jesus has come as the proclaimer of deliverance rather than judgment, of the acceptable year, rather than the terrible day, of the Lord' (p. 42); to suffer, and not simply to administer, a baptism; to redefine 'the mighty One', 'in terms not of the potentate but the slave' (p. 44).

The figure whose coming John foretells, is anonymous (as Robinson acknowledges, p. 30). Yet to be sure he has characteristics reminiscent of the historic Elijah, of whom Sirach says: 'Then the prophet Elijah arose like a fire, and his word burned like a torch By the word of the Lord he shut up the heavens, and also three times brought down fire' (48:1, 3). If John's 'coming One' is

9. 'Elijah, John and Jesus' (*op. cit.*, pp. 33-44).

10. As evidence Robinson adduces: 1) Jesus' identifying himself with John's mission, by submitting to John's baptism and authorizing the same sort of baptism (pp. 39f.); 2) Mk. 11:27ff. (the authority behind Jesus' actions is also behind John's); cf. Jn. 3:5 (pp. 40f.); 3) the contention of A. Robinson that the Gospel of Jn. rightly places the (one) cleansing of the temple at the outset of Jesus' ministry, 4) the Temptation story, which, Robinson suggests, describes a crisis after the baptism and an early Judaeon ministry, and just before the departure into Galilee, 'If this story does express the decisions of this crisis, it is readily intelligible as Jesus' resolution to model himself henceforth not on the mighty one of John's proclamation but on the servant-Son of the Baptismal voice' (p. 43).

to be identified with (or to conduct himself like) this Elijah, several things should be recognized: 1) Although Elijah plays a prominent role in the judgment upon the prophets of Baal (1 Ki. 18), he only executes a judgment already pronounced by God. In 1 Kings 21:17ff., Elijah delivers to Ahab a word of judgment declared first by the Lord (who speaks in verses 21-24, as well as verse 19), and executed by means other than Elijah. Such judgments, incidentally, are far from being purposeless and arbitrary (1 Ki. 18:37; 21:20, 22) 2) Judgment is not Elijah's exclusive function. If the cessation of rain (1 Ki. 17:1) is judgment, its commencement (18:45) is blessing. Elijah performs miracles, to supply material needs (17:13ff.) and restore life (17:19ff.) ; cf. Luke 4:25f., Matthew 27:47, 49.

Can the 'coming One' be the *latter-day* Elijah? We should be cautious in making such an identification (indeed Robinson does not want to dogmatize, pp. 30f.). According to Robinson, John's version of the eschatological figure had 'largely been painted from Malachi's palette' (p. 38). Yet in Malachi 3 & 4 (as in Kings) it is God himself who judges (3:5; 4:1ff.). Elijah's role is to prepare his hearers for the advent of the 'great and terrible day of the Lord' (4:5), by warning of the certainty of judgment unless the people are reconciled to one another (4:6). 4:5f. identifies the messenger of 3:1a, and explains his mission (cf. Mk. 9:12). However, this messenger is not the 'messenger of the covenant' of 3:1b, who purges the priestly service of corruption so that pure sacrifices may again be offered: this is the work of Yahweh himself.¹¹

On the other hand, the One whom John expects, does not (according to what we have of John's preaching) proclaim judgment; he executes it. 'The Messiah whom John . . . announces is the judge of the world . . . who gathers in the last harvest.'¹² It would be going too far to suggest from Luke 3:17, that John expected to be followed by Yahweh himself.¹³ However, the verse shows that the 'coming One' has greater authority and a more direct role in the impending judgment than we would expect of the latter-day Elijah of Malachi: 'His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear *his* threshing floor, and

11. The argument for this interpretation must be excluded for lack of space.

12. G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London, 1960), p. 46.

13. The use of Isa. 40:3 and Mal 3:1 in the Gospels, shows that as far as Jesus and the early Church were concerned, John did prepare the way for the LORD himself—the LORD present in the person of his eternal, only-begotten, and now incarnate Son (who is also 'the Christ', whom John expected to follow him, according to Jn. 3:28).

to gather the wheat into *his* granary.' It is in fact *John* who, although denying that he is Elijah, announces judgment in the manner of the first messenger of Malachi. The coming One will do what John foretells.¹⁴

But assuming that John was looking for an Elijah or an Elijah-like Messiah, several points need to be made: 1) In early Jewish sources, the latter-day Elijah is not primarily a prophet of judgment. He is to effect ἀποκατάστασις (Mal. 3:23, LXX), to establish peace within the community of God's people (Sir. 48-10b).¹⁵ The means necessary for the realization of such peace, is repentance.¹⁶ Furthermore, Elijah is to announce the *Heilszeit*.¹⁷

2) It is highly questionable whether we should say with Robinson that Jesus assumed, then deliberately abandoned, early in his ministry, the role of Elijah, to go the way of the Servant; that from the time of this change, Jesus was the 'proclaimer of deliverance rather than judgment'.

a) According to the Synoptics, John announces the judgment which the coming One will effect (as we saw above). It may be granted that the latter also proclaims the judgment he has come to execute. Declarations of judgment are to be found in the teaching of Jesus, but (and this is the important thing) in close connection with gospel, and throughout the ministry, as the Evangelists have presented it. To be sure, Jesus has 'not come to judge the world but to save the world' (Jn. 12:47). Yet the very provision of salvation initiates a sifting process, whereby men who respond to the offer are separated from those who do not.¹⁸ The latter are judged. Thus

14. J. W. Bowman writes: John 'spoke of winnowing fans and judgment to come, of axes already laid His message was by implication a gospel only in so far as he referred to the "coming one", who should bring salvation. His major stress, it is generally agreed, was upon repentance and judgment. In form, and generally in content, it was the warning of a prophetic voice, and its message was briefly, *Repent or be damned*' (*The Intention of Jesus*, London, 1945, p. 27). This is curious, because insofar as John spoke of 'fire, winnowing fans and judgment to come', he was speaking of the work of the *coming One*, not his own. The One to come would indeed 'bring salvation', but judgment as well. And far more frightening than John's warnings would be the presence of the Judge himself.

15. *TWNT* II (J. Jeremias), p. 935.

16. See Pirque, R. Eliezer, quoted *loc. cit.*; 4 Ezra 6:25f.; and Lk. 1:17.

17. See *Strack-Billerbeck* III, pp. 8f.

18. See L. Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (London, 1960), pp. 50, 62; and Kümmel, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

immediately after the above statement, Jesus can say: 'He who ejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day' (12:48; cf. 3:17f., 36; 5:24; 9:39). Synoptic passages which apply include Mark 3:29; 4:10-12 (note the pars., and 4:25); 6:11 (cf. Mt. 10:15, Luke 10:10f.); 8:38; 12:1-9; Matthew 7:13f.; 11:20-24; 12:41f.; 22:1-7; 23:37f. (cf. 24:1ff., 15-22).

b) The suggestion that Jesus first modeled himself on the mightier One of John's preaching, then abandoned this role for another, rests on precarious evidence (summarized in n. 10). (1) Jesus' identifying himself with John's mission, by submitting to his baptism and authorizing the same or a similar rite, may have little, if anything, to do with the way Jesus conceived of his own fulfillment of John's 'judgment' sayings. Robinson himself in the course of a strong case or certain links (and differences in degree, not in kind) between Qumran and John,¹⁹ points out that (i) the sectarians looked upon themselves as a redemptive group, a 'pure and purifying remnant', whose final object was to embody the Isaianic Servant ideal, (ii) this kind of outlook may well provide the *raison d'être* of John's movement, and (iii) Jesus' baptism could demonstrate his desire to associate with such a group. Thus Jesus' describing his redemptive suffering in terms of baptism (Luke 12 :50 ; Mark 10:38) is explained by the fact that at the Jordan he had seen his baptism in terms of redemptive suffering. Moreover, says Robinson, it may well be that the sectarians expected the Servant ideal to be realized in the community only through an individual (the figure of 1 QS 4:20f.). If so, John may well have been looking for the revelation of just such a figure. Now if Jesus deliberately sought baptism as a sign of his desire to assume the role of Servant (albeit with other such Servants—if we follow i-iii above), and if John was looking for the descent of the Spirit upon an individual (who was to be *the* Servant)—an event he did witness, according to John 1:32 (most naturally applied to the time of Jesus' baptism)—it is difficult to imagine either that Jesus would begin to fulfill this role only at a later time (cf. Robinson, n. 10), or that John would be surprised or dismayed at Jesus' assuming such a role. (2) It cannot be assumed that the cleansing of the temple in John 2 is properly placed chronologically, or, on the other hand, the only such action taken by Jesus. (3) Mark 11:27ff. and John 3:5 tell us nothing about the way Jesus looked upon John's 'judgment' sayings. For what it is worth, note that there is no

19. 'The Baptism of John . . . ' (as in n. 7), originally published in 1957, a year before 'Elijah, John and Jesus'.

mention of a baptism with fire in the conversation with Nicodemus, and that the Matthean parallel to Mark 11:27ff. comes in 21:23ff., considerably later than the events of 11:2ff.

c) How then shall we account for John's doubt in Mt. 11? I agree with Robinson that John 'could tell that all was not going according to programme' (p. 38), but would add that his perplexity was due, not to a change of character in Jesus, but to the apparently *one-sided* character of his ministry. John had looked upon Jesus all along as the Servant of God in a peculiar sense, but he had also expected the 'coming One' to execute judgment *swiftly* ('His shovel is ready in his hand', Luke 3 :17, NEB) and (we may infer) *overtly*—things Jesus had not done, except perhaps in the temple-cleansing of John 2. John may well have wondered: If this man is the coming '*mightier* One', why am I languishing in *prison*? The report of the healing miracles in Jesus' reply, cannot have been news to John. Yet Jesus is reminding the Baptist that his *present* task is to accomplish those things for which the Spirit anointed him at the baptism.²⁰ But that Jesus has not thereby ceased to declare judgment is shown in 11:10ff. (cf. Isa. 42:1-4, 16f.; 6:1f).

The overt judgment which John envisaged is yet future (cf. Mt. 13:24-30, 47-50). But as we have seen, one's position in the future judgment is now being determined, by the way he responds to Jesus.

III. Conclusion

For John, as for the latter OT prophets, the element of judgment was integral to the concept of the Day of the Lord (cf. Am. 5:18-20; Joel 3 :12-21; Zeph. 1:14-18). None of these prophets (John included) could perceive, as we can, the span between the dawn of the Day and its consummation. Thus for the prophet sent to 'proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God' (Is. 61:2), 'day' and 'year' doubtless describe the same epoch. Similarly, John cannot be blamed for thinking that the proximity of the Kingdom meant the imminence of the Judgment.²¹

Jesus came first as a herald, to announce, and prepare men for, the coming of the Kingdom. In so doing, he was repeating the message of John. Indeed, in Matthew, the preaching of both begins: 'Repent,

20. With 11:5, cf. Lk. 4:18. In all probability it was mainly on account of miracles such as Jesus mentions (vs. 5) that people believed he was Elijah (cf. Lk. 9:7f., and Jeremias, *TWNT* II, p. 938). In any case there is every reason to believe that this was a popular belief *throughout* the ministry (Mk. 6:14f.; 8:28).

21. Cf. H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel* (London, 1961), p. 200.

Chamblin: *Preaching of John the Baptist*

for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (3:2; 4:17). (I am inclined to believe that Mk. 1:15 would be appropriate on the Baptist's lips, although Jesus would understand far more by 'gospel' than John possibly could.) The difference between Jesus and John is fundamentally that Jesus came to accomplish what he, and John, had declared.²² This he was to do in two phases. The first was to fulfil the role of Servant, in life (through healing, providing, and forgiving) and in death (by offering himself 'as a ransom for many', Mark 10:45),²³ The second phase will be completed only at the End, when all men are judged by Jesus Christ (Mt. 16:27; 25:31ff.; Jn. 5:22; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 2:16; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8).

22. In the words of G. R. Beasley-Murray: 'The supreme difference between Jesus and his predecessors lies in his connection of the new age with his own person and activity' (*Jesus and the Future*, London, 1954, p. 72).

23. Cf. O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the N. T.* (London, 1959), p. 45.