

**October 3, 2010**

Dennis the Areopagite

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

Because their appearance in history was brief---and most of them, within a generation or so, were absorbed into the Christian Church---rather little is known of the disciples of John the Baptist. The early Christians, who regarded John as significant almost exclusively as the forerunner and herald of Jesus the Messiah, showed little interest in John's disciples---except, of course, when the latter became Christians (cf. John 1:35-42).

Josephus, the only non-Christian writer of the period who mentions John, provides a variant picture: For the author of *The Antiquities of the Jews*, the Baptist was memorable chiefly as a moral teacher: "Herod slew him, who was a good man and exhorted his Jewish hearers to virtue (*arete*), both by justice towards one another and piety towards God." John's baptism, said Josephus, required a prior moral reform, "the righteousness of a thoroughly cleansed soul." For this reason, Herod feared John and decided to strike first, prior to a possible rebellion (18.5.2 §117-118).

This description of John's activity is interesting: For Herod, he represented more than a movement based on single conversions and the moral efforts of individuals. Had that been the case, the king would scarcely have thought it politically dangerous. The danger Herod foresaw in the "John the Baptist Movement" had to do, rather, with its discernible social character. At least in an informal way, the thing was becoming recognizably organized.

Among early Christian writers, rather little attention is given to this social or communal aspect of John's ministry. Even Mark, who provides the lively account of his martyrdom at the hands of Herod (6:14-29), describes that act solely in terms of cruelty and vindictiveness within Herod's family; he conveys not the faintest hint of its communal or political significance.

The New Testament writers, in describing the message of John, generally emphasize personal conversion (Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). Beyond that, they comment that John's disciples, like the Pharisees, were much given to fasting (Matthew 9:14; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33). Otherwise, they generally note almost nothing of how John's disciples were socially distinctive.

The exception is Luke. Were it not for Luke, we would have little sense of the extensive reach of John's social influence over his disciples long after his death. Nor would we have guessed that this influence spread far into non-Palestinian Judaism. Twenty years later, Luke tells us---and hundreds of miles from Jordan's banks where he baptized---the disciples of John made up a recognizable group, readily distinguished from other Jews (Acts 19:3-4). From Luke we also know of an accomplished biblical scholar from Egypt, who counted

himself one of the disciples of John (18:24-26).

Among the notable features distinguishing these disciples, Luke speaks of their particular manner of prayer, rather much as the Lord's Prayer was a distinguishing mark of Christians (Luke 11:1). For the rest, the teaching of John, as reported by Luke, was reminiscent of Israel's famous "social prophets," like Amos and Isaiah.

That is, John stressed the concerns people must have for one another. Luke alone records the detailed application of this concern: "So the people asked him, saying, 'What shall we do then?' He answered and said to them, 'He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.' Then 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 what is appointed for you'" (Luke 3:10-13). Here we have the practical details of the social virtue Josephus saw in John's teaching: "justice towards one another."

Finally, it appears that John's moral influence extended beyond the Jews. Luke also tells us of certain soldiers---foreign forces commissioned by Rome to maintain order in the Holy Land---who approached John for counsel: "Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, 'And what shall we do?' So he said to them, 'Do not intimidate or falsely accuse anyone, and be content with your wages'" (3:14).

Such, then, were the disciples of John the Baptist, both Jews and Gentiles, who turned their hearts to God in piety and their hands to one another in justice. Luke clearly knew them first-hand---and liked them.

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