

AMAN SENT FROM GOD

Jesus carried on with the normal life of his family in Nazareth with only periodical absences from time to time, with little or no explanation regarding where he had been or what he had been doing. It was not unusual with young Jews at that time, but mostly the absences had to do with acquiring further education, or experience with guerrillas, and became part of community gossip. Jesus never offered explanations and, when asked by friends of his youth, he would just give a polite but general reply.

The much-vaunted *pax Romana*, "Roman peace", might have existed elsewhere in the world but in Judea and the neighbouring provinces there was escalating unrest, especially in Galilee, where it was difficult at times to distinguish between guerrillas fighting for a cause and gangs of discontents robbing indiscriminately.

But suddenly there had emerged from the desert the first prophet in the past four hundred years called John, the son of the notable priest Eleazar and Elizabeth. The paths of John and Jesus had separated since their youth as John devoted himself more and more to his vows as a Nazirite in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah.

As they had grown older their different manner of lives had carried them apart and they had not met in several years, although news about each had been brought by relatives. In that time John had completed his tenure as a strict Nazirite. This was the highest form of consecration to God's service, aspired to by the exceedingly devout only, and accomplished in total abstinence by very few. Beyond the strict demands of Moses' *Law*, beyond the later multitudinous "hedge" requirements of the rabbinic *Traditions*, lay the ascetic "*way of the Nazirite*". Only one who knew Jehovah intimately, and who was passionately devoted to Him, could follow in this committed way. The laws regarding ceremonial cleanliness were stricter for the Nazirite than for the rabbi, and this meant a watchful care that he never came near anything or anybody that might in any way be "*unclean*". If by some mischance he did so, he had to isolate himself, accept a seven-day fast, shave his head, and offer a trespass-offering to the priest, before he could resume his vow again. The most distinctive public features of the Nazirite vow were: he must never let a razor come near his hair from the day he was born; he must never partake of wine of any kind, nor even go near a vineyard where there was "*the fruit of the vine*"; he must wear the simplest basic clothing; he must take only a minimum of food. The Nazirite was distinctive in any Jewish company and community, and was highly revered for his holiness of life.

John had grown up separated from other children because of his Nazirite vow, and because of the strict religious requirements. In addition, he was said to be very conscious of his great destiny foretold by the Angel Gabriel to his father, Zechariah, in the Temple, that he was to be "*the Forerunner of the Messiah*." It had never been far from the centre of his thoughts: everything he learned, every discipline he exercised, every statute he observed, every ceremony he performed, every discussion in which he participated, he was reminded of his responsibility. In his mid-twenties, when his priestly duties were completed, he had withdrawn into the desert to prepare himself more fully for the task ahead. At that time some other devout Jews, called "*Essenes*", had withdrawn into the desert, partly as a protest against the deteriorating religious practices of their fellow

Jews, and partly because they wanted to live a purer, holy life. They lived simply and communally, were celibate, observed the *Law* strictly, practiced ceremonial baptisms as a form of spiritual cleanliness, opposed the contemporary Temple priesthood and were apocalyptic as they anticipated the coming of the Messiah—which they expected shortly. The Essenes lived mostly in the region of Engedi, in isolated monasteries, or even in caves in the mountainside. There were about four thousand of them living in the dreary waste of rocky valleys, cleft and shattered by earthquakes into stark gorges, with only an occasional spring.

All of the Essene-imposed disciplines were designed to release the soul from its connection with the sensual, to break the power of the sensual life by all means of bodily and spiritual fasting, in order to reach for higher things. John did not remain long with them, for he had little sympathy with their metaphysical speculations and fantastic allegorizing of Scriptures. There was a world of difference between what the Essenes believed and taught, and what had been communicated by God through the prophets—which was immediate, practical, attainable, and part of the demonstrable rule of God in the lives of individuals and nations. Also, John knew the Messiah was already here—whereabouts uncertain, but born in Bethlehem and brought up in Nazareth, awaiting God's time.

But John had believed that it was in the desert that his great counterpart, Elijah, had learned to know God, alone, face to face. So John had withdrawn from all communities into the lonely barren gorges for his own final preparations. In this desolately savage setting John was no longer distracted by the raging political and religious controversies tearing the rest of the country apart; no longer pressured by the ceremonial observances, and the family requirements; no longer bothered by the demanding rituals of the Temple or the monastic Essenes. Without such distractions he could practice the Levitical purity without effort other than self-discipline, leaving his mind free for meditation, reflection and prayer. He was not withdrawing from reality like the Essenes, but rather preparing himself for reality in its inherent essential minimum before he

confronted it in its contemporary complexity in the world beyond the desert.

In the rugged solitudes his spirit rose to the consciousness of a mighty vision. He was aware that the nation and the world were ripe for judgement; but he knew that a wrathful Jehovah was also merciful. He also knew that both mercy and judgement were the prerogatives of the coming Messiah. It was not his responsibility to usurp those prerogatives, but to prepare the way, in the spirit and power of his great predecessor, Elijah, for the Messiah to fulfil his mission. His knowledge of Moses' *Law*, the *Psalms* and the *Prophets* informed him that this preparation involved the repentance of the disobedient Jews, for that had always been the primary requirement of an offended Jehovah. Obedience and repentance, therefore, would be his message to this stubborn and rebellious people as he prepared the way of the Messiah.

When John finally emerged from his desert experience he was spare to the point of emaciation; his skin was darkened by exposure to sun and winds; his hair, always long and thick, hung between his shoulders and waist. He was dressed in a single robe of roughly-woven, brown camel's-hair, lightened by much washing, tied around his waist with a leather girdle, in which were tucked his metal drinking cup and plate. His food consisted of wild locusts, honey from bees, and water. He bathed himself twice daily, morning and evening. He was a riveting spectacle even if he had never opened his mouth.

But when he spoke, he had the tongue of an angel. He was "a voice out of the wilderness", he said of himself, come to "declare the coming of the Messiah". In the summer of that year he made his first public appearance in Lower Jordan, and not in the Temple precincts. As people poured out of their cities, towns and villages to hear him, his impact on the cynical Jews, arrogant rabbis, swaggering nationalistic guerrillas, and superficial Hellenist intellectuals, was stunning. At first patronizing and mocking, they passed quickly to respect and apprehension as John's incisive intelligence and transparent piety cut through all their political, social and religious cant and pretensions. His message was simple but revolutionary,

giving the words of Moses which they knew so well a new freshness and dynamism:

“If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands that I give you today, the Lord your God will set you above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God . . .

“The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven. The Lord will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples of the earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will fear you . . .

“However, if you do not obey the Lord your God, and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: you will be cursed in the city, and cursed in the country. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. You will be cursed when you come in and when you go out.”

The kingdom of God, John told them, was not just a lovely paradisaical myth inherited from their ancient past. The kingdom of God was the place of Jehovah's pleasure and rule on earth. They had been declared by God to be His distinctive people in the Promised Land of Israel in the midst of unbelieving heathen. They had been chosen to be holy people as their God was holy; to be a kingdom of priests acting for God on behalf of others not so blessed as Jews. As God's chosen people they must forsake their constant obsession with rapacious and unjust Roman officials and soldiers, leave their empty religious ritualism, reject their hypocritical pursuits of wealth and pleasure while preaching the virtues of simplicity, repent of their neglect of Jehovah's commands in pursuit of their own endless conceits. They must turn back to belief in and dependence on the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of David and Solomon, and He would return to them. The time of the Messiah was near, and

he, John, had been sent to prepare a people ready to receive and follow the Anointed of God Messiah in his great task.

Those who had responded to John's driving message of repentance he had baptized in the River Jordan as a sign of their repentance and new manner of life. The Jews had known of the Essene practice of baptism as a ritual cleansing of the body to be undergone only by those whose souls were already purified by doing righteous works. But his baptism, John declared, was to be taken as a sign, a symbol, of repentance and remission, a "washing away" of an individual's sins, and a public assertion of a commitment to live a life of divinely-commanded words and works afterwards.

John's baptism was a single, unrepeatable act of initiation, similar to but more than the ritual bath which converts to Judaism had to take before they could become one of the chosen people, different from all others. John insisted that it was the chosen people themselves, "*children of Abraham*", who had to be initiated into the new relationship with God in expectation of the coming of the Messiah. His task from God, John declared, was to prepare a people fit for such a divinely ordered event. Like their forefathers crossing through the waters of the Sea of Reeds before entering the Promised Land, leaving their bondage in Egypt behind them, the present chosen people had to pass through the waters of baptism before entering their new Messianic inheritance from God.

To the Jews it was heart-stopping symbolism. Moses had indeed brought them out of Egypt through the waters of the Sea of Reeds. Joshua had led them dry-shod across the River Jordan into the Promised Land, where John was now baptizing. On nearby Mount Carmel Elijah had poured water on the altar before calling on Jehovah to send down fire from heaven to consume his offering. Namaan the Syrian had been cured of his leprosy by Elisha through bathing seven times in this same Jordan. Regarding the rite of his baptism, John set no mysterious sacramental value. It was only water, a mere emblem of purification required in the life and heart; and it required an "after-baptism" by the Holy Spirit—which, he declared, would be provided by the Messiah himself when he

appeared. No one could receive the first, or the second, baptism till he or she had demonstrated his or her sanctity by a humble public confession of their sins. It was a publicly expressed spiritual vow which would be shown afterwards, in an improved manner of life, that an inward change of heart had taken place.

John spelled out what that change should be: *"The man with two coats should share with him who has none, and the one with food should do the same"*. To the hated tax-collectors who sought repentance and baptism he said, *"Don't extort more than is due under the Law"*. To the soldiers he said sternly, *"Don't blackmail the people for money and food as is your normal custom; stick to your army rations"*.

They poured in their hundreds, then their thousands, from all across the land to the verdant spot beside the savage desert to see and hear this new prophet with his unsparing but vibrant message, and to be baptized by him. As the numbers of followers climbed into the tens of thousands, the earlier amused and patronizing rabbis became concerned and apprehensive. Already, in only a few months, John the Baptist, as he was now known, had increased his following beyond any other leader, political or religious, in Israel in recent years. If he chose to turn his undeniably effective fiery oratory from religion to politics there could be serious trouble in the country beyond anything experienced so far. So they sent some of their best debaters to question him, to find out where he stood in relation to some of what they considered major national issues.

John the Baptist swept them aside. He thundered:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Go and produce results in keeping with repentance. Don't just think you can say, 'We have Abraham for our father', as if that were all that is needed by God to approve of you. I tell you that God can raise children of Abraham from these stones here that would be better witnesses than you. The axe is already laid at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire".

The main theme of John's message, however, was the imminent coming of the Messiah:

“One more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

This effectively stopped all growing speculations that John himself was the Messiah, but it increased to white heat of expectation the excited conjectures as to who might be the Messiah and from where he might emerge. And, above all, what would happen to the local and national situation, especially with regard to the Roman occupation of the Promised Land, when the Messiah—*“greater than David,”* the Scriptures said—appeared in their midst.

John did not discuss the political implications. Did they or did they not, he demanded, wish to be part of the purifying of the nation in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah? Whether spontaneous out of flaming conviction, or deliberate because of clever rhetoric, the question was devastating and unanswerable by the scheming rabbis and others. No true Jew could afford to question the necessity of purification or repentance in the light of the Messiah’s coming. They retreated in disarray with a disturbing report for the Sanhedrin regarding the mounting influence of the new prophet in Israel.

Then John stunned the nation with a dramatic denunciation in what could be construed as a political subject: Herod Antipas, and his adulterous relationship with his brother’s wife, Herodias. There was no doubt in the minds of those who listened to the fearless prophet that he was right in what he said; it was his temerity in saying it, the immensity of the national confrontation that was implicit in the prophet’s rebuke, which overwhelmed them. The other leaders were nervous when John demanded that the rich share their wealth with the poor, but they could dismiss this with sneers as naive and unrealistic sermonizing. But when John spelled out his judgment against Herod to thousands in public the threat to the Roman-approved Herodians was clear and unequivocal: no-one would be exempt from the strictures or changes being demanded by the Forerunner of the Messiah.

John's challenges were supported from quotations taken from the words of Moses in his *Book of the Law*, which all Jews knew so well, and which were incontestable:

"When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.

"Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. The Lord your God will put all these curses on all your enemies who hate and persecute you. You will again obey the Lord and follow all his commands I am giving you today.

*"Then the Lord your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land. The Lord will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers, if you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this **Book of the Law** and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul."*

In Jerusalem, John's spreading influence in the country was the major topic of discussions between the supporters of the Roman Pontius Pilate, the Idumean Herodians, the extremist Zealots, the terrorist Sicarri, the Galilean revolutionaries, and the ever-warring factions of the professional religionists. The simmering resentments against all Herods, the extortionate taxes, the extravagant buildings and banquets and games, all became a rumored part of John's anticipated moral judgments.

Group after group were sent to the River Jordan to entrap John

with predetermined difficult questions from the *Law* and the *Traditions*, and from national or international circumstances, but they all failed in their purpose. They were mere dilettantes compared with the man who had trained from childhood in the Scriptures, whose daily spiritual disciplines far exceeded their own, and who had spent his early manhood with God in the desert reflecting on them. The man *was* the message, the measure of the nation and its need, and they knew it.

When they asked John, "Are you the Messiah?" he replied "I am not."

"Then who are you?" they demanded. "Are you Elijah?"

John answered, "No, I am not."

"Are you the Prophet foretold by Scripture?"

"No," said John.

Finally they said in exasperation: "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

And John gave them the words spoken by Isaiah the Prophet: "*I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'*"

"Why do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet," they demanded.

"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you there is one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

What had begun a few months before as simply a "*local*" affair of mild religious interest in a country riven with revolution and political crises had now become the most talked-about event in the whole nation. The noble, the base, the worldly, the religious, the corrupt, the friends of Rome and its enemies, the genuine and the pseudo-intellectuals, all went to hear John the Baptist.

Among those going to see and hear John the Baptist was a solitary traveller on the road to the River Jordan, remarkable in that he was on his own in a place and time of great danger from ruthless soldiers, enforcing guerrillas, and marauding bandits. Only the very poor travelled on their own, and then only when they could not

attach themselves to other travellers. The road was one of the three branch roads from the main trading artery running north and south along the River Jordan from Mesopotamia through Palestine at Caesarea Philippi and on to Egypt. There was the branch road from Joppa to Nablus to Shechem, which passed between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim; and the other roads which set out in all directions from Jerusalem, the two to Gaza, one passing by Bethlehem, the other by the Wadi es Surar, the two to Joppa, the other by Lydda. Then there was the famous - or infamous haunt of bandits— road to Jericho, which crossed the Jordan at the last place it could be forded, the ford of Bethabara.

In Judea there were none of the rightly acclaimed Roman roads made up of paving stones, presumably because of the disturbed nature of their military occupancy in the country. Here there were only the ancient roads of tamped earth, rapidly straightened and repaired by Roman army engineers. Bridges had been built by the Romans, and by the Herods, and river-fords had been paved with blocks of stones with channels cut in them to keep cart wheels stable. There were passing places beside the roads where carts and animals could be driven to let the columns of soldiers and their military equipment go past. There were camping places for travellers, public wells for people and for animals; and, at rare intervals, inns, or caravanserais—primitive lodging-places where people slept on bare board along the walls, and the animals were tied up in the courtyards.

The solitary traveller was making for Bethabara, at the ford of the River Jordan. He was obviously a rabbi from his dress: a simple robe, earth-coloured, woven out of one piece with a neck-opening, its flowing length gathered by a wound girdle at the waist, making a pouch in which was usually kept a drinking-vessel, or other small items, leaving the lower legs free. Over one shoulder was thrown the folded dark goat's-hair cloak for use in the cool of the evenings, and for a blanket at night. On his head he wore the looped length of cloth used as a head-scarf, now loosely falling over his shoulders to pull up over his face against the rising dust. On his feet were the usual leather open-work sandals.

He had come from some distance, for he was covered with a light film of dust cast up from his own footsteps and from the passing caravans of animals going north and south. But he moved easily, as one accustomed to walking long distances. There was little to distinguish him from thousands of others of his kind, except from close up, when the serene and penetrating quality of his gaze caught the observer's immediate attention.

His thoughts were occupied with the rapidly spreading reports regarding the appearance of Israel's first prophet in four hundred years, John the Baptist, who recently had come out of the desert like a thunder-clap, his preaching like a thunder-storm. Within a few months John had a following of thousands, and tens of thousands were said to be coming from all over the country to the Jordan to hear him.

All of this was passing through the mind of the solitary traveller on the road on his way to meet John. The divine destiny that had touched them both in their childhood was bringing them together again after many years of separation. His experience had been as different from John's as day was different from night. He had been to many places, seen and heard many things from many peoples, in his divinely-ordered education.

John was at Bethabara, sometimes known as Bethany-beyond-Jordan, on the edge of the desert, a little above the mouth of the Jordan where it entered the Dead Sea. It was only a small village, made important by the easy crossing of the Jordan on the main north-south highway. The river which in its reaches above and below was swiftly flowing, widened and calmed into the shallow waters of the ford. Seen from above, as the traveller saw it, the surrounding landscape was one of serene majesty as the ridged and forested mountains swept upwards from the heat-hazed desert of the lower Jordan - the only such terrain in the world more than one thousand feet below sea level - all the way to snow-crowned Mount Hermon in the far distance. To the south, along the purple hills of Moab, the Dead Sea shone with its sometimes caressing sapphire, sometimes menacing bronze glitter, reflecting the rays of the blazing sun. Nearby, and on the descending slope beneath the traveller, stately

sycamores and red tamarisks, tall oaks and graceful willows, lined the banks of the river, providing shade for some of the huge crowd of people gathered to hear John.

There were supercilious rabbis, cynical scribes, aristocratic Sadducees, arrogant Pharisees, priestly dignitaries, cautious Levites, rich merchants, dignified elders, poor peasants, foreign traders, tough soldiers, acolytes and proselytes, women of all classes, crowding the hillsides above the river to observe and, if possible, to talk with the fiery prophet from the desert who so strangely warmed the hearts of all with his message of promise. It was over four hundred years since one of the last prophets had addressed the people of Israel with such magnificent visions of the future destined for them by their God.

As the traveller walked down the slopes of the hillside through the massed crowd, making his way towards the clearing on either side of the ford, he could see John standing in the shallow waters of the ford baptizing those who had responded to his message. John would speak a few words to the individual who approached him, immerse him or her under the water, and then utter a few words of prayer before turning to the next person.

When the traveller reached the edge of the ford he laid aside his outer cloak and few belongings, and clothed only in his linen undergarment he joined the line of people waiting patiently for baptism. When it was his turn, John turned to address him, then stopped and gazed at him searchingly, recognizing him immediately. He began to say something then stopped himself.

So the time had come at last, he thought with rising anticipation, the time of destiny prepared for them both before the foundation of the world. The ripple of the river, the murmurs of the crowd, faded as John's tumultuous thoughts stilled into the blazing conviction that all the years of discipline and suffering and yearning hopes were now being fulfilled in this place at this time. Nothing had been in vain; all had been as it was written and spoken. Eternity had reached into time and was holding it still in this moment. All former history flowed forward toward this moment; and all later history would flow backward to it. God had come in the flesh to claim his earthly

inheritance. The tormented nation of Israel could forget its pain, for its Redeemer, the Deliverer, the Messiah, had come.

"I, too, have come to be baptized," Jesus said to John quietly in the stillness, the murmurs of the people dying away as they became aware of something different in John's attitude before the new arrival. The crowd drew back, keeping to the river-banks, and the two men stood alone in the middle of the ford - the spare, ascetic prophet, and the taller, thoughtful stranger. John was shaking his head negatively in reply to Jesus' request: "Not so, Lord," he said firmly, the divine title coming naturally to his lips for the first time. "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?"

John knew that only one who was free from sin could be the Messiah and, therefore, the rite of a baptism of repentance was not for him. Also, he knew he was a creature standing before his Creator, the lesser before the greater, the bridegroom's friend before the bridegroom, and although he was aware he dominated the thinking of the nation he knew also he was only the "*Forerunner of the Messiah.*"

Jesus—surrounded on both river-banks by the chosen people of Jehovah who had repented of their sins in obedience to their God,—quietly but firmly insisted: "Let it be so now, John. It is right that we should do all that God requires of us."

It was a requirement that John immediately recognized and approved, for had he not himself submitted to every ordinance of Jehovah as a priest and Nazirite. His eyes filled with tears, and his heart filled with joy, as he reached for Jesus and baptized him. As Jesus came up out of the waters John became aware of a flaming light in the heavens overhead, above the brightness of the sun, taking the shape of a dove as it descended and rested on the head, and then enveloped the figure, of Jesus. This was the sign for which he had been waiting, for in the desert God had revealed to him in anticipation of this moment: "*He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit*". And now again, he heard the same voice speak out of the great light shining from the heavens: "*This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased*".

John turned to address the expectant crowd, his face radiant with the revelation: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel. I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, but the One who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' **I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.**"

The crowd was stunned by John's stentorian announcement. **This is the Messiah!** They broke into excited conversations and shouted questions as they speculated on what had been said by John in such categorically prophetic terms. The Jews among them were aware of the Scriptural symbolism of John's statement about the "lamb", but not of the "Lamb of God". The Messiah they expected would be known as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah". Some of them recalled the words of Isaiah the Prophet, never satisfactorily explained by the rabbis:

*"We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
Each one of us has turned to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed and afflicted,
Yet he did not open his mouth;
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
And as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
So he did not open his mouth . . ."*

The Lamb of God! But not the Messiah as a Lamb of God, the objections came. They meant some unknown Suffering Servant of God. In the argumentative confusion both John and the unknown stranger had disappeared, lost among the crowds now pushing to get home with this dramatic news.

I was among the crowds who had come to the River Jordan ever since John had emerged from the desert so dramatically. To tell the truth, like most people I had almost forgotten the amazing events of

the births of John and Jesus as time passed. Thirty years since the births, and about twenty years since the Temple discussions. So much water under the Kidron bridge. The Roman occupation of Judea increasing as the revolts in Galilee increased, a new Caesar emerging in Rome. But John's startling appearance from the desert, and his even more startling message, of the imminent appearance of the Messiah, had jolted me out of my studious torpor. SAs the saying goes: *"If winter comes can spring be far behind"*. After the Jewish Dispersions of Assyria and Babylon; after the Roman occupation of Judea; was it really possible that God was again stepping into Israel's history? First John; then the Messiah. Could it really be? So I had hurried to the Jordan together with the thousands of other Jews to check on the appearance and message of John the Baptist—and eventually found him with Jesus, the Messiah. Could it be?

The next day there were greater crowds than ever at Bethabara as the word raced throughout the city and countryside that John had announced the Messiah and he had been seen at Bethabara. Anxious leaders, professional religionists, scheming officials, suspicious military commanders, spies and informers of all kinds, mixed with the excited pushing multitude of people gathered on the banks of the river. Would John come as usual? Would the unknown stranger appear again?

They were disappointed. The crowd parted to let John and some of his followers through to the river, but there was no stranger beside John. Standing on the banks of the river John once more declared to the watching crowd that the Messiah had indeed come, and once again gave the details of his experience. He did not know when the Messiah would reappear, but he was certain that he would, and soon.

Chapter 5

will be available on this site on the 1st November 2009