John the Baptist

Prophetic Figure and Mirror-Image to Christ

John the Baptist is an eminent figure in the Christian tradition. His ministry and role as baptiser in the early first century exerted considerable influence upon the religious landscape of Judea, preparing the way for Jesus Christ. Several components of his life could be seen as a mirror-image of Christ's own life, suffering and death. This helps to solidify certain moral messages and ideas in the New Testament.

Ministry and Message

Commencing his public ministry near the river Jordan, John called for repentance and baptism in preparation for the arrival of Christ:

> I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.[1]

This infers that John's practice of baptism was inferior to Jesus'. John's baptism with water compared to Jesus' spiritual baptism with the Holy Spirit grounded John in the lower, physical realm and placed Jesus in a higher, more divine plane of existence. Scholars express the importance of John's role in paving the way for Christ. Risto Uro states:

> In the beginning was John's baptism. This is the impression received by the reader of the New Testament, and scholarship has generally confirmed John's important role in the emergence of the Jesus movement.[2]

The central tenets of John's message comprised of moral renewal and the imminent advent of God's kingdom, as expressed in the passage, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the Sin of the world'.[3] John preaches that Jesus is the one they should follow; he is the Messiah prophesised to save them from their suffering.

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[1] Project Gutenberg, *The King James Bible*, (Project Gutenberg Online Catalogue), Matt 3:11, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10900/pg10900-images.html#book40> [accessed 25 October 2025].
[2] Risto Uro, *Ritual and Christian Beginnings,* (Oxford University Press, 2016), p.71, <DOI: 1093/acprof:oso/9780199661176.001.0001>
[3] Project Gutenberg, *The King James Bible*, (Project Gutenberg Online Catalogue), John 1:29, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10900/pg10900-images.html#book43> [accessed 28 October 2025].

Lifestyle and Diet

John would have resided in the inhospitable Judean desert. The gospels describe his 'ascetic behaviour… eating locusts and wild honey, wearing garments made of camel hair'[4]. It is purported that the prophet 'Elijah, whom John resembles in many ways, is described as wearing the same ascetic clothing'.[5] This would have been a sign that he was a continuation in the line of men preaching God's true message. His diet would have consisted of foraged foods including the 'Melagria plant, widely eaten by desert dwellers'.[6] It is argued that scribes unaccustomed to the desert landscape may have changed the reference of this plant 'to meli agrion, or wild honey'.[7] Thus, contemporary understandings of John's diet may not be congruent with how first-century Judean hermits sustained themselves. John's ascetic way of life furthers the idea of suffering and hardship that prophets endured, again foreshadowing the ordeals of Jesus own life.

Baptism of Jesus

The baptism of Jesus is a significant event recorded in all four gospels. It is a pivotal moment in the Christian story as it signifies Christ's obedience to God's will and affirms his identity as the prophesised Messiah. It is stated in the New Catholic Encyclopaedia that:

> the Baptist describes himself as the friend of the Bridegroom who must decrease as Christ must increase (Jn 3.25–30); he proclaims Jesus as the Lamb of God, and a few of John's disciples follow Jesus (Jn 1.35–37).[8]

This indicates that after Jesus' baptism, John's role as forerunner to Christ is complete and subsequently, he will take a step back, or 'decrease'.[9] His mission to make the people of Judea aware of Christ is done. However, the mirroring of John and Jesus' life continues with a dire ending to the Baptist's life fast approaching.

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[4] Gianluca Olcese, 'John the Baptist and Fasting', *Vox partum,* 86 (2023), (P.35), <DOI: 10.31743/vp.14746>.
[5] Catholic University of America, *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, (Gale Group in association with the Catholic University of America, 2003), p.1013-1014.
[6] John Binns, 'John the Baptist: desert and diet', *Theology (Norwich),* 127.1 (2024), (P.13), <DOI: 10.1177/0040571X231218429> .
[7] Ibid, P.13.
[8] Ibid, P.1013
[9] Ibid, P.1013

Imprisonment and Death

During his ministry John's denouncement of King Herod's marriage to his brother's wife Herodias caused discontentment, which caused the King to fear an uprising. Herod imprisoned the prophet to silence him. It is written that:

> Herodias instigated her daughter Salome to request John's death; to please her Herod had John beheaded.[10]

To further the cruel and humiliating image of John's death, Salome requests his head on a silver platter; 'And his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel'.[11] Salome would present John's head to her mother; a symbol of revenge. John's condemnation of sinful behaviour, despite tragic consequences, is a clear symbol of how Biblical prophets faced pain and humiliation. This is exemplified by Jesus' own suffering and execution on the cross.

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[10] Ibid, P.1014

[11] Project Gutenberg, *The King James Bible*, (Project Gutenberg Online Catalogue), Matt 14:11, < https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10900/pg10900-images.html#N4014> [accessed 8 November 2025].