

TOBIAS CHURTON



THE MYSTERIES OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

HIS LEGACY IN GNOSTICISM,
PAGANISM, AND FREEMASONRY

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THE MYSTERIES OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

“In *The Mysteries of John the Baptist*, Tobias Churton has produced a remarkably fresh analysis of the ‘herald of the Messiah.’ The great value of this book is that Churton provides not only a careful overview of the role of John, as handed down in Christian tradition, but gives us a unique and erudite reanalysis of the role of the Baptist using the lenses of Gnosticism, Freemasonry, and other esoteric traditions that have elevated John to a position equal to or superior to Jesus. This book is a truly invaluable addition to scholarly literature on John the Baptist.”

THE REV. JEFFREY J. BÜTZ, S.T.M.,
INSTRUCTOR OF RELIGIOUS
STUDIES AT PENN STATE UNIVERSITY AND
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*I dedicate this book with love to my wife, Joanna,
and daughter, Merovée, with thanks to the
Brethren of Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22,
Alexandria, Virginia, and with hope to all the
St. John's Men and Women of today and tomorrow.*

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Inspiration comes to the prepared mind: a lifetime's study of mysticism and esoteric theology was never in my mind supposed to be buried in the esoteric world alone. I always intended to return to the canonical sources with renewed interest and perception: a golden key to open the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven; such has been the case.

I am reminded of how well I was taught the rudiments of biblical scholarship, both at school and at university. The following names ring out for special mention: divinity teacher Trevor Harding (who encouraged me to return to school with the tantalizing promise of "opening my mind" after I had left for a craft apprenticeship, aged fifteen); Canon Aleric Rose, rector, fine scholar, bibliophile, and sincere Christian; Canon John Fenton, then theology tutor at Christchurch, Oxford; Old Testament specialist Rex Mason of Regent's Park College, Oxford; and master of ancient Near Eastern texts Prof. John Day of Lady Margaret Hall. My wits have been further sharpened by encounters with the late master of Gnostic studies Hans Jonas, the unforgettable Gilles Quispel,

the intriguingly provocative Elaine Pagels, and the late head of Uppsala University's theological faculty Jan-Arvid Hellström.

Above all, I thank my late parents, Patricia and Victor Churton. They furnished me with all I needed to embark on a lifetime's theological and mystical quest for truth.

That which inspired John inspired them, and inspired me.

PREFACE

I seldom cease to be amazed by the extraordinary wealth of esoteric knowledge to be found in the Bible. That word *found* is of course the key: “Seek and ye shall find” is a master watchword; do not expect to find anything if you wait to be shown. As I grew up, I was always struck by how much religious instruction came secondhand. No one really wants secondhand parents; likewise we should not be satisfied by anything less than a genuine relationship with the One who draws our imaginations onward to the truth we seek. We need to experience truth in ourselves; if it is not *our* truth, both gift and possession, it is of little value: parrot-talking is the language of the moral bigot who knows what is right for everyone else but does not know himself, fearing exposure to the spiritual light. Laws are walls built to protect us; spiritual truths are doors to the unknown. Hence, the fear of God is the beginning of all understanding; this is the fear that enables us to enter the unknown.

Congregations customarily “receive” the word; consequently the word seldom acquires profound levels of meaningfulness for the receiver. People often hang on to beliefs like talismans, fearing “offense,” as if the talisman might shatter if touched by the unknown. Has there ever been a society more fearful of causing or receiving “offense” than ours? The phenomenon suggests to me that our convictions are paper thin, demanding protection of law. Lawyers do well from it all, but spiritual liberty suffers. Meanwhile, sacred mysteries, pregnant symbols, spiritual doors are bandied about like goods in the vulgar marketplace like

beautiful love songs on the lips of the lascivious. We take religion for granted, as if we know it all.

We do not.

This insight became very clear to me when I decided to investigate John the Baptist. We think we know who he is, but we have been misled: a flanker has been pulled, rendering us blind. I hope you can share in my journey for the truth of John the Baptist.



Chapter One

THE MYSTERY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

*Among them that are born of woman there hath not risen
a greater than John the Baptist.*

MATTHEW 11:11A

I HAVE LONG BEEN FASCINATED by the figure of John the Baptist, but did not realize how persistent a fascination this was until I noticed, some time ago, that our home displays no fewer than three portraits of the mysterious prophet. Each portrait tells a different story, each reveals something different about the man known to us as a Christian saint, but who, in his own time, was seen as nothing of the kind.

Three paintings. They all feature “John,” yet they might very well depict three different people, even though two of the paintings are the work of the same artist.

First, we see John as a heroic, muscular, commanding figure. He stands firm, practically naked, towering over the River Jordan with all the force and passion of Poseidon in his natural element. Fierce and kind, the Baptist’s face and beard are reminiscent of a Sikh warrior and holy man: an inspired guru, one who knows the world and what is

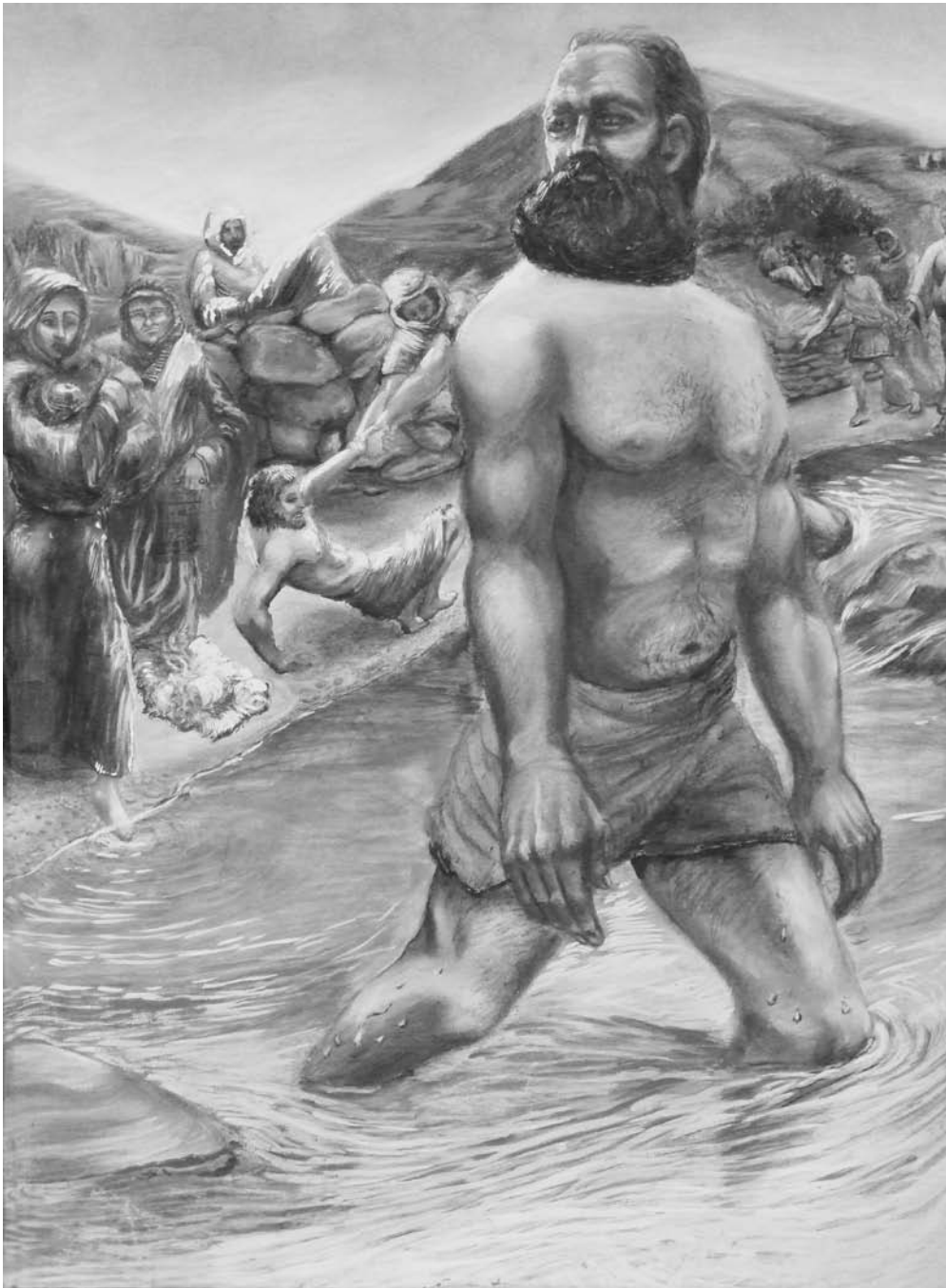


Figure 1.1. Painting by Louise Ford

beyond it. He has the chest of a Hollywood Hercules, with masterful hands mighty enough to take anyone through anything, from belated baptism to a brick wall.

The background figures, by contrast, seem diminished. They appear as sick, curious, censorious, or violently hostile—like townsfolk nervously watching Clint Eastwood stalking a remote Main Street in a “spaghetti western.”

On a hill above the people, Jesus reclines. Perhaps insignificant, a sole spectator of the star performance, Jesus observes the scene below. On the shore, a female figure (a self-portrait of the artist) dips her toe into the waters. Should she “take the leap,” or should she not? Should she join the giant in the water’s depth and be transformed, or forever cling to familiar, secure territory?

This painting depicts John the Baptist as a figure of massive attraction, at least to the artist. Her watercolor is a kind of fan letter: one from the heart, wrought with the pigments of imagination dipped in the waters of initiation.

Recently, I met the artist, Louise Ford, by chance. Now a quarter of a century since she had been moved to concentrate her talent on the Baptist, just what, I asked, had inspired the work? John, Ford recalled, was for her the man who had *gone beyond*. He was the man with the guts to step outside of society, regardless of peer disapproval and hostility. Heeding a higher light, a purer voice, he entered the wilderness to live in the wild on what nature alone provided: to go without comforts, subsisting on the spirit, to live out his “outsiderness,” his consciousness of his difference to the “once-born” children of matter, with all his strength of endurance. Trusting he had done aright, John demonstrated with actions, as well as words, his willingness to pay the price for his audacity and startling holiness. The John-type goes beyond the city walls: the mind-set of his time. And the city, which thinks it knows all, cannot tolerate him; John tells the truth. He is a “voice crying in the wilderness”—a cry the artist long ago heard and clearly longed

to hear again, in the feverish vacuum of our collective anthill.

Louise Ford's second vision of John is very different. Wrought in bright poster paints, the painting attempts to fashion a fresh approach to religious art: a kind of psychedelic spiritualism, to capture the spirituality of an event as seen *from within*. The chosen moment is the baptism of Jesus at John's hand. Jesus, having taken the plunge, has arisen, while John also rises from the billowing, quaking waters like a god hewn from a great ship's prow. The beam of his arm extends to his fellow, Jesus. Jesus, no less muscular than his baptizer, stands in a state of sublime reception. He accepts. His arms outstretched, his large hands open, his eyes are closed in mystic union. Above his head we see a divine figure, golden, resembling his physical part, but transfigured. This spiritual figure may be coming from on high—a kind of "Holy Guardian Angel" from beyond this world—or he may be rising from Jesus's head, signifying an inner experience. The overall impression is one of Jesus himself rising, in travail of fire, air, earth, and water—raised, apparently, by the power of John's hand. For all this we still feel ourselves in the midst of a familiar scene, a scene that has defined John's purpose and his status in Christian tradition.

John baptizes Jesus. That is to say—and we are meant to see—John is a secondary figure: one who serves the "main event."

For ancient Christians who favored what would come to be called the heresy of "adoptionism," this baptism signaled the spiritual being of Christ's "adoption" of the mantle of the "man Jesus." The man thenceforth served to cloak the transcendent being: a temporary identification of man and divinity. Whether today's Christian follows the orthodox or so-called heretical scheme here, *John's* position is, in either case, incidental.

Oddly, we might think, John's baptizing of Jesus indicates in Christian tradition not John's mastery, but his subservience. Even the baptism itself is relegated in significance and potency, *before it even happens*. Despite its occasioning the "opening of the heavens" to Jesus's inner vision (Matthew 3:16) and subsequent descent of the "Spirit of

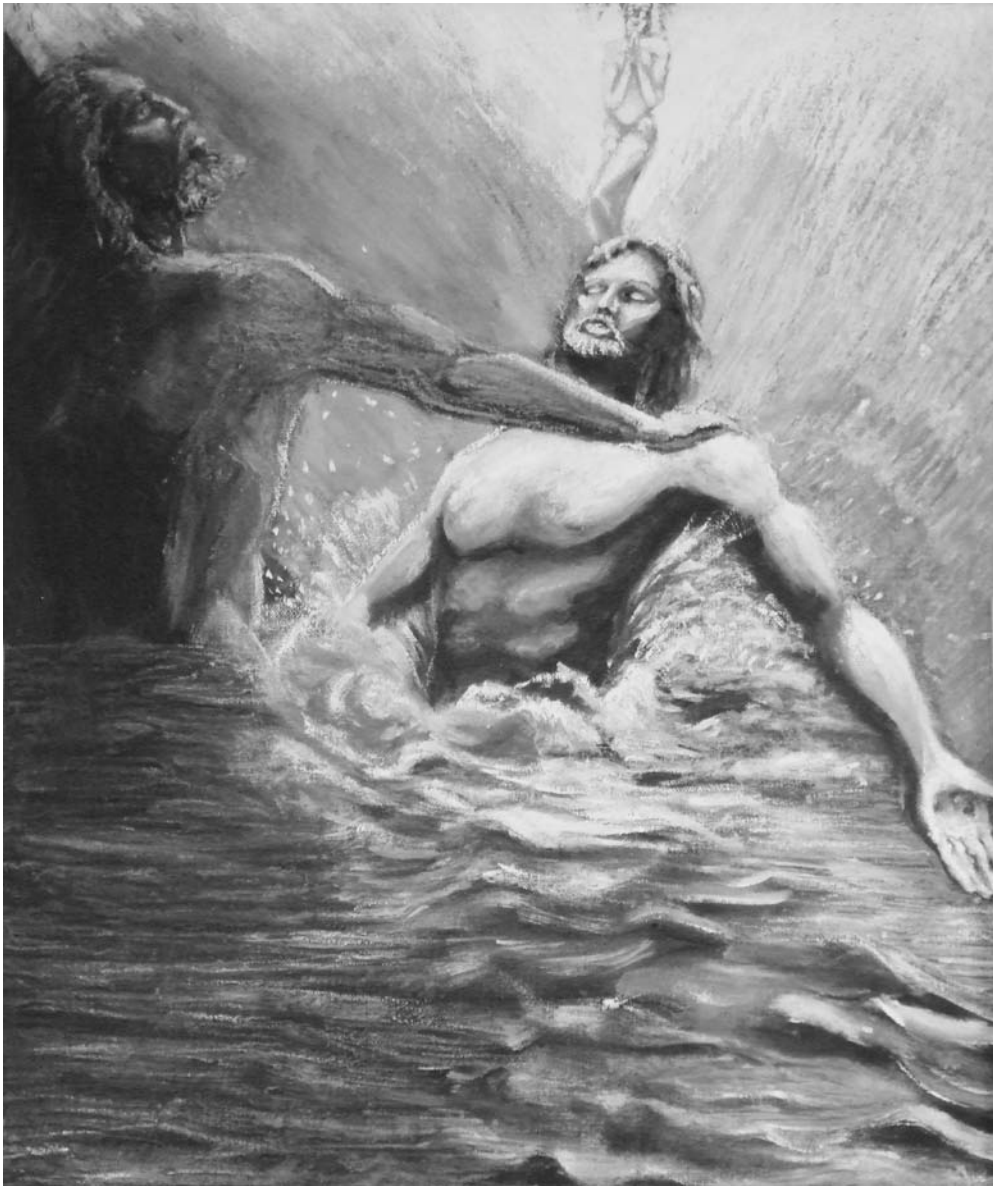


Figure 1.2. Painting by Louise Ford

God” like a dove to Jesus’s head, John’s kind of baptism is nonetheless regarded in the Gospels as deficient; deficient, that is, when compared to that of a greater one to come “after” him.

John’s baptism is only “of water.”

Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine a more effective baptism than this one of John’s: a baptism that has inspired artists for nigh on two thousand years! The event is capped by nothing less than a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). This divine endorsement of Jesus’s significance, apparently a conflation of Isaiah 42:1, Psalm 2:7, and Genesis 22:2, is a statement of religious reflection. Jesus, the Son of God, has come “after” John. Whatever one might make of this account’s historicity, John’s part in the story is apparently done. Having prepared the way in the wilderness, John ought to retire gracefully. Jesus has no further need of him; the Baptist is redundant; his baptizing the one “after him” is John’s spiritual swansong.

Exit John. Enter Jesus.

In spite of the early church’s determination to ensure that John’s significance be confined to that of herald or, if I may say, “warm-up act” for the big star, a very great mystery about John, *the real John*, persists. That mystery kindled the imaginative genius of Leonardo da Vinci. Leonardo painted the third image of John that has hung in my home for many years (see fig. 1.3).

While Leonardo’s original *John the Baptist* now hangs before the public in Paris’s Louvre Museum, five hundred years ago its viewing required an invitation to the private apartments of François I, King of France. Captivated, perhaps haunted, by the Baptist, Leonardo’s royal patron would stare in timeless contemplation into John’s enigmatic eyes and androgynous form. The painting became a true *icon* for the king, a window into the beyond. I have been similarly bemused by this great work of art, painted between 1513 and 1516 when Leonardo was in his early sixties. It is perhaps Leonardo’s last testament in paint.



Figure 1.3. John the Baptist by Leonardo da Vinci, Paris, Louvre

So remote from the image of the unshaven Hebrew prophet, Leonardo's depiction of the "Christian saint" is peculiar. Emerging from blackness, the beautiful figure suggests nothing so much as a pagan "come-on" issued from the cheeky girl/boy face who has borrowed his all-knowing smile from the expressive pallet of the *Mona Lisa* and his left, obscure, and decidedly serpentine arm from the neck and head-form of Leda's divine, impregnating swan, also painted by Leonardo. John's right arm, meanwhile, makes a dramatic gesture, crossing his chest, bending at the elbow to make a "square," then pointing sharply upward—to heaven, presumably. The forefinger gesture is as visually dynamic as Michelangelo's near-meeting of the Creator's index finger and that of Adam on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling.

What does it mean?

Is there a naughty anticlerical double meaning or joke inherent in the finger gesture? John's "model" may have been Leonardo's scurrilous pupil nicknamed "Salai" or the "little devil," so that the gesture may be taken, on one level, as a lewd one: "*Up your ass!*" Leonardo's use of the pointing gesture is, however, a recurring sign in his religious art. But what constituted Leonardo's personal religion, if anything? The slender reed cross was added later. Was it a sop to theological propriety? Though not detracting overmuch from the painting's central action, the cross was probably added to bring Leonardo's puzzling image into securer doctrinal waters. The cross declares this John is a Christian! And, talking of waters, there are none to be seen. This "Baptist" has nothing to baptize with, save his eyes and that suggestive gesture we cannot quite decipher. So strong, indeed, is the pagan, sensual, classical feel of the depiction, rendering it practically unusable, at least at the time, in obviously sacred contexts, we can hardly escape wondering if Leonardo did not see something else hidden in the orthodox, biblical picture of John.

Underlining the ambiguous and arguably pagan inspiration of Leonardo's John is the existence of a similar work, thought to have been

painted between 1510 and 1515 by a follower of Leonardo from a drawing by the master. The painting has a dual identity. It is known both as *St. John in the Wilderness* and as *Bacchus*, the god of religious ecstasy, wine, and intoxication.

Originally a variant on Leonardo's conception of the Baptist, some *curiosus* in the late seventeenth century chose to add vine leaves to the figure's head and leopard spots to John's hairy loincloth. A vine wreath added to the Baptist's former staff transformed it into a Bacchic *thyrsus*, Dionysus's sacred staff borne by his wine-intoxicated followers. According to Euripides, the thyrsus dripped with honey—a not insignificant detail, as we shall see. We may naturally ask whether this iconographic vandalism resulted from pious outrage at a sensual St. John or whether it was derived from positive insight into the figure's pagan provenance.

We cannot leave this maverick image of John-Bacchus without noting that the characteristic da Vincian finger gesture is stranger still. The Bacchic, or Dionysian, John—if we may call him such—has his right forefinger pointing up at 45 degrees across his chest, while his left forefinger points down vertically to the Earth. With the figure's left leg drawn across his right knee at a right angle to the staff, there is the suggestion of some geometrical conceit, but any suggestion of an injunction to accept the famous, pointedly “Hermetic” principle *as above, so below*—indicating magical links between heaven and Earth—is nullified by the fact that the figure's right hand does not point directly upward, as in Leonardo's more famous painting, but at an angle, as though referring to something off, or right of canvas. The gestures baffle, but they do not compel, as in the single finger gesture of Leonardo's own finished work.

JOHN AS DIVINE MERCURY

Renaissance philosophy revelled in allegories, visual and literary puns, dynamic riddles, and multiple meanings. Renaissance man sought unity

of being through the diversity of the world. He confronted chaos and disorder with a faith in hidden harmonies and higher orders on which he depended and with which he could operate. Symbolic links between the pagan gods of the classical period and corresponding “principles” perceived in the church’s approved biblical figures were not only highlighted for moral and philosophical uplift but, in many a learned in-joke, sported with. At least one of these correspondences may illuminate some of the mystery of Leonardo’s *John the Baptist*, if not the mystery of “the Baptist” himself.

Less than a decade before Leonardo painted his late masterpiece, the considerably less talented German artist Conrad Celtes adopted the then-current fad for presenting biblical figures as pagan deities. Celtes produced a woodcut wherein, among other obvious correspondences, the goddess Minerva appeared as Mary while the Greek god Hermes appeared as a straight stand-in for John the Baptist. There was no mystery or allegorical depth to this cross-identification of John and Hermes. Celtes simply hooked into the idea of Hermes as the divine messenger and made the not-very-startling, or not-very-original, identification of John-Hermes by reference to the ecclesiastically acceptable understanding of John the Baptist as revered “fore-runner” or *herald* of Christ: the one crying in the wilderness. Once appreciated, however, the link of John to Hermes turns out to be highly suggestive.

In ancient times, the “herald” or “ambassador” (Greek: *kērux*) enjoyed an important presiding role at official ceremonies. Like the god Hermes, the herald was the mouthpiece of the sovereign power: the messenger with the message. In Leonardo’s day, Hermes was not understood simply as the classical divine messenger with wings on helmet and feet—a kind of Olympian mailman—he was also seen as the divinity active within Hermes Trismegistus (Thrice Great Hermes), the divine philosopher par excellence and legendary giant of patriarchal science. Thrice Great Hermes (today we might say *Super-Mega-Awesome*

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