

Epiphanius on the Baptism.

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p. 184.¹ There really intervened about 26 years between this and the coming of the Lord from Egypt unto Nazareth at the age of forty years. However the blessed evangelist as if it followed close after continues his narrative thus: In those days cometh John the Baptist . . .

p. 185. Let us continue, and as our next chief task acquaint ourselves with the coming of the Precursor into the wilderness of Iudæa. For the infuriated Herod, treacherous throughout, when in due time he heard of the departure of the Magi from the land of Palestine, and when he determined to massacre the children, first sent the chief executioner to the priest Zacharias, saying, Give me your child John, that I may see him; for I have heard of his beauty. And this he said out of craftiness. But the chief priest answered, I am here in the house of the Lord ever since the day on which I came to celebrate the feast of Pascha. But his mother, on the completion of the feast, took the child and departed to her home. And the impious one, having heard this answer from the holy one of God, hastily sent some of his soldiers, to go and slay, before all the other children, John; for he imagined that he was still the king because of his marvellous birth. And when the soldiers were gone forth, an angel of God appeared to Elizabeth, while she was engaged in prayer, and said to her, Arise, take thy child and follow me, for the soldiers of Herod seek to slay him. And she rose up at once, and went forth from the city, and no one saw them, because the right hand of the Lord was their shelter to guard and keep them. And the executioners entered the house of Zacharias, but found no one whom they hoped to find; and they went out in haste into the wilderness, into the hill region, and diligently sought and searched hither and thither, as being troubled with fear of the tyrant. And Elizabeth saw them and was much frightened; but they were not able to see her. And the angel said, Fear

¹ Vgl. Bd. VII (1906), S. 318 ff.

thou not. Forthwith Elizabeth fell down in adoration before the God of Israel, together with her child, interceding with the angel of the Lord who led them. But [p. 186] the rock was opened like as a tent before her. And the angel said, Enter into yonder tentlike place, which God hath prepared for you, because thou hast entreated him in faith. And at once Elizabeth entered, carrying her child, the prophet, in her bosom; and the rock was sealed upon their tent, as it was before. And the angel departed unto his place; but the glory of the God of Israel with luminous sheen in the heart of the rock guarded and kept them inviolate, for three days and three nights, in token and image of the burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And in the same hour the soldiers returned to the king and announced to him, saying, We could nowhere find and take him, because they were enfolded by angels and mankind. But the king hastily sent a courier to the chief executioners, and executioners whom he had dispatched beforehand to massacre the infants, but who had not yet slain anyone and until they went, the chief executioners were still performing the work of slaughter, and were themselves as it were flushed and exultant. Whom in his wrath God slew all together on one day within the tower.

Now after three days was opened the rock which guarded them, and Elizabeth went forth carrying her child in her bosom and went straightforth in the name of the God of Israel. And she passed on to the further side of the Jordan, the angel of God preceding her; and there she found certain shepherds with tents dwelling in the wilderness by the Jordan, remaining in the open all the days of their life. And she desired to dwell with them, as with fathers and brethren and as with mothers and sisters. Wherefore they also by heavenly intimation took great pity and made much of her. And they were there in the wilderness 17 years; and Elizabeth tasted naught of their food, saving their bread, while John himself remained with his mother a suckling for these 17 years. And the shepherds with glad and fond affection magnified the child prophet as if he were an angel, and honoured him.

Let us continue. But God had revealed to the great chief priest Zachariah concerning the Forerunner and his mother, that they were still alive, indicating the spot. And he rejoiced exceedingly and exulted, because he had been more and more distressed about them, though he knew indeed that they were not delivered into the hand of the impious one; and he told it in secret to Alexander the priest. And they twain

went forth without discovering themselves, and came to where it was told him to come; and they found the Forerunner so much grown and increased in size, and the grace of the spirit of God was upon him. And his father saw him at his side with enthusiasm, and as if he held fire in his embrace greeted him with kiss of holiness and lifting up a shrill voice said: 'Child of thy aged sire, and gift of God. These many years are passed since I set eyes on thy divine countenance. Although I hoped to be alive, yet I have been afflicted 17 years. But now I thank my God the more because he has held me worthy to behold the voice of thy word, and I shall hereafter die filled with joy and gladness.' Likewise also the Forerunner rejoiced and was glad exceedingly at the Light of his father for which he had longed.

Wherefore he many times questioned his mother about him, and she praised and exalted him, as indeed it beseemed her to do. Moreover Alexander the priest gave greeting to the Forerunner and his mother Elizabeth, and they conversed for about one hour about all that had happened. In the same watch while they were conversing, following the order of their words, Elizabeth began to praise her first-born and his father. And herself reclining as it were and lifting up her eyes to heaven spake in tone of lament: —

'God of our Fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, receive the spirit of thy handmaid in peace.' And forthwith she gave over her righteous and spotless spirit into the hands of God, according to the saying: The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God. And they made great mourning for the proper time over her, and still more the dwellers in tents and the shepherds who lived in the open, and their sons and daughters, because they loved full well the righteous lady.

Moreover they wound and bound her round, as was the custom; and lifted her up and carried her to the mountain called Nabar, which looks over the God-receiving waters of Jordan, in which our Lord was afterwards baptised.

To continue — With hymns of praise they offered up entreaties to God for her soul, and themselves remained in that spot three days; and then they blessed the shepherds which lived in the open and their wives and children, and let them depart in peace. And in that same hour Zacharias and Alexander took counsel with each other about the Forerunner, whether to take him with them. However they were afraid to, because he was still talked about everywhere and especially in Jerusalem; for men remembered what had happened in connection with

the children of Bethlehem. And this is why, as regards the Forerunner, they were desirous to know by signs and hints, why the prophet's birth had been announced beforehand. And as if tempting him, his father said: 'My son and my hope, arise and let us depart together to the home of thy father and mother, and thou shalt become heir of thy aged father'. But he answered: 'Not so, father; but unto whom I was dedicated, to him will I be servant and heir. Wherefore was it written of me. The voice of a cry in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord. And be it not for me to dwell within a building, but in wildernesses. Accordingly henceforth, as I have been left by my mother, so do I become a dweller not among men, but in an uncultivated region, until the Lord shall visit me'. And they passed the night entire in prayer to God, but at dawn they bade one another farewell with many tears; and especially in Zachariah's spirit was kindled the flame of parental love, as he made his own the child, the prophet of the God of Israel.

And they went down and passed over the Jordan, and came to their houses glorifying the God of Israel. But John was in the wilderness until the day of the apparition of the new Israel. For it is he of whom it was said by Isaiah the prophet, the voice of a cry etc. For the Word knoweth how by a voice to make known the might [p. 189] of the divine mystery; since he himself was made ready thirty years before to become a temple pure and recipient of Father and Son and holy spirit

So after his mother's death John stripped off the garment which she had made for him; and he passed on to a place where the camels pastured, and there obtained, by pulling it off, the old camel's hair. Then he took it and spun it into thread with a cross-shaped distaff of wood, and gave it to the tent-dwelling shepherds. For they loved him bravely indeed, because he have been brought up among them. And they made that material for him into a garment like a sack, and he cut out in it a hole for his neck and wore it; and so was dressed in sack cloth all the days of his life, and never drew it off, nor ever wore any new raiment. And in it his disciples wound and bound him after death, and carried him to burial.

And his food was locusts and wild honey': Some of the holy doctors have said it was really locusts and wild honey; but we have met with certain men from the country itself who were still there in tents; and I asked them privily, and they told me that in that wilderness

there is a plant which in springtime, wherever it is, shoots up green; but when winter comes its root remains without disappearing, and it is sweet to the taste like honey cake. And the name by which it is called is locust, and it is sweet to taste like honey. And thus the blessed evangelist indicates the intolerable harshness of his life, contented as he was with such herbs. But it was befitting that he should be thus, being an angel in the flesh of clay engendered nature

Wherefore also in his baptism <he used> water alone as truly accords with his name. He was forerunner of all the world, for it to worthily attain to the true baptism into the death of Christ, in name of Father and of Son and of holy Ghost; which is able to make us heirs of God and coheirs with Christ in his Father's glory.