JOHN THE BAPTIST: 
THE FORERUNNER OF GOD HIMSELF

BY

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One of the fundamental questions which C. H. H. Scobie seeks to answer in his study of John the Baptist is how the historical John regarded his own mission. On this point Scobie is naturally confident in interpreting the Baptist’s work as basically that of proclaiming the imminent approach of the end of days. He is much more hesitant about committing himself to a detailed explanation of the main features of this proclamation. His considered judgement, arrived at after an examination of the various interpretations which have been given to John’s prophecies about the future, is that the Baptist’s expectations were characterized by a certain vagueness, particularly in respect of the identity of the Coming One who figured centrally in his description of the imminent world crisis 1).

Scobie’s conclusion has not proved the last word on the nature of John’s historical role. Shortly after the publication of Scobie’s work there appeared two articles 2), written independently of each other, which argued that the Coming One proclaimed by John was none other than Yahweh himself. It is this view which points the way to a satisfying interpretation of John’s own consciousness of his mission.

It should not be forgotten that one element in the eschatological expectations of the Jewish people before and during the time of Jesus was the belief that Yahweh himself would play the central role in intervening in the affairs of men to establish his Kingdom. The work of preparing for this decisive intervention in history was held to be that of a prophet whose appearance would herald the end of days. A convenient general description of the role of this eschatological Prophet is provided by O. Cullmann:

The function of the eschatological Prophet in the Jewish texts consists primarily in preparing the people of Israel and the world by his preaching for the coming of the Kingdom of God. He fulfils this function, not simply as the former Old Testament prophets did, but in a much more direct way as the immediate Preparer of the way for the Kingdom of God itself. He comes endowed with unique eschatological authority. His call to repentance is final and requires final decision. This gives his preaching a final, absolute character such as the preaching of the ancient prophets did not have . . . for when he speaks, he points to the Kingdom of God already approaching 1).

The particular form of this expectation which relates to the ministry of John the Baptist is that which identified the eschatological Prophet with Elijah. It is clearly stated in Mal. iv. 5 that Elijah would return to herald the coming of the new age: “Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes”. This reference must be read as an editorial comment on Mal. iii 1-3, which is cited in full below in order to clearly indicate the interpretation given to it by J. A. T. Robinson 2).

Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord.

Robinson identifies the “messenger” of iii 1a with the “messenger of the covenant” in iii 1b; and he argues consequently that the purpose of Mal. iv 5f. is to identify Elijah as the one who will be like

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