ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE LOWER WORLD

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The theme of John the Baptist's mission after death as precursor of Christ to the Underworld has been generally neglected or given only partial treatment in the literature concerning both John the Baptist as well as Christ's descensus ad inferos.1 This note will attempt to document the genesis of this theme, to suggest the dimensions of its fortleben and use in exegesis.

The position of John the Baptist in the Gospels is an ambiguous one. He was given a pivotal place in salvation history, 'Ο νόμος και οἱ προφῆται μέχρι 'Ιωάννου ἀπὸ τὸ τῇ βασιλείᾳ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐναγγελίζεται ... (Luc.16,16). John is more than a prophet (Mt.11,9; Luc.7,26) and the greatest of men (Mt.11,11; Luc.7,28), but the fact remains that ὁ δὲ μικρότατος ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τοῦ Θεοῦ μείζων αὐτοῦ ἐστιν (Mt.11,11; Luc.7,28). Hence arises the question, yet to be solved in any precise way, of the nature of John the Baptist's relationship to the Kingdom. An attempt was made in the ancient church to clarify John’s place in salvation history by providing a role for him in the extension of salvation to those who died before the completion of redemption, Christ’s descensus ad inferos.

1 See J. Monnier, La Descente aux enfers: Étude de pensée religieuse, d’art et de littérature (Paris 1905) 117; L. Capéran, Le problème du salut des infidèles, essai historique (Paris 1912) 1,66-67; C. Schmidt, Gespräche Jesu mit seinem Jüngern nach der Auferstehung, Texte und Untersuchungen,43 (Leipzig 1919) Exkurs II: “Der Descensus ad inferos in der alte Kirche”, 507 (+n.2), 541 (+n.3), 574 (+n.2); J. Kroll, Gott und Hölle: Der Mythos vom Descensuskampfe (Leipzig 1932) 89 (+n.1), 99 (+n.1), 107 (+n.1); J. Daniélou, Jean-Baptiste, Témoin de l’Agneau (Paris 1964) 183.
1. BACKGROUND

Following Grillmeier⁸ one may divide the complexity of the descensus into three soteriological themes or aspects of Christ's activity in the Underworld: 1) Christ's preaching to the dead (the preaching theme, Predigtmotiv),⁹ the oldest theme; 2) Christ's administration of baptism in the Underworld (the baptism theme, Taufmotiv);⁴ and 3) Christ's subjugation of Hell and the liberation of the just (the battle theme, Kampfmotiv), the most common and enduring theme. The descensus, particularly in its preaching and baptism themes, was of central importance in Jewish Christianity in dealing with the matter of the salvation of the just who died before Christ.⁵ These themes suggest an extension to the Underworld of an economy of salvation parallel to that which had been elaborated in the world of the living. This approach is to be found particularly in the Alexandrian church, in Clement, in Origen, as late as Ammonius, and elsewhere as well.⁶ As controversy arose over the extent of the salvation of the dead, sc. whether Christ liberated all, sinner and just alike, whether He converted the sinner and the incredulous in the Underworld or liberated only those whose behaviour in this life warranted salvation, the preaching and baptism themes declined somewhat, generally leaving the field to the battle theme of the "Harrowing of Hell".⁷ John

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³ U. Holzmeister, Comm. in Epp. Ss. Petri et Iudae, I (Paris 1937) 307, conveniently divides the preaching theme into three aspects, 1) preaching for conversion, 2) preaching as announcement of liberation, and 3) preaching of a condemnatory judgement.
⁴ For the sources of the preaching and baptism themes see the note of J. B. Cotelier in his S.S. Patrum ... Opera, ed. Joannes Clericus (Antwerp 1698) 117–118; Grillmeier, art. cit., nn.11 and 12; R. Cantalamessa, L’Omelia “In S. Pascha” dello Pseudo-Ippolito di Roma (Milan 1967) 246, n.176.