

The Life of John the Baptist by Serapion

A new translation and introduction
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Introduction

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God. Asking for God's help and hopeful of his support for this endeavor, we write here the history of holy John the Baptist, the son of Zechariah, may he intercede on our behalf. Amen.

The birth of John the Baptist is foretold

1 ¹During the reign of king Herod of Judea, there was among the people of Israel a prophet, an old man named Zechariah, who was a Levite priest from the tribe of Judah.^a He had a God-loving wife called Elizabeth who was a descendant of Aaron from the tribe of Levi. ²She had no children and both she and her husband were getting on in years. They were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. **(Luke 1:5-7)**

³Zechariah was constantly officiating in the temple. **(Prot. Jas. 26:1)** When his turn came to offer incense to the Lord, he entered the temple at the time of the offering as usual. ⁴Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified and startled, but the angel said to him, "Rejoice and do not be afraid, Zechariah, because God has heard your prayers. ⁵Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son who will be named John and he will cause you great joy and jubilation. ⁶He will be great in the sight of the Lord, he will not drink wine or strong drink and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even in his mother's womb. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and strength of Elijah, he will go before him to prepare the people for the Lord." **(Luke 1:8-17)**

⁷When he heard these words, Zechariah was astonished and doubtful since he was old and did not have any children. He did not remember Abraham, the greatest among the patriarchs, to whom God gave Isaac, although he had already passed the age of hundred. **(Prot. Jas. 1:3)** Nor did Zechariah remember Sarah, Abraham's wife, who was childless just like him.

⁸Zechariah said to the angel, "How will this happen? I am old and my wife is getting on in years." ⁹The angel replied, "I am Gabriel, the angel. I was sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. Because you did not believe my words, from now on you will be mute and unable to speak until the day these things occur, which will come in due course." ¹⁰And with this, the angel disappeared. **(Luke 1:18-20)**

¹¹Meanwhile the people who were waiting outside for Zechariah were starting to wonder at his delay in the temple. When he finally came out, he could not speak to them and they realized he had seen a vision in the temple and could only gesture at them. When his time of service ended, he went home. **(Luke 1:21-23)** ¹²Elizabeth already knew of all that had transpired.^b

¹³At that time, Elizabeth conceived and she remained in seclusion until the fifth month because she was ashamed. **(Luke 1:24)** She was afraid to be seen as an old woman with her belly growing and milk dripping from her breasts. So she spent her days alone in a small

^a As Mingana ("New Life of John the Baptist," 235) points out, this does not make sense: a Levite priest is, by definition, a member of the tribe of Levi and cannot therefore be a member of the tribe of Judah.

^b In the Sahidic *Panegyric on John the Baptist* (Kuhn, *Panegyric*, 18) after speaking to Zechariah, Gabriel visits Elizabeth as well.

room^c in her house with everything she needed there with her. ¹⁴Zechariah too lived like this and there was a locked door separating the two of them. For some time, both were completely cut off from the world.

The birth of Jesus is foretold

2 ¹When Elizabeth reached the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to the fiancée of a man named Joseph, of the house of David. This virgin's name was Mary. ²When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, Mary, *for you have found favor with God. You will conceive and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the son of the Most High.*" ³Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born of you will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ⁴And now, your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son, even though she is advanced in years. *This is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.*" ⁵Mary let go of all her doubts and said to the commander of angels, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." The angel then said goodbye and departed from her. **(Luke 1:26-38)**

⁶But Mary was still astonished at hearing about Elizabeth's pregnancy and said to herself, "Your deeds are truly great and wonderful, O omnipotent God, for you have brought forth offspring from an old barren woman. ⁷I will now go and will not stop until I meet her and see the great miracle God has performed in our times: a virgin giving birth and an old woman breastfeeding."

⁸At that time, Mary set out and hurried to a Judean town in the hill country. ⁹She entered the house of Zechariah and she greeted Elizabeth, who came out to meet her with joy and jubilation and greeted Mary with the words, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*" **(Luke 1:39-42)**

¹⁰The pure holy Virgin kissed the Word's true turtle dove and the Word baptized John while he was still in his mother's womb. David appeared between them and said, "Mercy and justice have met and righteousness and peace have embraced." **(Ps 85:10)** And John moved in his mother's womb as if he wanted to come out to see his Lord. ¹¹After they finished greeting each other, the Virgin stayed with Elizabeth for three months until Elizabeth was about to give birth, at which time she left and went home.

¹²When the chaste Elizabeth gave birth, there was great joy and jubilation in her house. ¹³After eight days they were going to circumcise him and name him Zechariah. *But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John."* They said to her, "*None of your relatives has this name.*" She said to them, "Ask his father what his name should be." *He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John."* ¹⁴Immediately after he finished writing, his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, praising God who gave him this great blessing. **(Luke 1:57-64)** And he spoke prophecies concerning his son John the Baptist, since he was aware of the gift God bestowed upon him. **(Luke 1:67)**

John and his mother escape from Herod

3 ¹John grew into a beautiful child and his mother breastfed him until he was two years old. The grace of God was in his face and he grew healthy and strong with the help of the Holy Spirit.

^c *qaytūn*. An Egyptian dialectal word for a small room derived from Greek *koitōn* "bedroom" (Reinhart Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes* [2 vols.; 2nd ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1927], 2:378). Mingana ("New Life of John the Baptist," 237) translates as "secluded room" and traces it back to Syriac *qaytōna* which ultimately derives from Arabic *qaytūn*.

²When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, *wise men came from the East, saying, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the East and have come to pay him homage."* ³When Herod heard this, he was frightened because of what he heard from the wise men about this king of the Jews and he immediately wanted to kill him. **(Matt 2:1-3)** ⁴An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and said to him, "*Get up, take the baby and his mother, go to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you.*" ⁵Herod did search for the Master^d in order to kill him, but did not find him, so he started killing all children in Bethlehem. **(Matt 2:13,16)**

⁶Elisabeth feared that her son might be killed as well, so she took him and went to see Zechariah in the temple and she said to him, "My lord, come, let us go with our son John to some other land, lest Herod the unbeliever kills him because of Jesus the Messiah. Mary and Joseph already left for Egypt. Come, before they kill our son John and turn our joy into grief." ⁷Zechariah answered, "I cannot leave the service of the temple of the Lord and go to a foreign country where they worship idols." ⁸She said to him, "What should I do to save my little boy?" ⁹The old man replied, "Rise and go to the wilderness near 'Ayn Kārim^e and if it pleases God, you will save your son. If they come looking for him, they will shed my blood instead of his."

¹⁰O how he cried when the time came they had to be separated from each other! Zechariah held the boy to his chest, kissed him and said, "Poor me, poor John, my son, the treasure of my old days, for they are keeping me from your face full of grace." ¹¹He then took him to the temple and blessed him, asking God to save him. Suddenly, Gabriel commander of the angels came down to him from heaven, holding a scapular^f and a leather belt, and said, "Zechariah, take these and put them on your son. God sent them from heaven, this scapular that belonged to Elijah and this belt worn by Elisha." ¹²Holy Zechariah took them from the angel and prayed over them before putting them on his son, attaching them to his clothing which was made of camel's hair. **(Mark 1:6//Matt 3:4)**

¹³He brought him to his mother and said to her, "Take him and go with him to the wilderness, for the hand of the Lord is with him. I have learned from God that he will live in the wilderness until the day he shows himself to Israel." ¹⁴The blessed Elizabeth took him with tears in her eyes and Zechariah was crying as well when he said, "I know I will never see the both of you again while we all live. So, go with God's peace and may he guide you." ¹⁵And so Elizabeth walked away with her son; and they went to 'Ayn Kārim where she stayed with him.

Herod's soldiers come looking for John

4 ¹When king Herod sent his soldiers to Jerusalem to kill her children, they began killing them as soon as they arrived and did not stop until the evening. ²This was on the seventh day of the month Tūt^g (that is the month Elūl). ³As they were about to return to their king, suddenly Satan came to them and said, "Why did you leave the son of Zechariah without killing him? He is hiding with his father in the Temple. Do not let him get away; kill him, lest the king will be angry with you. Go to him, and if he tries to hide his son from you, kill him instead."

⁴The soldiers did as Satan taught them and went to the temple early in the morning. They found Zechariah serving the Lord and they said to him, "Where is your son whom you

^d I.e., Jesus.

^e A village in Palestine (now a neighborhood of Jerusalem), traditionally considered the birthplace of John the Baptist.

^f *skhēma* (a loan word from Coptic), a part of a monk's habit. Traditionally, it is an outer garment as wide as a person's shoulders, hanging down to the ground both front and back, but open on both sides. See Aziz S. Atiya, ed., *Coptic Encyclopedia* (8 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1991), 2:650-55.

^g Only C, D, and F give the name of the month in Coptic with C and D adding the Syriac name in the margin.

have hidden from us?” He said to them, “There is no child here with me.” They said, “But you do have a child and you have hidden him from the king’s order.” He replied, “You fools whose king drinks blood like lionesses, how long will you continue to shed the blood of innocents?” They said to him, “Bring out your son so that we can kill him, or we will kill you in his place.” (*Prot. Jas. 23:1-2*) The prophet answered, “My son left for the wilderness and I do not know where he is.”^h

Flashback to Elizabeth

5 ¹When Zechariah said goodbye to Elizabeth and his son John, he blessed him and made him a priest. Then he handed him to his mother and she said to him, “Pray over me, my holy father, so that my journey in the wilderness is easy.” He said to her, “May he who gave us a child in our old age guide your path with him.” ²So she took him and went to the wilderness where no one else lived.

³O blessed Elizabeth, your story is truly wondrous and righteous, for you did not ask another adult to accompany you, although you did not know where to go or where to find shelter. You did not worry about having bread or little water for the child to drink. You did not say to his father Zechariah, “To whom are you sending me in the wilderness?” ⁴There were no monasteries in the wilderness at that time, or any communities of monks, so you could not say “I will go and stay with them together with my son.”

⁵Tell me, blessed Elizabeth, what did you rely on, for the evangelist testifies that you grew old without having children, (**Luke 1:7**) yet now you have been breastfeeding this child for three years. ⁶Listen to the answer the blessed Elizabeth gave.ⁱ She said, “Why are you astonished that I would go alone into the wilderness? I am not afraid of anything, because I have one of God’s kin in my arms; and Gabriel travels with me and paves the way before me.” ⁷She said, “I rely on the kiss I received from Mary, mother of the Lord, because as I greeted her, the baby in my womb leaped with joy and jubilation and I heard both of them kissing each other in our wombs.” ⁸And Elizabeth said, “I went and dressed my son in a garment made of camel hair and a leather belt, (**Mark 1:6//Matt 3:4**) so that the mountains in the holy wilderness may become inhabited, communities of monks grow and multiply and offerings are made in them in the name of the Lord. ⁹So if God sustained Hagar and her son Ishmael, who were slaves, as they wandered through the desert (**Gen 21:14-19**), how can he not be bound by a rule he himself established?”

The death of Zechariah

6 ¹We have described to you virtues of holy Elizabeth, let us now return to holy Zechariah the holy martyr and explain to you his many virtues. ²Me, I wish to recount your true story, but I am afraid that I will only hear your reproach, just like the happy Elizabeth did. ³I am in awe of you, pious Zechariah! When Herod’s soldiers came to you asking, “Where is your little boy, the son whom you had at an advanced age?” you did not deny him, nor did you say “I do not know him,” you said “His mother took him to the wilderness.”

⁴And when Zechariah said this about his son to the soldiers, they killed him inside the temple. (*Prot. Jas. 23:3*) The priests shrouded his body and they placed it next to the body of his father Berechiah (**Matt 23:35**) in a hidden tomb out of fear of the wicked. ⁵But his blood boiled on the ground and continued to do so for fifty years until Titus Vespasian, the king of Rome, destroyed Jerusalem and killed the Israelite priests for the blood of Zechariah as the Lord ordered him.^j

^h Zechariah’s answer is missing from F.

ⁱ G omits “for the evangelist ... Elizabeth gave.”

^j The reference to Titus Vespasian and the execution of Sanhedrin is unique to P, all other MSS (including Q which is partially defective at this location) end the chapter at “fifty years.”

The death and burial of Elizabeth

7 ¹As for blessed John, he wandered in the wilderness together with his mother. God prepared locusts and wild honey for him to eat in accordance with the instructions Elizabeth received not to let anything unclean enter his mouth. **(Luke 1:15)** ²After five years, the blessed and pious venerable Elizabeth passed away. Holy John sat down to cry over her because he did not know how to shroud her or how to bury her, as he was only seven years and six months old. Herod also died the same day blessed Elizabeth passed away. **(Matt 2:19)**

³Lord Jesus, whose eyes see heaven and earth, saw his relative John sitting next to his mother crying. He also started crying and cried for a long time, but no one knew why. ⁴When Jesus' mother saw him crying, she said to him, "My son, what happened, why are you crying? Did Joseph or somebody else make you upset?" ⁵The mouth filled with life said to her, "No, mother, it is your relative, the venerable Elizabeth. She left my beloved John an orphan and he is now crying over her body which is lying in the mountains."

⁶When the Virgin heard this, she started crying for her relative, but Jesus said, "Do not cry, my virgin mother, for you will see her with your own eyes this very hour." And as he was talking to his mother, suddenly a cloud filled with light appeared and landed between them. ⁷Jesus said, "Get Salome,^k we will take her with us," and they mounted the cloud and it flew with them to the wilderness near 'Ayn Kārim, to the place where the body of blessed Elizabeth was together with holy John.

⁸The Savior said to the cloud, "Set us down here" and immediately the cloud stopped and descended to earth. The sound it made reached the ears of blessed John who became afraid, left the body of his mother, and ran. ⁹Immediately a voice reached him which said, "Do not be scared, John, my beloved. It is me, Jesus your Lord, Jesus your relative. I have come to you with my beloved mother to fulfill the command^l of your happy mother Elizabeth because she is a relative of my mother." When he heard this, the blessed John turned back and the Messiah and his mother both kissed him. ¹⁰The Savior said to his virgin mother, "You and Salome, come and wash her body." So they washed the body of blessed Elizabeth in the spring from which she and her son used to draw water. The pure Virgin Mary held the Blessed One, cried with him and cursed Herod for the many evils he had committed.

¹¹Suddenly, Michael and Gabriel came down from heaven and dug a grave. The Savior said to them, "Go and bring the soul of Zechariah and the soul of Simeon^m the priest so that they will chant hymns while you bury her body." Michael brought the souls of Zechariah and Simeon and they buried Elizabeth's body and sang over it for a long time while Jesus' mother and Salome cried. ¹²The priests then made a sign of the cross and prayed over her three times before laying her to rest. Then they sealed the grave with the sign of the cross and went back to where they came from in peace. ¹³Jesus and his mother then sat down next to the blessed John and consoled him for seven days because of his mother. They also taught him how to get by in the desert. ¹⁴And the blessed Elizabeth passed away on the 15th day of the month Amšīrⁿ (Ševāt).

¹⁵Jesus said to his mother, "Come, let us go to a place where I can complete my mission." But the Virgin cried because John was all alone and still a small child. And Mary said, "Son, let us take him with us, he is an orphan and has no one." Jesus said to her, "This is not the will of my Father in Heaven. He will stay in the wilderness until the day he shows

^k This is presumably the Salome who was present at Jesus' death (Mark 15:40) and who witnessed the empty tomb (Mark 16:1). For more on her identity, see Burke, "Serapion's *Life of John the Baptist*," 295.

^l Mingana erroneously translates "in order to attend to the business of the burial."

^m Presumably the Simeon present at Jesus' circumcision (Luke 2:25-35).

ⁿ Only C and D give the Coptic name of the month, with the Syriac equivalent in the margin (C) or above the line (D).

himself to Israel. ¹⁶Instead of wild beasts, he will find a wilderness filled with multitudes of angels and prophets. I have ordered Gabriel the commander of angels to watch over him and give him the power of Heaven. I will also make the water in this spring sweet as his mother's milk. ¹⁷Who was it who watched over him since he was a small child? Was it not me, because I love him, o mother, more than the world itself? Zechariah loved him as well and I had him come and ask about him, for his body is buried in the ground, but his soul lives on. His mother Elizabeth will come see him regularly to take care of him and comfort him as if she had not died at all.

¹⁸“She truly is blessed, o mother, because she bore my beloved. Her mouth will never succumb to rot because she kissed the pure lips. Her tongue will not fall apart in the ground because she spoke a prophecy concerning you which said, ‘*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*’ (Luke 1:45) Her insides will not putrefy in the ground, but her body will remain free of decay just like her soul. And my beloved John will persevere as he gazes upon her and he will be comforted.” ¹⁹This is what the Messiah said to his mother while John was in the desert.

²⁰They mounted the cloud while John was looking at them crying. Mary cried with him and said, “O poor John, you will be all alone in the wilderness! Where is your father Zechariah? Where is your mother Elizabeth? Let them come and cry with me today.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Do not cry for John, mother, because I will not forget him.” And as he said this, the cloud lifted them up and flew with them until they arrived in Nazareth where he lived to become fully human in all things except for sin.

John rebukes Herod and his voice haunts Herodias

8 ¹While holy John lived in the desert, God and his angels were with him. He led a strict ascetic life in great devoutness, did not eat anything but grass^o and wild honey (Mark 1:6//Matt 3:4) and prayed and fasted constantly, waiting for the salvation of Israel.

²In the second year of his reign, king Herod the Younger,^p who ruled of the province of Judea, took the wife of his brother for his own. He did not do so openly, but found opportunity to send for her and usher her into his private chambers filled with filth where the two of them perpetrated their perversions. ³At that time in the desert, Gabriel the commander of angels taught John the son of Zechariah (*Life Mart. Bapt. 2:1*) to say, “O king, you must not take the wife of your brother while he is alive.” (Mark 6:18//Matt 14:4) He kept repeating this in a loud voice as the angel taught him in the wilderness. ⁴At night, people could hear his voice and Herodias would light a lamp and search her rooms believing there was somebody there with the two of them. But she could never find anyone and only heard the voice. ⁵Both of them were distraught over this and she said to Herod, “Go and send your soldiers to the wilderness near ‘Ayn Kārim to kill John because this is his voice.” But God was with him and he delivered him from their hands. ⁶When she learned this, she could not find any rest in what she was doing. The wicked one then said to her, “If we hear this voice again, I will summon the magicians and order them to capture and kill him in secret.” But the voice did not stop.

⁷The wicked Herodias said to Herod, “Who is this John who wanders around in the wilderness and the desert and whose body is not worthy of wearing the clothes of people, but has to dress in camel's hair? Who is he to chide the king of a province and the ruler of a

^o Mark 1:6 and Matt 3:4 speak of *akrides* i.e., “locusts,” one of the species of insects belonging to the family Acrididae (compare also *Life Bapt. Serap.* 7:1). However, since asceticism and devoutness generally required abstaining from eating meat altogether (see also *Life Bapt. Serap.* 7:2), many traditions substitute a vegetarian meal of some sorts. See James A. Kelhoffer, *The Diet of John the Baptist* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) for more details.

^p I.e., Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great.

region?”⁸ Herodias then pressed on and said to Herod, “Whatever you want to do, do it openly and do not think anyone in this province will blame you if you do it except for John. And if we find an opportunity, we will get rid of him.” This is how this adulteress wooed the heart of Herod to commit this sin and seduced him until he sent his brother to his death and married her openly.⁹ And John remained in the desert and continued to rebuke Herod until he was thirty years old.

Jesus is baptized

9¹ *As for Jesus, He grew in wisdom, stature and grace with God and people. (Luke 2:52)* He did not show any signs of his divine nature, but acted humbly towards all.² When he reached the age of twelve, he began to rebuke the Jews and the teachers who led people astray. **(Luke 2:42-50)**

³In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius who ruled after Augustus, when Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee and Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, in that year, the word of God came down to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **(Luke 3:1-3)** He came to the lands around the river Jordan, preaching, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*” **(Matt 3:2; cf. Mark 1:4)**⁴ People from all over Judea and Jerusalem came to him and let themselves be baptized by him, confessing their sins. **(Mark 1:5//Matt 3:5-6)**

⁵At that time, the Savior came down from Galilee to the river Jordan to see him and said to him, “Baptize me.” When John saw God standing before him asking to be baptized, he became very afraid and said to him, “He who led the children of Israel through the Red Sea and gave them sweet water to drink from solid rock, he is now standing before his servant who himself needs to be baptized by his divine hand and says to him, ‘Baptize me’.”⁶ And with this, John began to turn away from him. But Jesus said to him, “Stay, this is how we must finish it now.” **(Matt 3:13-15)**

⁷The two of them went down into the water and holy John baptized him with these words, “I baptize the one who was sent by the Father to fulfill a great mystery.” At that moment, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove which came face to face with John. Then the voice of the Father rang, “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased, obey him.” **(Mark 1:10-11 par.)**⁸ The Savior climbed out of the water and went straight to the desert. **(Mark 1:12 par.)** Holy John stayed near the river Jordan and continued to baptize everyone who came to him.

John rebukes Herod and is imprisoned

10¹ At that time, Herod rebelled against Philip his brother and slandered him with the king emperor saying to him, “My king, the one whom you appointed over the province of Trachonitis,⁹ that is Philip, plundered your province and said, ‘I will not pay tribute^r to the king ever again because I am a king as well’.”² The emperor was filled with rage and ordered Herod to take Philip’s province and all his property and his house from him without any pity, even for his soul.³ Herod did as the king ordered and stole the province that belonged to his brother Philip, as well as his house and everything that he had, and assumed power over all that Philip had ruled.⁵

⁹ All MSS have *Antarachonia* or a variation thereof.

^r The word here is *ḥarāġ*, a term from Islamic law designating tax on land.

⁵ Josephus (*Ant.* 18.4.6) does not mention the conflict between the brothers and reports that Philip passed away peacefully still holding the office of the tetrarch. He does make a reference to his wife Herodias who divorced Philip (adding “while he was still alive”) and married his brother Herod Antipas (*Ant.* 18.5.4).

⁴Philip had a wife whose name was Herodias and she had a daughter with Philip whose name was Arcostariana.¹ Only the mother was more perverted than the daughter. ⁵When Philip became more poor than anybody else, Herodias hated him very much and she said to him, “I will not stay with you anymore. I will be with Herod the king, your master who does not lack in security,^u because he is better than you.” ⁶And she immediately wrote a letter to Herod: “Herodias writes to Herod. Now you rule over all of Syria and all the inhabited world, yet you still have not taken me for your wife, even though I am very beautiful and better than all the women of Judea. ⁷I also have a daughter whose beauty and stature cannot be matched in all of the inhabited world. I wish to be your wife because I have come to hate your brother very much and because I am loyal to your kingdom.”

⁸When these crafty words reached the ear of the wicked king, he liked what he had heard and arranged for her and her daughter to be taken from Philip’s house. ⁹When Philip saw his wife taken from him by force, he said to his daughter, “Stay with your father, even though your mother is taken from me.” The little whore said to him, “I will not stay with you, but I will accompany my mother wherever she goes.” ¹⁰So they both were taken and brought to Herod who was greatly pleased with them because he was a whoremonger. And they performed deeds of Satanic trickery and the perverted Herod whored with both of them day after day.

¹¹News of this reached holy John the Baptist from Philip her husband. People considered John a prophet and he was greatly respected by everyone because he preached to people proclaiming, “*Bear fruit worthy of repentance, for every tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*” (**Matt 3:8,10; cf. Luke 3:8-9**) ¹²When John heard this from Philip, he was saddened by their damnation—that is, of Herod and Herodias—and he immediately wrote to them the following: “John the son of Zechariah, called the Baptist, says to you: Herod, you may not marry the wife of your brother while he is still alive.” (**Mark 6:18//Matt 14:4**)

¹³When Herod heard this, he was afraid and disturbed. He went to see Herodias and said to her, “Herodias, what are we going to do? The news of our sin has reached John^v and now he has rebuked us. We are doomed, because our sins have increased greatly and reached the ears of the prophets.” ¹⁴The wicked woman said to him, “Calm yourself, my king. Who is this John, who wears camel’s hair, to contradict a mighty king like you? He surely deserves to have his tongue pulled out.” ¹⁵He said to her, “So what are we going to do? I cannot bear the rebuke of someone as mighty as him.” ¹⁶She answered, “Have him brought here and kill him, then we can continue to give pleasure to each other.” And she did unspeakable things to him and performed acts of devious perversion. So Satan turned his heart against John and he had him arrested and thrown into a prison. (**Life Mart. Bapt. 8:2**)

¹⁷Herodias then had him brought to her and she said to him, “What is your problem with me, you chaste man? Do you want to keep me and the king apart? I conjure you by the God of your fathers not to trouble me like this ever again. And I promise you, if you stop talking about me and stop making your accusations, I will release you from this prison right away and shower you with riches and honors.” ¹⁸Holy John said to her, “I am telling you, Herodias, you should not be with Herod while Philip is alive.” (**Mark 6:18//Matt 14:4**)

¹⁹When the wicked woman heard this, she became angry and said to him, “I will kill you dead. I will put the hair from your head into the pillow I lie on with Herod every night and I will bury your head where I wash myself every time I sleep with him.” ²⁰John said to

¹ This is the most likely reading of the name found in CEFHPQ. MSS ABG have Arcostiana or alike. Salome, the name most frequently associated with Herodias’s daughter whom the gospels keep nameless, was adopted into Christian tradition from Josephus, *Ant.* 18.5.4.

^u Mingana erroneously translates this phrase as “your new lord Herod.”

^v Mingana erroneously translates as “It is the end of our sinful union.”

her, “You will kill me, since God wills it, but you will not lay eyes on my head. It will stay with me after my death and it will proclaim your humiliation and your shame to all the world. You will suffer for my unjust murder because your ruin is near.”²¹ She said to his guards, “Take him and throw him in prison in chains. And if he escapes, you will pay with your lives.” The guards took him and put him in prison. **(Mark 6:19-20)**

The death of John the Baptist (Mark 6:22-28//Matt 14:6-11)

11¹ Herodias tried to get Herod to kill him, but he said to her, “I cannot kill him just like that. The people will rise against me, chase me out and bring accusations against me with the king^w who will then take my kingdom from me like he did with my brother Philip.” And he said to her, “Show me a better way to kill him.”^x She said to him, “I will tell you something and when you hear it, you will find a way to kill him.” He said to her, “Tell me.”^y

³ She said to him, “Well, king’s envoys are staying with you; so go and prepare a feast for them and invite all the high officials as well, since your birthday is near. Once everybody is happy and they all start getting drunk with wine, I will send in my daughter dressed in her best clothes to dance before you, my king, with her beautiful face.⁴ When she does that, tell her ‘Ask for whatever you wish’ and you will swear to her by the king’s life^z ‘Whatever you wish for, I will give it to you.’ She will then ask for the head of John and you will have found a way to take his head.”⁵ This is how Herod was tricked by the reasoning of the adulteress and he began to fulfill her wish because he loved her for her ruthlessness^{aa} and her devilish cunningness.

⁶ That very day he prepared a feast and the king’s envoys were sitting right next to him. When they started to get drunk, the cursed Uxatriana^{bb} entered the room wearing necklaces of gold and silver, perfumes and many jewels and she presented herself to all assembled. She danced in devilish ecstasy and Satan filled their hearts with evil and lust through her evil trickery, so they all were enthralled with her.⁷ Herod was proud of her^{cc} and said to her, “If you ask for whatever you want, by the life of Emperor Tiberius, I will give it to you, even if it were half of my kingdom and my possessions.” She said to him what her mother had taught her, “What I want here is the head of John the Baptist on a plate.”⁸ He was greatly saddened because he swore on the king’s life and it was clear to his dinner companions that he could not break the oath. And so he ordered the executioner to go to the prison and take his head on a plate—this was the second day of the month of Tūt (Elūl)^{dd}—and they brought it to Herod. Herod gave it to the girl and the girl gave it to her mother.

The last words of John the Baptist

12¹ Before the king’s men^{ee} came with the executioner to take his head, John said to his disciples, **(Life Mart. Bapt. 7:3-12)** “Look, the king has sent for my head. The king’s men

^w I.e., the Roman emperor.

^x Herod’s exhortation to Herodias is unique to P.

^y This exchange is missing from P.

^z Lit. “by king’s redemption”—a very Christian turn of phrase and thus an obvious anachronism.

^{aa} Mingana’s translation has “beauty.” It fits the context and could be obtained from the text by interpreting the existing word as a scribal error, but this is not supported by any of the manuscripts.

^{bb} Alternatively, *Oxatriana*. P has *Arcostariana*. F and Q do not give her name and only call her “Herodias’s daughter.”

^{cc} Alternatively, “came to his senses.”

^{dd} C and D give the Coptic name of the month with the Syriac name in the margin (C) or above the line (D). ABEFHQ give only the Syriac name while P converts the date to “the 29th of the month Ab.” For more on the latter date, see Mingana, “New Life of John the Baptist,” 251, note 1.

^{ee} Somewhat confusingly, the same phrase is used here to refer to Herod’s executioners and to the emperor’s envoys in the previous verses.

went out with unsheathed swords in their hands, carrying lanterns and torches and weapons. What is happening now will also happen on the night the Messiah will be betrayed. **(John 18:3)** ²As for me, they will take my head and present it on a plate. As for the Messiah, he will be nailed to a cross so that he will purify all with his pure blood. ³As for me, I will go to where I am going; but woe to the king who ordered my head to be cut off, for many calamities will befall him and the people of Israel will be scattered because of him. ⁴As for you, do not be afraid, for no one will be able to harm you.” ⁵He then opened his mouth and praised God and glorified him for his incomprehensible gifts, saying, “I bless you and praise you, invisible Father, visible Son and consoling Holy Spirit.”

The head of John the Baptist

13 ¹Now let us return to the head of the blessed John. ²When his head was brought to Herodias, the eyes of holy John were open and his eyes heard as well as they did when he was still alive. ³The whore then spoke before the head seething with anger, “Here is the eye^{ff} that was not ashamed to look into the eyes of the king and answer him. I will pluck you out with my own hand and put you on a plate. I will pull out the tongue that used to say to the king ‘You are not permitted to take Herodias, the wife of your brother.’ **(Mark 6:18/Matt 14:4)** And I will take the hair from your head and your beard and sweep it under the feet of my bed.” She said this without any shame or hesitation and with her outstretched hand she tried to grab John’s head and do with it as she said. ⁴Suddenly the head of the blessed John let the locks of its hair loose from the plate, spread them, and flew to the center of the room in front of the king and his high officials. At that very moment, the roof of the building opened and John’s head flew high in the air.

⁵As for Herodias, her eyes were pulled out from her head and fell on the ground. **(Solomon of Basra, Bk. Bee 41)** Her room collapsed on top of her, the ground opened its mouth and its throat swallowed her, and then she sank to the depths of Hell, still alive. ⁶Herodias’s daughter went mad and broke all the vessels that were there at the feast. ⁷In her madness, she went to a frozen lake and danced on it. The Lord ordered the ice under her to break and the lake swallowed her. ⁸Soldiers tried to pull her out and could not, because the Lord did not want her to be rescued. Finally, they cut off her head using the sword with which holy John was killed. At that very moment, a whale appeared and threw her out of the lake, dead. **(Ep. Herod Pil.; Solomon of Basra, Bk. Bee 41)** May God have no mercy on her!^{gg} ⁹Immediately after that, Herod suffered a stroke in front of his dinner companions.

¹⁰When his aide saw these great miracles, he quickly went to the prison, took the body of John and handed it over to his disciples. **(Mark 6:29/Matt 14:12)** They took it and buried it in the city of Sebaste^{hh} next to the body of the prophet Elisha.

¹¹His head, however, flew over Jerusalem and preached to the city for three years, saying, “Herod, you may not marry the wife of your brother while he is still alive.” **(Mark 6:18/Matt 14:4)** ¹²Once three years of preaching over Jerusalem had passed, it left for the whole world to shout and announce Herod’s scandalous actions, with the words “Herod, you may not marry the wife of your brother while he is still alive” until 15 years since his murder had passed. ¹³When 15 years had passed, it stopped preaching and came to rest in the city of Homs.ⁱⁱ The faithful in that city took it and buried it with great ceremony. ¹⁴Some time after that, a church was built over it which to this day is still standing in Homs. **(Life Mart. Bapt.**

^{ff} Mingana erroneously translates as “accursed one.”

^{gg} Verses 7 and 8 are found only in P.

^{hh} According to Islamic tradition, Sebastia is the resting place of John the Baptist and his father Zechariah (Yāqūt, *Mu’dzam* 3:184).

ⁱⁱ A city in western Syria. See the introduction, p. \$\$\$.

10:2) The head of holy John the Baptist was buried there 15 years after the resurrection of our Lord and Savior and it is still there.

The body of John the Baptist is brought to Alexandria

14 ¹After four hundred years had passed, during which the body of the saint whose feast we are celebrating today (that is, John the Baptist) was buried in Sebaste,^{jj} at that time there was an infidel king by the name of Julian^{kk} who reigned over Syria. ²He was a Christian at the beginning of his reign, but after some time, Satan filled his heart and he abandoned the faith of our Lord and Savior and worshipped fire. At that time, he ordered that pagan temples and sanctuaries where idols would be worshipped should be built everywhere. ³He also ordered that a pagan temple be built in Sebaste where the body of John was, but he could not build it or worship idols there because of the bodies. ⁴They gathered and informed him, that bodies of holy men were buried there and prevented them from building the pagan temple. He said to them, “Go burn them down and build the temple.” So they set the place on fire, but the fire would not come near the coffins of the prophets. ⁵Many treasures were found there, including a vessel above the coffins which contained a leather belt, a garment made of camel’s hair, and a scapular with two leather belts.

⁶The faithful present there immediately understood that these coffins were those of John the Baptist and Elisha the prophet. They wanted to take them from that place, but they were not able to do so because they were afraid of the wicked king. ⁷Then God brought him down with a death more wretched than anyone had ever endured. ⁸After his death, righteous men gathered, took the coffins and went with them to the sea, planning to take them to Alexandria to the Holy Father Athanasius,^{ll} because they said that at that time, there was no one in the whole world who was worthy of taking possession of them except Anba^{mmm} Athanasius, the patriarch in Alexandria.

⁹When they came to the sea shore and found a ship sailing for Alexandria, they boarded and brought the coffins with them. They sailed the sea until they dropped anchor in the port of Alexandria and when they landed, they could not reveal their purpose to anyone, because time was pressing. ¹⁰So they went to the patriarch and told him of everything that had happened and how they were moved by the Holy Spirit to bring the coffins to him. ¹¹The patriarch was overjoyed to have them and venerated them greatly. He went out to the ship with his brother at night and took the remains in a kerchief and brought them to his living quarters in the cathedral in secret. ¹²This Holy Father wished to build a church for them, but could not because of the trouble at the time caused by the wicked.

A church is built to house the remains of John the Baptist

15 ¹The bodies remained hidden in the well where Anba Athanasius placed them until the day the Holy Father passed away. ²After his death, he was succeeded by Anba Peterⁿⁿⁿ who was followed on the patriarchal see by Anba Timothy^{ooo} who appointed me, your unworthy father Serapion, to this office, even though I do not deserve it. When he passed away, he was succeeded by Anba Theophilus^{ppp} who is now sitting on the patriarchal see. ³During his time, God’s grace and faith manifested themselves and were strengthened by the pious

^{jj} P adds “which is Nablus of Samaria,” referring to the ancient city of Samaria rebuilt and renamed as Sebaste during the reign of Herod Antipas, today’s Sebastia in the West Bank.

^{kk} Roman Emperor Julian who ruled between 361 and 363.

^{ll} Patriarch Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373).

^{mmm} A title used for high officials in the Coptic church.

ⁿⁿ Patriarch Peter II of Alexandria (d. 380)

^{ooo} Patriarch Timothy I of Alexandria (d. 384).

^{ppp} Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria (d. 412), assumed office in 385.

Theodosius,^{9q} and God through his love united the king and the patriarch. They opened the doors of pagan temples, which stored many treasures, notably the great pagan temple in Alexandria which opened before them.^{rr} Inside, they found much gold and great amounts of silver. ⁴The pious Theodosius honored the patriarch by appointing him to oversee all the treasures and he said to him, “Anba Theophilus, take this and use it to build churches from here to Aswan, for the greater glory of God and his saints.” And indeed, the patriarch began to build churches.

⁵The first one to be built was a church dedicated to John the Baptist in Alexandria, which he adorned and made a beautiful church because he wished to place the body of John there. ⁶When he completed it, he wanted to consecrate it and he wrote to all the bishops who were under his jurisdiction to gather and witness the consecration of the church he had built. I, the unworthy, also received the invitation and went with all the bishops to the Pope, Anba Theophilus. ⁷When the news reached him that all the bishops had come to the city, Theophilus was pleased with us like someone who has found many riches. He went out to meet us together with many of those who were in the city and led us into the city where we stayed with him for some time. ⁸After that, he began to consecrate the church and he took us to see it and we found it to be a wonderful building.

⁹And he said to us, “This is the place where Athanasius wanted to build it, but time was not in his favor.” ¹⁰Anba Theophilus then said, “I was walking with them when I was just an acolyte and I attended to him. When we came to this place, he said to me ‘My son Theophilus, when you find an opportunity, build here a church dedicated to John the Baptist and place his bones in it.’ ¹¹After I had built this place, I remembered the words of this man of God, Anba Athanasius, especially when I remembered that my father Athanasius was like David the prophet who wanted to build a temple to the Lord, but he was not allowed to because of wars he fought. The Lord said to him, ‘David, you will not be the one who builds my temple, but the one who comes out of your loins will’ and this was Solomon. **(2 Sam 7:12-13)** ¹²Therefore, when I ceased waging wars on idolaters, I became worthy of building this church, which is dedicated to John the Baptist, the morning star.”^{ss}

¹³When the second day of the month Ba’ūna (that is month Ḥeziran)^{tt} came, he took us to the place where the body was hidden. We did not know exactly where it was, but after a prayer, God showed it to us. ¹⁴When he brought it out, he called to him all the inhabitants of the town. They gathered around him with many lanterns and lamps so that the night shone like day. ¹⁵He let bishops carry the coffins on their heads and the patriarch walked before them with deacons singing hymns until we came with them to the church with great ceremony. ¹⁶The patriarch took the coffins, embraced them and let all the people be blessed by the holy bodies. Then he put the coffins in the church on a chair at the side of the altar and prepared the consecration for that very day. ¹⁷He consecrated the church, we said mass, and all of us received communion from the patriarch.^{uu} This was the second day of the month Ba’ūna.^{vv} ¹⁸After this, the patriarch said goodbye to us and we left the city, each of us going to his own country in God’s peace, amen.

¹⁹The body of holy John the Baptist performed miracles, proofs and healings among the Christian people, as witnessed by many wondrous stories.^{ww}

^{9q} Roman Emperor Theodosius I (347-395).

^{rr} This is a reference to the chain of incidents which culminated in the destruction of Alexandria’s Serapeum (“the great pagan temple”).

^{ss} “Morning star” is missing from C.

^{tt} So EFHQ. ABP have Ḥeziran only, C has Ba’ūna only, and D has Ḥeziran with Ba’ūna in the margin.

^{uu} In C, the description of events in vv. 6-17 is somewhat shortened.

^{vv} So ABCDEFQ. H and P have Ḥeziran.

^{ww} This refers to the work *Miracles Bapt.* which in most manuscripts follows *Life Bapt. Serap.*

²⁰Praise and glory and power are due to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one in nature, now, always and forever and ever, amen. Praise to God always, amen.