

Chapter 4

John the Baptist

Matthew seemingly took the essence of the role played by John the Baptist in his narrative, unchanged, from Mark. He merely made it more explicit and comprehensive than Mark did. Wink (1968:41) summarized Matthew's specific emphasis of John the Baptist's role as follows: 'Matthew has made explicit everything in Mark's picture of John which lay hidden: The Herodian opposition, the fate of the prophet, his identity as Elijah. But by so doing, he has completely altered the representation.'

Scholars who have made a study of the function of John the Baptist in the Gospel of Matthew, like Trilling (1959:271-289), Wink (1968:27-41), Sand (1974:127-137) and Meier (1980a:383-405), all agree that the essence of the role of John the Baptist, taken by Matthew from Mark, is that of John the Baptist as a *parallel figure of suffering*, who foreshadows and anticipates the passion and death of Jesus.

In the previous section we pointed out that Jesus was rejected and eventually killed by the Jewish multitude on the ironic grounds that they opposed his interpretation of the Torah. This rejection and eventual killing of the protagonist by the antagonist was foreshadowed in the role of John the Baptist. The function of John the Baptist in the gospels of both Matthew and Mark is thus essentially that of fulfillment of a *prototype* role.

In what respects does the image of John the Baptist as the *prototype* of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew differ from that in the Gospel of Mark? Wink (1968:41), in the footsteps of Trilling (1959:289), considers that Matthew wanted to aggravate 'Israel's' guilt by stressing that 'Israel' was responsible for the deaths of both Jesus and John the Baptist. According to Trilling and Wink, John the Baptist's suffering and death, in parallel with that of Jesus, offered Matthew a further reason to see the 'church' as replacing 'Israel' in the 'history of salvation'. The singular image of John the Baptist in the Gospel of Matthew is, however, in my view, directly related to Matthew's dominant theological perspective, namely his *God-with-us* theme.

This becomes clear when one realizes that the 'parallel' theme in the Gospel of Matthew involves more than a mere 'parallelism' between Jesus and John the Baptist. In the Gospel of Matthew one finds a continuous line from the Old Testament prophets to John the Baptist and from Jesus down to the disciples. The thesis of our study is that Matthew's *ideological* perspective consists of his creating an analogy, using this idea of *continuity*, between the Jesus-events in the pre-paschal 'period' and the disciple-events in the post-paschal 'period'.

The *name* that on the one hand links the role of Jesus in the pre-paschal period to both the role of John the Baptist and the Old Testament prophets, and on the other carries forward the line of continuity to the disciples in the post-paschal period, is that of Προφήτης (cf i a Hill 1964/1965:296-302).

This name of Προφήτης for John the Baptist (Mt 11:9; 14:5; 21:26) features in the Gospel of Matthew even in contexts where Προφήτης does not explicitly occur as a name. Examples of this are the *Elia redivivus* theme (Mt 17:10-13), the identification of John the Baptist's preaching as the (prophetic) 'voice in the wilderness' with the function of 'forerunner' of the Messiah (Mt 3:3) and the similarity in the attire of John the Baptist (cf Mt 3:4 with 1 Ki 1:8) and that of the prophet Elijah (see i a Beare 1981:90).

To Matthew, the name of Προφήτης inextricably relates firstly to the prophet's work both as a herald and, in the sense of the final eschatological prophet, the forerunner of the messianic kingdom. Secondly, it relates to the suffering fate that a prophet can expect as a result of his proclamation. Both functions, that of *forerunner* (the *Elia redivivus* theme) and that of the *fate of a prophet*, are used in the Gospel of Matthew, as far as John the Baptist is concerned, in a 'prototypical role': In the first place as the 'prototype' of Jesus and, in the second, together with the Old Testament prophets and Jesus, as the analogic 'prototype' of the disciples. Cullmann (1966:23) formulates the continuous line between the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist and Jesus as follows: Matthew 17:10-13 clearly refers to the Baptist as the returned Elijah. At the same time, in accordance with the Jewish expectation, the Baptist, according to Jesus, also fulfills the fate of all earlier prophets, namely to be persecuted. His role, therefore, is not only the calling to repentance, but also suffering, which put him in the position of the suffering servant of God. Although, in the application of the name Προφήτης to John the Baptist, an *eschatological motif*, in the sense of the 'end-time prophet', was existent (cf i a Cullmann 1966:22-28), this motif plays a subordinate role in the Gospel of Matthew. The motif of so-called *Prophetenschicksal*, which was well known in contemporary

Judaism (cf Sand 1974:125f), is the dominant one in Matthew's Gospel. In his name Προφήτης for John the Baptist, Matthew stresses the irony of 'persecution on the grounds of δικαιοσύνη'. This thought is strikingly expressed in Matthew 5:10-12, which relates to the disciples in the post-paschal period, who endured suffering in continuity with the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist and Jesus: 'Blessed are they that are persecuted because of righteousness [δικαιοσύνη]....Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, *for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*' Only on the grounds of this logion is it clear that the term δικαιοσύνη is closely associated with the theme of suffering in the Gospel of Matthew. The fact that this term is linked not only directly to the 'Jesus events' (and the 'disciple-events'), but also to the actions of John the Baptist (Mt 3:15; 21:32) is a further amplification of the 'parallelism' motif mentioned above.

Apart from in the name Προφήτης, which the Jewish crowd used for both John the Baptist (Mt 21:26) and Jesus (Mt 21:46) and which is discussed later, the 'parallelism' between John the Baptist and Jesus can be seen in the following expressions and motifs in the Gospel of Matthew: Matthew uses the term παργίγεται (= 'appear') to introduce the actions of John the Baptist (Mt 3:1) as well as those of Jesus (Mt 3:13). Where John the Baptist's preaching is in the imperative μετανοείτε, ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (= 'Turn away from your sins') (Mt 3:2), this also applies to Jesus (Mt 3:17). The Jewish leaders – the antagonists in the Gospel of Matthew – are also John the Baptist's opponents (Mt 3:7); they refer to John the Baptist, as they ironically refer to Jesus, as someone 'who has a demon' (Mt 11:18) and they are, just as in the case of Jesus, responsible for John the Baptist's death (Mt 14:1-12; 17:10-13; 21:36).