

THE PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST AS A MODEL FOR RELIGIOUS CLERICS IN THE PURSUIT OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

The main focus of this paper is to address the need for socio-religious transformation in Nigeria, an issue that is begging for a functional and practical solution. I say this because of the ethno-religious and political cum economic crises that have bedeviled the country, Nigeria, since independence. The ethno-religious killings in Kano (1980 & 1986), Kaduna (1982 & 2000), Jos (2009 & 2010), Bauchi (1982), and Maiduguri (1982) are still fresh in our memory. So also are the rigging of elections, the looting of public treasuries by political office functionaries, the corruption menace in The Nigeria Police Force, and the monetization of the Gospel in the name of 'prosperity preaching' with its attendant consequences. Other issues that are beckoning for solution are the '419' saga,¹ the problems of kidnapping and assassination in the Niger-Delta and other parts of the nation, the issue of drug peddling, the marketing of fake drugs, substandard goods, poverty and a high level of insecurity in the nation, to mention just a few.²

It is under this background that we can appreciate the ministry and personality of John the Baptist, a man who was sold to the business of social transformation in his times in Israel. This John stood out among his contemporaries and preached a message that is still relevant in our 21st century. His discipline in dress and diet (Matt.3:4-6), and his authoritative preaching that held the whole of Judea spell bound and drew converts from all walks of life should serve as a veritable model for religious clerics in Nigeria. A brief summary of John the Baptist's message is as follows:

He said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "*Teacher, what shall we do?*" And he said to them, "*Collect no more than is appointed you.*" Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, John answered them all, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing

fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people (Luke 3:7-18, RSV).

This article recognizes that religious clerics occupy a significant position in the life of the nation. They also have the singular opportunity of addressing the teeming population of the nation and its policy makers and executives who throng our mosques and churches every week to worship and pray. It is therefore hoped that if they would take a cue from the style of John the Baptist, they would become a catalyst to socio-religious transformation in Nigeria, a nation that is seeking 'rebranding' without repackaging. John exhibited the prophetic style of preaching wherein they boldly and authoritatively rebuked the erring ones in the society and fearlessly condemned their misdeeds and declared God's counsel to them. This was coupled with his exemplary conduct and simple lifestyle in dress and diet, which were also characteristic of Old Testament prophets.

Our methodology in this paper would be descriptive analysis as well as contextual hermeneutic. We would therefore examine the various biblical passages as well as extra biblical texts that have something to do with John the Baptist and use these to chart a course for religious clerics in Nigeria. We shall commence with John the Baptist's Bio Data before we go to his preaching and conclude with a contextualization of his message for Nigeria.

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS

The primary sources that provide information about John the Baptist are the New Testament, the writings of Flavius Josephus,³ the Jewish historian of the first century A. D., some early Christian writers and the Mandaean Literature.⁴ Of all these, the New Testament is the chief source and it consists of a wealth of information about John the Baptist in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles. Josephus' data is contained in his *'Antiquities of the Jews'* and *'The Jewish War'*. The early Christian writers that provide information about John the Baptist are Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Origen. Their information is however dependent on the New Testament. Others are apocryphal works such as *The Gospel according to the Hebrews* (dated c. A.D. 110), *The Gospel of the Ebionites*, *The Gospel of Nicodemus* and several apocryphal infancy gospels, chief of which is *The Book of James (Protevangelium)*.⁵ Some of these expand the New Testament stories about John the Baptist and his baptism of Jesus Christ but are of modest contribution to our discourse in this paper.

With regards to the Gospels' accounts of the Baptist there have arisen some criticisms that have tended to deny John's historicity. These can be classified into three groups. The first is predicated on inconsistencies within the New Testament records. A few examples are as tabulated below:

THE SYNOPTICS	JOHN'S GOSPEL
John is regarded as the returning Elijah – Matt. 11:11-15	The fourth Gospel denies this – Jn. 1:21
John and Jesus come into contact only at the time of Jesus' baptism.	A period of contact is known in the Fourth Gospel – Jn. 3:22-30.
Jesus' ministry commences after John's arrest – cf Mk. 1:14f, Matt 4:12f.	The ministry commences before John's imprisonment – cf. Jn. 3:24; 1:43 – 2:22.

The second criticism is that the excessive stress on the subordination of John to Jesus Christ in the Gospels raises some suspicion. There is a constant reminder that John is inferior to Jesus Christ. The problem with this however, is that, (i) rather than stop, John continued his ministry after the Baptism of Jesus, (ii) when in prison he appears not to have decided whether Jesus was the coming one or not. (iii) there is much evidence in the New Testament as elsewhere that a Baptist sect continued to exist even after John's death.⁶ The implications of these arguments, according to the critics, are that John was in fact more of an independent religious figure than the New Testament allows and that continuity of a Baptist sect suggests that some of his followers had resolved to continue their pursuit and did not cross over to the Jesus movement.

The third criticism is that it is suspected that John's message had been 'Christianized'. Reference is made to Luke's conclusion of John the Baptist's message with the claim that "he announced the good news" (Lk. 3:18). This makes it appear that the early Christian community regarded John simply as the first Christian preacher.

What we can make out of the foregoing critical issues raised about the reliability of the New Testament accounts of John the Baptist is that these issues are not sufficient to render the New Testament account inauthentic. If what the New Testament claims about John were not true, some living witnesses would have raised objections. But there is no indication that any objection was raised by anyone. Apart from that contradictions in the records can be accounted for by the errors in the transmission of the text which are well known to biblical scholars. The tendency to subordinate John to Jesus rather than being held to be suspect should be seen as lending credence to passages that present a high posture of John the Baptist. On the whole, therefore, we can conclude that the New Testament source is very reliable.

The Mandaean literature, on the other hand, belongs to a sect of late antiquity who are known to exist in Iraq till date. When they were first discovered they were mistakenly referred to as the Christians of St. John. It has, however, been discovered that they have nothing in favour of Christianity and Judaism. The Mandaeans claim that John the Baptist was God's light for the world and the divine redeemer.⁷ In some of their literature, the *Ginza* and the *Book of John*, references are made to John's birth (see *Ginza* II, I, 151f and the *Book of John*, 32) and to his preaching. These materials are rejected as a true witness to John the Baptist as they are found to have been compiled around the 8th c. A.D.

Scobie informs us that:

The Mandaean interest in and exaltation of John took place only at a comparatively late date. There was a good reason for this; toleration was granted to religious sects by the Arabs only on condition that they had a prophet and a sacred book. It was the Arab invasion which compelled the Mandaeans to present John as their prophet. From Syriac Christian and possibly other late sources, they had some knowledge of John. These traditions were now expanded as the situation required.⁸

The above implies that Mandaean literature is of no value to ascertaining John's history. We shall discuss Josephus' literature on John later in this paper. Data on John's birth and upbringing is extensively provided in Luke's gospel chapters 1:5-2:52. Here, the preparation for his birth is recounted and his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth are shown to be of priestly descent. Both are

advanced in age and are very pious and yet experienced a prolonged barrenness until the coming of John the Baptist. His conception and birth took place in extraordinary circumstances and at his dedication there was a prophecy that he would be a great man. It is, however, remarkable to note that rather than stay with his pious parents and be nurtured, John is said to have grown and “became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel” (Luke 1:80, RSV).

Many critical issues are raised with this account of John’s birth and upbringing. First of all, the passage is seen as a later interpolation into Luke’s Gospel. This is predicated on the fact that the preface to the book of Luke (1:1-4) is composed in elegant Greek while the birth and infancy pericope is couched in Semitic style and reveals Semitic grammar, vocabulary and thought forms. Apart from that, the 3rd chapter of Luke reads like that of a new book. The birth and infancy story is also legendary and appears to be based on an earlier source originally composed either in Hebrew or Aramaic. This may not be taken to mean that the account is not historical but rather that the author of the Gospel most probably used existing materials and wove them around the birth of John the Baptist. With regards to his having spent his youth in the wilderness, it is postulated that it could be possible if we recall that some Essenes are reported to have been adopting other people’s sons and training them in accordance with their own principles.⁹

Concerning John’s mission he was portrayed before he was even born as a prophet who would turn the hearts of God’s people back to him and he is also to be a forerunner who would prepare the way in the wilderness for the Lord. The Gospel of Matthew identifies him with the returning Elijah being expected by the Jews before the Day of the Lord. John fulfils this role by preaching a baptism of repentance and calls the people to come back to their Lord. John also adopted an ascetic lifestyle, eating only grasshoppers and wild honey and avoiding strong drink in keeping with his Nazirite dedication. Several of these practices of John the Baptist place him in the camp of the Essenes. We, therefore, conclude that John must have been a member of the Essenes.

JOHN THE BAPTIST: THE PREACHER

Getting acquainted with John’s background would shed light on his preaching and life style. We would therefore, briefly consider John’s religious and/or sectarian affiliation here and the locale where he operated. Since the New Testament makes it clear that John was a contemporary of Jesus, we would assume that the situations in the times of Jesus also apply to the Baptist.

With regards to his sectarian affiliation it has been made sufficiently clear that John did not belong to the famous Jewish sects like the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Zealots, because his life-style and preaching run contrary to the beliefs and practices of these sects.¹⁰ Many scholars identify him with a Baptist movement known as the Essenes. Others think that he was a member of the Qumran community before withdrawal for his ministry.¹¹ Scobie, however, opines that the Essenes may have been an umbrella name covering many Baptist sects such as the Qumran community. Apart from the Essenes, several other Baptist sects are identified as existing during the time of the Baptist. These include the Nasarenes (*Nasaraioi*), the HemeroBaptists whose chief practice was the rite of washing, the Masbotheans – also believed to be a sect that practiced baptism since their Aramaic name means to baptize, and the “Morning bathers’ mentioned in the Tosefta and Talmud.¹²

This exploration shows that there was a widespread of sectarian Baptist movements in the time of John. The reason why he earned the title of the Baptist may not have been because baptism was innovated by him but most likely because of his influence and public ministry. It is, however, remarkable to note that of all these Baptist sects none claimed to be baptizing for repentance as did John but rather baptized daily for self-purification.

With regards to his area of operation, John is presented as a 'prophet of the wilderness'. Mathew says that John operated in the wilderness of Judea' (Matthew 3:1). This must have been in the region known as 'the wilderness of Judah' (midhbār yehūdā) in the Old Testament. This lay between the Judean Plateau and the Dead Sea.

The wilderness had become symbolic of many religious and historical events to the Jews. God's revelation to Moses took place in the wilderness (Exod. 3). Israel was delivered in the wilderness. The Law and the Covenant were cut in the wilderness. So also are several prophets and David linked with the wilderness. But the wilderness could also be seen as a place of sin and punishment. John's stay and operation in the wilderness may suggest a re-enactment of God's deliverance of his people in the wilderness.

JOHN'S PREACHING AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

This section brings us to the crux of this paper. In it we shall examine the message of John the Baptist and demonstrate how it could serve as a model for religious clerics and the search for socio-religious transformation in Nigeria. The approach we would like to adopt is to first of all present the biblical texts of John's message before we begin to draw inferences from them.

- (a) An analysis of John the Baptist is referred to by all the Gospels, although with varying details and in different contexts or settings. Mark takes off his entire writing with this and places John's preaching as a preparation for the ministry of Jesus Christ. Matthew does the same thing but places it after the return of baby Jesus from the Egyptian asylum. Luke on the other hand puts the message between the presentation of the twelve-year old Jesus in the Temple, most probably at his graduation from elementary school (*beth ha-sepher*) and the beginning of Jesus' ministry.¹³ The fourth Gospel, however, weaves the story in a theological discourse about the incarnation of the Word and simply tries to show that John the Baptist was a mere witness to the Light that had come into the world.
- (b) Of the records of the message of John in the synoptic gospels, Mark lacks details; Matthew is fuller while Luke is the most comprehensive. Our focus will therefore be on the Lukan account in Luke 3:1-20 and to a lesser degree that of Matthew in Mt. 3:1-12.

Luke begins his account of the Baptists' message in 3:1-2 by placing him in a historical setting. Historical figures, Tiberius Caesar, Pontus Pilate, Herod Antipas, Philip the Tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests, are mentioned following the style of historiography in New Testament times.¹⁴ This, from all indications, proves to us that the Baptist is a historical figure and that we can rely on this account.

Next we are told that the Word of God came to John in the desert. This conforms to the style in the Old Testament and may be designed to portray John as a prophet and his source of

authority as God.¹⁵ The summary of the message of John is that he was preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (v.3).

Much has already been said about baptism and Baptist movements in this article. However, it will be important to reiterate here that John's baptism was different from those of the other Baptist sects and Jewish proselyte Baptism in several respects.¹⁶ Firstly, the baptism of the Baptist sects such as the Essenes or the Qumran community was a daily affair for spiritual self purification while that of John was once and for all.¹⁷ Secondly, the sects' baptism was not for repentance. Thirdly, proselyte baptism was limited to non-Jews who wished to convert to Judaism. Furthermore, the baptism of the sects was limited to their members and localized while John's baptism was for every Jew who cared to be made right with God. This would be offensive to the Jews since it implied that they, like the Gentiles, were to come to God on the same terms and not on the basis of biological descent, i.e. the merits of the fathers or covenant relationship.

The next thing to be noted is the response of the people to John's call to repentance. Luke describes those who came to be baptized as 'the crowds' (οἱ ὄχλοι). This reveals the massive nature of John's influence over the people. Rather than get annoyed at the treatment he meted to them the Jews thronged out to the desert to meet John for baptism only to be addressed as brood of vipers (γεννηματα εχιδνων). Keener reports that 'vipers (e.g., the Nicander's viper) were commonly believed to eat their way out of their mother's womb; thus John's calling the crowd "vipers' offspring" was even nastier than calling them "vipers".¹⁸ It describes their wicked disposition. The use of the word to flee (φυγειν) creates the picture of serpents and other wild beasts fleeing a burning field. In similar manner, these 'offspring of vipers' were taking a step towards fleeing the judgment that was imminent. In order to truly flee from the 'fire' they are charged to bear fruit worthy of repentance, a reference to transformed character. The Jews who ostentatiously believed that their descent from Abraham conferred salvation status on them were told that they too must repent and exhibit transformation of character to be truly saved. The imminence of the impending judgment is illustrated with the figure of an axe laid ready to fell unfruitful or bad fruitful trees and cast them into the fire.

When the people inquire what they are to do in order to qualify for God's kingdom, John spells out the following duties:

- (i) They are to participate in poverty alleviation in truth and not as political propaganda, by sharing their clothes and food with the less privileged in their society. This underscores generosity. There were many poor people in the land of Israel at the time of John the Baptist who needed to be helped. John, therefore, called on those who professed to have repented to show concern to them by sharing their belongings with them. This had always been one of the features of Israelite religion, i.e., the giving of alms. (Luke 3:10-11).
- (ii) Tax-collectors and soldiers as well as the police were to abstain from extortion, exploitation and harassment of the citizenry. They are also warned against inordinate desire or craving after wealth and are rather told to be contented with their salaries. These two groups of people, the tax collectors and the soldiers were known for their exploitative deals in society. The tax collectors operated as allies to the Roman Government against their fellow Jews. They served as contractors of tribute. For example, if a community was required to pay a million pounds, these 'tax contractors'

would collect something like two million pounds, remit the one million to the government and keep the rest of the money for themselves, thus enriching themselves at the expense of their people. This earned them hatred by the masses coupled with the fact that the citizenry saw them as being disloyal to their God (Yahweh), who alone qualified to collect tax from His people.¹⁹

Another thing which is embedded in the message of John the Baptist is his self discipline. This is revealed first in his refusal to play God or to arrogate too much air to himself. He tells the people frankly that he is not the Christ and that as a matter of fact he is far less than the coming one. Secondly, John elsewhere is described as dressing moderately and being very austere in his appetite for food (see Luke 3:15-17 & Mark 1:6).

The last aspect of John's message which we must take note of is his fearless confrontation of the Herod who represents the powers that be. We are made to understand that the Herod in question here is Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great, who succeeded their father in 4 B.C. as tetrarchs (rulers of one-fourth of the country).²⁰ Herod Antipas had been married to the daughter of Aretas, the Arabian king of the nearby kingdom of the Nabataens.²¹

Houston reports that Herod Antipas ran into his marital problem when he visited his half-brother Philip in Rome. He fell in love with Herodias who was Philip's wife.²² They came to an agreement that they would both divorce their spouses and get married. The Mosaic Law permitted people to divorce and remarry (Deut. 24:1-4) but did not allow a man to marry his brother's wife, - 'If a man marries his brother's wife, it is an act of impurity; he has dishonoured his brother' (Lev. 20:21). It is also pointed out that even if Philip were dead, Mosaic Law would not have allowed Herod to marry Herodias because she had a child, the girl Salome. Levirate marriage was allowed only in cases where it was necessary to raise offspring for a childless deceased brother. Herod overlooked these legal provisions and divorced his wife and took his brother's wife. John the fearless preacher and forthright prophet in Old Testament prophetic style condemned Herod to his face by saying 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife' (Mark 6:18). Herod rather than repent, arrested John and put him in prison (Mk. 6:17 and Matt. 4:12). Later, at the maneuvering antics of Herodias, John was beheaded at the orders of Herod Antipas (Mk. 6:19-29). John thus paid the supreme price for daring an evil, vindictive, and heartless ruler.

Flavius Josephus, however, tells us a different story about what led to John's death. According to him,

Some of the Jews believed that Herod's army was destroyed by God, God punishing him very justly for John called the Baptist, whom Herod had put to death. For John was a pious man, and he was bidding the Jews who practiced virtue and exercised righteousness toward each other and piety toward God, to come together for baptism. For thus, it seemed to him, would baptismal ablution be acceptable, if it were used not to beg off from sins committed, but for the purification of their body when the soul had previously been cleansed by righteous conduct. And profoundly stirred by what he said - Herod feared that John's so extensive influence over the people might lead to an uprising (for the people seemed likely to do everything he might counsel). He thought it

much better, under the circumstances, to get John out of the way in advance, before any insurrection might develop, than for himself to get into trouble and be sorry not to have acted, once an insurrection had begun. So because of Herod's suspicion, John was sent as a prisoner to Machaerus, the fortress already mentioned, and there put to death. But the Jews believed that the destruction which overtook the army came as a punishment for Herod, God wishing to do him harm²³ (The Jewish Antiquities XVIII, 5, 2).

We may not be able to ascertain what the true situation was concerning the cause of John the Baptist's death by Herod. On this matter also opinions vary. Some scholars see Josephus as distorting the New Testament story. Scobie belongs to this school and argues that it was the usual practice of Josephus to distort Jewish stories in order to demonstrate to the Roman authorities that the Jews were good and to exonerate them from doing what might provoke the Romans. According to him, therefore, the aim of Josephus in John's story might have been to present the Baptist as one of the pious Jews. Others, however, see Josephus' account as being the only reasonable explanation. This is the position of H.B. Altinger who argues that political motivation for killing John the Baptist by Herod is a more compelling reason than his condemnation of the adulterous act reported in the New Testament.²⁴ Rather than see the two accounts as contradictory we would like to see them as complementary. This is because as reported by Josephus, Herod would have been truly worried about the popularity of John the Baptist and would have perceived some impending danger should John choose to champion an insurrection.

Josephus' account reveals that John the Baptist was a pious man. Secondly, it shows that John was a very effective preacher and commanded a lot of respect as 'everybody turned to John for they were profoundly stirred by what he said'. Thirdly, he had much influence with the people to such an extent that "they seemed likely to do everything he might counsel". This agrees with the records in Mark's and Mathew's Gospels that tell us that "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him" (Mk. 1:5 and Matt. 3:5). Surprisingly, Mathew reports that many Pharisees and even many Sadducees came to John's baptism. If we consider the fact that the Sadducees had no faith in judgement and life after death, we would see how much of an influence John the Baptist's message had been in Israel. We have thus agreed with Josephus as the biblical evidence confirms that John was of immense influence over the people of Judea. We however, opine that the reason for his arrest by Herod Antipas was not only his suspicion of insurrection but that coupled with John's preaching against his adultery. We shall now turn to the challenges in John's preaching.

JOHN'S MESSAGES ON BELIEF IN GOD, REPENTANCE AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF NIGERIAN NATION

In this section of the article we are going to apply the message of John the Baptist to the Nigerian situation. It will be noticed that three things are relevant indeed in the message of John the Baptist. These are the need to address poverty in the society, the need to tackle corruption amongst the Police and Custom officers, and the problem of harassment and exploitation by those who carry arms, the army and the militants. We shall deal briefly with these issues here.

- i. **The Problem of Poverty.** Nigeria is one of the major Petroleum exporting countries of the world today. Apart from the huge income that is generated from petroleum resources there are large deposits of solid minerals and natural gas in Nigeria. Aside this most of the land mass of the nation is suitable for agricultural produce from the North to the South and East to the West. In spite of all these Nigeria is ranked as one of the poorest countries of the world. Less than ten per cent of the populace control the wealth of the nation, siphon public treasuries and keep this loot in foreign banks in Europe and Asia. Politicians make laws that favour them and pay themselves huge amounts of money as salaries and allowances, while the civil servants languish in poverty. On October 1, 2010 the Nigerian President, Dr. Jonathan Goodluck in a national broadcast on national television (NTA) announced a minimum wage of seventeen thousand naira per month (an equivalent of about \$115) for Federal civil servants while the Senators and those in the State and National Houses of Assembly earn more than three million naira (about \$20,000.00) per month. The situation is even worse for those in the private sector. No enabling environment is being created. Most large and small scale industries that depend on electric power supply are forced to fold up as power supply is regularly epileptic. The few that can afford to buy power generators build the operational costs into their products thus heightening the cost of living and exerting pressure on the masses. It is estimated that at present over fifty per cent of Nigerians are unemployed, while another ten percent are underemployed. There are hundreds of beggars that parade the streets in search of daily food. This situation has created many armed robbers and kidnappers as well as prostitution. It is also responsible for the craze for emigration to the Western world where it is hoped that there would be greener pastures. Such is the situation under which John the Baptist's message becomes apposite. He called on those who had bread to share with those that had none. He also advised that the one having two tunics should share with the one having none. As it applies to the Nigerian situation John was calling for concern and practical steps to be taken to alleviate poverty in the society.

It should be borne in mind that what John was advocating is not mere *sadakat* or a situation where the rich move along the streets and give a few naira notes to the waiting beggars. No, John was advocating for such sacrificial action that would truly meet the needs of the poor. Giving away one of two tunics owned by a person implies giving half of your possessions. This would imply a cut in the salaries of the politicians and other public office holders, a reduction in the number of cars and houses being sought after, and the creation of an enabling environment for private businesses to thrive. If these practical steps are taken, the problem of poverty would be reduced and this will also reduce crime wave in the society. If people continue to steal money and forget the poor kidnapping and armed robbery would continue to increase.

- ii. **The tax-collectors.** In Nigeria today, those we can consider as the tax collectors are those who collect revenue such as the Customs and Excise, the Immigration Officers, and those charged with the responsibility of handling revenue and export business for the nation. It is common knowledge Nigeria today that those in these establishments are

- there just to amass wealth to themselves. Those who handle the exportation of crude oil and other mineral resources account for just a little percentage of what is derived and compromise with those who buy at different levels and enrich themselves at the detriment of the nation. The Custom Officers look the other way while illegal acts are perpetrated provided they are “settled”, or given their own percentage. Auditors and accounting officers strike deals and manipulate records and allow tax evasion when they are settled. The rot is massive and alarming. To all these officers, John says ‘collect only that which is legally approved’ and pay it where it should be paid.
- iii.* The soldiers represent all military personnel and militants in Nigeria. These exhibit the superior mentality. As was the situation in John’s time, they harass people and sometimes intimidate them with their uniforms and gun power. Those who are supposed to provide security to the populace have become a security risk, sometimes shooting and maiming or even killing at the slightest provocation. Sometimes they drive against traffic and cause unwarranted accidents in the streets. To all those in uniforms, John says, be contented with your wages and exploit no one. He also says shun violence and be courteous and considerate (Luke 3:12-14).

JOHN AS A MODEL TO RELIGIOUS CLERICS IN NIGERIA

In the introduction to this article, we highlighted some of the problems that are plaguing the Nigerian nation. These include ethnicity, poverty, unemployment and under-employment, religious and ethnic violence, kidnapping, armed robbery, political thuggery and assassination, rigging of elections, environmental pollution, drug peddling, sale of fake drugs, sale of substandard goods, the monetization of the Gospel, in the names of ‘prosperity preaching’ and ‘prophetism’, oil bunkering, money laundering by political office holders, child labour, military harassment, and corruption of security agents, just to mention a few.²⁵

We also stated in passing that these vices are begging for a functional and practical solution. From the discussions that go on among the masses and from the ‘rebranding propaganda’ and ‘the seven-point agenda’ of the national government, it would appear as if Nigerians are yearning for a ‘Messiah’ that would turn the fortunes of the country around. The problems of electric power supply, failed and airing banks, the crippling economy and the deplorable state of Federal and State roads are problems that have hitherto proved to be a deadly nightmare. No one appears to have an answer in sight. Both high and low revel in corruption and fraudulent acts. The contemporary Nigerian society would qualify as ‘brood of vipers’ to use John the Baptist’s parlance! The irony of the situation is that almost every serious thinking Nigerian knows that ‘rebranding’ and constitutional review as well as change of policies are not the panacea to these deadly and venomous cankerworms. Every serious thinker thinks that the panacea to the nation’s socio-religious palavers is to be situated in attitudinal change. Attitudinal change, however, is usually midwived by some ethical challenges, either of a humanitarian or spiritual nature. This, from my opinion appears to create room for religious clerics after the manner of John the Baptist, whose counsel everyone should like to follow. Apart from the counsel he provided, John’s lifestyle can serve as a veritable model to Nigerian clerics. As can be

seen from Luke 3:7-18 and Mark 1:5-7 John had simple dress style, ate moderately and did not arrogate too much power to himself. This shows that he was selfless and disciplined. He was also fearless in his approach to condemning vices in his preaching. These are sterling qualities that any religious cleric should possess.

We do not have reliable statistics, but if what the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life tells us is anything to go by, Christians and Muslims constitute more than 90% of Nigeria's population.²⁶ Most of these people attend church and mosque regularly. It would, therefore, not be an overstatement to say that the religious cleric holds the key to socio-religious transformation in this nation. If every a preacher or religious leader in Nigeria would choose to model his/her life and ministry after John the Baptist, the very much attitudinal change desired would come quickly.

What then are the qualities that suit John the Baptist as a model to clerics in search of socio-religious transformation? We would look at them in the next subsection.

JOHN'S QUALITIES OF A MODEL

From the foregoing exploration of biblical texts about John the Baptist's preaching and lifestyle, we may draw the following qualities that suit the Baptist as a model:

- (i) We are told that John preached his message in the desert, (Mat. 3:1). There were cities and towns in Judea, but John did not choose any of them as a base for his ministry. The desert or wilderness of Judea is described by H.V. Morton as follows:

Some writers have described this hot gash in the earth's crust as the most horrible place in the world, while others have found it strangely beautiful. It is, I suppose, a matter of temperament or, perhaps, liver. If you are not feeling too well, I can imagine that the Jordan valley with its overwhelming heat and its airlessness, and Jericho with its flamboyant vegetation, its reptiles and its insects, could be a terrible nightmare... All around are piled dead rocks twisted in the agony of some prehistoric convulsion, unlike the good clean rocks from which men can build their homes; obscene rocks stained with yellow slime and covered with a ghastly shroud of salt.²⁷

This description demonstrates that to stay in the wilderness by John required the spirit of endurance. John was ready to turn his back on the pleasures that city life could offer in order to get God's work done. This contrasts favourably with the stance of many a preacher of today whose calling is only for city ministry. Secondly, the accounts of Matthew and Mark inform us that even though the Baptist was in the desert all the people of Judea went out to his ministry. This demonstrates that he had what the people needed - a word from God. The implication of this for the Nigerian religious cleric is that if he/she truly has God's message, ministry in the rural area would not be a barrier to his/her success.

- (ii) **The Nature of John's Message**

Three things characterize the Baptist's message. First of all it was Kingdom-centred; John called on the people to repent for God's kingdom was at hand. Secondly, he

placed the ethical requirements of being accepted by God before the people that came to his baptism; they were to bear fruits worthy of repentance and not just to wash themselves in water.²⁸ Thirdly, John was bold and fearless in his preaching. He told the soldiers, the tax collectors, the Pharisees and Sadducees as well as everyone else who came to him the truth without mincing words.²⁹ Some of these groups represented the most corrupt of the land.³⁰ His confrontation of Herod Antipas with the truth is a case to note by Nigerian clerics who deal with political office holders. Instead of telling them the truth, many have become their prayer hirelings and diviners for the sake of naira and kobo. John showed these ‘so-called big men’ no special favours and was not interested in their money or wealth or political appointment. This should serve as a challenge to Nigerian clerics.

(iii) **John’s Lifestyle**

The Gospels inform us again of two things that characterized John’s lifestyle - his food and dress³¹. John chose to live an austere life. He could have made a lot of money from the crowds that thronged his ministry and could have eaten the best of the land. He, however, chose to live on grasshoppers and wild honey. His dress was not of fine velvet or linen, but camel’s hair, the raiment of poor people and prophets.³² This reveals to us that John had his appetites under control. This is grossly lacking in those who provide religious leadership in contemporary Nigeria. They should take a cue from the Baptist.

(iv) **Non-ethnic Prejudice**

John, though a Jew by birth, did not consider the Jews to be different from the other nations (Gentiles) as far as getting into God’s Kingdom was concerned. Two things demonstrate this. Whereas proselyte baptism had been for Gentile converts to Judaism, John insisted that even Jews must be baptized as the Gentiles in order to be saved. The second thing was that John condemned Jewish belief in the merits of the patriarchs. They should not think that having Abraham as their father conferred special salvific privileges on them. Thus, John saw every human being as equal before God. Religious clerics should model themselves after John and abstain from complicities in ethnic and religious killings in Nigeria.

(v) **Humility**

John demonstrated humility in the way he comported himself.³³ When occasion demanded him to play God or arrogate power to himself, he turned it down. The people asked him if he were the Christ or the prophet but he said simply that he was ‘just a voice in the wilderness’ and not the Christ or the prophet. He announced that he was only preparing the way for a ‘Coming One’ who was mightier than he was and whose sandals he was not even sufficient to stoop and untie or carry. Many religious clerics today see themselves as demi-gods and demand ‘worship’ as it were from their followers. They should turn a new leaf and pattern their lives after the Baptist.

(vi) **The Influence of John**

It is remarkable to note how the Gospels and Josephus converge in reporting that John had all the people going for him. More remarkable is the report that even the Pharisees and Sadducees went to John to be baptized. In my reckoning the influence

of the Baptist over the people stemmed from his non-dependence on them and the quality and evidence of his sincerity and lifestyle. When the religious clerics stop seeking the favours and goodwill of their members, their word would become respected and they would be able to sway the people in God's direction and implant attitudinal change in them. Nothing short of this would work.

(vii) **The Apolitical Nature of John's Ministry**

We conclude this section by drawing attention to the fact that John's ministry was devoid of any political motivation. His preaching was completely kingdom-based and ethically conditioned. He did not meddle in national or international politics (with Herod and the chief priests on the one hand and the Romans on the other).

There is an attempt by Robert Eisler to explain John's ministry in political terms. He uses the Slavonic Josephus as a basis for his exegesis and makes John out to have been encouraging the people to revolt against their foreign rulers. His baptism of repentance is said to have been directed at those Jews who had submitted to the Idumean line and to the Roman rulers. These Jews, according to Eisler, were considered by John to be Gentiles and should receive proselyte baptism to qualify as true Jews. This line of argument is rejected by biblical scholars as it is based on literature of a spurious nature as the Slavonic Josephus.

John the Baptist, therefore, had no political motivation for his ministry. A situation where some clerics in some denominations must be appointed on ethnic considerations should be stopped. Similarly, clerics who meddle in ethnic and national politics should take a cue from John and face their spiritual ministries squarely.

CONCLUSION

Our survey of biblical and extra-biblical texts has revealed that John the Baptist truly qualifies as a model for religious clerics in Nigeria. It also demonstrates that if the desired attitudinal change that would lead to socio-religious transformation would come about, religious clerics must do the following:

- (i) Recognize that they occupy a very significant place in the life of the nation.
- (ii) Realize that for them to be able to sway the nation in God's direction and bring about the desired transformation, their lifestyles must be modeled after that of John the Baptist.
- (iii) They must bring their appetites under control. This means they must not allow food, clothes, money and sex to control them.
- (iv) Their messages must be Kingdom-centered.
- (v) They should avoid pecuniary gain in their ministries and seek to tell the truth baring whoever's sheep/calf is gored.
- (vi) They should also be willing to pay the supreme sacrifice and endure hardness as God's faithful soldiers.
- (vii) They should also shun 'dirty' politics and ethnicity and do the work of ministry. This way, socio-religious transformation would be easily achieved and entrenched in Nigeria.

The paper has also addressed the generality of Nigerians and called upon them to heed the message of John the Baptist in his sermon. Areas where John beamed his searchlight were on the issue of poverty, corruption among revenue collectors and violence and harassment by the militia. The government and people of Nigeria are called upon to find

practical solutions to the monster of poverty by cutting down the jumbo salaries of public officers and checking their money laundering attitudes, which John the Baptist criticized in the tax-collectors and soldiers. Similarly, government should create an enabling environment for those in the private sector by building a stable electric power base and checking corruption in the high places as this would result to opportunities for job creation and alleviation of poverty. This would address John's injunction about sharing our food and clothes with those that do not have (Luke 3:11-13). Mechanized agriculture should also be encouraged and supported by the Federal and state governments. This would boost food production and would consequently improve the living standards of Nigerians. If these things happen, they would have fulfilled the social gospel which John the Baptist preached in Israel.

ENDNOTES

¹ 419 is a section in the Nigerian constitution that deals with fraudulent acts. It is now used in Nigeria to mean fraud.

² J. D. Gwamna, “John the Baptist on Corruption: Drawing lessons for the Nigerian Context”, a chapter in *Biblical Studies and Corruption in Africa*, Biblical Studies Series, No 6, Ed. By S. O. Abogunrin *et al*, Ibadan: NABIS, 2001, 434 – 436.

³ W. R. Farmer, “John the Baptist” in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* vol. 2 ed by G. A. Batrick *et al*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962, 955 – 962.

⁴ J. Strugnell. “John the Baptist, Saint”, *Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica 2009 Student and Home Edition*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009.

⁵ C. H. H. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1964, p.13-31.

⁶ H.B. Altinger, *John the Baptist: his True Life and Work*, trans. By Ross-Verlag, Internet Version downloaded from <http://www.E:/John the Baptist.htm> on May 5, 2010, 82f.

⁷ D. A. Desilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation*, D. Grove: IVP, 2004, 404.

⁸ Scobie, 31.

⁹ See Josephus, *The Jewish War* II, 8.2

¹⁰ Scobie, *op cit*.

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, “John the Baptist” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd Ed., edited by J. D. Douglas *et al.*, Leicester: IVP, 1982 , 602-603.

¹² Scobie, 34f.

¹³ Some scholars argue that Luke’s Gospel like Mark must have originally commenced with John’s message, the preceding material coming later. Scobie, 14.

¹⁴ C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, NT D.G Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993, 196

¹⁵ K. Barker *et al*, ‘Notes on Lk. 3 :2’ in the NIV Study Bible Grand Rapids : Zondervan Corporation, 1985, 1540.

¹⁶ Οερκε, βαπτω, βαπτιζω, βαπτισμος, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. By G.W. Bromiley, and ed. By Gerhard Kittell and G. Friedrich, Vol. One, Ten Vols., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1964, , 527.

¹⁷ D. A. Delsilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation*, D. Grove IVP, 2004, 207

¹⁸ Keener, *op cit*, 196.

¹⁹ K.L. Barker and J.R. Kohlenberger III , *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Abridged Ed. NT. 2 Vols; GR: Zondervan, 1994, 222.

²⁰ T. Houston, *Characters Around the Cross*, 2nd Eastbourne: MARC, 1990, 81 - 90.

²¹ R. A. Burridge, "Studying the Gospel" in *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible*, ed by G. M. Butterworth *et al*, GR: Zondervon, 1999, 584

²² Commentators have revealed that mark's data on Philip is faulty. Herodias was the wife of another brother of Herod. See J. Hardgreaves, 113-114

²³ F. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XVIII, 5, 2, Trans by H. St. John Thackeray, in Loeb Classical Library and cited by Scobie, 17-18.

²⁴ H.B. Altinger, *John the Baptist: his True Life and Work*, trans. By Ross-Verlag, Internet Version downloaded from <http://www.E:/John the Baptist.htm> on May 5, 2010, 85-92.

²⁵ J.N. Kwasau, "John the Baptist's injunctions to public officers: a challenge to the people of Nigeria" a chapter in *Biblical Studies and Leadership in Africa*, ed by S.O. Abogunrin *et al*, Ibadan: NABIS, 2009, 269-270.

²⁶ PEW Foundation, "Religious Demographic Profiles: Nigeria" , <http://Pewforum/world-affairs/countries/?countryID=5> downloaded 30 /6/2009.

²⁷ H.V. Morton, *In the steps of the Master*, P. 95 cited by Scobie, 44.

²⁸ I.H. Marshall, 'Luke' in *New Bible Commentary*, Third Ed., ed. by D. Guthne *et al.*, Leicester: IVP, 1970, 894.

²⁹ F.F. Bruce, 603.

³⁰ P.O.O; Ottuh, "John the Baptist's 'Social Gospel' in Luke 3:10-14; a challenge to public officers in Nigeria" a chapt. in *Biblical Studies and Leadership in Africa*, ed. by S.O. Abogunrin *et. al.*, Ibadan: NABIS, 2009, 257-258.

³¹ F. Foulkes, *A Guides to St. Matthew's Gospel*, London: SPCK, 2001, 18-19.

³² K.L. Barker and J.R. Kohlenberger III, 'Mathew' in the *Expositors Bible Commentary*, Abridged Ed. NT. 2 Vols; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 16-17.

³³ John Hargreaves, *A Guide to John's Gospel*, Revised ed., London SPCK, 1995, 10.

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