

# A STUDY ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST

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As a young initiate is introduced into Freemasonry he is informed that a Masonic lodge is dedicated to two eminent patrons of Masonry; both are named **John**. John the Evangelist was the disciple of Jesus who was considered the one “most loved” by Him. He was the author of the Gospel of John, the Epistles of First, Second, and Third John, and the Book of Revelation. John the Baptist was the cousin of Jesus who was the messenger sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah and call the people to repent and be baptized by water. This was a sign of cleanliness and the promise of an effort to live in a Godly life. This John could also be referred to as “John the Baptizer” since that act was so key to what he did to so many people, even Jesus himself. This study will attempt to review and summarize the history of John the Baptist as revealed in the Holy Bible.

According to historian Robert Macoy: “The lodges of symbolic Masonry which were formerly dedicated to King Solomon are now dedicated to John the Baptist and John the Evangelist. Hence the first three degrees are called Johannite Masonry.” There have been concordant bodies which were formed for short periods in Templary, Swedish Rites, etc. which were based on one of the Saints John. Today festivals are still observed dedicated to them, specifically: the 24<sup>th</sup> of June is dedicated to John the Baptist and the 27<sup>th</sup> of December to John the Evangelist. Lodges are encouraged to observe both events in some special fashion.

The references denoted in square brackets [] refer to the paintings given at the end of this paper.

## **Prophecy**

Many Old Testament passages are considered prophecies dealing with the ministry and life of John the Baptist. A very good example is: Isaiah 40:3-9:

Here are verses 3 through 5: *“A voice is calling ‘Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low, and let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley, then the Glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

Often in olden days a king would decide to travel to various part of his realm. In that case, messengers would be sent to tell the citizens that he was coming. The roads would need to be repaired, or even constructed from scratch, to make his trip comfortable. Low places might need to be filled in and hills would be leveled. Even the

various travels and visits of important political figures today also have their visits arranged in advance In the same way God prepared the way for the coming of His Son.

The example, in Malachi chapter 3 verse 1 there is a very clear prophesy:  
*“Behold, I am going to send My messenger and he will clear the way before Me, and the Lord whom you see will suddenly come to His temple, and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, He is coming” says the Lord of Hosts.*” It should also be noted that the passages that follow this one begin to deal with the Christ Himself. *“But Who can endure in the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears? etc.... ”*

The immediate prediction of the birth of John the Baptist came directly to his father, Zacharias, from the Angel Gabriel. (Luke 1:5-20). [1] Zacharias was performing his duties in the Temple, since he was a priest, when the angel appeared to say: *“Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall give him the name John.”* (Luke 1:13) Both parents of John were too old to normally have a son, but God the Creator was able to overcome physical limitations and procedures, just as he did for Abraham and the Virgin Mary. (See Genesis 18:1-14 and Luke 1:28-38.) The Angel also said that John would not drink wine or any strong drink. This indicates that he could be considered in the category of a Nazirite. That designation means anyone especially set aside for service to the Great Architect of the Universe. The two major examples of Nazirite in scripture are Samson (Judges 13:4-5) and Samuel (I Samuel 1: 11, 28). Zacharias composed and recited a very significant and beautiful poem about his son John which speaks of the blessing John is destined to provide to God’s people. It is given in Luke chapter 1 vs. 67 through 79. A portion says:

*“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised a horn of salvation for us...salvation from our enemies...to show mercy to our fathers...”* and so forth. He also laid out a kind of “plan of life” for his son. Verses 76-79 contain:

*“And you, Child will be called ‘the prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways; to give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercies of our God”*

Thus, it is shown that John the Baptist had a clear purpose from God. He was destined to fulfill the words of the Old Testament prophets and become a prophet himself. Bible commentators point out that the last of the O.T. prophets occurred some thousands of years before. Prophecy was silent until the arrival of John. Only with him do we again have the words: *“...the word of God came.,”* (Luke 3:2) Those are the words that were used in olden days when men like Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were called out and given special knowledge of the message from the Lord. They come again to testify to the calling of John.

### **John’s Heritage**

As covered above, John’s father Zacharias was a Priest. Both he and his wife Elizabeth were descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, the first High Priest and a descent of Levi. In Exodus chapter 24 there is the story of Aaron and Moses establishing

the covenant with God after Moses had his first visit to Mt. Sinai. In the normal course of things John the Baptist would have followed his father into the priesthood. Instead, John migrated into the desert/hill area close to the Dead Sea. See Luke 1:8: *“And the child continued to grow, and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel”*,

### **Artistic Renderings**

An untold number of fine artists have attempted to produce a painting that would depict the rugged nature, bushy hair, and ragged clothes of John the Baptist. Most are titled simply with his name. Many of those classical works of art can be found in a search of Wikipedia or simply checking with Google. This author was successful, with little effort, to uncover forty of such paintings. One of the most popular and well-known of the ones with which we are acquainted would be the one painted by Tiziano Vecellio (Titian) in about c. 1540. Another fine example was produced by Leonardo Da Vinci about 1505. This work was revised sometime later, and both versions are excellent. [3] A work produced by Luca Giordano about the year 1696 shows John the Baptist while he is preaching to the people. [4] John is also shown as a beautiful child, in no way related to his later lifestyle. A good example is one painted by Bartolome Esteban Murillo in 1665. [5]

### **Other Accounts**

Matthew chapter 3:1-12 is the beginning account of John's ministry in this Gospel. *“Now in those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea saying: ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand’. For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet saying: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make His path straight.’ (V.1-3)* This passage describes John as having a garment of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. (Note that the locust tree produces a rather dry pod, like a large pea pod, that is without much meat but still is edible.) Verse 5-6 says: *“Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.”*

John was especially harsh to the Pharisees and Sadducees (religious leaders) because they believed they were perfect in the eyes of God, just because they were descendants of Abraham. He referred to Jesus when he said: *As for me I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not even able to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”* Verses 13-17 of Matthew tell about Jesus coming out to see John and to be baptized, even though John at first said he was not worthy to perform that sacrament on Jesus.

### **John the Baptist and Jesus**

Even though we do not find in the Bible the exact relation between John and Jesus, we know they that they were cousins of some sort. The two mothers, Mary and Elisabeth are given as cousins in the scripture. When Mary learned that she was to be the mother of Jesus she made a trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem to visit her cousin, Elisabeth. It could

have been that, since Mary was still young, she wanted advice from some older support. The close relationship between the two unborn children is curiously illustrated. Elisabeth reported that the baby John “leaped” in her womb when Mary came in the door. (Luke 1: 39 – 45)

Some Medieval artists have chosen to imagine a time when John and Jesus were together as children. Two of the best examples of this approach come from Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. The first of these artists painted a masterpiece (unfinished) known as “Madonna and Child and St. John and the Angels.” (c. 1500) [6] This piece is displayed in the National Gallery of London. In it two Angels appear to the right, while only outlines appear to the left -- still waiting the master’s brush. Jesus and John appear as children, presented to be only about one or two years old.

Another picture of the children is seen in another painting by Di Vinci. [7]

Two additional works by da Vinci also contain the two Biblical children, both works known as “The Virgin of the Rocks.” (the first from 1483, found in the Louvre) [8] The name comes from the very rough rock formation in the background behind the Virgin Mary. DaVinci was apparently not satisfied with the first rendering, so it was repeated later in a period around 1506-08. [9] This “Virgin of the Rocks” is at the London National Gallery, showing baby John pointing to Jesus, who is holding a cross. Both children have halos in this painting. The whole idea of Jesus & John being together as children may be interesting artistically, but it has no basis in reality.

The first account we have of Jesus & John actually being together is when the former came to be baptized (Matt. 3: 13 – 17; Mark 1: 9 – 11; Lk, 3: 21-22; Jn. 1: 29 – 34). John at first demurred, declaring that Jesus was the one who should baptize him. However, Jesus made it plain that this was the will of the Father. [10] After the ceremony both men witnessed the verification from the Holy Spirit of that act and heard the words: “*Thou art My Beloved Son; with Thee I am well pleased.*”

On many occasions John made it plain that he was the messenger, but Jesus was the message! He told the Pharisees and Sadducees that one was coming who would be mightier than he – he was not worthy to carry the sandals of the true Son of God. In the gospel of John it is told that once when John saw Jesus coming he said: “*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*”

### **What Jesus Said About John the Baptist**

When Jesus first came to John to be baptized John was reluctant to perform that ceremony on Jesus. He thought that Jesus was already pure, and did not need a ceremonial washing. But Jesus said that it was proper and necessary for Him to go through it since He was still also a man. He said: “*What you are doing is within the will of God.*” (Matt.3: 15)

In the Gospel of Luke chapter 7 verses. 18 – 23 we find a story telling when John sent two of his followers to question Jesus to try to be sure that He was indeed the “promised one.” Jesus replied saying: “*Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear,*

*the dead are raised up, the poor have the Gospel preached to them. And blessed is the one who keeps from stumbling over me.”* Jesus then went on to talk about John and his unique character and mode of living. John was not “a weed shaken by the wind”; he did not dress in fancy clothes. Instead, He asked if they were looking for a prophet. *“Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about it is written. ‘Behold I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you.’”* (Luke 7: 26-27)

Jesus was open to discuss the difference between His lifestyle and John’s. John was living in the wilderness, and demonstrating the character of a Nazarite, (see Samuel and Sampson) avoiding wine, limited food, etc. Jesus was living a more normal life. *“For John has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say ‘He has a demon.’ The son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say ‘Behold a gluttonous man, a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners’”* (Luke 7:33-34)

At one period when the Chief Priest and other priests were questioning Jesus, they asked Him from where he received His authority. He then again used John the Baptist as an example, and demonstrated how He was sure that John’s work was in God’s will. He asked: *“Was the baptism of John from Heaven or men?”* The true answer was obvious, but one that the Jewish leaders were not willing to admit to. Jesus then said: *“Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”* Luke 20: 4 & 8)

Jesus was also very willing to recognize John for the role he played in preparation for His own works. Jesus pointed out that He (Jesus) was his own authority and witness, but John’s was also important. *“There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which he bears of me is true. You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth.”* (John: 5: 32-33)

### **The Death of John the Baptist**

In order to understand the circumstances of the tragic death of God’s messenger, John the Baptist, it will help to briefly investigate a few of the so-called “royal family” in Judea and Galilee. We begin with Herod the Great, the well-known ruler of Palestine and surrounding regions. He was, of course the person who ruled at the time of the birth of Christ, who met with the Wise Men, and who demanded the death of baby boys. He had several children, but we are only interested in a few. Three of his sons were: Aristobulus, Herod Antipas. And Herod Phillip. The first two of these at times ruled over portions of Palestine after Herod the Great’s death. Aristobulus had a daughter named Herodias. She at first married the before-mentioned Herod Phillip, (her uncle) and had a daughter named Salome (apparently with Phillip). Then the third named character in this drama, Herod Antipas, decided that Herodias was too good for Phillip. He simply took her away and made her his wife. (Remember, Antipas is also an uncle to Herodias.

All these kinds of incestuous marriages did not go well with John the Baptist, He preached broad and loud that the marriage of Herodias to Phillip was bad enough, but now the transfer to Antipas was doubly sinful. Now, this broadcast did not sit well with Antipas, to say the least. We have indications in the scripture that Antipas had some respect for John, but he just wanted John’s complaints to be suppressed. So, he had John arrested and

put in prison. (Matt. 14: 1 – 5; Mark 6: 16 - 20)

The rest of the story is well known. At a fancy dinner/party of great merriment, (one account says Herod's birthday) young Salome performed a dance (probably quite seductive) for the party. Herod Antipas, being obviously somewhat inebriated and without thinking, declared that he would reward Salome with anything she wanted. Being young and unsure she asked her mother, Herodias, what she should ask for. Herodias then had the opportunity she was waiting for to completely end the criticism by John, so she said: "Ask for the head of John the Baptist." We read that Herod Antipas was shocked at that request, but he was too weak to renege. That, then, was the end for the great prophet, preacher, and baptizer who led the way for the coming of Jesus, the Christ. (Matt. 14: 6 – 12; Mark 6: 21 – 29))

### Art Concerning John's Death

The brutal and unnecessary execution of John has been illustrated a few times. The subject "Salome with the Head of John" was painted in the 1670's by Onorio Marinari. [11] Another painting of the same title, somewhat more dramatic, was produced by Andrea Solorio. The most disturbing piece about the situation is known simply as "The Head of John." That's just what it is -- on a platter, and as gruesome as you might imagine it would be. How could that sight be so pleasing to Herodias? [12]

### Conclusion

In trying to bring to a conclusion this review of what the Holy Bible tells us of John the Baptizer, it might be well to consider just why is it that he has been adopted as a Patron of Freemasonry. The same question could also be asked of John the Apostle (sometimes referred to as John the Evangelist). There could be more than one answer to each of these questions; they are clearly hidden far back in the early history of the craft. It would be hard to find a period when these two saints were **not** given a prominent role in the teachings of the lodge. (see reference to Macoy, above) So, to attempt to be somewhat specific, this author will propose one approach to determining why the two Johns are elevated to the position of "Patron". We would like to point out that the two "brackets" on either side of what is the key focal point of all history – that is the birth of Jesus Christ. Whether we use BC/AD or some other designation, the arrival of the baby in Bethlehem is the center around which the history of world revolves. John the Baptist came before that event; John the Evangelist came after. The first of these made predictions and tied Jesus to the prophecies of the Old Testament. The second, in writing five of the books in the New Testament, repeated and amplified the teachings of the Son of God. Both advocated a mode of life based on the Ten Commandments and practicing **Brotherly Love** and **Relief**. Both made it clear that their purpose in life was to reveal **The Truth**.

In the early part of the Gospel of John, the Baptizer is referred to with: "*He was not the light but came that he might bear witness to the light.*" In referring to Jesus by John the Evangelist we read: "*There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.*" (John 1: 8 & 9) The Book of Revelation, written by John the Evangelist, begins

with: “*The revelation of Jesus Christ...*”

Thus, we can conclude that John the Baptist and John the Evangelist had as their missions in life to **point to** the same **True Light**. So, that is why they are considered the Patrons of Freemasonry. [3]

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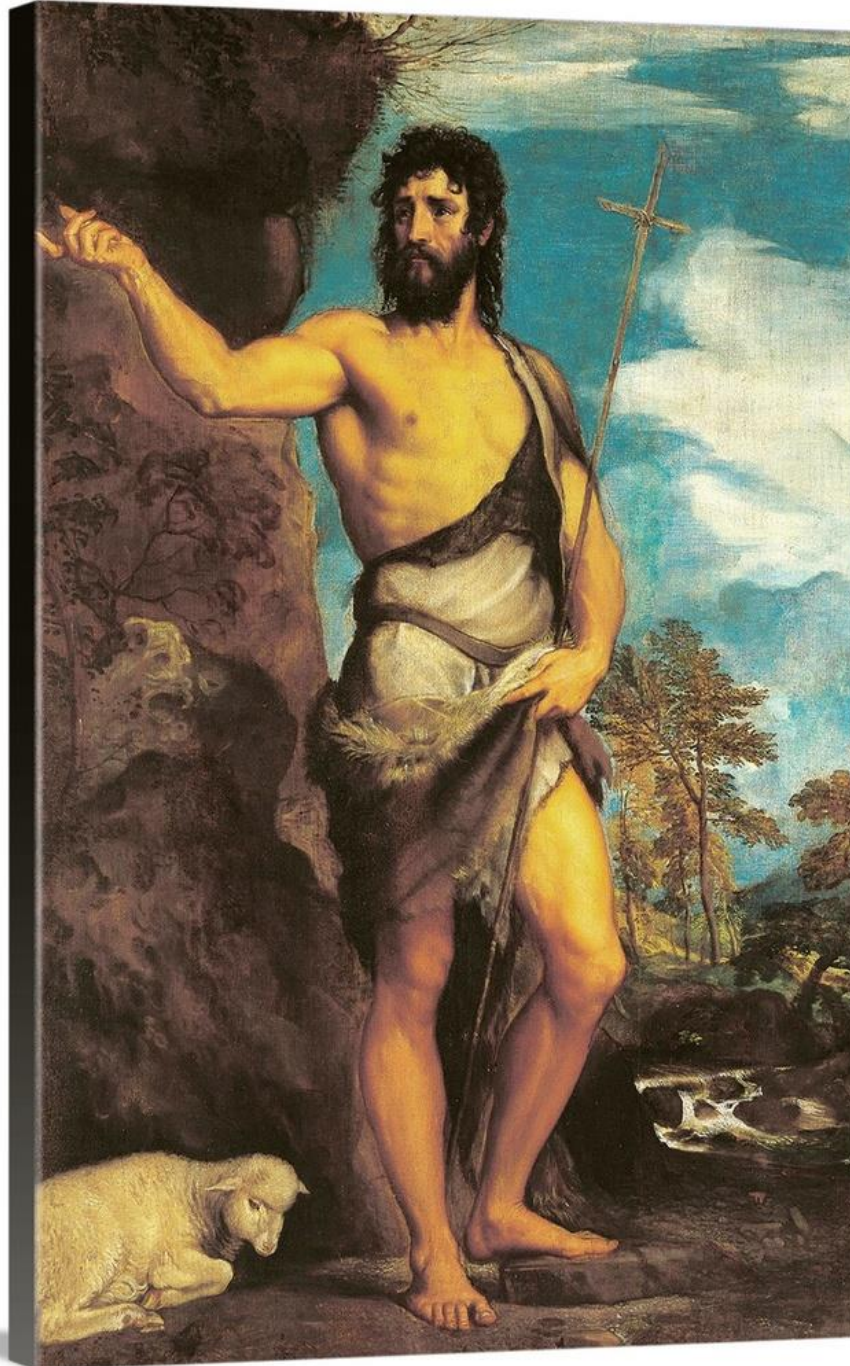
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Painting 2. Saint John the Baptist by Tiziano Vecellio (Titian) (1540)

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Painting 3. The Baptism of Christ (by Saint John the Baptist) - by Leonardo da Vinci (1470 - 1475) (Uffizi Gallery)

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Painting 4. Saint John the Baptist Preaching by Luca Giordano (circa 1695) (Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

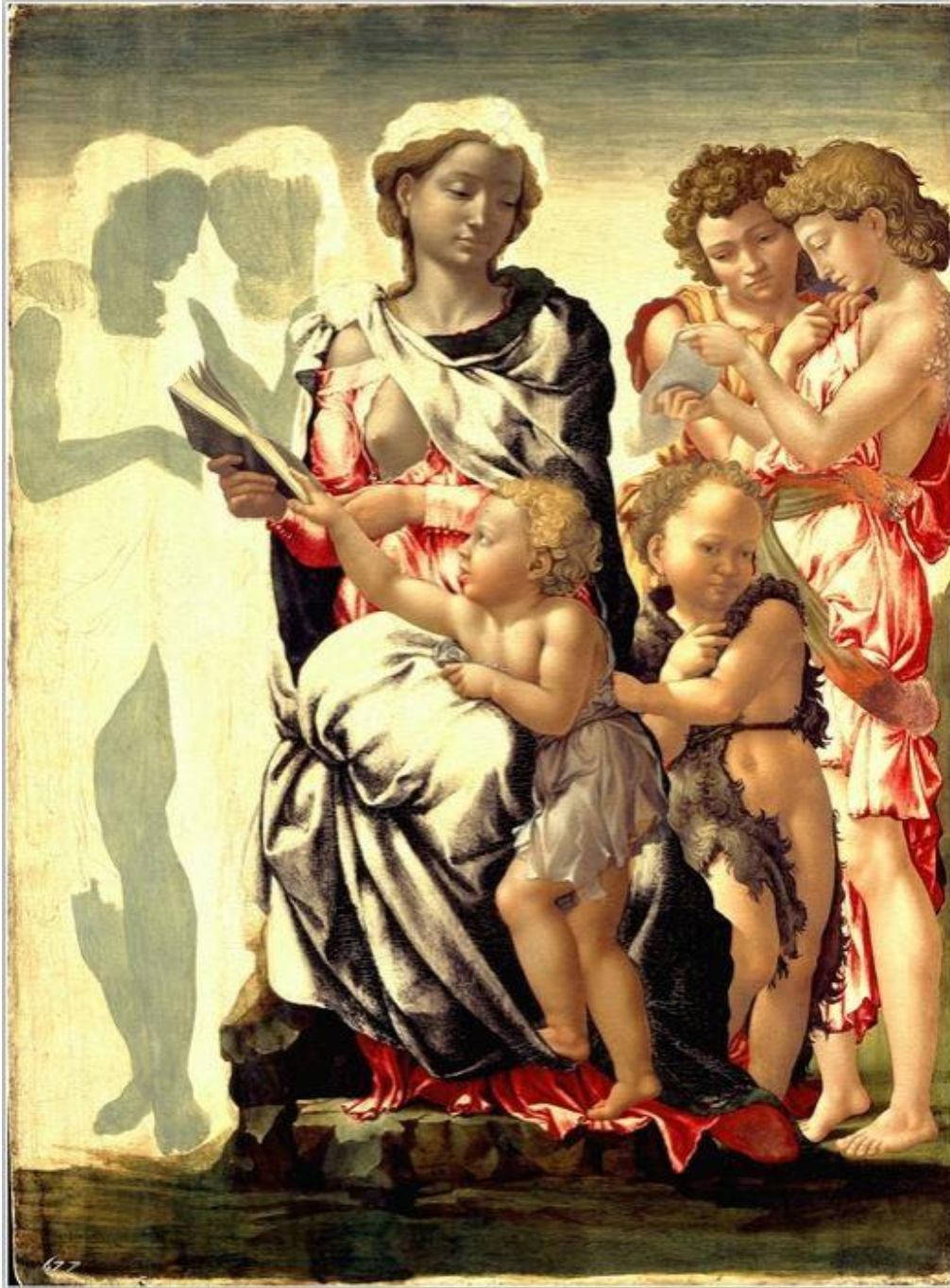
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Painting 5. The Infant Saint John with the Lamb by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1660-1665)

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Painting 8. Virgin of the Rocks by Leonardo da Vinci (Circa 1483) (The Louvre)

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Painting 9. Virgin of the Rocks by Leonardo da Vinci (1483? - 1519 ) (National Gallery, London, UK)

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Painting 10. Baptism of the Lord by Bartolome Murillo (1655) (a Berlin Museum)

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Painting 12. Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist by Andrae Solorio

(1507–1509) (The Friedsam Collection)

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Painting 3. The Baptism of Christ (by Saint John the Baptist) - by Leonardo da Vinci (1470 - 1475) (Uffizi Gallery)

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