

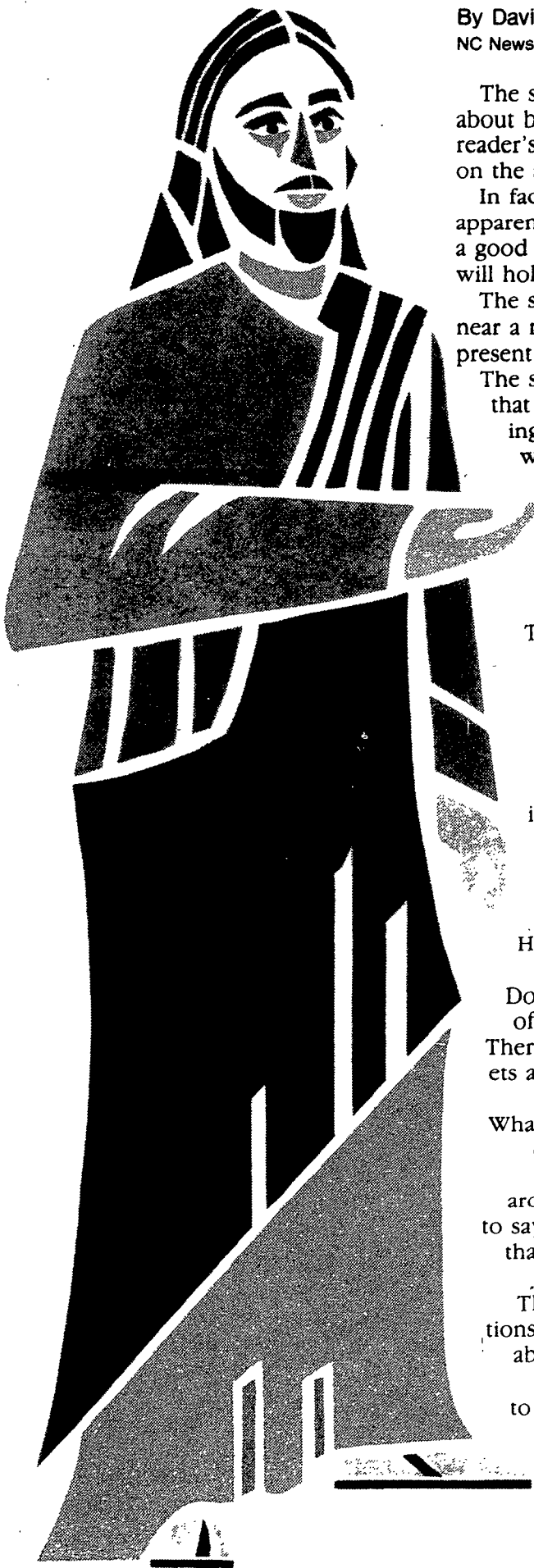
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The appearance of the main character

By David Gibson
NC News Service



The story I want to tell you about begins with a flourish. The reader's full attention is captured on the story's first page.

In fact, it immediately becomes apparent that all the elements of a good book are here — one that will hold a reader's interest.

The setting is in the country, near a river. A large crowd is present.

The story's writer indicates that everyone in the surrounding countryside knows about what has been happening at the river. Everyone is interested, curious.

Word has spread into the city, too. The crowd is peppered with people from there.

The first major character to appear in the story almost startles the reader. Is this the way he dresses? a few people ask.

His clothing is unusual. It is said that what he eats is unusual too. But then he has come from the desert.

The man wears the skin of an animal and a leather belt around his waist.

His name is John. He would stand out in any crowd.

Does he remind these people of the prophets of long ago? There haven't been any prophets around this river for a long time, the reader suspects.

Whatever, John creates a sense of vague discomfort in the reader. The people crowd around him. He is intriguing, to say the least. But is he really that compelling? What makes him so compelling?

There are unanswered questions here: things to be known about the people who come out to hear what John has to say — their motives, their expectations; things to be known about John himself — his background, the meaning behind his words.

You have to read on. A

mystery unfolds as the pages of a book are turned. It can't be given away completely on the first page.

But the scene can be set. Questions — and a sense of anticipation can be raised. Clues can be hidden on the first page.

John is baptizing the people in the river. He calls it a baptism of repentance. And he is talking with them about their way of life and their hopes for the future.

It is well-known that these people live in a nation occupied by a foreign power. As in any such situation, the forces at work among the people are complex, not simple.

Some people want to overthrow the occupying forces. Some people fear that a disturbance of the social order will make matters worse for the people. Some people are looking for a new, powerful leader who will put an end to what almost seems like slavery to them.

This day will prove disappointing for some of the people, who have begun to pin their hopes for the future on John. Others will be surprised, still others will think "I knew it!" when the popular desert preacher says he is simply a messenger preparing the way for someone else; that even another baptism will one day supersede this one.

John's manner does not escape the crowd's notice. It is as if John thinks he is preparing them for someone of real importance: another prophet? a king?

Now the story's writer in-

troduces a second character. He is a man in the crowd that day. His name is Jesus.

John baptizes him. But that's not all.

When the baptism takes place you get the impression there is something earthshaking about the moment. Something new is being born. Something is being created! For the Spirit of God, we are told, hovers over the river's waters on this day — much as God's Spirit hovered close at hand when the world was first created.

Does the writer mean to suggest that the story to unfold here is about a special creation, some sort of new creation? Is this a clue, planted on the story's first page, about the meaning of what will follow?

Now the story can begin. The reader's taste for adventure has been whetted. And the reader knows that Jesus will figure prominently in the pages that follow. This story, one suspects, is really about Jesus.

Will some of the people who pinned their hopes to John begin now to pin their hopes to Jesus? What can he do for those in the crowd who feel oppressed and who desperately need some hope now?

The writer has created a sense that there is more to the events on his first page than meets the eye.

There is a sense, too, that something big is at stake.

(Gibson is editor of Faith Today.)

Lenten Series

For a brief moment, an extraordinary man from the wilderness captures the reader's attention. But it soon becomes clear that he is only a messenger. Momentous events are about to unfold.

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