

“The Testimony of John”

The Fifth in a Series on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 1:19-28, Deuteronomy 18:15-22

Although we read about him in the New Testament, Jesus said he was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. And given his rather odd diet (locusts and honey) and his distinctive attire (camel hair with a leather belt), it is easy to think of John the Baptist as some sort of religious eccentric who appears out in the Judean wilderness and begins preaching “the end is near.” But John the Baptist is an important figure in redemptive history, and is identified as such in the opening chapter of John’s Gospel when the Baptist appears as the messianic forerunner who bears witness to the fact that with the coming of Jesus, the light has come into the world of darkness.

We have completed our time in the prologue to John’s Gospel (vv. 1-18) and we now move into the body of John’s Gospel beginning with John the Disciple’s account of John the Baptist in verses 19-28 of chapter 1. In John’s prologue we have learned that Jesus is the eternal word (*logos*) who was with God in the beginning. Therefore, Jesus is God, yet distinct from the father. We have also learned that Jesus is the creator of all things who then took to himself a true human nature (the word “became” flesh) to save us from our sins. John speaks of the creator becoming our redeemer in terms of darkness (human sinfulness and willful ignorance of the truth) and light (the grace and truth of Jesus Christ). It is Jesus who gives us the authority to become children of God, something which cannot be accomplished by natural birth or through an act of the human will.

In the prologue, John the Disciple (and the author of this gospel) has also introduced us to the “other” John, John the Baptist. The Baptist is that one who sent by God to bear witness to Jesus Christ, the light who has come into the world to overcome the darkness. Says John (about the Baptist) in verses 6-8, “*there was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.*” In verse 15, the disciple adds, “*John bore witness about him, and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’*” In John’s prologue we learn who Jesus is so that when John begins to recount the details of our Lord’s messianic mission later in chapter 1, we already know that Jesus is the eternal God become flesh. In his prologue, John also tells us who the Baptist is, and what his mission as messianic forerunner will entail. John the Baptist’s calling is to give testimony about the one coming after him.

Given the important role that John the Baptist plays in redemptive history, it would be a good idea to go through the biblical background regarding John the Baptist to learn more about him and dispel the idea that he is some sort of self-appointed religious zealot. It is vital to understand the critical role he plays in preparing the way for the coming of Jesus Christ. If John the Baptist is the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, then we should know more about him.

We read in chapter 1:5-7 of Luke’s gospel of John’s conception and birth—Luke is our primary source of information about John’s early life. “*In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.*” John was born to godly parents. His father was a priest and through his mother’s line he was

descended from Aaron (Israel's first high-priest). Elizabeth, apparently, lived under the cruel social stigma of barrenness, before she conceived. We also know from Luke 1:65 that Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in the hill country of Judea—in the same area where John begins preaching and baptizing.

In Luke 1:36 we learn that John's mother Elizabeth was related to Mary (likely a cousin) and that John was born six months before Jesus, at some point between 6-4 BC. John was probably about 30 years old (like Jesus) when he began his public ministry. Although many have tried to tie John to the mysterious sect of Qumran (founded by the Essenes—who left us the Dead Sea Scrolls) there is no evidence for this other than the fact that John was born and raised in the Judean hill country in same general area as Qumran. In 1:80, Luke does tell us that *“the child [John] grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.”* The implication is that John spent many years in preparation for the significant role he would play in redemptive history.

In Luke 3:2, we are told that *“during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”* In chapter 3 of his gospel, Matthew describes the beginning of John's ministry as follows. *“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”* This was the area just to the west of the Dead Sea, but in verse 28 John's Gospel he will tell us that the Baptist was in Bethany, a village just east of Jericho, on the other side of the Jordan River. We also know from John 3:23 that John preached in other places and moved about regularly.

When John begins his ministry (about 26 AD?), Pilate had just become governor of Judea. John's attire and diet suggests that John's was very much patterned after the prophetic ministry of Elijah (who according to 2 Kings 1:8—*“wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist”*). His clothing is especially interesting in light of the prophecy regarding the messianic forerunner in Malachi 4. *“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts. “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”* There can be little doubt that John the Baptist is that Elijah foretold by Malachi who will appear immediately before the Messiah does (the sun of righteousness).

John not only dressed like Elijah, his life was simple and he was totally devoted to his mission. According to Matthew 11:18, *“John came neither eating nor drinking,”* and was accused of being demon possessed. John made no effort to preach in Jerusalem (that we know of), and given John's stress upon a baptism of repentance, John appears in areas of the wilderness near bodies of water suitable for his baptism (which may not have been by complete immersion, but by having the person being baptized kneel in the water, with water poured over their heads).

It is important to notice that John did not preach to the Egyptians or the Babylonians—that would happen

when the followers of the Messiah would preach the gospel to Israel's historic enemies. John's mission was to preach to Israel (the Jews), warning them that the "kingdom of heaven was at hand." The Baptist's preaching took the form of a stern warning that judgment was coming and that it was time for repentance. John was careful not to identify himself as the Messiah, and he emphatically denied that he was Elijah come back from heaven—despite the obvious similarity in appearance and in light of the prophecy of Malachi.

John also knew that Jesus was greater than he, and that John's role and importance would necessarily diminish when Messiah came. His mission was to warn Israel that the messianic age was soon to come and that someone much greater than himself would dispense God's covenant blessings and curses. As John warned those Jews who heard him preach, it did not matter a whit whether someone's genealogy chart took them back to Abraham. Because of unbelief, Israel will face judgment from foreign oppressors (an important point give Rome's current occupation of Israel). The only way of escape from the coming calamity was for people to repent of their sin and receive John's baptism of repentance. Given his unique role as the messianic forerunner, John's baptism was transitional and served to prepare the way for Christian baptism soon to come. But it was John, who baptized Jesus.

It is clear from the gospels that John's preaching attracted large crowds and loyal disciples still followed him even after John was eventually arrested and imprisoned by Herod Antipas. John's disciples were so loyal that some of them remained as late as the events recounted in Acts 19 when Paul encountered a group of professing Christians who only knew of John's baptism—and had not heard about the Holy Spirit. In the first century, it was not an easy thing to pack up and go into the wilderness and seek out John—but many did. It took days of walking in desolate, sparsely-populated areas where food and water were hard to come by. We can easily overlook the effort it required to go out into the wilderness and hear John preach. But many did so (the Bible speaks of multitudes), and it was this fact which got the attention of the denominational headquarters in Jerusalem. The Sadducees and Pharisees soon came to check out John, only to hear John the Baptist warn them that they would soon come under judgment.

Herod feared that the Baptist would lead a revolt and cause the Romans to crack down on the Jews. As John will tell us, it was John's rebuke of Herod for marrying his brother's wife which led to John's arrest—but the two things are not contradictory (fear of the Romans and resentment from the royal family). When he was arrested, John's disciples immediately came to Jesus and reported what had happened. It was Herodius (Mrs. Herod) who eventually orchestrated John's death through beheading. And it was Jesus who said of John in Matthew 11:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by

force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

When asked to name the greatest figure of the Old Testament, we might name Abraham or Moses. Jesus named John the Baptist, the Elijah to come and a prophet of prophets. No one greater, Jesus says.

So, given what we have read of John the Baptist in the prologue of John's gospel, we should not be surprised that John the Disciple does what the synoptic gospels do—John will begin his account of Jesus' messianic ministry with John the Baptist who came to bear witness to the light. But not only do we read of John the Baptist, we read of those who have come to question him and challenge his authority. As the light begins to dawn, the defenders of darkness want the light snuffed out. In verse 19 of chapter 1, the body of the gospel opens with the statement, "*and this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'*"

Unlike the synoptic gospels which begin the account of John the Baptist at the beginning of his ministry, John begins at a later point in the ministry of the Baptist. Jesus already knew of John and had been baptized by him.¹ John is already preaching about the coming Messiah. But in verse 19, it is mentioned that John is giving "testimony," which takes on a legal character as that one commissioned by YHWH to present his divine subpoena (summons) announcing YHWH's intention to sue Israel on the ground that Israel (the Jews) has repeatedly and systematically broken the terms of the covenant God established with Israel at Mount Sinai. When the suzerain (the king) sued his rebellious vassal (the subject) the king first sent messengers to remind the vassal of all the benefits of serving the king, as well as warn the vassal of what will come next barring repentance—the king's army to mete out punishment. Some have seen this pattern in John the Baptist as the messenger, and Jesus as that one who pronounces blessing and curse. Therefore, it is John who warns Israel that one greater is coming.² So when Jesus comes and begins his messianic ministry, it is already too late for Israel. Israel has already been given the subpoena and told that judgment is coming. The blessings and curses will be dispensed.

As John the Baptist gives his testimony, the time for Israel to repent is drawing to an end. And as John the Disciple informs us, "the Jews" sent priests and Levites to question the Baptist. When John speaks of the Jews, he is not using the term as a racial denigration, but after Israel had been cast from Palestine (specifically after Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed) it was no longer accurate to speak of Israel. The nation no longer existed—but the people ("the Jews") did, and John uses the term in a variety of ways. Some Jews are said to believe in Jesus. And Jesus himself is said to be a Jew. But here, the term is used in its most common manner, as a reference to those who do not believe, who actively oppose Jesus, and who eventually begin plotting Jesus' death.

It is the Jews in Jerusalem (probably a reference to the Sanhedrin), who had heard of John the Baptist, but knew not what to make of him (except he did not have their approval to do what he was doing). They sent priests and Levites to find John out in the wilderness. The Levites descend not from Aaron, but from the tribe of Levi. The Levites of Jesus' day were musicians and temple police. Most priests and Levites were Sadducees and considered the Pharisees too rigid—which is interesting because according to verse 25, they had been sent by the Pharisees or there were Pharisees in their group. They probably knew

¹ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 62.

² Meredith Kline, By Oath Consigned, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 52.

that John the Baptist was both the son of a priest and a Levite, and they came to see for themselves what was going on with the wayward son of one of their own number.³ The Pharisees in the denominational headquarters certainly wanted to know what was going on out in the Judean wilderness.

In verse 20, the Baptist replies to their queries in terms which are overtly legal, echoing the language of giving “testimony” in v. 19. We do not know, what, exactly the priests and Levites asked John, but we know his answer. “[John] *confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’*” John’s answer is clear—he confesses that he is not the Christ, but neither does he deny that the Christ has already come. In fact, his answer implies that the Christ has come! The line of questioning from the delegation (which we can discern from John’s answer) certainly implies that there was much messianic speculation in the air, and that this was their biggest concern. Some Jews of that era thought Messiah would be a priest or a great prophet, others thought he would be a Davidic king. Did ever John claim to be the Messiah? No, he did not. But why then were people flocking to him out in the wilderness? Who was this man? He confessed and did not deny! YHWH’s emissary tells the truth. John is not the Messiah.

John’s confession necessitates the follow-up question recounted in verse 21. “*And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’*” The gospels universally report that John always saw himself in a subordinate, preparatory role for the Messiah. His very presence in the wilderness meant that there was a Christ (an “anointed one”) or long-expected Messiah. John was that one foretold by Malachi. But he was not the same Elijah who had been taken into heaven in a chariot of fire come back (cf. 2 Kings 2:11). No, John was not the literal Elijah (the historic person), but he functioned as that figurative “Elijah” who would come and warn Israel that the day of the Lord was at hand. Elijah was not the Messiah, but he prepared the way for the Messiah.

Nor was John “the prophet.” Notice the question is not whether John was *a* prophet, but whether he was “the prophet. In Deuteronomy 18:15-22 (our Old Testament lesson), Moses foretold of a final, consummate prophet yet to come. The Jews associated Moses’ prophecy with the coming Messiah. No, John was not “the” prophet. Notice too that John’s answers to his inquisitors are short, to the point, even “curt.” John was not out in the wilderness establishing his own religious movement. John was called by God to preach in the wilderness and bear witness about that one who was “the” prophet, that one who was before John, and greater than John (the logos, the word become flesh).

John’s self-understanding about his role as messianic forerunner becomes clear in the next round of questioning as seen in verses 22-24. “*So they said to him, ‘Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.’ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.)*” Obviously frustrated by John’s answers, his questioners press him harder. Who are you? What are you doing? Our bosses (the Sanhedrin) want to know. John responds by quoting from Isaiah 40:3 in which the preacher is described as a voice in the wilderness.

The preacher of Isaiah 40 is not *the* prophet or the Messiah. He is not on a par with the word. His is but a lonely voice who was foretold by Isaiah, a voice which proclaims that the Messiah is coming. In its original setting, in chapter 40 Isaiah is calling for a rebuilding of the roads so the God’s people might return from exile. But the return from exile in Babylon points ahead to the messianic age and a new exile, with the Messiah leading the multitudes through the wilderness to worship YHWH. So when John

³ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 141-142.

applies this prophecy to his own ministry, “*make straight the way of the Lord,*” this is but another way of saying, “prepare the way, for the Messiah is coming!”⁴

If John is not the prophet or the Messiah, what then is he doing? As we read in verse 25, the delegation continues to press him. “*They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”*” The question is really about authority. If John is not the Messiah or the prophet, who told him to be the one to baptize his followers, the vast majority of whom were Jews, who did not need to be converted to a new religion, or seek purification beyond the animal sacrifices and sanctioned ceremonies (i.e., the feasts)? The question reveals the real issue—“John, you do not have our permission to do this.” How dare this man go out into the wilderness and start baptizing!

In verses 26-27, John answers them. “*I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.*” The Baptist’s preaching is authorized by the one coming after him (of whom the priests, teachers and preachers of Israel know nothing), and who is so much greater than John. John is completely unworthy of the mysterious call his answer implies he has received. Lost on us is the cultural significance of loosing someone’s sandals. This is what slaves did for their masters as a sign of submission. While students served their teachers like slaves served their masters (as a sign of respect), it is noteworthy that disciples were exempt from untying a teacher’s sandals (because they were students of a master, not slaves). The one coming after John is so great that the Baptist is not even worthy of untying his sandals.⁵ This is an expression of utter humility on John’s part. He is not afraid of this delegation because he knows who it is who he has baptized and who is coming after him. He knows judgment is soon to come.

In verse 28, John even tells us where this took place. “*These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*” This is a different village than the Bethany near Jerusalem which will be mentioned later. This Bethany is beyond the Jordan. In other words, it is out in the sticks. Not only have the crowds sought out John in such a far away place, but so has the group of inquisitors from Jerusalem. John is a humble man, doing the Lord’s work. His preaching is stern, and he proclaims a baptism of repentance. But his ministry is raising a ruckus, people have heard of him, they are intrigued by John, and the multitudes sense that the messianic age is about to dawn. So too, the religious leaders of Israel must see for themselves just what it is that is going on in the wilderness east of the Jordan.

John (the author of this Gospel) is making an important point when recounting the ministry of John. John the Baptist has come to bear witness to the light (Jesus, the eternal word made flesh), but the delegation from Jerusalem reminds us that the Jews (especially their leadership) cannot stand the fact that the light is beginning to shine out in the wilderness. They hate the fact that people are flocking to John, while ignoring or rejecting them. They too may have sensed that the messianic age was about to dawn, but of course, the Messiah would come to them first, not to a mere “voice” out in the wilderness. The Messiah would certainly reward them because of their great piety and zeal for the law. Not even close.

The religious leaders of Israel are in for a massive shock, because John the Baptist was about to point them to Jesus, the very Lamb of God (that word become flesh) who takes away the sin of the world. And it is to that declaration we will turn next time.

⁴ Morris, The Gospel According to John, 137.

⁵ Morris, The Gospel According to John, 141.