

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Witness of John the Baptist

After over 400 years without a prophetic figure in Israel, John the Baptist showed up in the wilderness of Judea with a prophetic message that called Israel back to God. **He was dressed in clothes that would have reminded anyone who knew the Old Testament of the garb of the prophet Elijah** (II Kg. 1:7,8; Mk. 1:6). He was as bold and fearless with the religious leaders of his time as Elijah had been with evil King Ahab and the prophets of Baal (I Kg. 18). **His message was a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, and he seemed to be claiming things that sounded reminiscent of the Messenger that would precede the Lord that the last prophet, Malachi, had prophesied about** some four centuries before (Isa. 40:3-5; Mal. 3:1-3; Lk. 3:4-6,16,17). As would be expected, his fame rapidly spread throughout the land and everyone was curious to hear this strange ascetic preacher in the wilderness. Throngs came to hear him. Soon, all Israel was talking about John and his message. **John the Baptist became one of the most important figures of his time to the Jew.** The stature of John is evident by the fact that every gospel, and the book of the Acts, mentions how he bore witness to Jesus.

We have a thumbnail sketch of John's ministry in John 1:6-8. In spite of the public stir and powerful impact of his preaching, our author describes John the Baptist as "a man having been sent from God". **A great deal of the material about the Baptist in this chapter had to deal with his identity.** Right from the beginning, then, the author clearly stated that **he was a human being, whom God chose and sent. His mission was to bear witness of the Light, the Eternal Word.** He was not just a prophet or teacher. He was a *witness*. He came to testify as to what God *showed* him about the Light. **The purpose for this was so that all might believe by means of his testimony.** He himself was not the Light; rather, he came to bear witness concerning the Light. The Light/Eternal Word was coming into the world, but they would not recognize Him. John's prominence and ensuing testimony would identify Him.

Part of John's testimony was "This was He of whom I said, '**The One coming after me has come to be in front of me, because He was existing before me**'" (1:15). The last phrase could also be translated, "because he was being my first", referring to the "first-place-above-all-others" position that belonged to the Word, the One John was serving. **The author wanted to cause us to ponder again the Eternal, Preeminent nature of the Word.**

Beginning with verse 19, John the Baptist testified in response to questions from certain "Jews" from Jerusalem. *Usually when the phrase "the Jews" occurs in this Gospel, the apostle is referring to the religious leaders.* Since the events take place in Palestine, almost everyone mentioned is physically Jewish, so that term would not be a very helpful way to identify a particular sub-group. *The apostle's usage may come from the arrogance on the part of these religious leaders, who thought they were better than "common people".* One of the ways they mentally set themselves apart was that they lived in the region immediately around Jerusalem, Judea. They looked with disdain upon Jews from Galilee or from other parts of the Roman Empire as not being as "pure". The Greek word for Jew was *Ioudaios*, closely related to the word for Judea, *Ioudaia*. It could be that the apostle John (who was from Galilee) was poking at their *prima donna* attitude, referring to them in a tongue-in-cheek way like they are the "true Jews", by applying this term only to them. **The religious leaders in Jerusalem wanted to know what John was claiming to be,** because he was becoming very popular, and was therefore a possible threat to the status quo, especially to *their* power and influence. **They sent a delegation of priests and Levites, therefore, to find out what he said about himself.** Note they were "sent from the Pharisees" (vs. 24). These were the religious leaders with whom Jesus would have the most confrontation.

The first question was, "Who are you?" John immediately volunteered that he was *not* the Christ. Many of the people *were* wondering if this is who he was (Lk. 3:15). John readily offered, not even in response to a direct question, that he was *not*. **The word "Christ" (from Gk., *christos*) means "anointed one".** The Hebrew word, *messiach*, from which we have derived the English word "messiah", means the same thing. **It was a title, not a name.** We have seen the words "Jesus Christ" together so often that we think of "Christ" as a last name. Jesus would have been known to people as Jesus Bar-Joseph (*bar* = son of), or Jesus of Nazareth (His home town). "Christ" was a title applied to Him later, by those who believed in Him. (Often the Greek is written as "Jesus the Christ", but most English versions by convention do not translate the word "the", which unfortunately adds to our confusion.) **What is the significance of this title?** Luke 23:2 tells us plainly that **the Christ is a king** (cf. John 18:33-37; 19:19-22). This began in the OT with the anointing of King Saul and King David by the prophet Samuel. "The Lord's anointed" was the way David referred to Saul as the God-appointed king (I Samuel 9:16; 10:1; 16:1,12,13; 24:6). The Messiah, or the Christ, was the prophetically

promised king that people expected would reign once again over Israel and deliver them from their oppressors. **The believing Jews of Jesus' day were very much looking for God to send such a deliverer for them.**

Are you Elijah? (vs. 21) -- Elijah was an OT prophet whose story is found in I Kings 17-II Kings 2. The reason that these questioners asked John if he was Elijah was based upon Malachi 4:5,6. **The last two verses of the OT scriptures state that God would send Elijah the prophet before the day of the Lord's judgment.** One curious thing about Elijah that made this more credible is that he never died. He was taken up alive into heaven, so it was not at all inconceivable that he might come back. **Modern day Jews still set a place for Elijah at their tables during the Passover meal.** At a certain point in their evening observance, they will open the door "for Elijah", enacting their continued expectation of his coming. ***"I am not."*** -- **John flatly denied being Elijah, although there was much about him that was reminiscent of this great prophet.** Many OT prophecies have more than one fulfillment, often one that is partial, then later a more complete fulfillment. When we examine all the evidence about John, we must conclude that his ministry was a foreshadowing of the yet-to-come ministry of Elijah. **He had an Elijah-type of ministry, though he was not actually Elijah Himself** (cf. Malachi 3:1-6; 4:1,2; Luke 1:13-17,76-79; Matt. 11:7-14; 17:1-13). Some think that since the two witnesses of Revelation 11 perform signs reminiscent of Moses and Elijah, that they may be these great figures from the past sent to prophesy against the evil of the world at that time. If so, this would be a more complete fulfillment of Malachi, since it immediately precedes the "great and terrible day of the Lord".

Are you the Prophet? (vs. 22) -- **"The Prophet" they asked about was someone that Moses had spoken of. He said that God would send "a prophet like me from among you"** (Deut. 18:15-19). What would make this prophet different from the other OT men of God was his unique, intimate relationship with Yahweh and the evidence of powerful signs and wonders in His ministry (Num. 12:1-8; Deut. 34:9-12). This later would provide the basis for early church preaching about Jesus (Acts 3:12-26). **And he answered, "No."** -- **John denied being this important figure.**

Who are you...? What do you say about Yourself? (vss. 22,23) -- John's quotation of Isaiah 40:3 is a literal summary of his ministry. **He was "a voice crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord."** Note that he saw his role as preparing the way for the Lord, very similar to the ministry of the "messenger" in Malachi 3:1.

Why are you baptizing (immersing)...? (vs. 25) -- The Greek word for baptism is *baptizō*. It literally means to "dip, immerse, plunge under". It was used to describe the process of washing where hands, pots, or utensils were put *under* water to wash them. It was also used in the dying process, where cloth was *dipped into* dye to become colored by it. There were other words to describe sprinkling or pouring. John was not applying water in these ways. **John the Baptizer was immersing people in the water of the Jordan river as a sign of their repentance.** This action was controversial because generally Jews did not require ritual baptism for cleansing, except in the case of a Gentile convert to Judaism. **In effect, by offering baptism for repentance, John was saying that being born a Jew was not good enough** (cf. Lk. 3:7-9). **If they were to escape the wrath of God, they needed to change the way they thought (repent) about their relationship with Him, and live in a way that indicated their serious desire to live righteously as subjects of their heavenly King.** They needed to start over again, expressing their commitment as new converts would. The Pharisees wanted to know what right John had to invoke such sweeping changes. He did not answer their question. Instead **John insisted that he was preparing the way for Another, One much greater than him** (vss. 26-28). **He is already among them,** John said, and **"...I am not worthy to untie the thong of His sandal"** (1:27), a powerful image of comparative rank and importance.

The very next day, John sees Jesus, and testifies, **"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"** (vs. 29) -- clearly a reference to the idea of substitutionary atonement. **Jesus was to be a sacrificial lamb that would die on behalf of the offenses of others** (Gen. 22:7,8; Ex. 12:3-13; Num. 28:3-10; Isa. 53:4-8). At this time, John repeated this same statement from verse 15, word for word. Generally, when a statement in the Bible is repeated, it is for *emphasis*. On the surface, this is a seemingly odd statement. John knew Jesus. They were actually relatives (Lk. 1,2). John knew that Jesus was six months younger than he was (Lk. 1:31-36). At the time John made the original proclamation of this statement, however, he did not know that Jesus was the One he was speaking of. **That only became apparent when he saw the sign of the Spirit descending as a dove upon Jesus, and remaining upon Him. This was the sign God had instructed John to look for** (vss. 31-33). John was physically six months older than the man Jesus, but Jesus was the Eternal Word made flesh. He existed before all creation, and He was the Preeminent One, who John willingly served and bore witness to. **John had come baptizing in water to make Him known.** His popularity, his message, and now his testimony were all about identifying and pointing out this One who would come after him, the "One baptizing in the Holy Spirit" (vs. 33). **John boldly declared, "I have seen, and I have testified, that This One is the Son of God"** (vs. 34). The term "son of God" was the title for the Messiah, the king of Israel (Psa. 2:1-12). Pre-existent One, Lamb of God, Baptizer in the Holy Spirit, Son of God, King of Israel, ...John had a lot to say about Jesus, the One coming after Him. **He would be far greater than John, as "the voice in the wilderness" said.**