

The Quotations Bible Study: Series I: The Person of Jesus

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Week 4. Messenger: Jesus on John the Baptist

Prayer: Father, we believe your word as we believe your Son. Make us fit receptacles for your Gospel and your word, in Jesus' Name, amen.

John the Baptist is one of the many figures who is incompletely drawn in the brief New Testament accounts. Scripture surrounded and permeated his life and remarkable ministry, but it all ended rather abruptly in the emergence of Jesus. Both the evangelists and Jesus had a fair amount to say about John, and it is significant that all four evangelists began their accounts of Jesus' ministry with some mention of John.

Jesus claimed that John, his cousin, fulfilled prophecy. So did the evangelists. Let us begin by taking a look at the prophecy cited by the evangelists, and then proceed to Jesus.

I. Voice in the wilderness

Focus passage:

A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."—
Isaiah 40:3-5

Background: Isaiah 40

[Enrichment: Some notes on Isaiah

No one reading the book of the prophecy of Isaiah can keep from wondering at the profound difference between chapters 1-39 and chapters 40-66. The seam itself, between chapters 39 and 40, is sharp and clear enough. The narrative up to this point has mostly been down-to-earth, fiery, focusing on judgment, interacting with kings, warning of future consequences for present-day actions. In Isaiah 40, the oracles of God take on a lofty tone, not so concerned with immediate issues as with the ultimate plan of God for the salvation of His people. One cannot help but notice that the imagery, always vivid in Isaiah, begins to have a mystical, apocalyptic quality in chapter 40 (perhaps first hinted at in Isaiah 35, the passage prophesying "streams in the desert" leading to the return of the people to Zion).

For many years, some scholars believed that there had been two Isaiahs written at far different times, so much so, that the second part of Isaiah, chapters 40-66, were referred to as Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah. The witness of the Dead Sea Scrolls, 100-200 B.C., tells against this theory, however. There are several Isaiah scrolls that have survived, none of which give any evidence of a seam at chapter 40. In fairness, it must be pointed out that many other scholars had been convinced of the unity of Isaiah all along.]

The vision of Isaiah following chapter 40 transcends time. It is about the inevitable character of God's actions, His irresistible movement in history, and His immanence. Kingdoms may rise and fall (Isa. 40:17) and the affairs of man may wax good or evil, but they are transient. In the Lord's emerging plans, they count for no more than grass or fading flowers (Isa. 40:6-8). It is out of this that the passage concerning the Suffering Servant springs (Isa. 53), in which we learn so much about Jesus. God is very close in this section, as He reveals His mind.

The part we are concerned with begins with Isaiah 40:1. Let us answer a few questions about this passage.

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- Q1:** Whatever the timeframe, the LORD is speaking as though the people are in captivity. The imperative “comfort” is plural. Whom is the LORD speaking to? (Isa. 40:1)
- Q2:** What comfort has the LORD to offer? (Isa. 40:2)
- Q3:** How much has Jerusalem been punished? (Isa. 40:2)
- Q4:** What is the “way of the LORD”? (Isa. 35:8-10)
- Q5:** If the geographical images in Isaiah 40:3,4 are applied to the strata of human society and the landscape of human affairs, what is going to happen?
- Q6:** Who is “all mankind”? (Isa. 40:5)
- Q7:** What is the “glory of the LORD” that “all mankind” will see? (Isa. 40:5)
- Q8:** To what is the transience of man compared? (Isa. 40:6-8) Who else suggested this? (Matt. 5:17,18, James 1:10)
- Q9:** Who is the shepherd? (Isa. 40:11, John 10:11-16)
- Q10:** In all that will happen, who will survive? (Isa. 40:31, Hab. 2:4)

This is strong Messianic material. Behind it all is the prophetic imperative, “get ready,” because these things are coming.

II. Preaching in the wilderness

Focus passages: Matt. 3:3, Mark 1:2-3, Luke 3:4-6, John 1:23 (see below)

Background: Matt. 3:1-12, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3:1-18, John 1:19-33

The evangelists connected the prophecy about the “voice in the wilderness” with John. That John preached and lived in the desert area of Judea only made his identification with the Isaiah prophecy more compelling.

[Enrichment: An oddity in the translation

The translators of the AV parsed the Hebrew in Isaiah 40:3 differently from the way modern translators do today, attaching “in the desert (wilderness)” to “crying (calling)” instead of “prepare”:

AV: The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD ...

ASV: The voice of one that crieth, Prepare ye in the wilderness the way of Jehovah ...

RSV: A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD ...

NIV: A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD ...

ESV: A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD ...

Interestingly, the ASV, RSV, NIV, and ESV do not extend this treatment to the quotations in the Gospels, preferring to attach “in the desert (wilderness)” to “calling (crying).”

The reason for this is that the Masoretic Text, the Hebrew source for the English Old Testament, could be read either way. Making “in the desert” modify “prepare” seems better for two reasons, (1) it preserves the parallelism with the second half of the verse, and (2) the location of the voice seems like trivial information in comparison to *where* the way of the LORD is to be prepared.

But the evangelists follow the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament translated from Hebrew about 100-200 B.C.) in this instance, in which “in the desert” appears to modify “crying.” Since there is no punctuation information in either the Hebrew or the Greek, it becomes a matter of interpretation. But this oddity explains why the ASV, RSV, NIV, and ESV punctuate the Old and New Testament versions differently. There is probably not much net difference in the two readings, but this is typical of the problems one encounters in a study like this.]

The passage from Isaiah 40:3-5 is one of the few that is quoted in all four Gospels. Matthew quotes only Isaiah 40:3, as does Mark. Luke quotes the whole passage. John quotes only Isaiah 40:3 but places the quotation in the mouth of John himself, turning the opening clause into a first-person declarative sentence. The last is interesting in that the opening clause of Isaiah 40:3, and its quotation in the other three Gospels, is rendered as a fragment. The translators, who are so often willing to supply the missing or understood verb, are hesitant here. John the evangelist filled it out.

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Each Gospel uses the quotation to introduce the story of John the Baptist, and each places the ministry of John prior to the beginning of Jesus' own ministry.

C. H. Toy's analysis finds that all the quotations follow the wording of the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew, which are admittedly not very different. Let us consider each of the passages.

A. Matthew's account

This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"—Matt. 3:3

After describing the announcement of both John and Jesus in chapter 1, and Jesus' birth, retreat to Egypt, and return in chapter 2, Matthew jumped directly to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, by an account of John the Baptist.

Q11: Where was John preaching? (Matt. 3:1)

Q12: What was John preaching? (Matt. 3:2)

Q13: What does Matthew claim about John? (Matt. 3:3)

Q14: John dressed oddly, didn't he? (2 Kings 1:8; Matt. 3:4)

Q15: John's message attracted attention. Where did people come from to hear him? (Matt. 3:5)

Q16: What did John do to those who came to him? (Matt. 3:6)

Q17: Whom did John condemn? (Matt. 3:7)

Q18: Whom did John announce? (Matt. 3:11,12)

Q19: What was the other baptism? (Matt. 3:11)

The account concludes with the baptism of Jesus, the descent of the Spirit, and the Voice of God, declaring Jesus to be His Son.

B. Mark's account

"...a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"—Mark 1:3

Mark actually began his Gospel with John the Baptist in the wilderness, introduced by the quotation from Isaiah 40:3. In Mark 1:2, the Evangelist cited another prophecy, from Malachi 3:1, which itself appears to be a quotation from Exodus 23:20. We will encounter this again in the next section.

Q20: What does Mark claim about John? (Mark 1:2,3)

Q21: Where was John preaching? (Mark 1:4)

Q22: What was John preaching? (Mark 1:4)

Q23: What did John do to those who came to him? (Mark 1:4)

Q24: John's message attracted attention. Where did people come from to hear him? (Mark 1:5)

Q25: Whom did John announce? (Mark 1:7)

Q26: What was the other baptism? (Mark 1:8)

Again, the account concludes with the baptism of Jesus, the descent of the Spirit, and the Voice of God, declaring Jesus to be His Son.

C. Luke's account

As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.'"—Luke 3:4-6

Luke's account of John is by far the fullest. Also, Luke quotes the Isaiah passage almost completely.

Q27: What does Luke claim about John? (Luke 3:2)

Q28: Where was John preaching? (Luke 3:3)

Q29: What was John preaching? (Luke 3:3)

Q30: Whom did John condemn? (Luke 3:7)

Q31: Whom did John announce? (Luke 3:16)

Q32: What was the other baptism? (Luke 3:16)

Luke's account contains some details of John's teaching, directed to the crowds and to two particular classes, tax collectors and soldiers. John's demands to those groups were simple and practical, easily within the reach of the truly repentant.

D. John's account

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"—John 1:23

John's account of John the Baptist's ministry is carried out in first person, a record of what John said about himself, his mission, and the one who was to come after John.

Q33: Who came to quiz John and where were they from? (John 1:19)

Q34: Whose identity did John deny for himself? (John 1:20,21)

Q35: What was John doing? (John 1:26)

Q36: Whom did John announce? (John 1:26,27)

Q37: John the Baptist's witness to Jesus is very detailed. How did he know Jesus? (John 1:33)

Two of the men who became disciples of Jesus first heard of Him through John. Because of what John said, Andrew followed Jesus.

[Enrichment: Straightening out the Herods

John the Baptist sorely offended Herod by criticizing his marriage to his disgraced, but still-living, brother's wife Herodias, contravening Lev. 18:16. (Luke 3:19) Herod threw John into prison.

But *which* Herod? Let's take a moment to straighten out all the Herods in the New Testament.

The Herods were from an Idumean (Edomite) family of Roman client rulers that oversaw Palestine for several generations. To some extent, they respected Jewish law and considered themselves Jews. They were each appointed to office by the Roman emperor or senate. They were supported by the Jews to some degree because they represented the last vestige of what might be regarded as self-rule.

First, there was Herod the Great, who received the wise men from the East at Jesus' birth and had all the Bethlehem baby boys killed. That Herod died about 4 B.C. aged around 70. He carried out many public works and rebuilt the Temple, which was not finished until 64 A.D.

Then there were his sons.

First there was Herod Archelaus, who succeeded Herod the Great, and whom Joseph avoided upon the Holy family's return from Egypt (Matt. 2:22). He ruled from 4 B.C. to 6 A.D. (d. before 18 A.D.)

Then there was Herod Philip (d. 34 A.D.), simply called Philip in Matt. 14:3, who was married to Herodias. His mother was determined to be a traitor, and Philip shared her disgrace, though he kept his life, but lost his wife.

That brings us to Herod Antipas (d. after 40 A.D.), who murdered John the Baptist (Matt. 14:1-12), and who was tetrarch of Galilee. Tetrarch means the ruler of a quarter of a country, usually a province, often titled as king. After Herod Philip fell, Herod Antipas married Herodias, which John the Baptist publicly condemned (Matt. 14:4, Luke 3:19,20). Herod Antipas had John jailed and then later executed him at the request of Herodias and her daughter Salome. Some folks don't like people criticizing their marriage (not much has changed). Herod Antipas was also the Herod who judged Jesus.

Just to confuse things, Philip the Tetrarch mentioned in Luke 3:1 is not Herod Philip mentioned above, but another son of Herod the Great by a different wife (he had ten of them that we know of), also named Herod Philip (d. 34 A.D.). He had a reputation as a just ruler. This Herod Philip eventually married Salome (his niece).

Finally, there was Aristobulus, who with his brother Alexandros, was murdered by his father, Herod the Great. Aristobulus was the father of Herod Agrippa, the Herod of Acts 12. Herod Agrippa was father of King Agrippa (Herod Agrippa II), who with his sister Bernice, heard Paul in Acts 25.]

III. The messenger

Focus passage:

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.—Malachi 3:1

Background: Malachi 3:1-3

The prophecy of Malachi is the last in the Old Testament. It ends the story of Israel prior to the coming of the Messiah with sharp criticism of Israel’s conduct. Thus, after two chapters of charges, argument, and condemnation, the Malachi abruptly raises the subject of the return of the LORD, declaring the LORD’s words in first person. He starts with the rather surprising statement that He will send His messenger first. Since the form of words is similar to Ex. 23:20, one wonders at the use of the word “angel” in Exodus, but the word is the same in Malachi, and it can mean “messenger.”

Q38: What will the messenger do? (Mal. 3:1)

Q39: What happens after the messenger completes his task? (Mal. 3:1)

Q40: Who is the messenger of the covenant? (Mal. 3:1)

Q41: How bad will it be? (Mal. 3:2,3)

Malachi’s simultaneous account of both judgment and deliverance foreshadowed both John and Jesus in a powerful way.

Later in Malachi, the prophet mentioned Elijah by name (Mal. 4:5) as one who will be sent before the day of judgment. It was not surprising that John the Baptist should have been identified with Elijah early on.

Now, let us see what Jesus had to say.

IV. Jesus declares who the messenger is

Focus passages:

This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’—Matt. 11:10

This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’—Luke 7:27

Background: Matt. 11:1-15; Luke 7:12-28

Mark’s Gospel quotes the Malachi verse in Mark 1:2, which we have already discussed. Luke’s Gospel quotes the passage twice, once in the mouth of Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist (Luke 1:76), and once through Jesus. We will skip both the Mark and the Zacharias quotations to concentrate on the two passages where Jesus applied Malachi 3:1 to John the Baptist.

In Matthew 11 and the parallel passage in Luke 7, we find Jesus again preaching in various cities while His reputation spreads. John the Baptist heard about it from within prison. Strangely, he who had declared Jesus to be “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” suddenly has doubts. John sent a couple of his disciples to Jesus with a question, Are you the one or should we look for someone else?

Q42: John heard about what Christ was doing. What had he been doing? (Matt. 11:1,5; Luke 7:14,15)

Q43: Why did John doubt? (Matt. 11:2; Luke 7:19)

Q44: What works did Jesus point out to John’s disciples? (Isa. 35:5,6; Matt. 11:5; Luke 7:22)

Q45: Jesus discussed the role of John in the Kingdom, describing him with irony. What did “a reed shaken by the wind” mean? (Matt. 11:7; Luke 7:24) Hint: was John a popular figure?

Q46: Why did Jesus refer to fine clothes? John was not a snappy dresser (Matt. 3:4) Hint: John was unjustly a king’s prisoner. (Matt. 11:8; Luke 7:25)

Q47: Jesus said John was more than a prophet. (Matt. 11:9; Luke 7:26) What could be more than a prophet? (Matt. 11:10; Luke 7:27)

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At this point, Jesus authoritatively positioned John as the fulfillment of the Malachi prophecy. Jesus affirmed that John was the greatest of the prophets, the greatest man yet born (Matt. 11:11; Luke 7:28). Moreover, Jesus affirmed John in the office of Elijah. (Matt. 11:14; 17:10-13) But then Jesus added a phrase that has had scholars arguing for centuries. He said, “the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” (Luke 7:28b) Matt. 11:11b is virtually identical. (By the way, Paul claimed the position of “least” in the Kingdom, Eph. 3:8, for himself.)

[Enrichment: Greater than John the Baptist?

There are many different explanations of this strange saying of Jesus. Most seem unsatisfactory in one way or another. For what it is worth, here is mine.

John’s role was to proclaim the Kingdom and to call and exhort the people to repentance. Why should I (for example), undoubtedly near the bottom of the list in the Kingdom of Heaven, be greater than John. One reason only: I have received the Holy Spirit as part of the promise made to all believers. You and I are priests, in a kingdom of priests (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6). John was not. (Don’t worry, John is in the Kingdom; see Luke 13:28.)

John was the greatest prophet because, of all the prophets, John pointed to Jesus in the clearest way yet. But you and I are in a superior position because we know the outcome of Jesus’ revelation and work of atonement. We can point to Jesus in an even more definitive way than John, because we can know Him better (2 Pet. 1:19).

Do you have another explanation?]

V. Conclusion

John the Baptist, stood at the top and the end of the line of prophets that stretched back to Abraham (who was the first person in the Bible to be called a prophet, Gen. 20:7). With him, the age of promise, which began with God’s promise to Eve in the garden after the Fall (Gen. 3:15), came to a close. John’s task was not so much to predict as to announce and identify.

John’s ministry illuminated the work of all the prophets, in that they all, clearly or obliquely, pointed to Christ. And with that done, John was withdrawn from the scene. At the focus of all the prophecy was the man Jesus, the Messiah. All Israel had lived for that day.

Jesus prevailed where Israel had fallen. Jesus was tempted but did not sin. Because He was worthy, Jesus inherited the promises of God to Israel, and He alone was a fit sacrifice for the redemption of God’s people. Hence John’s final prophetic utterance, “Behold the Lamb of God...” at the sight of Jesus approaching.

There are no more prophets (of the Old Testament type), because their principal message has been fulfilled. We see more clearly than they. Jesus is now the prophet we must listen to. Whatever He says will come about. And He has promised to return.

Can we pray this **prayer** together?

Father, we bless you for your teaching in Scripture. Thank you for the Lamb of God and for the knowledge we have of Him. Grant us some measure of John’s boldness in proclaiming our Lord, in Jesus’ Name, amen.