

October 16, 2016

JOHN THE BAPTIST: MORE THAN A PROPHET

Matthew 11:1-15

What did John the Baptist think about Jesus? What did Jesus think about John the Baptist?

John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod. He had rebuked the “king” for his illicit relations with Herodias, his brother’s wife, and, because of all the evil things that Herod had done. (Luke 3:19-20; Matthew 14:3-4) Herod wanted to shut John up, so, he put him in prison. They say the prison was Machaerus. It was just east of the Dead Sea. Very apparently, John the Baptist was able to have visitors, and some of his disciples told him about the things that Jesus was saying and doing.

It makes logical sense for the story to reveal John the Baptist’s affirmation of Jesus as Jesus’ ministry reaches this high point. Some would think that John is expressing a lack of certainty about the man he Baptized in the Jordan River, perhaps, only a year-or-so, ago by now, since he tells his disciples to ask Jesus if He *is* the One. Is John expressing a need to know from Jesus’ own mouth that He is, in fact the Messiah? Or, is he setting up a turning point for his disciples, hoping they will shift their focus from him to Jesus? Either way, the real issue is not what John thinks.

Jesus’ response to the question: “*Are you the One who is to come, or, are we to wait for another?*” is basically, “Think for yourselves!” If He had given a direct answer He might have incurred the wrath of the Pharisees sooner than He wanted to. But He says, “*Go and tell John what you hear and see...*” (v. 4) The assumption of the day was that “*the One who is to come*” would be far more political and warrior-like than Jesus seemed to be at this time in His public ministry. Jesus had done little to purge the kingdom of Israel of the Roman oppression. He had not been the hero many Old Testament passages about the Messiah had foretold. Jesus had been more of a personal redeemer than a national leader. He had been more about spiritual faith than about earthly power. Jesus was healing, cleansing, and delivering individuals rather than the nation that expected a messianic king. Jesus was teaching the crowds and preaching forgiveness rather than defeating oppressors and raising a nation. Or... was He?

Thousands followed Him. He was becoming incredibly popular. He was thought of more highly than the High Priest in Jerusalem, and was easily greater than Herod, the secular king of the Jews. Can anyone lead a nation politically until they have won the hearts and minds of the common people? I believe not. But the last thing Jesus tells John’s disciples is, “*Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at Me.*” (v. 6)

You can be neutral then, and be counted in this blessing. But, I think the issue of “taking no offense” is determined by out and out rejection, compared to a willingness to give Jesus a hearing. It is obvious that Jesus is uniquely special. People said about Him that “*A great prophet has risen among us!*” “*God has looked favorably upon His people.*” (Luke 7:16) Demons being exorcised would say, “You are the son of God!” Luke concluded some of the episodes of Jesus’ ministry by saying things like, “*A report about Him began to reach every place in the region.*” (4:36) Or, “*Now, more than ever, the word about Jesus spread abroad; and many crowds would gather to hear Him and to be cured of their diseases.*” (5:16) God was being glorified by what Jesus did. People saw in Jesus the fulfilling of a great need. He was not a candidate. There was not going to be an election. Jesus is the revelation of God! Did they really need to think twice? What Jesus seems to be saying to the disciples of John is, “Isn’t it obvious?”

Meanwhile, what did Jesus think about John the Baptist? “*As John’s messengers went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John!*” (Matthew 11:7) “*What did you go out into the wilderness to behold?*” Was it something like a reed shaken by the wind? Did he make a mysterious

sound? Or was it as opulent as the most fashionable could ever be? Such people don't spend any time in the wilderness! They live in luxury, in royal palaces! But what did John do? He lived as simply as possible. Earlier in Matthew, we were given a description of John the Baptist's lifestyle: "*John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey!*" (Matthew 3:4) John's life was very out of the ordinary. He was fairly ascetic. No luxuries, nothing frivolous, basically Spartan, except for his more serious pursuit of spiritual things. Some scholars have even speculated that he may have been a part of the Qumran community (that preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls), but that community didn't exist formally, as far as they know, until after the time of Christ, even late into the First Century. We do know, however, that there were cultic branches of "prophets." These were basically groups of people who lived in a sort of communal setting that could compare to the monastic orders that evolved later in Christianity. Was John the Baptist a part of such a community? I can believe he was, but nothing historical nor scriptural can absolutely confirm the notion.

Jesus was not an ascetic the way John the Baptist was. Jesus lived in the center of life. He did not separate Himself except for brief times of prayer. He was a carpenter by trade. Still, He affirms John the Baptist as "*more than a prophet...*" (v. 9) Jesus proclaims John the Baptist to be the messenger that would prepare the way of the Messiah. Of John, Jesus says that "*among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist!*" But Jesus sets a very remarkable contrast: "*The least in the Kingdom is greater than John the Baptist!*"

All human beings are born of women. Even Jesus was born of a woman! (Of course, Jesus is certainly not the least! Not after the resurrection and ascension!) Our earthly birth is one thing. But our spiritual birth, our birth into the Kingdom, of God, is another. How it is possible, in the Kingdom of God, for any of us to be greater than John the Baptist is beyond me. But I can believe that when we become true disciples of Jesus, and, as we deny ourselves and take up our crosses daily, we will slowly become more and more like Christ. And Christ is greater than John the Baptist! John once said, "*One who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to carry His sandals. He will Baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!*"

And then Jesus says something extraordinary: "*If you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, who is to come!*" The last words of the Old Testament are Malachi 4:5-6 – "*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible Day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse!*" This is what Jesus is talking about. John the Baptist is not just about preparing the way for the Messiah, He is about the great and terrible Day of the Lord!

Christ has come! The Day of the Lord was happening. This is the Day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! But realize, if it's a great and terrible day, we could rejoice only if we respond accordingly! Get ready!