
As we go through the book of John, I hope to teach you to always look for the story within the story. John left us so many clues and little details all throughout the text that if we are careful not to just read over them, we can gain great insight into the cultural, political, and religious drama that surrounds each story as well as the interpersonal conflicts that are the backdrop for the amazing conversations in which we get to participate. Every time John adds some little detail or description we will want to stop and ask why. We will want to know what other information John was trying to convey. Hopefully each week we will walk away with a more robust understanding of the whole story with all its subtleties.

John 1:19-23

This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." They asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said."

John the Baptist, is the first among the witnesses that will attest to Jesus being the Messiah, the Christ, the Word, the Light, the lamb of God, the Savior of mankind. John does not spend a lot of time detailing for us the life of John the Baptist, but from this first description we know that John B's life was embroiled in

conflict and tension. But, as usual, there is so much more going on that meets the eye.

Notice that those who were coming to investigate and question John B's authority to baptize were priests and temple assistants. I believe the John gives us this information to highlight a major cultural conflict which provides the backdrop of John B's story.

No one knows for sure, but John most likely belonged to a religious order called the Qumran which is a branch of the Essenes. The Essenes were a group of priests that were considered by the majority to be radicals and dissidents. They rejected both the appointment of the high priest by the political powers of the day and the second Temple, arguing that their community was itself the new Temple and that obedience to the law was the ultimate form of sacrifice.

Coming from the priestly line of Abijah, and then wandering out in the wilderness of Judea, it is likely that John was attracted to the Qumran community that was in that vicinity. The Qumran stood for the maintenance of the purity of the priestly line. They believed that the high priest must follow the lineage of Zadok, who was the high priest during Solomon's reign, when the first temple was originally dedicated. However, approximately 174 B.C. the last priest in Zadok's line was deposed by a ruler of the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire named Antiochus IV. When Antiochus successfully invaded Israel, he handed the priesthood off, as a political appointment, to the Hasmonians who were a group of "worldly" Jews that were drawn to Greek culture and practically alienated themselves from their religious heritage.

The Hasmonians did whatever it would take to ingratiate themselves to their foreign rulers. They longed to be like the other nations of the world; free to indulge in whatever they wished, free from the yoke and bondage of the requirements of

the Torah. They were in effect willing to sell out their national heritage and culture in exchange for world citizenship and economic advancement. It has been recorded that they were willing even to give up the Temple and allow Jerusalem to become a Greek city just so they could share in the “good life” that the other nations enjoyed.

The Qumran community, which John was likely a part, developed from those priests who were purists and rejected the political, social, and cultural entrapments of the Hasmonian leadership; which is why they up and located themselves out in the wilderness. The isolation helped them maintain their purity as they dedicated themselves to the study and practice of the Jewish law. In this way, they believed they would be a people prepared for the Lord, ready to be His chosen instruments when the time came for Him to once again act on behalf of the nation. The scripture they used to support their withdrawal to the wilderness is *Isaiah 40:3*.

Isaiah 40:3

A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

This is the same scripture that John B quotes to the priests and the temple assistants in reply to their question about his identity. In other words, John was telling them, in no uncertain terms, that he does not recognize their politically imposed authority, and feels no need to provide them an answer. He was telling them that he comes from the true seat of authority – the true priests – who are dedicated to the culture, the heritage the tradition and the law.

Let’s now step back to the questions that these priests and temple assistants were asking of John. They asked John if he was the Messiah, the Elijah, or the Prophet,

to all of which he answered a resounding no! As far as a claim to be the Messiah, the Christ, he flatly denied it saying "I am not the Messiah." That was obvious to John; he knew that God had told him that he would be the one to point out the Christ, the Messiah, to the people. But who are the Elijah and the Prophet?

Let's start with the Prophet and work backwards to the Elijah. This Prophet is a reference to a prophecy and a promise Moses made in *Deuteronomy 18*.

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Moses continued, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. For this is what you yourselves requested of the Lord your God when you were assembled at Mount Sinai. You said, 'Don't let us hear the voice of the Lord our God anymore or see this blazing fire, for we will die.'

"Then the Lord said to me, 'What they have said is right. I will raise up a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell the people everything I command him. I will personally deal with anyone who will not listen to the messages the prophet proclaims on my behalf.

So what do you think it means when the text says God will raise up for them a prophet like Moses? Well, similar to Moses, the Jews were expecting the Prophet to come and carry out 3 essential functions on behalf of the nation. The Prophet would: 1) rescue the nation from the oppression of their foreign occupiers in the same way that Moses rescued them from the oppression of Egypt; 2) rule the

nation and bring it under the administration of God; and 3) be the intermediary between God and Israelites, as the people still did not want to hear the voice of the Lord or see the blazing fire. In essence the Prophet would be Priest (an intermediary), King (the ruler of the nation), and their Savior (free them from oppression).

Stephen addresses this expectation in the book of Acts.

Acts 7:35-38

And so God sent back the same man his people had previously rejected when they demanded, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us?' Through the angel who appeared to him in the burning bush, God sent Moses to be their *ruler* and *savior*. And by means of many wonders and miraculous signs, he led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and through the wilderness for forty years. "Moses himself told the people of Israel, 'God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people.' Moses was with our ancestors, the assembly of God's people in the wilderness, when the angel spoke to him at Mount Sinai. And there *Moses received life-giving words to pass on* to us.

In this statement by Stephen you see all 3 roles: King, Priest, and Savior. Peter then provides us the direct interpretation of Moses' prophecy. He said that the Prophet is none other than Jesus the Messiah! In addressing a crowd of Israelites, Peter said:

Acts 3:17-23

"Friends, I realize that what you and your leaders did to Jesus was done in ignorance. But God was fulfilling what all the prophets had foretold about the Messiah—that he must suffer these things. Now repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away. Then times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord, and he will again send you Jesus, your appointed Messiah. For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets. Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people. Listen carefully to everything he tells you.' Then Moses said, 'Anyone who will not listen to that Prophet will be completely cut off from God's people.'

Since Jesus was both the Messiah and the Prophet, we know why John B flat out denied that he was either of them. But then what about the Elijah – could he be the prophet who was to come in the spirit and power of Elijah? Well to answer this question we have to once again step back into Old Testament prophecy and then jump back to the New Testament interpretation.

The concept of the Elijah comes from a prophecy in *Malachi*, which is most likely the last book written in the Old Testament. *Malachi* was written approximately 400 years before Christ. This final word from the Lord ushered in a long period of time of unique silence where God did not speak to the nation until right before the coming of John the Baptist. The prophecy in *Malachi* about the Elijah, which happen to be the last two verses in the book, state that Elijah the prophet will come right before the great and terrible day of the Lord. Let's look at *Malachi 4:5-6*.

Malachi 4:5-6

"Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.

The Jews expected that before the Messiah would arrive on this earth, and in effect be the conquering King they were expecting, someone in the spirit and power of Elijah would show up and preach a message that would return those who have strayed from the truth back to the Lord. Unfortunately, their understanding of this verse was limited by their wrong belief and unbelief.

They did not accept the prophecies in *Isaiah 53* and *Psalms 22* which state that the Messiah would first come to suffer and die for the sins of mankind. As a result, they narrowed their understanding of the coming of the Elijah preceding the Messiah to the very end of time during what we Christians understand as the second coming of Christ – the time when the Messiah crushes His enemies and establishes His administration on this earth. So it was their wrong belief and unbelief that caused them to not fully understand the meaning of these verses in *Malachi*.

Fortunately, Gabriel, one of the arch angels, comes down to earth 400 years later and tells us what to expect.

Luke 1:11-17

While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the **spirit and power of Elijah**. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. **He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children**, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly."

Jesus also made sure we did not miss this truth about John the Baptist. He confirmed that the Elijah did indeed come and no one recognized him.

Matthew 17:10-13

And His disciples asked Him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" And He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

If this is the case – if John B is the Elijah, you might be wondering why John denied it. It is possible that maybe he really did not understand his calling and the role he was to play in this unfolding drama? Is it possible that his parents never told him the prophecy and the words of the angel Gabriel? Honestly, I don't think either of those scenarios is all that viable.

I believe it is more likely that John was acting from his Qumran roots and basically sticking it to the priests and the temple assistants for whom he had little to no respect. Besides, what he said was the truth, he did not lie. They asked: "Are you Elijah?" and he said: "no." And in fact he was not Elijah, he was a prophet who came in the spirit and power of Elijah. But John was not going to give them the time of day and he did not care if they were confused.

I think John's parents would have absolutely told him what the angel said; after all, it was Gabriel who spoke to John's dad in the Temple. Everyone knew that if Gabriel showed up you had better listen for in the Old Testament he is the messenger that God used to bring his word to Daniel. This was a big deal! Could you imagine if Gabriel showed up and had something to say about your life? You would know that you were set apart for some unique purpose. Besides, I am sure at some point his parents had to explain to John why he could never touch wine or hard liquor. John probably knew the whole story; and it is likely that this sense of being set apart and dedicated to the Lord is what gave John the moxy to join the community of Qumran in the first place, with all their hardcore commitment to the law and priesthood.

That is why I believe John was being antagonistic in answering these priests and temple assistants. He was also probably quite incensed that these priests and temple assistants were just a bunch of lackeys of those "so called" religious leaders who were pulling their strings. He was probably irritated that those in charge did

not have the guts to even come out there and ask him the questions themselves. Notice in verse 22 they say: “tell us so we can give an answer to those who sent us.” I am sure that comment just infuriated John.

John 1:24-28

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. "It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

After asking who he is and not receiving any answer that was acceptable, they now turned to challenge his authority. If you are not the Christ, the Elijah or the Prophet – in other words, if you have no legitimate claim to authority – what makes you think you can baptize others? Examining their question, it is clear that they are not really concerned with whether God was working or not in the lives of the people who were being baptized; they were merely obsessed with control and authority.

We are told another little fact in verse 24; the priests and temple assistants came from the Pharisees. Let me give you some background on this group. During this time there were two major religious groupings of the leadership in Israel, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. These two groups had major philosophical differences when it came to the Jewish law and tradition.

The Pharisees were considered to be the most expert and accurate expositors of Jewish law and they are the ones that were considered to be the sages. Whenever you hear someone being called a Rabbi, they were likely a Pharisee. Their influence over the lives of the common people was strong and they were very involved with the daily life of the common Jew. Their rulings on Jewish law were deemed authoritative by most; however, the Sadducees believed the Pharisees were way too liberal in their interpretations and saw them as being not much more than people pleasers. For example, the core of the conflict between these two groups has to do with the interpretation of *Exodus 19:3-6* where the Pharisees believe that the whole Jewish system should be open to all those who belong to the nation of Israel and not just the priests whereas the Sadducees, being quite an exclusive group, believed that they were the only ones who could truly interpret the Torah.

The Sadducees were the priests that controlled the Temple services and they were an elite group that really did not care about the people, but only about their position, their wealth, and their social status. They interpreted the Torah quite literally and used it to justify their separation from the common folk.

The Pharisees and Sadducees had worked out a political peace, so to speak, with their Roman occupiers and in that regard were always vying for power and authority with the Romans. This is why when a new guy would come onto the scene and start threatening the status quo, they got very nervous.

Even though these religious leaders get a bad rap, their trepidation was actually quite justified. In the time period right before Jesus was born, there were a number of political uprisings by radical Jews who wanted to purge their land of Roman oppression. The Romans moved quickly and decisively against these uprisings. In order to gain control and restore their rule, they killed and crucified thousands of Jews and sold many others into slavery. This is in part why the Pharisees and

Sadducees were on the lookout. They wanted to stop any rabble rousing before it rose to a furor and incited any further Roman intervention. However, from the perspective of the Essene, they just considered both the Pharisees and Sadducees to be sell outs to their faith, heritage, and culture, and not truly devoted to God.

So when John's authority was challenged, he did not even answer their question directly; rather, he met power with power, authority with authority. John silenced them by saying that he was not the one they needed to be concerned with, for there is one in their midst, that they don't know about, who is authority and who is power. John said that he was not even worthy to untie this one's sandals – which in that society was the job of a slave. This must have really rocked these guys' world and made them very nervous.

Let's look at the parallel passage in *Matthew 3* and we will see that John said that this one who is ready to begin His ministry will come with the power and the authority of none other than God.

Matthew 3:11-12

As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

I am sure these priests and temple assistants went back to their leaders with great anxiety and concern, for John spoke of judgment and ensuing conflict. In their minds, I doubt they had any thoughts of the Messiah coming to earth to do a great

work of redemption. I am sure that all they heard in their mind was that John said one was coming who would bring conflict. They instantly thought that this one, whom they did not know about, might challenge their Roman occupiers. Their memories were still alive with the sights and smells of the thousands who were crucified and killed; and their hearts still ached when they thought of their brethren who were slaves in foreign territories. I am sure even the thought of those tragic events brought up all sorts of emotional pain and agony; which explains why they had no interest in asking John any more questions about this one who was coming. They had heard enough! Their power, their authority, their wealth, their social status, their lifestyle, and their peace with the Romans were all suddenly at risk. This was not something they could tolerate.

Isn't this still so true today? I am going to tread a bit lightly here because I know it is a sensitive issue to many. But a big part of our leadership within Christianity has made peace with the world around them. They are very at home with their power, authority, wealth, social status and their lifestyle. I believe that this is one of the main reasons that the church really does not look much different than the world around it.

It is sad, but the greatest pushback I have had to the concepts of walking in the Spirit of God, hearing His voice, knowing God's will, doing only what the Father tells you to do and saying only what the Father tells you to say, has come from the professionals in the Religion of Christianity. It seems they are threatened by a message of freedom and grace, which, in their perspective, might just take the power and authority out of their message and their pulpit. To me it is sad; they should be the ones to see, understand, and believe. They should desire to see everyone find true life and freedom in the mercy of Jesus Christ. They should

desire to see the shackles and weight of a works based form of Christianity abandoned. But instead they resist. This breaks my heart.

John 1:28

This incident took place at Bethany, a village east of the Jordan River, where John was baptizing.

Why do you think John made a point of telling us the location of where John was baptizing? Again, don't miss the detail. Most scholars believe that John was baptizing on the East side of the Jordan River the territory just 12 miles above Jericho, which is believed to be the crossing location of the children of Israel when they first entered the land. In fact, "Bethany" means "ferry house" or "crossing place." If this is accurate, that would be quite a powerful word picture as John was providing the crossing place – through baptism – for one to ready his or her heart for the coming of the Lord and entry into the true promised land of rest and peace which is found in relationship with Jesus Christ.

We will stop here and let you muse on this concept of true rest and peace in Jesus Christ. Notice, I did not say rest and peace in Christianity. Rest and peace is not found in a system, it is not found in a religion, it is only found in a person – the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah!

Let's Pray