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JOHN 1:6-8,19-37 -- 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 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, mention how he bore witness to Jesus. As his ministry progressed, he spoke more and more about "the One who would come after" him.

NOTES:

Vss. 6-8 -- A thumbnail summary of John the Baptist's ministry. *There came a man* -- John was an important prophet, but he was only a man. *sent from God* -- He was here on a Divine mission. God's purpose for his life was plainly stated even before he was born (Lk. 1:13-17,67-79). *He came... that he might bear witness of the light* -- John saw this as the purpose for his ministry (vs. 31). *that all might believe through him* -- The testimony and evidences which God has brought together to indicate to us who Jesus was are all meant to encourage us to proceed beyond intellectual awareness to offer our allegiance and put our trust in Him (20:30,31 -- Theme verses for this gospel.). From the outset, John's ministry was to persuade people to trust in and follow Him who is the light from God. *He was not the light, but came that he might bear witness of the light.* -- Let there be no confusion about who John was and who Jesus was. John was a servant whose purpose and function was to prepare the way and to identify the One who would come after him.

Vs. 19 -- *Who are you?* -- 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. (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 it would not be a helpful way to identify a particular 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] is 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.) They sent a delegation, therefore, to find out what he said about himself.

Vs. 20 -- *he confessed... "I am not the Christ."* -- From Luke's account, we find that 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. 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 in the Greek it is written as "Jesus the Christ", but most English translations 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 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.

Vs. 21 -- *Are you Elijah?* -- 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. These last two verses of the OT 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 Revelations 11 perform signs reminiscent of Moses and Elijah, that they may indeed be these two great figures from the past sent to prophesy against the evil of the world at that time. If so, this would be the more complete fulfillment of Malachi, since it immediately precedes the "great and terrible day of the Lord".

Are you the Prophet?-- "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" (Deuteronomy 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; Deuteronomy 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.

Vs. 22,23 -- *Who are you...? What do you say about Yourself?*-- John's quotation of Isaiah 40:3 is a literal summary of his wilderness ministry. 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.

Vs. 24 -- *sent from the Pharisees* -- The group of religious leaders that Jesus was to have the most confrontation with in His ministry. Here, they were behind the investigation of John's credentials.

Vs. 25 -- *Why are you baptizing (immersing)...?* -- 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 to describe the dying process, where cloth was dipped into the dye to become colored by it. There were other words to describe sprinkling or pouring. John was not applying water in these ways. He was immersing the person in the water of the Jordan river as a sign of their repentance. This action was controversial because generally Jews did not customarily 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 insist on such sweeping changes.

Vss. 26-28 -- John does not directly answer their question, but tells them he is preparing for another, "He who comes after me".

Vss. 29-31 -- John testifies of Jesus. *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* -- 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 (Isa. 53:4-8). ...*He existed before me* -- Amazing statement since John knew Jesus was six months younger than he was (Lk. 1:31-36). *in order that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water* -- John's purpose for ministry.

Vss. 32-34 -- God spoke to me. He told me what to look for. *I have seen and bear witness. "This one is the Son of God."* -- Cf. Psa. 2:1-12; Prov. 30:1-4.