

E. Judea (3:22-36)

After providing his account of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, John turned next to one further episode involving John the Baptist. Here as well, John's design was to use the Baptist to develop his portrait of Jesus, the Messiah, but in this episode (as in the first, ref. 1:19-27), Jesus wasn't actually present. Rather, the Baptist spoke of Jesus and his relationship with Him in response to an inquiry by some of his disciples (3:25-26).

1. John associated two circumstances with this inquiry by the Baptist's disciples: their awareness that Jesus and His disciples were also performing baptisms and a specific discussion they'd had with another man regarding the matter of purification. These circumstances raise several questions that deserve some consideration:
 - a. First of all, John specifically noted that this episode occurred before the Baptist's arrest and imprisonment (3:24). Given that John the Baptist was executed in prison, this observation seems completely unnecessary; *obviously* the Baptist hadn't yet been imprisoned if he was still baptizing people. But it appears John mentioned this detail, not because it wasn't obvious, but because of the way it contributed to his main point in recounting this episode, namely Jesus' supremacy over John the Baptist. And the focal point of that distinction was the Baptist's role as the Lord's forerunner. *In the nature of the case, the One who is heralded is greater than the one who heralds him and prepares the people to receive him.* And when the herald has fulfilled his task, he steps out of the picture in deference to the one he proclaimed. So it would be with John: His imprisonment was God's affirmation that he had completed the work He assigned to him. Now it was time for him to step aside. And so, by reminding his readers that the Baptist hadn't yet been imprisoned, John was lending a prophetic quality to the Baptist's own summary declaration: *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* (3:30).
 - b. John didn't explain how Jesus and His disciples came to be baptizing. He noted only that this practice had come to the attention of John's disciples (apparently John had moved his own baptizing activity to the same general area – "Aenon near Salim," likely a few miles from Bethany – because of the availability of water) and they were questioning it and its implications for John's ministry. In particular, it seems they were concerned that Jesus was gathering disciples to Himself, the implication being that He was "stepping on John's toes" and undermining his work and its credibility (3:26). Subsequently John commented that it was actually Jesus' disciples who were administering these baptisms (though clearly with Jesus' approval) and it seems they regarded this work as complementing that of the Baptist rather than supplanting him (4:1-2).
 - c. The second matter which apparently lay behind the Baptist's disciples inquiring of him was a debate they had with a "Jew" (perhaps of the ruling class) regarding the rite of purification (3:25). Once again John provided no clarification and so it's uncertain how these two issues (Jesus' baptizing activity and the discussion of purification) fit together (if at all) and the role each played in this circumstance.

Because baptism was a purification ritual, it's possible that this man had questioned John's disciples about how his baptism and its cleansing significance correlated with the baptism being performed by Jesus' disciples. It's also possible that the man knew nothing of Jesus and what His disciples were doing and he'd approached the Baptist's disciples purely out of concern with his baptizing activity. But three considerations argue that this controversy, whatever its specifics, pertained to the baptisms of both John and Jesus' disciples: The first is the fact that this Jew came to *John's* disciples, not Jesus or His disciples. Secondly, John mentioned this discussion in connection with the disciples' decision to inquire of their rabbi, indicating that it had a part in that decision and the subject matter they wished to discuss. And finally, when the Baptist's disciples came to him, they asked him about *Jesus'* baptizing activity.

2. In terms of the inquiry itself, John provided only a summary statement (3:26). Again, the disciples' statement (together with John's response) indicates that they were concerned that Jesus was setting Himself up as an alternative prophet to John and seeking to gather disciples to Himself, perhaps even by drawing away John's disciples. Whatever the particulars of their concern (which somehow reflected the concerns of the Jew who'd come to them), *it highlights the fact that, for all his preaching and instruction, John's disciples still didn't grasp who Jesus was and the relationship which existed between Him and their master.* They evidently regarded Jesus and John as prophets of equal status with God; prophets who, in some sense, were competing with one another for the devotion of the people of Israel. They failed to discern Jesus, and to that extent they equally failed to discern their own rabbi. These devoted disciples of John – the prophet appointed by God to herald the Messiah and introduce Him to His people – called their own discipleship into question by failing to recognize the One John proclaimed. Though instructed by the forerunner himself, these men were among the “unbelieving believers” of Israel, and this is the likely reason John chose to include this episode in his account.

From this vantage point it's clear that John's response was as much a rebuke as a clarification. Though the day was soon coming when John would *himself* stumble over Jesus (ref. Matthew 11:1-11), he must have been shocked that his disciples were putting him on a par with the One he proclaimed and served. From the beginning he'd insisted that he wasn't the Messiah and that he was unfit to even stoop down and untie the sandal thong of the One who is (cf. 3:28 with 1:25-27; also Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:15-18). So far from sharing equal status with Jesus, John had always asserted that he was in every way inferior to Him, leaving his disciples with no excuse for their misjudgment. Here John reaffirmed the distinction between them by drawing upon four related considerations.

- a. The first point of distinction he noted was the fundamental one – the one which identified him and defined his ministry to Israel. John was the *Isaianic forerunner*: He was not the Messiah, but the Messiah's herald; he was a man who'd received Yahweh's commission from heaven to prepare Israel for His theophany in His Servant-Messiah and then announce Him to the nation when He arrived (cf. 3:27-28 with 1:6-7, 19-23 and Isaiah 40:1-11).

- b. Parallel with his watching and announcing role as the forerunner, John identified himself as the *friend of the Bridegroom* (3:29); Jesus was the Bridegroom, whereas he was the *shoshben* – in Jewish tradition, the closest friend of the groom chosen to direct the wedding arrangements. While the *shoshben* roughly corresponds to the contemporary concept of the “best man,” the former played a far more significant role in the marriage circumstance than the best man does.

“The “friend of the bridegroom” was charged with the preliminaries of the marriage. He arranged the contract, acted for the bridegroom during the betrothal, and arranged for, and presided at, the festivities of the wedding-day itself. It was a position of honour, in proportion to the position of the bridegroom himself, and was given to his chief friend. That friend then joyed in his joy, and there was none brighter on that day than he.” (Ellicott’s Commentary)

In an important sense, then, the *shoshben* was the focal point in bringing together the bridegroom and his bride. Along with his duties as summarized above, he also watched for the bridegroom’s coming and, when he saw him, announced it to the bride and the rest of the wedding party so that they could go out to the bridegroom and proceed with him to the marriage ceremony. In this way the *shoshben* served the bride as well as the bridegroom; he was the bridegroom’s close associate, but also the bride’s servant, serving her needs and good on behalf of the bridegroom. John the Baptist here captures these ideas by three statements: *The bride belongs to the bridegroom; the bridegroom’s friend stands and waits to hear the sound of his coming; when he hears the bridegroom, he rejoices* (3:29).

Though John didn’t explicitly say so, he obviously was identifying Jesus as the bridegroom and the children of Israel as His intended bride (cf. Matthew 9:14-15). Thus John’s answer to his disciples who were concerned that Jesus was overshadowing him and gathering His own disciples was that there was no competition or even parity between them: The children of Israel – including John’s own disciples – belong to the Messiah, not to him (cf. 1:35-42). He was Yahweh’s prophet commissioned to prepare Israel for her Bridegroom, announce His coming to her and then deliver her into His hand.

But John didn’t choose this marital imagery simply because it provided a suitable metaphor for his relation to Jesus; he knew that Yahweh employed it to depict His relationship with Israel: *He was the Bridegroom and Zion was His bride who bore children for Him*. But Zion had shown herself to be an incorrigible adulteress and so Yahweh had sent her away and stripped her of her children through exile. He had made His “wife” desolate, but with the assurance of a future new betrothal and consummation of their now-fractured union. Zion would again be radiant, this time in truth and forever. So also she would bear new children for her Husband, but faithful children who would bear their Father’s likeness and serve Him in sincere devotion (cf. Isaiah 50-54; Ezekiel 16, 23; Hosea 1-3). Now that day had come: *Yahweh was returning to His bride to purify and betroth her to Himself, but He was doing so in His Messiah just as Isaiah had promised* (59:1-61:9).

- c. John described himself to his disciples as the friend of Jesus, the Bridegroom. Jesus was greater than him because he served Him on behalf of His bride. Thus even John's disciples were not his own. To the extent that they were actually his *faithful* disciples they belonged to the Bridegroom as part of restored Zion. They stood with John only until he could hand them over to their betrothed. But this was no ordinary husband; *if Jesus excelled John by being the Bridegroom, He did so all the more because He had come to His bride as Yahweh returned to Zion.* John was the earthly shoshben; Jesus was the heavenly Bridegroom (3:31-33; cf. 3:11-13 with 1:9-11; ref. also Isaiah 49, 61-62; Revelation 19:1-9, 21:1-11).
- d. Jesus was "from above," and *uniquely* so. Only one man had ever "descended from heaven" and this descent originated in the heavenly realm; Jesus had not descended after having first ascended from the earth (ref. again 3:13). Among all human beings, He alone was not "earthly" in the first instance (1:1, 14). And having His origin in the heavenly realm as the eternal Logos of God, Jesus enjoys the place of absolute preeminence; He is "above all" (cf. Colossians 1:15-20). Moreover, as the incarnate and immanent Logos who is in the bosom of the Father, *Jesus is the complete and perfect exegesis of the Living God* (1:18).

Thus His witness is the witness of heaven itself; if other men spoke Yahweh's words as His prophets, the Son communicates His words as One who *embodies* both those words and Yahweh Himself; Jesus speaks what He has personally seen and heard in the presence of His Father (3:32; cf. 5:17-24, 30-36, 7:25-29, 8:12-55, etc.; also Hebrews 1:1-3). John emphasized as a core theme of his account the fact that Jesus is the embodiment of truth and His words and works accord with the truth of His person; *thus the startling irony that His witness was rejected by those who should have recognized Him.* Indeed, so few embraced Him that John could assert that "no one receives His witness" (3:32b; cf. 1:11). Nevertheless, there were some who *did* and the Baptist included himself among this group; he received Jesus' witness as true and thus solemnly affirmed that *God* is true (3:33). For John the Baptist had witnessed the Spirit descend upon Jesus and he heard the Father's testimony concerning Him (3:34-35; cf. 1:32-34 with Matthew 3:13-17).

All of these points of distinction between the Baptist and Jesus have profound significance as matters of scriptural fulfillment. Once again, the focal point of that fulfillment was John's role as the Isaianic forerunner appointed to prepare Israel for the Lord's return to Zion (40:3-5) and herald His coming when it occurred (40:1-2). He had now returned to Zion in His Son and John had been faithfully carrying out his task of preparation and annunciation by his baptizing and preaching. But the very nature of John's calling identified it as *temporary*. Like the Law of Moses itself, John's work was preparatory and prophetic (Matthew 11:1-15); he and his ministry pointed to the coming One. John was the greatest of the prophets in the preparatory salvation history, even as he served on the very threshold of the in-breaking kingdom. He heralded the kingdom and its King, but he didn't live to see the kingdom inaugurated (Matthew 11:11). John understood his calling and the fact that he was a transient signpost. He knew that his significance resided in the person, purpose and work of the Messiah, so that each passing day meant his own decrease in the face of Jesus' increase – not the decrease of failure, but of faithful completion.