

STUDY TWO

The Coming of John and Jesus

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND MESSIANIC ANTICIPATION

We have noted that anticipation of a deliverer, or at least desire for the appearance of such a one, was at a high pitch. Whilst this had intensified about the time John the Baptist appeared near Jordan, it had been strong for some decades prior to that. In fact messiahs of a sort had appeared, sometimes with disastrous consequences (cf. Acts 5:34–37).

What we do have to understand is not only that having been deceived, the Jews would need good attestation for one claiming to be Messiah, but also that in fact this person would have to have very clear references to make any claim at all to being Israel's anointed, appointed Messiah. For this reason it would have been hopeless for Jesus to have suddenly appeared on the scene and to have claimed Messianic being and authority. This is why the story of John the Baptist is very important. He was to be the bridge between Old and New Testament epochs. He was to be the prophet who of all prophets would see the fulfilment

of not only his own prophecy, but also of all prophets who had been before him and who had prophesied the coming of the Messiah.

The Birth of John the Baptist

One of the later accusations of Jesus' enemies was that he was trying to destroy the law, and especially the temple and its rituals. It is significant then that the prophecy of the birth of John was made in the temple itself, by an angel, and from the right hand of the altar of incense at the time of the incense offering. The man to whom it was made was the priest who was leading that worship, the man Zechariah, who was aged and had an aged wife. The angel predicted that the priestly couple would have a child. In Luke 1:14–17, the angel prophesies and in doing so quotes Malachi 4:6. This speaks of one who is to come and 'turn the hearts of [the] fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers'. It is to be 'before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes' (Mal. 4:5).

In the same prophecy the angel speaks of John as one who will 'go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah'. Who, then, is the 'him'? This is explained in Malachi 3:1–2. That one is to be 'the messenger of the covenant'. He is to be a dynamic person for, 'who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?' In other words, this John is to prepare the way for the messenger of the covenant.

John himself will be 'great before the Lord'. He will drink no strong drink, and uniquely, 'he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb'.

In Luke 1:76–79, Zechariah, being filled with the Holy Spirit (following John's birth), speaks of the actual ministry

of John which is to 'go before the Lord to prepare his ways . . . when the day shall dawn upon us from on high'. His ministry then is to be one of preparation for the coming of Messiah.

The Ministry of John the Baptist

There is some interpretation of John's ministry, not only in the prophecies of the angel and John's father, Zechariah, but also in Scriptures applied to John. Matthew, Mark and Luke apply Isaiah 40:3-5 which speaks of the one preparing the way for the coming of the King. Mark quotes Malachi 3:1 (which we have already seen) and links it with Isaiah 40:3. In John 1:19-23, John the Baptist explains himself in the light of Isaiah 40:3. In other words, he sees himself as the messenger sent to prepare the way for Messiah.

It is clear that no prophet was ever appointed by the leaders of the people, for by nature of the case that was impossible. God alone called prophets and then sent them. There had been no canonical prophet for some hundreds of years, so that John's appearance was quite unusual. The leaders had every right to test out his vocation, although by the time John commenced his ministry this was generally accepted by the people. In the account of Matthew 3:1-12 there was little doubt that John's ministry was of such powerful nature as to convince not only the common people, but also to draw a number of Sadducees and Pharisees, although John had little time for them. It appears that John rejected the Sadducees and Pharisees, demanding genuine repentance of them. In John's Gospel, priests and Levites are sent from the leading Jews to test out the prophetic call of John the Baptist, and he gives them short shrift.

We may conclude that John was accepted as a prophet, though not by the Establishment. Jesus was to ask the question, later, ‘Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men?’ and this was one question the leaders did not dare answer—either way (cf. Luke 20:1–8).

The nature of John’s ministry is clear: it was preparatory to Christ’s coming. It spoke of the following:

- (a) The kingdom of God, that is, a universal kingdom.
- (b) Universal forgiveness. John demanded the baptism of water, of repentance, with a view to the remission of sins. Of Jesus he said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ (John 1:29).
- (c) Universal outpouring of the Spirit. John said the Messiah would baptise with the Spirit. Joel 2:28ff., later quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost, speaks of the outpouring of the Spirit ‘upon all flesh’.

The coming of the Messiah was to be: (i) for the renewal and establishment of the kingdom of God; and (ii) for the judgement of all that was wrong within the present kingdom of Israel (Matt. 3:7–12).

John, then, was the precursor to the coming of Messiah. He indicated who Messiah would be and what he would do. Then he identified this Messiah with Jesus. In order to understand this, we should read Matthew 3:13–17 and John 1:24–34. These passages show that John recognised Jesus as the Messiah. Later, in John 3:25–30, John the Baptist reiterates this to his disciples. In John 5:30–36 Jesus states that John bore witness to him. He points out that men ‘were willing to rejoice for a while in his light’, that is, they accepted the office of John as a prophet.

The Significance of John's Ministry

We have pointed out from Luke 20:1–8 that even the leaders did not dare say John's baptism was not from heaven. Whilst they would not say it was, they feared the people who accepted it as from heaven. Linked with this is the fact that John told Israel to repent. Since the nation was in its own land already (although not all were) it seemed strange for a prophet to demand repentance of the people and virtual re-entry to the promised land through the waters of the Jordan (as in Josh. 3 and 4), as if they were not yet there, and a baptism that was normally required only of Gentile proselytes. Virtually this meant that Israel was in the position of being a sinful nation, almost as the Gentiles. Being God's people it should, technically, have needed no repentance. But it did.

Jesus described John as 'a prophet . . . and more than a prophet' (Luke 7:26). He had reasons for this. In saying that among men born of women none was greater than John he meant:

- (a) *The coming of the prophet, John, had been prophesied.* Apart from the prophet of Deuteronomy 18:15ff. (i.e. Jesus) no prophet's coming had been prophesied.¹ Luke 7:27 (cf. Isa. 40:3; Mal. 4:5) shows John's coming was a matter of prophecy.
- (b) John was not only a prophet who saw his prophecy come to pass within his own time, but *he also*

¹ The question could be asked, 'Was not John that prophet of Deuteronomy 18:15ff.?' This is almost certainly the question asked of him in John 1:21. John denied he was 'that prophet'. However, it is clear that he was the prophet of Malachi's prophecy, which he himself linked with the messenger of Isaiah 40. This leaves the way clear for Jesus to be 'the prophet' of Deuteronomy 18.

saw the whole line of the prophets fulfilled in his own time (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10–12). Since ‘the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy’ (Rev. 19:10) and Jesus had come, thus the burden of the prophets was being fulfilled before his eyes.

- (c) *The prophets had been until John, but now the kingdom had come, in Messiah.* In Matthew 11:1–19, Jesus gives a full account of John the Baptist. He says that the law and prophets prophesied until John, but now it is the kingdom. In other places he points to the personal ministry of John as effecting repentance in the willing, but fixing the impenitent in their sin (Matt. 21:28–32; cf. Luke 7:29–30).

We conclude then that John’s ministry was in accordance with previous prophecy, that John was sent to bear witness to that light which was Messiah, that therefore Messiah’s coming was in accordance with the whole stream of true prophecy, and that Jesus was thus validated as Messiah.

The importance of this conclusion cannot be exaggerated. It means that the Jewish parliament (the Sanhedrin) should have accepted John’s ministry. Although they did not dare oppose it officially, neither would they officially endorse it. It meant that they should have accepted Jesus as Messiah but, as John the apostle says, ‘He came to his own home, and his own people received him not’ (John 1:11). Nevertheless the Sanhedrin had no legitimate grounds to complain of Jesus and his Messianic claims. His ministry was therefore valid. He does not appear, as it were, out of the air. He comes as the true fulfilment of all those intimations from the Old Testament which we examined in our last study.

MESSIANIC ANTICIPATION

The history of Jesus' times can be traced, even apart from the Christian Gospels. There was great anticipation of Messiah. For this reason the narratives of Jesus' birth are not at all strained. Whilst the apostle John can later speak of the Creative *Logos*—the Word by whom all things were made—and say, in beautiful language, 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us', he can say this because the events of the life and ministry of Jesus have happened and have proved his statement. In fact they have given birth to that statement.

The Birth Events

The angel of the Lord and the Holy Spirit are present in the birth events. The angel speaks to Mary, then to Joseph, each on more than one occasion. Just as unusual events attended the birth of John the Baptist, so even more unusual events attended the birth of Jesus. This must be noted, since it too is an attestation of his Messianic validity. Angels attended many significant events in Israel's history. No media used in the birth of Jesus could be unacceptable, as such, in the eyes of true Jews.

Hence Mary, when she is informed by the angel of the fact and nature of the birth of Messiah, is not astonished by the principle as such, but only by the fact that *she*, of all people, is to be the mother of the Lord (Luke 1:26–38). Again Joseph is not astonished that Mary should be with child in conformity with the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. He too accepts the conception through the Holy Spirit, as had Mary. The sudden infilling of Elizabeth with the Holy Spirit as she met Mary was a matter for joy rather than unbelief (Luke 1:39–56), and hence Mary interprets all

the events with remarkable clarity in her song called the Magnificat. In fact so clear is it that it can only be inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The prophecy by Zechariah over his son John was not confined to John, but was also of Messiah for whom John was to be the precursor. Such events constituted part of the 'build-up' for Messiah's coming. The two births were coming together.

The actual events of the birth—the census of Caesar Augustus which caused the couple, Mary and Joseph, to return to Bethlehem, with the birth in a lowly situation and the angelic manifestation to the shepherds—all tie in with the current Messianic expectancy. It was 'in the air'. Hence, when they take the child to the temple at Jerusalem (Luke 2:25ff.), the aged Simeon was anticipating 'the consolation of Israel', whom he could call, 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel'. Also, Anna the prophetess was in anticipation and saw that yearning fulfilled. She gave thanks to God and 'spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem'.

When we add to this the remarkable story of the Magi, and their mysterious understanding of 'he who has been born king of the Jews', we can see that Jesus' appearance was not at all astonishing, but as Paul says, 'when the time had fully come' (Gal. 4:4). This means that Messiah's coming was not only in accordance with prophecy, not only needed, but also actually expected at that point of history.

It is scarcely necessary to add that there were many misconceptions concerning the true nature of Messiah and his mission. Nevertheless, the age was prepared for his coming, even if it was not totally aware of the nature and purpose of that coming.

THE PERSONA OF JOHN AND CHRIST