

John 07 – John's Testimony, Part 2 – I Am Not the Christ

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Scripture 1: (Deut. 18:15-19 ESV)

"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers-- it is to him you shall listen-- just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' And the LORD said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.'

Scripture 2: (Mal. 4:1-6 ESV)

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

Scripture 3: (Jn. 1:19-28 ESV)

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

And he answered, "No."

So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Sermon:

Who was John the Baptist?

When we compare the testimony of the four Gospels, we are led to generate a graphic, mental picture. Most of us probably imagine him as an unkempt, disheveled, and dirty looking guy wearing animal skin clothes that were falling off of his body, being so gaunt and emaciated on account of very a low calorie diet. We probably also imagine him as having eyes like a crazy person: sunken in shadow but piercing and penetrating nonetheless. These kind of imaginings are obviously unattractive and they're meant to be.

We often think that the Baptist was more like a crazy Hobo rather than a suave and popular leader. We do not think about the Baptist as being a charismatic, attractive, and persuasive type person, such as JFK but, I think that may be a better portrayal for our modern minds. I believe the above characterization is not only unfair to the world of the text but also to John himself. I think it is wrong because it relies so heavily upon our modern opinions and sensibilities in drawing such negative assumptions about this important person. Perhaps this attitude began by folks trying to emphasize certain differences between the Baptist and Jesus, or between him and the social conventions of his time, trying to highlight his separateness and his “otherness” through non-conformity to worldly norms and expectations, but eventually it just devolves into a caricature.

Both Matthew and Mark tell us that the Baptist was known to wear clothes made of camel hair, tied with a leather belt, eating solely locusts and honey all things which seem very strange to us (Matt 4:4; Mark 1:6). Therefore we assume that because these details are highlighted, then they must be important and not just merely unusual, unexpected, and used to shock us. Knowing what we know about the rest of Scripture, we could think that these strange clothes help to build up his connection with the prophet Elijah because of an assumed “wildness”, but we would be wrong. Scripture does not describe how the prophet Elijah dressed, yet art will often depict him that way because of John's description. Instead of suggesting a dirty and negative appearance, this is actually a positive and very “clean” depiction of the Baptist, particularly from the perspective of ritual holiness.

Everything about the Baptist was simple and ritually clean; having a shirt woven from camel's hair {an unclean animal for eating, but not for contact or use} implies that animals were not harmed by its' production. This should not be surprising because the Gospel of Luke begins by explaining John's birth into a Levitical, priestly family. So he would have been very knowledgeable and practiced in personal holiness and ritual cleanliness. Since he belonged to a priestly family, he would have effectively been raised to be both a “public servant” and a religious professional since he was expected to work in the Temple twice a year, just like his father before him. This further suggests that he was probably personally charismatic and at least somewhat influential.

Even though the Gospel descriptions show him living a very extreme practice, it was actually not out of reasonable bounds; there were whole communities even more extreme than him. The little that we know about the Essenes and the Qumran community, whom some scholars believe that John could have been a part of, suggests that he was probably “influenced” by their extreme separateness and holiness practices, at the minimum.

This helps explain why Pharisees and other deeply religious people would come to John: both for his baptism and to ask him about the “What's, why's, and wherefores of what he was doing”; because he was “out Phariseeing the Pharisees” in regards to personal holiness and religious purity, and because of his social influence.

But none of that answers our original question of “Who was John the Baptist?”. Recognizing the importance of both the question and who his questioners were, he must have surely thought long and hard through the question

of “Who am I?” and obviously the answer was neither “Jean Valjean” nor “24601”. This question was and is so important because the answer proclaims the source of his authority and the reason for his importance.

When the priests and Levites and Pharisees came questioning the Baptist, they asked him two distinct questions.

First they asked him, “Who are you?”, offering him the choice of three expected religious characters: the Christ, Elijah, and “the Prophet”; each one of whom factored into and still factors prominently in Jewish theology.

The first option they offered was “the Christ”.

We are all familiar that Christ (*christos*) was the Greek expression used to translate the Hebrew term “Messiah” (*meshiach*), and that both terms mean “anointed”, and more specifically “the LORD's anointed”. “Christ” is used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures to describe the priests in Leviticus, then throughout the rest of Scripture it was only used regarding God's divinely anointed and ordained kings {even including Cyrus, a king anointed for the LORD's special purpose (Is 45:1); Habakkuk is the only exception, using it for Israel's special anointed status as God's chosen people (13:3)}.

The Jewish hope for a coming Messiah in the First Century, was founded largely upon the term's **idyllic** use within the Psalms (2, 17, 19, 27, 83, 88, 104, 131), concerning a divinely favored Davidic king who would be exemplified as a conquering hero (as David was). Psalm 2 best summarizes their expectation:

- *“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.” Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.” (Ps. 2:1-12 ESV).*

They were expecting a worldly conqueror and liberator, which explains why Jesus did not fit their hopes for the Messiah. However, Christians see Jesus' role in this prophetic Psalm as achieved through His ascension, enthronement, and in the final judgment at His return as well as by His conquering of Satan, sin, and death.

Then the second option which they offered him was “Elijah”. Elijah was the first great prophet during the divided monarchy. He was the “public face” of religious opposition to King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and their false gods Ba'al and Asherah, and he was taken up alive into heaven about 850 years before the birth of Jesus.

I suspect that this option was intended as a trap. Judaism has no conception of “reincarnation” and the Levites who were questioning him, surely knew John's family personally and by reputation. They may have even known about the story of his father Zechariah's visit from the angel Gabriel. So, if he claimed to be Elijah then they could call him delusional, crazy, self-important, or just a liar. Yet there remained some honest truth in asking that question, because they did (and still do) expect Elijah to return.

The prophet Malachi, whose writings close out the Old Testament scripture, prophesied, *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”* (Mal 4:5; ref. Luke 1:17). So, regardless of whether or not Elijah should return in a chariot

of fire and a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11), the Jews expected him to bodily return and herald the coming Messiah. Even still today, as the Jews await the Messiah whom they “missed”, each Passover they always (superstitiously) set an empty place and chair at the Seder table for Elijah, “just in case” he happens to show up.

Even though John did not claim the role, honor, or title of Elijah for himself, Jesus ascribed it to him, telling His disciples “*But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.*” *Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.*” (Matt. 17:12-13 ESV). Now, I do not think John lied with his denial, instead I think it was more a combination of his own humility {being unwilling to make such an outrageous claim that he could not prove} and a degree of blindness concerning himself.

The third and final option they suggested was “the Prophet”; someone whom we do not often hear discussed or expressly mentioned within the Christian tradition. This definitive expectation comes from an obscure prophecy in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 18, “*“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers-- it is to him you shall listen-- just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' And the LORD said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them **a prophet like you** [Moses] from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.*””. This prophecy was used as an important qualifier throughout the history of Israel because the verses which immediately follow it describe how to know whether a prophet is true or not, and then it commands a response: listen, heed, and obey a true prophet; avoid, ignore, and execute a false prophet. The test to determine if someone was a true prophet is whether their prophesy comes true or not (18:15-22). Although this rule was applicable to the prophets of the Old Testament, its full force and implementation seems to have been rarely applied by the Israelite community, much to their spiritual detriment since false prophets were so abundant.

While this Mosaic prophesy applied to every prophet in Israel's history: named and unnamed, true and false; its greatest fulfillment was generally expected to be found in the person of the Messiah: a deliverer on the scale of Moses (someone whom the Judean Jews of the First Century was expecting to be necessary to solve their “Roman problem”), who would free them from foreign rule and restore their Kingdom {we see evidence of this expectation throughout the Gospels and the historical record, even in the questions and assumptions of Jesus' disciples “*So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"*”

He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."” (Acts 1:6-8 ESV)}, but they were willing to consider that their interpretation might be wrong and that the Prophet could be a second, related person. This explains why his interrogators specifically asked John, “*Are you the Prophet?*”, because:

- He was clearly acting “as a prophet”; and
- He was very popular among the people, crossing social boundaries since common people, Roman soldiers (Luke 3:14), tax collectors, and even Pharisees (Matt 3:7) were coming to heed his words; and
- He was gaining a large following, becoming the guiding figurehead of a populist movement and was well-known for speaking against some of the ruling regime (Matt 14:3-5).

So, according to their expectations, John the Baptist remained a great candidate for their temporal hope since he was a very Moses-like figure, even if he was not the Messiah. Perhaps he could still be the one to lead the people against the Romans, or at least the family of Herod, and then crown the new Davidic king and Christ, filling a role like Samuel? That however, is only my speculation.

But, if not John, then who is the ultimate prophet about whom Moses wrote?

It is Jesus Christ of course. However, we do not often pause and recognize this specific connection, but we remember it every time we talk about Him as being our **Prophet**, our Priest, and our King.

- Jesus was born and raised as a Jew, an Israelite from the tribe of Judah; so he does come from among Moses' Israelite brothers;
- Jesus is a mediator like Moses, mediating the new and greater covenant of Grace and life, as Moses was the mediator of the lesser, old covenant of Law and death; and
- Therefore Jesus, as the Messiah, is also the Prophet greater than Moses. As the *Logos* who is *Theos*, He brought and spoke God's Holy Word to us just as Moses prophesied, “*And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.*”. Now life and salvation is found by all who heed His words, while judgment and death is received by all who do not obey His commands.

{However, this prophecy from Deuteronomy has another important interpretation which bears mentioning. It is a heretical and false interpretation, but knowing about it is very helpful.

Deuteronomy 18:15-22 is claimed by the Muslims to be fulfilled in the person of Muhammad. That is why his title is “The Prophet”. To their perspective, Jesus (or Issa as they call Him) is merely one of a long line of prophets like Moses, second only to Mohammad. Islamic theology even allows for Issa to be considered the Christ (although He is not the Son of Allah) because they keep this greater Prophet, like Moses, distinctly separate because the earlier Scriptures which they consider to possessing any authority (albeit corrupted) are the Jewish Torah (the Five Books of Moses) and the Christian Gospels (ignoring the divinity claims of Jesus); the Jewish Writings and Prophets are otherwise largely ignored.

This is an important point to recognize as they will/should show some sympathy for Jews and Christians because we are all three considered to be “People of the Book”, although Jews are considered heretics (for their denial of Mohammad) and Christians are blasphemers and idolaters (for our doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ). This is the principal Biblical point upon which Islam tries to justify and claim authority for Mohammad.}

- Jesus, as the Messiah, is our priest, our Great High Priest according to the “order of Melchizedek” (Ps 110:4; Hebrews 7). We call Him priest on account of His recorded prayer of intercession in John 17 (often called the “High Priestly Prayer”), and because of His intercession upon the cross (dying as an atoning sacrifice; the propitiation for our sins) as interpreted by the Apostle Paul across his many letters and by the author of Hebrews throughout that whole exposition.; and
- Jesus, as the Messiah, is our King because He is descended from the line of David (2 Sam 7; Matt 1:1-16; Luke 3:23-38) and He is the Son of God, our ultimate Sovereign and King. Jesus has ascended to heaven and now sits (and sometimes stands) at the right hand of God our Father (Matt 26:64; Luke 22:69; Acts 1:9-11, 7:54-60; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 8:1, 12:2), possessing and exercising all authority in

heaven and earth (Matt 28:18), possessing the name above all names, and is the One before whom every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess as the LORD (Philippians 2:9-11).

Now, after John responded to all three of their suggestions in the negative, he gave them a most unexpected answer, saying "*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said.*". This quote comes from Isaiah chapter 40, which is filled with eschatological and messianic hope regarding what the LORD shall do for His chosen people, and even more about Who the LORD is as the universal Sovereign.

However, the voice mentioned appears seemingly from out of nowhere speaking "Comfort" to God's people, possessing an authority and confidence which is grounded in the LORD's love and faithfulness. This voice appears heralding good news about the LORD's imminent appearing; the good news of restoration to wholeness by our gracious God of the covenant. However, the news which this voice heralds is so great that, although the bearer of such glad tidings would ordinarily be honored and revered, this herald apparently gets overshadowed, forgotten, or ignored in the wake of its' fulfillment.

Thus John the Baptist claimed to have been sent to prepare the way for the LORD's Messiah, the Christ. He functioned much like Aaron in introducing Moses to the Hebrew Elders in Egypt (Exodus 4:28-31), helping to prepare the way for the LORD to deliver Israel from their bondage and slavery.

The Baptist was not the Christ, but His job was to get things ready for when the Christ came and to announce, proclaim, and declare His arrival. He was the herald of the coming King. Heralds were always sent out ahead of the king, not just to announce him but to also get things prepared for his arrival. They helped arrange banquets, ensured that the king's favorite foods were prepared, that his quarters were suitable, and all other such details. That was what John effectively did through his ministry and his baptizing.

- He came to prepare hearts and minds to receive Christ.
- He came to call God's people into repentance; calling them to return to their LORD in faith, by trusting in His grace and mercy alone, instead of their own works of religious devotion or their own good works of human decency: charity and mercy.
- Ultimately, John came to direct everyone's attention to the person who is greater than himself: the One who possesses authority within Himself; the One who is meant to be the object of their devotion, trust, and faith; the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

This purpose of John's is why we began last time by thinking about the source of his authority: the authority of his ministry and the authority of his testimony; because that is what the priests, Levites, Pharisees, and teachers of the law were really asking him about. What they really wanted to know was: "Why was he doing what he was doing?", "By what right was he doing it?", and "Who gave him the authority or the permission to do it?".

Despite all of their pretensions, they were just more concerned about their own authority, influence, and social position than they were with the good things of the LORD: justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt 23:23). All of their works of piety and devotion {speaking generally about their broad class and not about every particular individual} were done more for their own good benefit, for what they gained them in the eye of God and in the eyes of men, than out of the earnestness of their faith; out of their humility and contriteness of spirit (Is 66:2); or from their broken hearted-ness because of their sins (Ps 51:17). Their influence, authority, and all their socio-political power was derived from the Jerusalem Temple and their relative position within that cult {cult being a technical term denoting a system of religious practice, and not being meant as modern English phraseology

pejoratively uses it}. But the Baptist was operating in the Judean wilderness, out on his own, and acting without the Temple's endorsement. He was an “outsider”. He appeared like a religious “separatist”, in a vein similar to the Essenes. Yet there is no evidence to suggest that John was trying to turn people against or away from the Temple and their orthodox worship and practice. Instead, through his calls for personal repentance and teaching about a higher standard of personal holiness, he was working to refocus them towards faith in the LORD, preparing them for faith in Jesus Christ.

Then, since John did not claim any source of authority that they acknowledged, *“They asked him, ‘Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?’”*, he answered them, effectively saying {I am baptizing to get people ready for the One with authority to come, and I am not worthy to untie his sandals.}. All John was doing was what the LORD had sent him to do; to “prepare the way”.

Now, even though these religious elites could not find any fault in or with John, they still stubbornly refused to recognize or acknowledge the source of his authority as being the LORD God; a point which Jesus later proved when they came asking Him the same line of questions, *“...and they said to him, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?’”*

Jesus said to them, ‘I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.’

And they discussed it with one another, saying, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘From man?’-- they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’

And Jesus said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.’” (Mk. 11:28-33 ESV)

So really, who was John the Baptist? He was the “voice crying in the wilderness”: the herald of our LORD and Savior and God, Jesus; come to prepare the hearts and minds of His chosen people to receive Him and His blessing.

This ministry and John's teaching about holiness and repentance was how he was “[preparing] the way of the LORD...” out in the Judean wilderness along the banks of Jordan river. The ministry of John can be summed up by one single commandment, which every other commandment is subordinate to, *“For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.”* (Lev. 11:44 ESV). John the Baptist reminds us that holiness is the “name of the game” for God's people because we are made in God's image and we are His representatives in this world; therefore, we must always be putting our “best foot forward”.

- We must bear the good fruit which is consistent with our faith in the LORD; good fruit which will naturally be holy.
- We remember that our personal holiness is not what causes God to love us and show us His favor. Holiness is our response to God's favor and love for when He “cleans us up” and forgives our sin, then we rightly want to “keep ourselves clean” now and not return to our sinful ways.
- This was how he was *“...making straight in the desert a highway for our God.”*.

John's ministry was a prelude to what our own ministries ought to be: ministries of peace and reconciliation to the world (2 Cor 5: 18-19), of holiness, justice, mercy, and love for neighbor and for Jesus Christ. All Christians are called to be living in such a way: living holy lives and teaching others how and why they should too. The

Baptist was our forerunner, he was our trailblazer whose example we ought to be following by preparing a way for the LORD in the world.

Therefore, we should be preparing our world by:

- proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel;
- by introducing people to Jesus through our words and deeds;
- by helping and loving others (our neighbors, strangers, family, and friends);
- by being “peace-makers” and working for reconciliation;
- by not seeking to cause conflict or strife {but that does not mean we should always be conflict avoidant, just that we should not work to create conflict}; and,
- by being holy, because our God is Holy.

We all used to understand this a lot better, more intuitively. This used to be the principal motivation for Christians in the world; working to make the world a better place in anticipation of the Christ's return and His complete restoration and renewal. When we used to do this, most of the world held a better opinion about Christians (even though they disagreed with who we believe Jesus to be) because they saw and experienced how much better we and our way of life make things.

- That is such a great fact and most atheists hate to admit it: life in the world is better BECAUSE there are Christians in it.

So, finally, the Baptist calls for us to live a life of holiness and repentance by faith in Christ. We have Scripture to tell us God's will for our lives, and we also have the command of Christ to love, as we are loved (John 15:12).

Therefore, repent! Be holy because our God: our Father and our Savior; is Holy! Let us join together with John and all the saints who have gone before, continuing to prepare the way of the LORD because Christ is coming and He is coming sooner than any of us know. Be prepared and be ready.

AMEN