

### The Ministry of John the Baptist

#### John 1:19-28

John 1:19-8 - *“Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”<sup>20</sup> He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”<sup>21</sup> And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.”<sup>22</sup> Then they said to him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”<sup>23</sup> He said: “I am ‘the voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the LORD,” as the prophet Isaiah said.”<sup>24</sup> Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees.<sup>25</sup> And they asked him, saying, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”<sup>26</sup> John answered them, saying, “I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know.<sup>27</sup> It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”<sup>28</sup> These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.”*

#### Background Notes

John 1:19-28 provides more about the ministry of John the Baptist, who was introduced in the prologue of John’s Gospel (v1-18). As we begin the main body of the Gospel, about the public ministry of our Lord, we learn about the ministry of John the Baptist. In verse 19, *“the Jews”* sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask John the Baptist, “Who are you?” *“The Jews”* here were not the Jewish people. After all, John was Jewish. The term, “the Jews,” particularly as used in the Gospel of John, referred to the religious leaders of the nation. This included the members of the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews, located in Jerusalem. John used the term “the Jews” about seventy times in his Gospel – and mostly in a negative way.

These priests and Levites who came to John would have been associated with the Temple rituals in Jerusalem. Notice that the Pharisees had sent them (v24). The Pharisees were members of a self-righteous religious sect. They were the interpreters and strict observers of the Law. For the most part, however, they were religious hypocrites. They didn’t accept the Messianic claims of Christ, and as we see here, they didn’t accept the ministry of John the Baptist either.

John was baptizing at Bethabara, or Bethany. This was not the Bethany where Mary and Martha lived. It was a spot on the other side of the Jordan River, in an area known as Perea, probably across from Jericho. We don’t know the precise location.

The Pharisees of Jerusalem sent this delegation of priests and Levites to John the Baptist, not to be baptized, but to “check him out.” What were his credentials? He wasn’t part of their establishment, and yet he was gaining many

followers. They were jealous! Who was this unknown preacher who had come out of the wilderness? Where had he come from? Where did he get his authority for baptizing people? They wanted a first-hand account of what was going on.

## Doctrinal / Teaching points

### 1. Jesus was the predicted Messiah, but not the expected “popular” Messiah.

When the investigation committee from Jerusalem arrived at John’s baptism place, the first thing they wanted to know was whether or not John was “the Christ.” Why did they even entertain the idea that John the Baptist might be Messiah? First of all, the Old Testament Scriptures are filled with prophecies about a coming Messiah, and within Judaism at that time there was a “Messianic consciousness.” The Jews of that time expected a Messiah. For the most part, the Jews expected the Messiah to come as a conquering king, as a popular war hero, especially since the nation was subject to the Roman Empire. They thought the Messiah would quickly rise to power, lead the people to independence from Rome, and then set up His kingdom.

A total of 400 years had gone by since the last Messianic prophecy had been given. No prophet had arisen for 400 silent years. Now John the Baptist had arrived on the scene! He was obviously a prophet - but maybe he was more than a prophet! He was gaining in popularity, and had a large following. Luke 3:15 says: *“Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not.”* They wondered, could John the Baptist possibly be the predicted Messiah?

But John squelched any idea that he was the popular Messiah that they were expecting. *“I am not the Christ”(v20). “I am ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the LORD”” (v23).*

Then John added, *“There stands One among you whom you do not know”(v26).* The Messiah was right there among them - but they didn’t recognize Him! The predicted Messiah was right there in their midst, but He wasn’t recognized because He didn’t meet the popular expectations about the Messiah to come. He didn’t come as a conquering king. He didn’t come as a popular war hero. (And, by the way, He didn’t come with a halo or a white robe, either!) Jesus was the predicted Messiah, but not the expected popular Messiah.

### 2. John the Baptist was not Elijah, but he could have been Elijah.

The delegation from Jerusalem also asked John if he was “Elijah” or “the Prophet” - and again John said “No” (v21). They were aware of Old Testament prophecy. In Deuteronomy 18:18 the Lord said to Moses, *“I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.”* Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of that prophecy. **He** is “the Prophet” of Deuteronomy 18:18!

The Jews also knew of the prediction in Malachi 4:5, that Elijah will precede the coming of the Messiah: *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.”* So the Jews wanted to know if John was the “Elijah” of this prophecy. And again John replied, “No, I am not.”

Why does our doctrinal point say that John the Baptist was not Elijah - but he **could have been** Elijah? The answer is found in what our Lord said in Matthew 17:11-12, after the Mount of Transfiguration event. When His disciples asked Him, *“Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”* the Lord replied, *“Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands”*

In Matthew 17 the Lord seemed to say that the Elijah prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist, but yet He said that Elijah is still coming! It sounds like the Lord was saying two different things. “Elijah has come” - and they understood that He was speaking of John the Baptist. And yet, “Elijah will come”! How do we explain this?

What He meant is this: If the Jews had received their King and His kingdom when Jesus came, then the kingdom of heaven would have truly been “at hand.” If the Jews had received their King and His kingdom, John the Baptist would have fulfilled the Elijah prophecies of Malachi 4. But the Jews rejected their King and His kingdom, so the physical kingdom of Christ was not set up at that time.

But it will be set up when the Lord returns! The kingdom has been postponed. There **will** be an Elijah-type figure preceding the return of the Lord to this earth to set up His kingdom. He may indeed be Elijah himself, or he may be one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11. John the Baptist was not Elijah, but he could have been Elijah.

## Practical Application

### Let's be humble road-builders, like John the Baptist.

When John was asked about his credentials, he said: I'm not the Christ, I'm not Elijah, I'm not the Prophet. I'm only “a voice crying in the wilderness, *“Make straight the way of the Lord”*(v23).

What a humble response! Only “a voice”! *“ It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”* John felt he was not even worthy to be a slave of the coming Messiah – and we should have that same humble attitude!

John was quoting Isaiah 40:3 when he said that he was only a “voice of one crying in the wilderness, *“Make straight the way of the Lord.”* In Isaiah 40, making a “straight road” is a picture of a highway being built in the desert for the coming of the Lord as King. The curves in the old road would have to be straightened, the valleys would have to be filled up, and the hills would have to be leveled off. The job would be like turning a secondary road into an interstate highway of today. Isaiah 40:3-4: *“ Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth.”*

John took that passage from Isaiah and applied it to his own ministry. He was preparing the road for the coming of the Messiah. His voice and message were straightening out the road, filling up the valleys, lowering the hills, preparing a straight way for the Lord. John himself, then, was a humble road builder, removing the obstacles to faith and preparing the way for Christ.

Let's be humble road-builders, like John the Baptist. This world is a desert, as far as the things of God are concerned. So many of the people with whom we come in contact need to come to Christ, but certain obstacles, certain barriers, certain difficulties, certain problems that are holding them back. The problems may even be of their own making. So, as humble road-builders, let's do our best to remove these obstacles and barriers so that the way is "made straight," or made easier, for these people to come to the Lord.

Maybe they need to hear some evidences for the faith, some apologetics, like evidences for the authenticity of the Bible or the existence of God. Maybe they need to be comforted because of some hurt or abuse. Maybe they just need to hear the gospel in terms they can understand. Let's do what we can to pave the way, and make the way straight for them to meet the Lord.

A few years ago I came in contact with a young medical doctor who was not a believer. He had a lot of intellectual questions about the Christian faith, but he was willing to examine the evidence. We decided to go out for supper together once a week. He would bring his questions, and I would do my best to answer them. I didn't try to manipulate him. I just worked to remove the obstacles and barriers – to "make the way straight" for him to come to the Lord. After about six months of meeting together, he didn't have any more questions. He was ready to become a Christian - and he did! I was only a "voice" - a road-builder making straight the way to the Lord. Let's all be humble road-builders, like John the Baptist!