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Non-Christian Beliefs Mentioned in the Bible: Part 8
John the Baptist

By Freddy Davis

Introduction

Most people who are familiar with the Bible know about John the Baptist. However, there is more to his story than most people realize. He was certainly an important figure in the life of Jesus, as he is the one who baptized Christ in the Jordan River. And several of his followers became apostles of Jesus.

But there is more to John's legacy than that. We read in Acts that well after the resurrection, and in places as diverse as Alexandria, Egypt and Ephesus, Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), disciples of John who had not become Christians were interacting with people in the Christian community. As such, it is important to know who these people were and what they believed.

History

John the Baptist was born sometime between 6-4 B.C., somewhere in Judea near Jerusalem. He was born into a priestly family of the order of Abijah, and his parents were Zacharias and Elizabeth. Zacharias was a priest who served at the temple in Jerusalem. Elizabeth was also of priestly lineage and was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This made John and Jesus cousins. The Bible records that Zacharias and Elizabeth were both very faithful and upright believers in God. When they are introduced in the Bible, we see that they were also both rather elderly. In fact, at the time of John's conception and birth, the Bible tells us that Elizabeth was past child bearing age. This made John's birth a miraculous act of God.

The Bible records that one day, Zacharias was given the opportunity to do the priestly duty of burning incense in the temple at Jerusalem. This was a great honor, and, because of the number of priests who served at that time, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. While Zacharias was performing this duty, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that God had heard his and Elizabeth's prayers, and that his wife would bear a son. Gabriel also shared that the child would be filled with the Spirit of God, even from his mother's womb, and that they should raise him under the strict Nazirite code. He was born about six months prior to the birth of Jesus.

The Bible foretold John's coming, referring to him as "a voice crying in the wilderness," and one who would come "in the spiritual power of Elijah." His parents committed him to the Nazirite vow from the time of his birth, so he could not drink alcohol or cut his hair.

The Bible's description of John is rather stark. We are told that he wore a garment made of camel's hair that was secured by a leather belt. We are also told that he lived on a diet of locusts and wild honey. This description is reminiscent of the clothing worn by certain Old Testament prophets. In fact, some have called John the last of the Old Testament prophets. He spent most of his life in the Judean mountains between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea.

The public ministry of John began in 26 A.D., and lasted for about three years. His ministry ended when he was put in prison by Herod Antipas for speaking out against Herod's unlawful marriage.

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As he engaged his ministry, John drew quite the crowd. The Bible tells us that even though he was not a miracle worker, people from Jerusalem and all over Judea flocked to hear him preach as he moved from place to place throughout the Jordan Valley. But he was known not only for his speaking, his greatest claim to fame was his baptizing. During the course of his ministry he immersed hundreds, or perhaps even thousands, of followers.

Over the course of time, various Bible scholars that have tried to associate John with the Essenes, a Jewish ascetic sect in Palestine. The Essenes lived in organized communal groups and held their property in common. It has not been established as certain, though, that John belonged to this group. While he did have certain things in common with them (an ascetic lifestyle, for instance), his message and activities were quite different from theirs.

What we know about John's mission is mostly what we find revealed in Scripture. We are told that God sent him to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Not only had the Messiah's role been prophesied in the Old Testament, but this one who would prepare the way was also foretold.

Beyond the teaching of the Old Testament, the angel Gabriel had told John's father, Zecharias, that his son would be used by God to prepare people to receive the Messiah, and that through him many people would turn to the Lord. God also spoke through Zecharias as he prophesied that John would be called the prophet of the Most High, and that he would go before the face of the Lord to make ready his ways.

John the Baptist's death came about as an execution at the hand

of Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. This occurred sometime between 28-30 A.D. Antipas succeeded his father as a ruler and was given the title tetrarch. Under the authority of Rome, he did not rule over exactly the same territory as his father, but he did inherit certain portions of his father's kingdom in Galilee and in Perea.

Herod was married to the daughter of a Nabatean king, Aretas IV. However, on a trip to Rome, he visited his half-brother, Philip, and fell in love with Philip's wife, Herodias. He then convinced her to leave his brother and come live with him. When she agreed, he divorced his own wife and married her. This immoral relationship caught the attention of John who publicly denounced Antipas for doing it.

While Herod did not appreciate hearing the message, he held some fascination with John's message and did not want to kill him. He was probably also concerned that, with John's popularity, if he did anything to him it might cause a popular revolt.

Herodias, however, did not feel constrained in that way and plotted to have John killed. Before having him killed, however, she was able to convince Antipas to imprison John in his fortress at Machaerus.

As it turned out, Herodias had a beautiful daughter named Salome by her previous marriage. On Antipas's birthday, she threw a party and had her daughter perform a seductive dance for him. At the conclusion of the dance, Herod was so taken that he offered her whatever she wanted – "up to the half of his kingdom." At that point, Salome, after consulting with her mother, requested "the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

This greatly distressed Antipas, but as he had publicly made the offer, he felt obligated to follow through. He had John beheaded and delivered his head on a platter to Salome.

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Contact Information

If you wish to contact us directly, you may do so by the following methods:

321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail:

info@marketfaith.org

Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)

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Authority

The authoritative basis for the Jewish beliefs that were prevalent during the time of John the Baptist was the Old Testament. There was a particular emphasis on the importance of The Torah (Law - first five books of the Old Testament), but the writings of the Prophets and the portion known as the Writings were also seen to be authoritative.

In addition to Scripture, Jewish religious leaders have, over the years, developed commentaries to help interpret the law. Various Jewish groups had their own specific approaches to what obedience to the law meant; with more conservative groups, like the Pharisees, being more legalistic, and the more liberal groups, such as the Sadducees, putting more emphasis on maintaining Jewish culture and traditions.

John the Baptist was Jewish to the core and held strongly to the teachings of the Old Testament Scriptures. His preaching put more of an emphasis on matters of the heart as he called for repentance as a means for people to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah. John's teaching, however, preceded the death and resurrection of Christ, thus did not include a complete teaching about the work of the Messiah he preached about.

Evidence for the Authority

The validity of the teachings of the Old Testament have been strongly affirmed by archeological evidence and by the fact that human experience regarding the nature of reality tracks very closely with the biblical teachings. As a result, the basic worldview espoused by Judaism is definitely pointed in the right direction.

Worldview Beliefs

God

John was a Jew through and through, and, as such, his under-

standing of God tracked with the monotheistic beliefs of Judaism. He viewed God as a complete unity, powerful, just, merciful, and loving. He understood God to be a personal being with emotions, who is able to have a relationship with mankind. He also believed that God was continually working in the world offering humans the opportunity to fulfill their obligations to him.

Man

John's belief about mankind also fit squarely within the Jewish belief of his day. He understood mankind to be a special creation of God created in his image. Because of this special position, John recognized that man had a great responsibility to live rightly before God. In Jewish theology, the distinguishing mark of humans is their ability to make ethical choices. Man also has a responsibility to help keep order in the world in accordance with God's purposes.

Salvation

Sin, in Jewish theology, is not a state, it is simply an act. It is for this reason that the law is so important. John's belief fit within that understanding. He believed that if individuals would simply obey the Jewish law, they could avoid sin. When they failed to do so, they only needed to come to God in repentance. Thus, repentance was one of the central themes of John's preaching.

The Jewish belief of John's day was that a Messiah would come and deliver Israel from the hand of the Romans. John came to believe that Jesus was that Messiah, and likely also initially held the common Jewish view about messiahship. Jesus gave John reason to understand his messiahship in a different way, but it is not completely certain to what degree he came to understand that message before he was murdered.

The typical Jewish understanding of salvation was a legalistic view that saw external deeds, like Sabbath observance, food preparation, dietary rules, and the keeping of holy days, as the means by which people could please God. John strongly emphasized baptism for repentance as a part of that mix. It is also important to understand that keeping the law, in Judaism, is not the means of salvation, but is rather done out of gratitude as a proper response to God's grace – not to get into the covenant with God, but to stay in it.

Other Beliefs and Practices

John's Message

The focus of John's teaching was expressed in three messages he proclaimed: 1) Behold, the Lamb of God, 2) Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand, and 3) the coming judgment.

Behold, the Lamb of God

As John began to preach, there were many who speculated that he was either the coming Messiah or a reincarnation of Elijah. In fact, the talk became so widespread that the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem sent a delegation of priests and Levites to check him out.

When confronted with this, John was very emphatic that he was neither the promised Messiah nor Elijah reincarnated. Rather, he understood his role to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of being "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah.

John, obviously, recognized that Jesus was the one who was the Messiah, and specifically pointed to him as such. He even declared himself unworthy to either carry Jesus' sandals or even unloose his sandals' thongs. In his preaching, John characterized Jesus as "the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."

In his teaching concerning Jesus, John specifically:

- Identified Christ as the antitype of the Passover sacrifice
- Asserted that Jesus' impending death would be a vicarious sacrifice for man's sins
- Affirmed the universality of Christ's mission
- Asserted that Christ "was before" him, even though John was chronologically older – thus recognizing that Christ was the divine, eternal, preincarnate Word.

No doubt, John recognized Jesus as the Messiah for a long time before he began his preaching ministry. Because of that, he was hesitant, at first, to baptize Jesus. He saw Jesus as the sinless lamb of God and didn't feel it appropriate to perform the ritual, as he viewed baptism to be a sign of repentance. Jesus had nothing to repent of.

Beyond that, however, the reality of Christ's messiahship must have been burned into his mind at a deeper level when he heard the very voice of God and saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus at the baptism. With that, John faithfully preached the message that Jesus was "the Son of God."

Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven Is at Hand

The second theme of John's preaching had to do with repentance. He preached about the coming kingdom of God and the need for people to repent.

There were a lot of corrupting influences that were prevalent in John's day, particularly the Paganism of their Roman captors and the prominent secularization and legalism within the practice of the Jewish religious system itself. It was against this backdrop that John felt the need to call the people to repent and turn back to God.

The repentance that John was calling for emerged from his understanding of the Old Testament teachings about the reign of God among the Hebrew nation. A Messiah had been promised, and a sign of his coming was expected. John recognized Jesus as this Messiah and saw himself as one whose calling it was to prepare people for his emergence. His call to repentance was an expression of that recognition.

The Coming Judgment

John's third message was a proclamation of a coming judgment. There were several figures of speech that he used to express this message. He spoke of: 1) the wrath to come, 2) the ax that lies at the root of the trees, 3) an unquenchable fire, and 4) a fan in the Lord's hand.

John's message of judgment centered primarily in two areas. One was the impending destruction of the Jewish nation – foreshadowed by his expressions of "the wrath to come," and "the ax lies at the root of the trees." The other was the spiritual separation of wicked sinners from a righteous God. This was signified by the "unquenchable fire" that portrayed the suffering of hell, and "the fan in the Lord's hand" that represented the winnowing shovel used to separate the wheat from the chaff at harvest time.

John's Baptism

While Paul was in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, he had a rather interesting experience. He came across some people who were preaching about Jesus and baptizing, and he assumed they were Christians. When he engaged them in conversation, however, he was surprised that they were not. What he asked them was whether or not they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed. Of course, everyone who has genuinely come to Christ has received the Holy Spirit. But when asked, these folks replied that they had never even heard of the Holy Spirit. Obviously, that was an indication that they were not Christians at all, so Paul inquired further; he asked about their baptism.

When they replied, those men shared that they knew only the baptism of John. Paul then proceeded to share with them the genuine gospel.

While John's baptism was important during the time Christ was still on earth, as it called people to repentance, it was wholly insufficient as a symbol for the Christian faith. John's baptism, looked forward to the coming of the Messiah and prepared people for his coming. Christian baptism, on the other hand, looks backward and symbolizes Christ's death and resurrection. Christian baptism is a statement of faith that indicates an individual has believed that Jesus Christ was God's Son who had been raised from the dead. Thus, John's baptism had an entirely different focus and meaning.

It needs to be understood that baptism was not something new with John. The Jews had practiced ceremonial washing from the earliest times. The particular practice John used was total "immersion" in water, and was a physical representation of a spiritual cleansing that took place when one repented. Thus, John's baptism was specifically a call for people to repent from sin, and the baptism itself was a sign of their total commitment to follow the coming Messiah.

John's Conception of Jesus

There has been a debate among Bible scholars about whether or not John and Jesus knew each other before John baptized Jesus. We do know that they were cousins, but this does not necessarily mean that they actually knew each other, or had even met. It is very possible that they could have known about each other without knowing each other personally. But in the grand scheme of things, this is quite irrelevant.

What we do know is that before Jesus' baptism, John did not know for certain that Jesus was the Messiah. John was given a prophesy from God who revealed to him that at some point he would see the Spirit descending and remaining upon someone. He was told that this would be the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit – in other words, the Messiah. Thus, while John had no doubt heard of Jesus and knew something about his ministry, the final confirmation of his identity came when he baptized Christ and saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus as a dove.

Even then, though, John probably did not understand the true nature of Jesus' messiahship. One of the ideas John had of the Messiah was that he would be an instrument of judgment. Jesus' ministry, on the other hand, displayed him more as a healer and one who was kind and gracious. Additionally, most Jews were expecting a military/political Messiah who would free Israel from the bondage of Rome. John likely also held this belief. Thus, based on the fulfillment of the prophesy John had witnessed at Jesus'

baptism, he certainly believed Jesus was the Messiah. Still, he was, no doubt, confused as to the true nature of his messiahship.

We see this confusion manifested in another place, as well. While John was in prison, he heard more about Jesus' ministry and sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah. This was, no doubt, a low time for John, and he may have begun entertaining doubt as to whether or not God was really at work in his situation. In response to his question, Jesus assured John by declaring that the ministry he was doing authenticated his ministry as divine.

John's clear calling from God was to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. He did this work to the fullest extent of his ability, and came to be certain that he had accomplished what God had called him to do. That said, it is also certain that while John fully recognized Jesus as the Messiah, he did not fully understand the nature of his messiahship.

John's Influence after the Resurrection

John obviously had a tremendous impact on the Jews who lived in Jerusalem and Judea during the time of his ministry. But that influence continued even after his death. The main reason this is important is that many of those he influenced didn't know about John's connection to Jesus and the true significance of his ministry. Thus, when John died, many of his disciples continued to believe and teach John's message of repentance and judgment without connecting it to Jesus' redemptive work on the cross.

One illustration of that came after Herod killed John. In the course of governing, Antipas continued to hear about Jesus and his mighty acts. At one point it seems he believed that John the Baptist had risen from the dead. But Herod was not the only one. John's influence continued both through his disciples and even into the early church.

Apollos was an example of one of those who did not know fully who Jesus was, but who spread the gospel message based on the incomplete message that John the Baptist had taught (Acts 18:24-28). The Bible tells us that Apollos was a Christian Hellenistic Jew from Alexandria, Egypt, that he had a great understanding of the Old Testament, and that he was gifted in communicating and defending the faith. It was just that his understanding of the gospel was incomplete. He knew about Jesus, but only a pre-resurrection Jesus. His message stopped at the need for repentance and baptism, and left out the need for giving one's life to Christ.

But Apollos was not the only one. We read in (Acts 19:1-6) about a time when the apostle Paul ran across a group of believers who were disciples of John the Baptist, but who also did not understand the fulness of the gospel message. The fact that these people are mentioned in Scripture tells us that this incomplete teaching about Jesus was something that the Christians in those early days had to deal with.

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