

THE INTERROGATION OF JOHN

John 1:19-28 (No. 8)

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John 1:19-28

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” ²¹ And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” ²² 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?” ²³ 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.”

²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” ²⁶ John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

INTRODUCTION

This passage begins a fascinating week in our Lord’s ministry. It’s rare for the Gospels to string a group of stories together on consecutive days. Rarer still for stories covering a full week. But that’s exactly how John the Apostle begins this narration of Jesus’ life and ministry. The first week of Jesus’ ministry was eventful. The first day covers our passage today and focuses on John the Baptist’s witness about Jesus. Then, v. 29 begins “the next day” and John encounters Jesus and proclaims him to be “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Day 3 begins in v. 35 as John sends two of his disciples to become disciples of Jesus. Verse 43 begins the “next day” when Philip and Nathanael become disciples of Jesus. And then in 2:1, the narrative skips ahead to the seventh day—“the third day” counts 3 days later—to the wedding at Cana and the first sign that Jesus performed.

I don’t have any doubt that the Apostle John begins his Gospel with a week’s worth of stories as a way to connect this Gospel with Genesis. Genesis begins with the first week of creation. John has already alluded to Genesis in the way he starts 1:1: “*In the beginning* was the Word.” “In the beginning” is exactly how Genesis starts.

So now John begins with a week of Jesus’ ministry as a way to highlight that Jesus’ life, ministry, and death is the work of a new creation—the people of God who trust in Christ. On this first day in the story, we once again encounter John the Baptist. John is confronted by some other Jews who have come to question him. John’s preaching attracted lots of attention and people began to travel from far away to come to him.

Matthew 3:5: “Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him”

The masses were hearing about him and going to him. So when the Jewish authorities heard about him, they naturally wanted to know about him and by what authority he was preaching and baptizing. They have two questions for him. And as the story unfolds, we find that these questions end up serving as a way to give tribute to Christ and bear witness about him.

I. THE QUESTION OF JOHN'S IDENTITY

v. 19: "the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?""

"The Jews" is a rare term in the other 3 Gospels, but John uses the term about 70 times. On some occasions, the term is positive. John 4:22: Jesus says that "salvation is from the Jews." But overwhelmingly, the term ("the Jews") is negative. In this Gospel the term most commonly describes the Jewish people hostile to Jesus, especially the Jewish leaders. This wasn't some form of anti-Semitism. The Apostle John who wrote this was a Jew, Jesus was a Jew, the other apostles were Jews. He clearly loves the Jewish people. But what becomes clear even from this first story, is that Jesus was opposed from the very beginning of his ministry. There was a group of Jews hostile to Jesus, led by the Jewish leaders, with few exceptions. Verse 24 tells us the specific Jewish leaders who sent this delegation to question John were the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were a religious party of the Jews, who were greatly concerned about keeping the Old Testament law, but who also piled up a mass of their own interpretations and added to the law their own man-made regulations. In practice, this meant that they paid more attention to their traditions than they did the law of God. The Pharisees apparently sent a delegation of "priests and Levites" from Jerusalem to inquire about John's identity.

The priests were the religious authorities who performed and officiated the religious ceremonies at the temple. The Levites in these days provided music at the temple and also acted as the temple guards. So naturally they had an interest in one who was claiming to be the forerunner of the Messiah and who was baptizing and attracting crowds.

John was about 29 or 30. And he was born into a priestly family, from the tribe of Levi, so the intrigue was only enhanced. He was a puzzle to them—not conforming to their standards. So they made the journey from Jerusalem to, according to v. 28, "Bethany across the Jordan."

v. 28: "These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing."

The location of *this* Bethany has not been found in modern times. The description "across the Jordan" tells us it was east of Jerusalem on the other side of the Jordan River. The description also distinguishes it from the other Bethany located nearby Jerusalem. John was preaching and baptizing at the Bethany across the Jordan and that's where the priests and Levites found him.

Who are you?

They had a question for John. The question that caused them to seek John out and travel so far was this: "Who are you?" They wanted to know John's identity. They are intrigued. They are wondering. They may have some suspicion, but they also wondered if he is someone sent from God. A man for the messianic age.

John's response is not what you would expect. Rather than telling them who he is, he tells them who he is not. It's not a normal way to make an introduction. John, knowing that they wondered whether he was the Christ, (v. 20) "confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'" His language is emphatic: "I am not the Christ!" You get the feeling that it pained him

for anyone to even entertain the idea that he was the Christ. John witnesses about Christ even as he denies that he is the Christ.

Christ is the Greek term for Messiah—the Anointed One of God who would come as God’s Deliverer of Israel. And we know from v. 16 that Jesus is the Christ. John’s whole ministry was to humbly lift up Christ: “He must increase, and I must decrease” (3:30). Somehow, John knew why they were there and what information they were after. They didn’t ask him if he was the Christ. But he knew the nature of their questioning.

From this Gospel we learn that the thing everyone had an opinion about—in Judea, in Galilee, and in Samaria—everyone had an opinion about what the Messiah would be like. Everyone had a view. Everyone talked about it—with their friends, with their foes. The expectation of the Messiah’s arrival was ‘in the air.’ And when Jesus came, unfortunately people judged him by *their* standard. They tried Jesus based on their conception of what the Messiah should be like. And John is quick to confess: I am not the Christ.

Are you Elijah?

And so (v. 21) the priests and Levites “asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’” If he wasn’t the Christ, then they wondered whether he was another prophet associated with the end-times. Perhaps they came to John that day already with a list of theories of who he was. So they wondered, are you Elijah?

Why would they ask that? Because they knew the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6:

“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.”

The prophecy said that before the Lord comes, Elijah will come. And these priests and Levites were anticipating Elijah’s coming before the end times. And it wasn’t crazy to think John might be Elijah. Judging from John’s dress and his message, he seemed a lot like Elijah. Elijah “wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather around his waist” (2 Kgs 1:8). John “wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist” (Matt 3:4). Elijah sought repentance from Israel in his ministry. John sought repentance from Israel in his ministry.

But John replies, “I am not.” John was not Elijah. He was simply John. He was not Elijah reincarnated. But John was Elijah-like. At the angel’s announcement of John’s conception, the angel told John’s father (Zechariah):

Luke 1:16-17: “he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

That’s a direct reference to the prophecy in Malachi 4. So John isn’t Elijah, but he comes “in the spirit and power of Elijah.” He comes with a similar kind of ministry, sent from God. This is what Jesus meant when he said in Matt 11:14: “if you are willing to accept it, [John the Baptist]

is Elijah who is to come.” Just after Jesus’ transfiguration, Jesus tells us that had the Jews not rejected him, John would have been the fulfillment of the Malachi 4 prophecy.

Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus at his transfiguration. And afterwards, Peter, James, and (notably) John the Apostle came down the mountain and they asked Jesus (Mk 9:11-13): “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” And Jesus said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. . . . But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased.” In other words, he came, but they killed him. John came in the spirit and power of Elijah and he was rejected and he was killed. Had the Jews received Jesus, John the Baptist would have been the fulfillment of the Malachi 4 prophecy. But since they rejected him, another in the spirit and power of Elijah will come before Christ’s Second Coming. So John the Baptist is not Elijah

Are you the Prophet?

The priests and Levites tried a third time (v. 21), “Are you the Prophet?” Since he wasn’t Christ and he wasn’t Elijah, then perhaps he was the prophet Moses spoke of in Deut 18. In Deut 18:15, Moses promises: “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—

Then in v. 18, Moses reports the words of the Lord himself: “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.”

Deuteronomy ends on a sad note: with Moses’ death. But it’s sad for another reason too: the prophet he spoke about had not yet come.

Deuteronomy 34:10 reads : “there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.”

Remember that Moses said the prophet who was to come would be like him. And this verse says, none like him has arisen. Many centuries later, in Jesus’ day, the Jews still expected the prophet to come. Given John’s reputation, this Jewish envoy wondered whether John was the prophet foretold. But John answered simply, “No.”

As we read later on in this Gospel, we find that the crowds of people began to see Jesus as the prophet foretold. Jesus miraculously fed the 5,000 and 6:14 says: “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” One chapter later, after Jesus claims to be the one in whom all spiritual thirst is satisfied, some of the people proclaimed in 7:40: “This really is the Prophet.” And this time the crowds were right.

Peter in Acts 3 and Stephen in Acts 7 apply the prophecy of Deut. 18 to Jesus. As it turns out, Jesus is the one about whom God told Israel:

“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” (18:18).

Jesus even says in 8:28, “I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.”

Who are you?

By this time, these Jews are exasperated. They are out of ideas. They're finding that their questioning is getting them nowhere in making a positive identification of John. They can't go back empty-handed, so to speak. They need an answer. So they said to him (in v. 22), "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

Their insistence on getting an answer points to what must have been an extraordinary ministry of John. Their guesses have been so lofty! Maybe he's Christ? Maybe he's Elijah? Maybe he's the Prophet? They are insistent in finding out who he is. And must point to the startling, yet extraordinary ministry of John the Baptist.

John's Answer

So they want no more denials. No more of who he is *not*. They want to know who he *is*. And the way John answers only furthers the intrigue.

v. 23: 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."

What a claim. If they had been standing in a room, the proverbial air would have gone out of the room. He answers by quoting Isaiah 40:3. In context, chapter 40 pictures the people of Judah in captivity to Babylon as judgment for their sins. They are far away from their homeland. And the picture in Isaiah 40:3 specifically is that Isaiah hears a voice calling for the leveling of a path through the desert so that God can lead his people home out of captivity in Babylon back to the promised land.

Listen to Isaiah 40:3-5: A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

So the promise is that God would deliver Judah from the wilderness of Babylon.

Here in the Gospel, John points to that passage in Isaiah and claims he is the one fulfilling that promise. He is the voice. He's saying that he's a voice of one crying out in Israel's *present* wilderness to make a pathway for the Lord, who will lead his people out of their spiritual darkness. He is the herald who goes before the King, to clear away obstacles, straighten the crooked roads, and level the hills and valleys (so to speak) so that the King would lead his people to safety. In humility, John only claims to be a voice. That's his identity. But he is a person who goes before the Lord.

But the blindness of the priests and Levites is seen in how they respond. He just told you he was the one who prepares the way of the Lord. But look at what they ask him next!

II. THE QUESTION OF JOHN'S AUTHORITY

v. 25: They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

Did they not just hear what he said?! He’s the one Isaiah spoke about. But it’s as if they never heard John. And notice the verse we skipped over. Verse 24 says, “(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.)”

That’s the author’s way of telling you why they responded the way they did. It’s the Apostle’s way of revealing the hearts of these priests and Levities. Because as we’ll see early on in this Gospel, the Pharisees set themselves against Christ. And the Apostle even here is foreshadowing this. He’s showing you that even from the earliest days of Jesus’ ministry, he was opposed. It’s a way of reminding you of v. 11: “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”

What’s the nature of their question? They’re done with the identity question. Now, they question his authority. If they had ears to hear, he just gave them the reason for his authority. But they will hear none of it. Now they want to know what right he has to be baptizing. What irked the Jews was *who* John baptized.

The *Jews* would baptize *Gentiles* (ethnic non-Jews) who converted and came into the faith. They saw the baptism as a symbolic washing away of the “pollutions contracted in the Gentile world.” But John baptized Jews! He was putting Jews into the same class as Gentiles.

He was demonstrating that because of their sins, the Jews were outside of God’s saving covenant and needed forgiveness. The Jews were no better than the Gentiles. The Jews and the Gentiles both needed to repent of their sins as they prepared for the Lord’s arrival. And to the Pharisees, this was highly offensive and horrifying. They counted themselves as God’s people—those who observed the law in the strictest terms. To be included in the same class as the dirty, polluted people of the godless nations—the Gentiles—was unthinkable.

John’s Answer

How does he answer? By giving a defense of his authority? No. Quite the opposite.

v. 26-27: 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.”

John has no need to defend himself. No need to stand on his authority. No desire to make himself great. He is meek. He is humble. And in his answer, he pushes away the focus on himself, and focuses on Jesus. All he does is baptize with ordinary river water. But he speaks of Jesus when he says, “among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me.” The Lord had already arrived and they did not know him. But John was sent from God (v. 7) as a witness, to bear witness about the Light of God breaking into the world.

The baptisms weren’t about John. They were about preparing for the one who comes after John, “the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” Even though Jesus later on says that no one born of women has been greater than John, even John is unworthy compared to Christ.

Rabbis or teachers of the OT weren't paid in those days, but they were compensated by having their disciples do services for them. But not even a rabbi's disciples would untie their teacher's sandals. There's a saying among the rabbis that dates to about AD 250, but is probably much older and likely captures the idea. The sayings says, "Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher expect the untying of his sandals."¹ Untying the straps on a man's sandals was the work of a slave. And John says, he's lower in rank, less worthy than even a slave compared to Jesus. John shifts the focus completely away from himself and on to the worthy of Jesus through his comparison.

CONCLUSION

There are many lessons we could draw from this story. From observations about the priests and Levites, we could focus on how even well-meaning observers of religion can miss what God is doing. We could focus on the humility in John's ministry and model ourselves after him. But our focus should be John's focus. The reason the Apostle includes this story isn't so that we can create a character study from John. This story is included as another witness to the greatness of Christ.

The Old Testament prophets foretold a time when the Lord would come. And in the fullness of time, he came. The Lord came. And, like John, we are not worthy of him. We are of lower rank than the slave. Christ's greatness is infinitely higher than anything we could achieve. We have nothing in ourselves to commend us to him. We can't claim to be good in ourselves. We aren't good. Good people don't need to repent. But we need to repent.

And so we are to heed John's message to repent from our sins—turning from them. And we are to look to Christ and receive Jesus by trusting on him as our only hope of forgiveness.

Have you repented of your sins? Have you made a break from them? Have you forsaken the thoughts, emotions, and deeds that displease God? Have you turned aside from the broad road that leads to destruction?

And instead, have you turned to Christ as the one whose greatness is unsurpassed? Have you received him as your Lord—the Master over your life who has the right to command you to do his will? Have you put your hand to the plough and not looked back? Have you committed your life to Christ and following him in obedience?

This is the message that John would have us hear. This is the message of this story. John prepared the way of the Lord. And the Lord has come. And he will surely come again. But this time, not to die on the cross to pay for the sins of all who repent. His second coming will be a rescue of those who have repented, and a death sentence for those who haven't.

¹ Leon Morris

Today is the day of salvation. Today is the day of the voice crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord. Today is the day you must receive Christ because tomorrow isn't promised to you.

So repent of your sins. Trust solely on Christ. And receive forgiveness for every sin you've committed or ever will.