

The figure of John the Baptist has long fascinated Christian readers of the Bible. Of all the characters of the Bible John must be one of the one of the least accessible to modern readers. He seems such an eccentric character – probably not the kind of person we would choose to announce the coming of the Messiah.

Today I want to look at the message of John the Baptist and contrast it with the message of the Messiah he was announcing. It will be very clear that their expectations were very different.

But first a little background.... John the Baptist

Who is this strange person who with the exotic diet of locusts and wild honey? Jesus called him the greatest man ever born. So surely we should make some effort to understand him. To begin to understand John we must transport ourselves back to the land of Israel during the time of the Herods.

John the Baptist was born to Zecharias, a priest, and his wife Elizabeth, a couple who lived in a town in the hill country of Judea. A relative of Jesus, the details John's youth are largely unknown to us. We know that he was a Nazarite, an extremely strict form of Judaism, and that he was filled with the Holy Spirit from before his birth.

The description of John is meant to make the reader associate him with Elijah, just as the people who encountered him did.

The gospel of John provides us with a remarkable detail concerning the inception of John the Baptist's ministry:

"Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Christ.' They asked him, 'Then who are you? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' John replied in the words of

Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the *voice* of one calling *in the desert*, "Make straight the way for the Lord" (**John 1:19-23**).

John's hearers

We are told by Luke (**Luke 3:15**) that the people were in a state of great expectation.

Matthew tells us that ALL Jerusalem, Judea and the surrounding districts were going out into the wilderness to hear and be baptised by John (**Matt 3:5-6**).

Why were they so excited? What was it that they were expecting?

The people of Israel have been through phases in their history when they have expected the Messiah and have looked for Him. In fact today there is a state of heightened expectation among many in Israel. Self-proclaimed messiahs are always to be found in Israel often wandering around Jerusalem and there are a few who have a significant following. It was into this kind of heightened expectation that John the Baptist comes.

The contrast between John's and Jesus' concepts of the Kingdom

You will not find any direct reference to the Kingdom of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Despite this, the concept was familiar to the Jewish community of the first century because it was discussed in rabbinic literature.

*** He announced the Day of God's judgement on the status quo.**

In **Luke 3:16-17**, John described the one who would come baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John has judgment in mind. What he associates with the Messiah is the final day of Judgement.

Mat 3:5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan;

Mat 3:6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.

Mat 3:7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

Mat 3:8 "Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance;

Mat 3:9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Mat 3:10 "And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

*** He called for National repentance. Luke 3:3-15**

Luke 3:9 And also the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

*** He denounced trust in lineage**

Luke 3:7 He therefore began saying to the multitudes who were going out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Luke 3:8 "Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

*** He announced the Coming Messiah**

Luke 3:15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he might be the Christ,

Mat 3:11 "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Mat 3:12 "And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Jesus' Message of the Kingdom

In **Luke 3:16-17**, John described the one who would come baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John has judgment in mind. What he associates with the Messiah is the final day of Judgement. Then Jesus was baptized, receiving divine approval and anointing for his work.

Matt 3:7-10

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

10 The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Luke 4:16-21

16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read.

17 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD."

20 And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him.

21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In **Luke 4:16-21** Jesus assumed the task prophesied in **Isaiah 61:1-2**.

Jesus has quoted most of Isaiah 61:1-2, notably omitting the final clause, "and the day of vengeance of our God."

Luke's quotation is from the Greek translation (LXX) of the Hebrew Old Testament and is actually a combination of various parts of Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6.

- a "Is this not the fast which I choose,
- b To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
- c To undo the bands of the yoke,
- d And **to let the oppressed go free**
- e And break every yoke?

Jesus quotes 61:1a,b,d; 58:6 d; 61:2a but He omits 61:1c and 61:2 b & c.

Isaiah 61 and 58 are linked by common words and ideas *dektos* [acceptable] in Isa. 61:2 and 58:5, *aphesis* [release/forgiveness] in 61:1 and 58:6), Luke may understand *aphesis* in both senses.

Another noteworthy detail is the replacement of the verb meaning "to call for" אָרָא *qara*, (call (121), called (301)) in Isaiah 61:2a with a verb meaning "to proclaim," κηρῶσω *ke russo* thus suggesting that the anointed one does more than merely "call for" the acceptable day of the Lord - he actually "proclaims" its arrival.

Of course, such a modification lends itself very well to the idea of Jesus preaching.

Luke builds the evidence for Jesus' claim to be Messiah and then in Luke 7 after a cycle of teachings and healings, the validity of his messianic calling is once more under consideration; and John the Baptist is the reference point.

Jesus Drives out an evil spirit 4:31-37

Jesus heals many people 4:30-44

Jesus heals a man with a skin disease 5:12-16

Jesus heals a man with who could not walk 5:17-26

Teaching as a rabbi 6:1-49

Jesus heals the centurion's slave 7:2-10

Jesus raises the widows son from the dead 7:11-17

The Background and Context.

When you read about Jesus works and teaching you must always remember that the people who witnessed these miracles and heard His teaching were well versed in the Old Testament. While the parallels between the Old Testament and the ministry of Jesus are often missed by a modern Christian audience the Jewish audience in Galilee was primed to look for them at every opportunity.

Why is this so?

It is because of a Messianic prophecy found **Deut 18:15-19**

- 15 The LORD your God will raise up for you *a prophet like me* from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.
- 16 For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die."
- 17 The LORD said to me: "What they say is good.
- 18 I will raise up for them *a prophet like you* from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.
- 19 If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.

This is also picked up in Mark's Gospel

Mark 5:15 Others said, "He is Elijah." And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

In the Jewish mind the greatest prophet of all was Moses and so we have a detailed description of Jesus teaching from a mountainside (Torah), feeding multitudes with bread (manna) and healing the sick (the snake of the stick).

What are the parallels with the Old Testament?

The location of the village of Nain is at the foot of the Hill of Moreh a few miles to the southeast of Jesus' hometown, Nazareth. On either side of the hill are two villages Nain and Shunem.

2 Kings 4: 8-37 The story of the prophet Elisha and the son of the Shunammite woman. The parallels are unmistakable.

John's question is not so much a crisis of faith, as is usually suggested, as a challenge to Jesus to get on with the programme. Jesus, on the other hand is being true to the Messianic vision He identified from Isaiah 61.

How different the last interaction between Jesus and John the Baptist looks when seen in the context of their different expectations.

Luke 7:19 Summoning two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?"

Luke 7:20 When the men came to Him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to You, to ask, 'Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?'"

Luke 7:21 At that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He gave sight to many who were blind.

Luke 7:22 And He answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.

Luke 7:23 "Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me."