

John the Baptist – More Than a Prophet

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When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "**What did you go out into the wilderness to see?** A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. What then did you go out to see? **A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.** (Luke 7:24-26 ESV // Matthew 11:7-9)

Jesus spoke these words to a general crowd after John the Baptist, from prison, had sent two of his disciples to verify the Messiahship of Jesus.¹

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1. John the Messenger

In the introduction to his Gospel, the Apostle John says:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. **He came as a witness**, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. **He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light** ... John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'" (John 1:6-8, 15 ESV)

The Apostle John is introducing Jesus Christ as the "Logos", the divine Word of God manifested as a human being, the eternally existent being known by the covenant name "YHWH" to the nation of Israel. He was the omnipotent Creator, eternal member of the God Family, along with the being he revealed as the "Father". Now John who came to be known as "The Baptist" was bearing witness to this awesome being, also known as the "Light", because he brought Truth, Justice, Hope, and Salvation to a sin-sick world.

¹ See Bruce pages 152-162 and IDB2 pages 955-962 for more information on John the Baptist.

The most important message communicated by God to human beings through the Old Testament was that a Messiah would come:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and **her offspring**;
he shall bruise your head ... (Genesis 3:15 ESV)

... and in you **all the families of the earth shall be blessed**. (Genesis 12:3 ESV)

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near:
a star shall come out of Jacob, and **a scepter shall rise out of Israel** ... (Numbers 24:17 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 ... (Deuteronomy 18:15 ESV)

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, **the virgin shall conceive and bear a son**, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14 ESV)

For **to us a child is born**, to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:6-7 ESV)

There shall come forth **a shoot from the stump of Jesse**, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear,
but with **righteousness he shall judge** the poor, and **decide with equity** for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. (Isaiah 11:1-5 ESV)

This is merely a sampling – many other scriptures could be cited. John the Baptist was the one chosen by God to announce the coming of the Messiah. He was prepared and instructed by God to recognize the Messiah when he came. He was the Messenger to prepare the way and inform the world when the Messiah arrived. This pivotal role in the Plan of God required a special person.

2. He Was Before Me

As recorded by all three synoptists, John is very clear on his role and his relationship with the Messiah:

As it is written in the prophets,

“Behold, I send **my messenger** before your face, **who will prepare your way**, [Malachi 3:1]

the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” [Isaiah 40:3 LXX]

John appeared, **baptizing** in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And he preached, saying, “**After me comes he who is mightier than I**, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

(Mark 1:2-4, 7-8 ESV)

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for **the kingdom of heaven is at hand**.” For **this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah** when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘**Prepare the way of the Lord** make his paths straight.’” [Isaiah 40:3 LXX]

“**I baptize you with water for repentance**, but **he who is coming after me is mightier than I**, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matthew 3:1-2, 11 ESV)

And [John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a **baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘**Prepare the way of the Lord**, make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways,

and **all flesh shall see the salvation of God**.” [Isaiah 40:3-5 LXX]

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts **concerning John, whether he might be the Christ**, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

(Luke 3:3-6, 15-16 ESV)

Mark uses a quote from Malachi to explicitly identify John as the prophesized Messenger. Mark and Matthew use one verse from Isaiah to highlight the work of the Messenger – “Prepare the way of the Lord”. Luke quotes two more verses from Isaiah which further elaborate his work. All three synoptists notice that John preached “baptism for repentance” – Mark and Luke notice that the objective of repentance is “forgiveness of sins”. Matthew states the motivation of repentance to be the imminence of “the kingdom of heaven”.

All three synoptists quote John as saying the “one coming”, the Messiah, is “mightier” than he – John is in fact not worthy to untie the Messiah’s shoe. All three quote John as contrasting his “baptism of water” with the Messiah’s “baptism of the Holy Spirit”. Matthew and Luke add that the Messiah’s baptism also includes “fire”. Luke provides the motivation for the explicit statement by The Baptist: “As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ”. This statement captures the contemporary zeitgeist: Messianic expectation was in the air.² The people were looking for a political Messiah – John was very explicit that he was not to fill that role.

3. Who was John?

The Gospel of Luke provides a sketch of the early life of John indicating how he was prepared by God for his life’s work:

And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And 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.” (Luke 1:11-17 ESV)

From this quotation, the following facts are discernable:

- John’s birth is miraculous: “there appeared to him an angel”
- John has an important mission: “he will be great before the Lord”
- John is to be a Nazarite (Numbers 6:1-21): “he must not drink wine or strong drink”
- John is called by God from birth: “he will be filled with the Holy Spirit”
- John’s mission is to turn people to God: “he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God”
- John is explicitly linked to the prophecy of a coming “Elijah” (Malachi 4:5-6): “he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children”
- John is to preach repentance: “the disobedient to the wisdom of the just”
- John is to prepare people to respond to the Messiah: “to make ready for the Lord a people prepared”

John’s parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, lived in a town in the hill country of Judah (Luke 1:39-40). This is no doubt where John grew up. Before John was born, Mary, the mother of Jesus, came to visit Elizabeth while both were pregnant. John’s endowment of the Holy Spirit is attested by his recognition of the closeness of the unborn Messiah (Luke 1:41). The circumstances of Elizabeth’s pregnancy had drawn considerable attention. When John was born, it was a significant event:

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered ... And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him. (Luke 1:57-66 ESV)

² See Bruce pages 122-134 for a discussion of the Messianic expectation.

John's mother, Elizabeth, is a "relative" (Luke 1:36) of Mary, Jesus' mother. If Mary and Elizabeth are first cousins, John and Jesus are third cousins. The Hill Country of Judah comprises a spine of mountains running parallel to the Jordan Valley from south of Hebron (half-way up the Dead Sea) continuing to about half-way to the Sea of Galilee (Map 1). Jerusalem is in about the middle of the mountain range (Map 2). The town where John grew up is not named. Shortly before Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem, he withdrew with his disciples to the town of Ephraim in the Hill Country (Map 3). It is possible this is where Zechariah and Elizabeth still lived:

Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples. (John 11:54 ESV)

4. The Prophecy of Zechariah

After the birth of John, his father Zechariah was inspired to deliver the following prophecy:

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:67-79 ESV)

This prophecy is a summary of the Plan of God as it relates to the life and work of John the Baptist:

- "he has visited and redeemed his people" John is the transition from the economy of the Old Covenant to the New Covenant; the final remnant of true believers among the physical nation of Israel had faithfully prepared for the first coming of Messiah since the return from the exile; this final remnant comprised the people who John was preparing to transition to the New Testament Church
- "a horn of salvation" this is John's message in preparation for the Messiah
- "house of his servant David" is the lineage of the Messiah
- "as he spoke" alludes to all the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah
- "saved from our enemies" alludes to prophecies of the Second Advent, upon which the popular anticipation of a political Messiah was based; but it also implies that through spiritual salvation, physical penalties are of no effect
- "the mercy promised to our fathers" is a direct allusion to the remediation of the covenant curses promised upon repentance (Deuteronomy 30:1-20)
- "oath that he swore to our father Abraham" alludes to the blessing to be derived on all nations through Abraham, i.e., the Messiah, to be realized through the New Testament Church and the New Israel following the Second Advent
- "might serve him without fear" prophecy of the New Testament Church
- "And you, child," John is instrumental in the transition from the old economy to the new
- "to give knowledge" John's message pointed to the Messiah as the source of salvation; he preached repentance for forgiveness of sins as the first step in coming to Jesus to be offered salvation
- "the tender mercy" the offer of God of salvation to all of sinning humankind is the ultimate expression of God's mercy (John 3:16)
- "sunrise shall visit" is a direct allusion to Malachi 1:11 stating the ultimate state of the entire world in true worship of God – "its a new day!"

We know nothing of John's formative years – Luke provides the barest summary:

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. (Luke 1:80 ESV)

John's age at departure to the wilderness is not given. By analogy with Jeremiah who was called to a very special commission at a very young age, a reasonable age for John's calling to the preparation in the wilderness would be about eighteen. (See **Excursus 1 – The Judean Wilderness**)

5. John in the Wilderness

Mark and Matthew provide a very terse description of John's ascetic life in the wilderness:

Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. (Mark 1:6 ESV)

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. (Matthew 3:4 ESV)

The camel hair garment and leather belt were traditionally associated with prophets like Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 1:8). He subsisted on foods naturally available in the wilderness. But John was not inactive in the wilderness, "he preached" (Mark 1:7) and people responded:

And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (Mark 1:5 ESV)

Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (Matthew 3:5-6 ESV)

Both Mark and Matthew record that people were "confessing their sins" – this was the crux of John's message: "repentance". But John's preaching went well beyond this one point. We saw above in Matthew 3:2 that he proclaimed the immanence of the "kingdom of heaven". Matthew and Luke also record a strong ethical component to his preaching:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father' ... (Matthew 3:7-9a ESV)

He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' (Luke 3:7-8 ESV)

Both Matthew and Luke record the same saying of John, but typically Matthew focuses the derision at the leaders, "Pharisees and Sadducees", while Luke is more generic "the crowd". John is attacking the attitude of those he derides – comparing them to crafty "vipers" seeking only to save themselves from impending wrath, by putting on a show of repentance without any inner changes, which can only be demonstrated by actions, "fruit" (James 2:18). John further cuts to the heart of their hypocrisy by condemning their self-righteous claim of superiority by race.

Luke then records more details relevant to various classes of people in the crowd:

And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:10-14 ESV)

The invocation to share food and clothing would strike at the heart of those motivated by the acquisition of material goods. Society then was much as today – many people operated under the crass philosophy of "he who has the most toys wins". Tax collectors were a particularly odious group since they were direct collaborators with the Romans. They typically become wealthy by gouging excessive amounts from the populous. John implores them to be honest, collect only what is due, and thereby take a serious cut in their standard of living. Soldiers were the direct representatives of the occupying power. Soldiers had the power to do as they pleased with the people. Soldiers were used to enriching themselves through plunder. John implores them not to bully the people and not to plunder.

Luke affirms the breadth of John's preaching:

So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. (Luke 3:18 ESV)

6. The Message of the Messenger

John's official role of witnessing for Jesus as recorded by Luke begins with the following:

In the **fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar**, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, **the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.** (Luke 3:1-2 ESV)

The "fifteenth year" of Tiberius Caesar is either 27AD or 29AD. Tiberius became Emperor on August 19, 14AD, but there is some evidence he was "co-regent" with Augustus in 12AD³. Jesus was most likely born in the Fall of 6BC and, therefore, John was born in the Spring of 6BC. If Jesus was born in Fall 5BC, it would be very difficult for all the recorded events between Jesus' birth and Herod's death in 4BC to have happened. So, Jesus turned 30 in Fall of 25AD. If he was baptized very early in 27AD, he was 31 years and a few months old – "about thirty years of age" (Luke 3:23). This suggests Luke used the "co-regency" date of 12BC for the beginning of Tiberius' reign. If Luke used the coronation date of 14BC, Jesus would be 33 years and a few months old at his baptism. At 33 plus, would he be still "about thirty years of age"?

In any case, when "the word of God came to John", he began to announce the Messiah:

After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:7-8 ESV)

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matthew 3:11 ESV)

"I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** (Luke 3:16 ESV)

All three synoptists record the baptism of Jesus by John at Bethany Beyond Jordan (see Map 4):

In those days **Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John** in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and **the Spirit descending on him like a dove**. And a voice came from heaven, "**You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.**" (Mark 1:9-11 ESV)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. **John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"** But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for **thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.**" Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw **the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him**; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "**This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.**" (Matthew 3:13-17 ESV)

John answered them all ... with many other exhortations **he preached good news** to the people ... Now when all the people were baptized, and **when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove**; and a voice came from heaven, "**You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.**" (Luke 3:16-22 ESV)

Mark and Matthew are explicit that Jesus is baptized by John. This is clear also by the context in Luke. All three synoptists record the voice of the angelic messenger with the statement from the Father: "... my beloved son ... I am well pleased". **This statement is pivotal in the Plan of God** – John the Baptist is the one who performed this essential service. This demonstrates the importance of his role in the Plan of God. Jesus is the only "son of God" who can ever exist in the way Jesus did. The one who became Jesus, gave up his status in eternity and through the miracle of the human birth through Mary he became a human being. Christians are offered to be Jesus' brothers and sisters, but no other "son of God" can ever be so in the same way that Jesus was. Indeed, God the Father was well pleased – the Plan was unfolding without a hitch.

Matthew records that John balked at baptizing Jesus. This shows the humility of John the Baptist – "I need to be baptized by you". It also shows the relationship that had developed over the years since John "leaped in her womb". John knew that Jesus was the Messiah, but he had not yet seen the proof from God.⁴ Jesus replies to John: , "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." The Plan of God entails the offer of the gift of salvation to all human beings.

³ See Robertson page 264 for a discussion of the evidence.

⁴ A similar scene is played out at the First New Testament Passover when Jesus goes to wash Peter's feet. (John 13:6-10)

“Righteousness” is a defining attribute of God’s character, his nature. For humans to be given the gift of eternal life, we need to replace our carnal nature with God’s divine nature. Jesus’ baptism by John was a necessary step in the accomplishment of God’s Plan, so naturally “Then he consented” to do the baptism.

All three synoptists record the Holy Spirit descending as a dove on Jesus. This was obvious and visible to John. Whether the “crowd” perceived it or not is not clear or important. What is important is the significance of this sign, as recounted in the Gospel of John. John the Apostle alludes to Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist:

The next day [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, **“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.”** And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but **he who sent me to baptize with water** said to me, **‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’** And I have seen and have borne witness that **this is the Son of God.**” (John 1:29-34 ESV)

The day after Jesus’ baptism still at Bethany Beyond Jordan, John spoke the above words. It is not explicit to whom the words are spoken. Luke specifies that there were many people being baptized: “Now, when all the people were baptized ...” (Luke 3:21 ESV). The day of Jesus’ baptism, there were “priests and Levites” in the crowd (John 1:19). The next day, John is explicitly teaching his disciples (John 1:35). The most likely audience for the above words of John is his disciples. Since he was in the open, others may also have heard.

John appears to be the first prophet to fully realize the significance of the symbol of the “lamb” with respect to the life and work of Jesus. (See **Excursus Two – The Lamb of God**) John unequivocally states that Jesus is “the Lamb of God” the sacrifice of which makes possible the removal of the individual sin of each and every human being. John had previously attested publicly that he was not the Messiah, and that a greater one was coming. John attests “I myself did not know him”, which seems strange since it is clear John and Jesus had a previous relationship. John goes on to say that the purpose of his message of repentance is to reveal the Messiah to Israel – the universal nature of the promised salvation was implied in that John stated that the Messiah is he “who takes away the sin of the world”. This salvation had first of all to be offered to Israel.

John the Apostle affirms that John the Baptist fulfilled his commission in that “John bore witness” to the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, that he is the Messiah. John repeats “I myself did not know him” and his meaning becomes clear. John knew from personal experience that Jesus was the Messiah, but “but he who sent me to baptize” had given him a sign to prove the Messiahship of Jesus. The details of John’s calling are nowhere given. He may have had angelic visitation, or it may be “the word of God” came to him. Nevertheless, he had been given the divine sign that the one upon “whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit” – the Messiah. Having seen the sign John the Baptist states “I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God” – John had fulfilled his mission to witness to the coming of the Messiah.

7. The Work of Elijah⁵

In the book of prophet “Malachi” it is stated:

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 [earth]⁶ with a **decree of utter destruction**. (Malachi 4:5-6 ESV)

⁵ For a more detailed discussion, see the paper, “The Work of Elijah” at www.mikewhytebiblicalresearch.ca

⁶ The Hebrew word עֶרֶץ - ‘eret, carries the range of meaning including “land” as in “land of Israel” and the “earth”. There is no equivalent English word. The meaning must be determined from context. The context here is “the day of YHWH”, which is universal; so clearly the meaning of ‘eret is the earth.

The angel Gabriel had specifically associated John the Baptist with this prophecy:

And 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 ... (Luke 1:16-17a ESV)

In Bethany Beyond Jordan, the “Jews” (likely the Sanhedrin) had sent a committee of “priests and Levites” to question John:

“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.” ... 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.” (John 1:19b-27 ESV)

It is not clear whether this is before or after Jesus’ baptism, but the Gospel of John places it prior to John the Baptist’s formal witness to Jesus as the Messiah. Luke had previously identified Messianic speculation around John:

As the people were in expectation, **and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ** ... (Luke 3:18 ESV)

Here the accusers specifically ask John if he is Elijah – he answers emphatically “I am not”. John had previously called a group of Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers” (Matthew 3:7), clearly at this time he was in no mood to cooperate with them either. He indeed was not a “reincarnation” of Elijah, so he cryptically pointed the committee to the Messiah – “among you stands one you do not know”. Clearly the “priests and Levites from Jerusalem” were not in a position to understand the prophecy of Malachi.

About two years later than this, after John the Baptist was dead, on a mountain near Caesarea Philippi the “Transfiguration”⁷ occurred:

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And **he was transfigured before them**, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them **Elijah with Moses**,⁸ and they were talking with Jesus. (Mark 9:2-4 ESV)

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And **he was transfigured before them**, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them **Moses and Elijah**, talking with him. (Matthew 17:1-3 ESV)

Now about eight days⁹ after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, **the appearance of his face was altered**, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, **Moses and Elijah**, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:28-31 ESV)

All three synoptists mention the appearance of “Elijah”. Only Luke mentions the discussion of the death of Christ. After the vision of the transfiguration Mark and Matthew record the following conversation:

And they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that **first Elijah must come**?” And he said to them, **“Elijah does come first to restore all things.”** And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that **Elijah has come**, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.” (Mark 9:11-13 ESV)

And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that **first Elijah must come**?” He answered, **“Elijah does come, and he will restore all things.”** 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.** (Matthew 17:10-13 ESV)

Having seen “Elijah” in the vision, both synoptists allude to the prophecy of Malachi: “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” Jesus responds somewhat enigmatically with “present tense” verb “does come”, even though John is dead. Matthew records a saying, which implies the duality, that “Elijah has already come”. As Luke had alluded to discussion of the death of Christ in the vision, both

⁷ For a more detailed discussion, see the paper, “The Transfiguration and the Tabernacle” at www.mikewhytebiblicalresearch.ca

⁸ Note that Mark puts Elijah first, Moses second, while Matthew and Luke do the reverse. This could reflect the actual memory of Peter, who was at the transfiguration. In popular thought Moses would naturally have the pre-eminence over Elijah. But since the focus of the vision is John the Baptist fulfilling the role of Elijah, it is likely that the representation of Elijah was more prominent than the representation of Moses.

⁹ Mark and Matthew are using “exclusive” calculation, while Luke uses “inclusive”.

Mark and Matthew record further discussion of it in the after conversation: “the Son of Man will/should suffer” as “Elijah” has suffered with obvious allusion to the execution of John the Baptist. Matthew is explicit: “the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist”.

The duality of the prophesized work of Elijah is clear from the original prophecy because it looks to the “the great and awesome day of the LORD” which immediately precedes the Second Advent. John’s explicit association with the prophesized work of Elijah, therefore, identified John’s work as a typical fulfillment of the prophecy.

8. He Must Increase I Must Decrease

Once John had fulfilled his mission to prepare the way for the Messiah, he knew his work was accomplished. The first thing he did was direct his disciples to the Messiah. Soon after Jesus’ baptism, still in Bethany Beyond Jordan, John did the following:

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, “What are you seeking?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day ... (John 1:35-39 ESV)

One of these disciples was Andrew, brother of Peter, the other, although un-named, is almost certainly John the Apostle.¹⁰ A few months later, John is baptizing at Aenon near Salim. It is not certain where this is, but Map 5 shows a possible location. John and Jesus were both in this area:

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison). Now a discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him’ ... Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:22-30 ESV)

To the end John was steadfast in his relationship to the Messiah. He continued his work of baptizing and preaching repentance as long as possible. He told his disciples to appreciate things as they are given: “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven”. But, his work would end and the Messiah’s would continue. Soon after this John was arrested:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:14-15 ESV)

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. (Matthew 4:12 ESV)

But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison. (Luke 3:19-20 ESV)

This marked the beginning of Jesus’ “Great Galilean Ministry” lasting perhaps two years. Mark identifies this as the transition from the old to the new – “The time is fulfilled.” John had prepared the way for the Messiah. John’s work was drawing to a close, but the work of the Messiah was just beginning – “the kingdom of God is at hand”. Luke notes that it was animosity over John’s ethical teaching that led to Herod Antipas’ arresting John. Josephus records that it was in fact more complicated:

... John ... who was called the Baptist ... who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness to one another, and piety towards God ... Now, when many others came to crowd about him, for they were greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it in his power and inclination to raise a rebellion ... Accordingly he was sent as a prisoner ... to Machaerus, the castle ... (Josephus Antiquities 18,5,2)

Machaerus is to the east of the Dead Sea as shown on Map 6. Josephus endorses the fact of John’s ethical teaching, he “commanded the Jews to exercise virtue”. Josephus also endorsed Luke’s

¹⁰ Andrew is explicitly mentioned (John 1:40). John the Apostle is clearly one of the first six disciples (Mark 1:16-20, Matthew 4:18-22). It is John the Apostle’s style to never explicitly mention himself in his Gospel.

assessment of the zeitgeist (Luke 3:15), Herod Antipas feared John might have it “in his power and inclination to raise a rebellion”.

John’s disciples continued the work of preaching repentance and forgiveness of sin. John continued to interact with them from prison:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Matthew 11:2-6 ESV)

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Luke 7:18-23 ESV)

John’s motivation in sending his disciples to Jesus is debated by commentators. One view is that John’s own faith was flagging in prison and he needed reassurance. However, it seems more likely that this was once again an attempt by John to point his disciples to the Messiah. John’s disciples allude to the prophecy, in Deuteronomy 18:15, of a prophet like Moses to come. Both Matthew and Luke record Jesus’ response as a demonstration of the signs of the Kingdom and a word that the signs of the Kingdom were being fulfilled. (See for example the signs identified in Isaiah 29:18-19, 35:5-6, 61:1) The Kingdom was beginning to replace the old order. Christ’s final message to John’s disciples was “blessed is the one who is not offended by me” – he hoped John’s disciples would come over to the new order.

After John’s disciples left, Jesus speaks to the “crowds”:

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.” [Malachi 3:1]

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. (Matthew 11:7-11a ESV)

When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings’ courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.” [Malachi 3:1]

I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. (Luke 7:24-28a ESV)

Both Matthew and Luke attest to the ringing endorsement of John the Baptist by Jesus Christ, the Messiah. John is indeed a prophet – he is the last of the Old Covenant prophets. John stood on the pinnacle between the old order and the new order – he is more than a prophet because he prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah. John fulfilled a most important role in the Plan of God. John brokered the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. The work of the Messiah was to inaugurate the New Covenant – John prepared the way for that work. Indeed, “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist”. No human being has fulfilled a more important role in the Plan of God.

Soon after this John the Baptist was executed by Herod Antipas at the behest of Herodias, his wife, through her daughter:

And she went out and said to her mother, “For what should I ask?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist.” And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison ... (Mark 6:24-27 ESV)

Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.” And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison ... (Matthew 14:8-10 ESV)

Later, a few days before the crucifixion, Jesus is facing his own death. Jesus is in the Temple and is challenged by the Temple rulers by what authority does he teach? Jesus appeals to the authority of John’s baptism:

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.” (Mark 11:28-30 ESV)

By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” (Matthew 21:23b-25a ESV)

Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.” He answered them, “I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?” (Luke 20:2-4 ESV)

Jesus knew they were trapped. If they acknowledged the divine origin of John’s baptism, their hypocrisy would stand exposed. They were afraid of the crowd if they denied John’s divine mission. They refused to answer, and Jesus went on to condemn their hypocrisy, making one final reference to John the Baptist:

Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him. (Matthew 21:31-32 ESV)

Jesus condemns the Temple rulers because even though they knew “John came to you in the way of righteousness”, they refused to repent. This reference to the “way of righteousness” is an allusion back to Jesus’ words to John at his baptism (Matthew 3:15). Even though they actually knew, they refused to acknowledge the truth.

9. The Parables of John the Baptist

John himself spoke several parables and Jesus used several parables to explain John’s mission and message. In John’s early preaching in the wilderness Matthew and Luke record the following:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:7-12 ESV)

He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:7-9 ESV)

These statements contain three parables presented by John the Baptist to the antagonistic Jews:

- **The Parable of Children from Stones:** a simple statement with implied comparison
 - Point of comparison: children
 - Known quantity: children are from their parents
 - Unknown quantity: God’s valuation of genetic descent
 - Meaning: the Jews presumed superiority due to physical descent from Abraham means nothing to God – true “sons of Abraham” are about to be revealed as Christians in the New Testament Church
- **The Parable of the Axe to the Root of the Tree:** a simple statement with implied comparison
 - Point of comparison: the axe
 - Known quantity: an axe can cut a tree down

- Unknown quantity: the fate of the root
- Meaning: the leaders of the Jews (the root) are about to be displaced – “cut down and thrown into the fire” – the “ruling elite” had not produced “good fruit” – they were doomed to their fate
- **The Parable of the Winnowing Fork:** a simple statement with implied comparison
 - Point of comparison: the winnowing fork
 - Known quantity: a winnowing fork separates the wheat from the chaff
 - Unknown quantity: identity of wheat and chaff
 - Meaning: those who respond to the message are wheat; those who do not go into unquenchable fire – those who responded to the call to the New Testament Church would be gathered “into the barn” – the obstinate Jews were destined for “fire”

When John is baptizing in Aenon near Salim and Jesus comes into the area with some disciples, the following interaction occurs:

Now a discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:25-30 ESV)

- **The First Parable of the Bridegroom:** this is a short comparison
 - Point of comparison: the bride
 - Known quantity: the bride belongs to the bridegroom
 - Unknown quantity: the fate of the friend of the bridegroom
 - Meaning: the friend shares the joy of the bridegroom while he hears his voice, when the bridegroom is gone with the bride, the friend’s joy is over: now that the Messiah has come, John’s work is over

Later after John had been put in prison, all three synoptists record the following interaction:

Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.” (Mark 2:18-20 ESV)

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” (Matthew 9:14-15 ESV)

And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.” And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.” (Luke 5:33-35 ESV)

- **The Second Parable of the Bridegroom:** this is a short comparison
 - Point of comparison: the guests at a wedding feast
 - Known quantity: while the bridegroom is in attendance the feast is ongoing
 - Unknown quantity: the status of the guests after the bridegroom leaves
 - Meaning: the “quests”, i.e., Jesus’ disciples, will have to carry on the work on their own after Jesus is gone

Immediately after the Second Parable of the Bridegroom, Jesus elaborates with two other parables:

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. (Mark 2:21 ESV)

No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. (Matthew 9:16 ESV)

He also told them a parable: “No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. (Luke 5:36 ESV)

- **The Parable of New Cloth on an Old Garment:** a simple statement with implied comparison
 - Point of comparison: a piece of unshrunk cloth
 - Known quantity: the cloth will shrink
 - Unknown quantity: the old garment
 - Meaning: John the Baptist is preparing the way for the “new covenant”; the “old covenant” is obsolete – it cannot be repaired or subsumed into the new covenant; it is gone

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins. (Mark 2:22 ESV)

Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved. (Matthew 9:17 ESV)

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. (Luke 5:37-38 ESV)

- **The Parable of Wineskins:** a simple statement with implied comparison
 - Point of comparison: new wine
 - Known quantity: new wine will expand
 - Unknown quantity: fate of old wineskins
 - Meaning: old wine skins cannot be reused for new wine: the “new covenant” cannot be subsumed to the “old covenant”, it must be contained in new “wineskins”, i.e., a new “heart”¹¹

The parable of the new cloth and the parable of the wineskins present reciprocal views of the new covenant and old covenant. The parable of the new cloth implies that the new covenant cannot be made to repair the old covenant. The parable of the wineskins implies that the old covenant cannot in any way contain the new covenant. The old covenant cannot be patched with the new covenant. The new covenant cannot be contained by the old covenant.¹²

Luke records another parabolic statement:

And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good.’ (Luke 5:39 ESV)

- **The Parable of the Old Wine:** a simple statement with implied comparison
 - Point of comparison: old wine
 - Known quantity: old wine tastes better than new wine
 - Unknown quantity: the new wine
 - Meaning: those who are committed to the “old wine”, i.e., the Jews committed to the ways of the Pharisees, by their own choice, cannot participate in the “new wine”, the new covenant

When John from prison sent his disciples to verify the Messiahship of Jesus, after John’s disciples had gone, in his teaching to the “crowd”, Jesus uses five parables to elaborate the significance of the work of John the Baptist:

... there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:11 ESV)

... none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. (Luke 7:28 ESV)

- **The Parable of the Least in the Kingdom:** a simple statement with implied comparison
 - Point of comparison: John the Baptist
 - Known quantity: no human is greater
 - Unknown quantity: one in the Kingdom
 - Meaning: to be in the Kingdom of God is of far greater value than to be the most esteemed of all human beings

¹¹ See Ezekiel 11:19-20, 36:25-27

¹² See the diagram in the Appendix for a depiction of the reciprocal nature of these parables.

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. (Matthew 11:12 ESV)

Luke records the same parable during the Later Perea Ministry:

... until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. (Luke 16:16 ESV)

- **The Parable of Violence and the Kingdom:** a simple statement with implied comparison
 - Point of comparison: John the Baptist's role
 - Known quantity: John's zeal for The Kingdom of God
 - Unknown quantity: violence required to attain the kingdom
 - Meaning: John's attitude of zeal is required of anyone aspiring to the gift of admission to the Kingdom of God

There are many Old Testament passages which use the metaphor of violence for the spreading of the gospel (see for example Numbers 23:23-24, Isaiah 11:14-15, 26:4-6, Micah 5:8-9).

For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. (Matthew 11:13-15 ESV)

- **The Parable of Elijah to Come:** a simple statement with implied comparison
 - Point of comparison: John the Baptist's role
 - Known quantity: Old Testament prophecy looks to the Messiah
 - Unknown quantity: Elijah who is to come
 - Meaning: John has fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi with respect to the First Advent – this understanding is for “those with ears to hear”, i.e., the converted

The next two parables relate directly to the role of John as Elijah and the need of “those with ears” to understand that role.

But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.”

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’

Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.” (Matthew 11:16-19 ESV)

To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.”

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’

The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.” (Luke 7:31-35 ESV)

- **The Parable of Children in the Marketplace:** this is a short comparison
 - Point of comparison: the people of Jesus' contemporary generation
 - Known quantity: the attitude of being unsatisfiable
 - Unknown quantity: the relationship of John and Jesus
 - Meaning: John and Jesus looked very different to their contemporaries, but their roles were integral to each other – in the end the wisdom of God will be seen to be justified. God's Plan will unfold as he sees fit, ushering in the Kingdom of God.
- **The Parable of Justification of Wisdom:** a simple statement with implied comparison
 - Point of comparison: is the previous parable – the distinction between John and Jesus
 - Known quantity: John was ascetic; Jesus was not
 - Unknown quantity: why the difference?
 - Meaning: according to the Plan of God many different roles are required – John had a distinct calling which he fulfilled. Each person God calls has a distinct role. All are required to support the Work of the Messiah as defined by God's wisdom.

10. The Legacy of John the Baptist

After his death, John was not forgotten. One day during the Later Judean Ministry Jesus' disciples, some of whom had been disciples of John, had this interaction with Jesus:

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread,

and forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation." (Luke 11:1-4 ESV)

Matthew had reported a very similar prayer outline in the Sermon on the Mount some two years earlier. This requesting disciple, perhaps previously a disciple of John, appealed to a precedent set by John the Baptist – these disciples may NOT have been present during the Sermon on the Mount.

The impact John had on the political scene is demonstrated by the fear of John the Baptist expressed by Herod Antipas at the work of Jesus:

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead." That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." (Mark 6:14-16 ESV)

Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." (Matthew 14:1-2 ESV)

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. Herod said, "John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?" (Luke 9:7-9 ESV)

The ubiquity of these sentiments is even reflected by Jesus' disciples:

And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist"; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." (Mark 8:27-28 ESV)

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." (Matthew 16:13-14 ESV)

And he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen." (Luke 9:18b-19 ESV)

In the book of Acts, Luke records several references to the work and message of John the Baptist. Jesus is quoted just before the Ascension:

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1:4-5 ESV)

Peter asserts Jesus' baptism by John to be the official beginning of apostolic qualification:

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22 ESV)

Twice Luke records Peter referring to the baptism of John in his early preaching:

As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed ... (Acts 10:36-37 ESV)

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' (Acts 11:15-16 ESV)

In Pisidian Antioch in the synagogue, to Jews of the diaspora, Paul alludes to the work of John:

... God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.' (Acts 13:23-25 ESV)

We have seen on more than one occasion that John referred his disciples to the Messiah. Yet it is evident that the disciples of John remained true to his memory and continued his work of preaching repentance and baptizing for the forgiveness of sins. Twice in the book of Acts, long after John's death and Jesus' death, we find evidence of the work of John's disciples:

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. (Acts 18:24-25 ESV)

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance", telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." (Acts 19:1-4 ESV)

The greatest statement of the success of John the Baptist in his mission to prepare for the Messiah is the testimony of the Book of Acts as to the number of people in Jerusalem and Judea who quickly converted to Christianity after the first Pentecost:

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand [persons]. (Acts 2:41 ESV)

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46-47 ESV)

But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand. (Acts 4:4 ESV)

And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women ... (Acts 5:14 ESV)

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number ... (Acts 6:1 ESV)

... the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7 ESV)

You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. (Acts 21:20 ESV)

Presumably, there were also large numbers in Galilee and Perea, even Samaria, although we have no record of it. Many of these conversions were the direct result of God's calling people who had been prepared by the preaching of John the Baptist.

In the modern world, the group called the Mandaens claims John the Baptist as a progenitor of their faith. This group has members in many countries with the largest concentration in the Middle East. For information on this group, see the two articles from Wikipedia referenced in the Bibliography – "Mandaens" and "Mandaeism".

Appendix: Maps and Chart

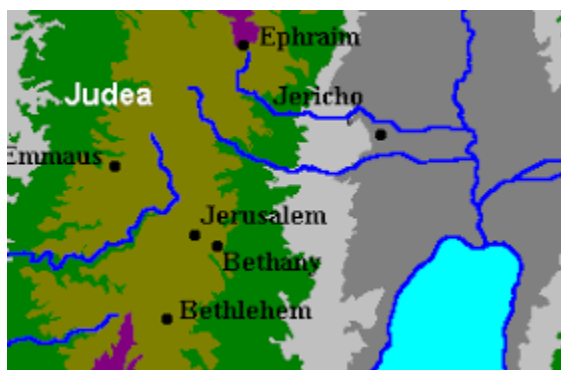
Map 1:



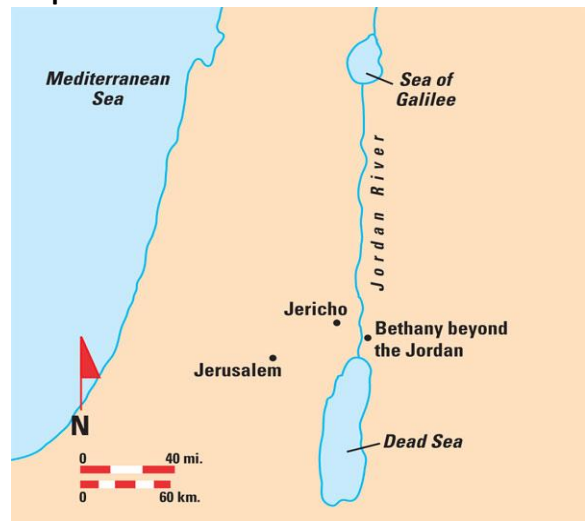
Map 2:



Map 3:



Map 4:



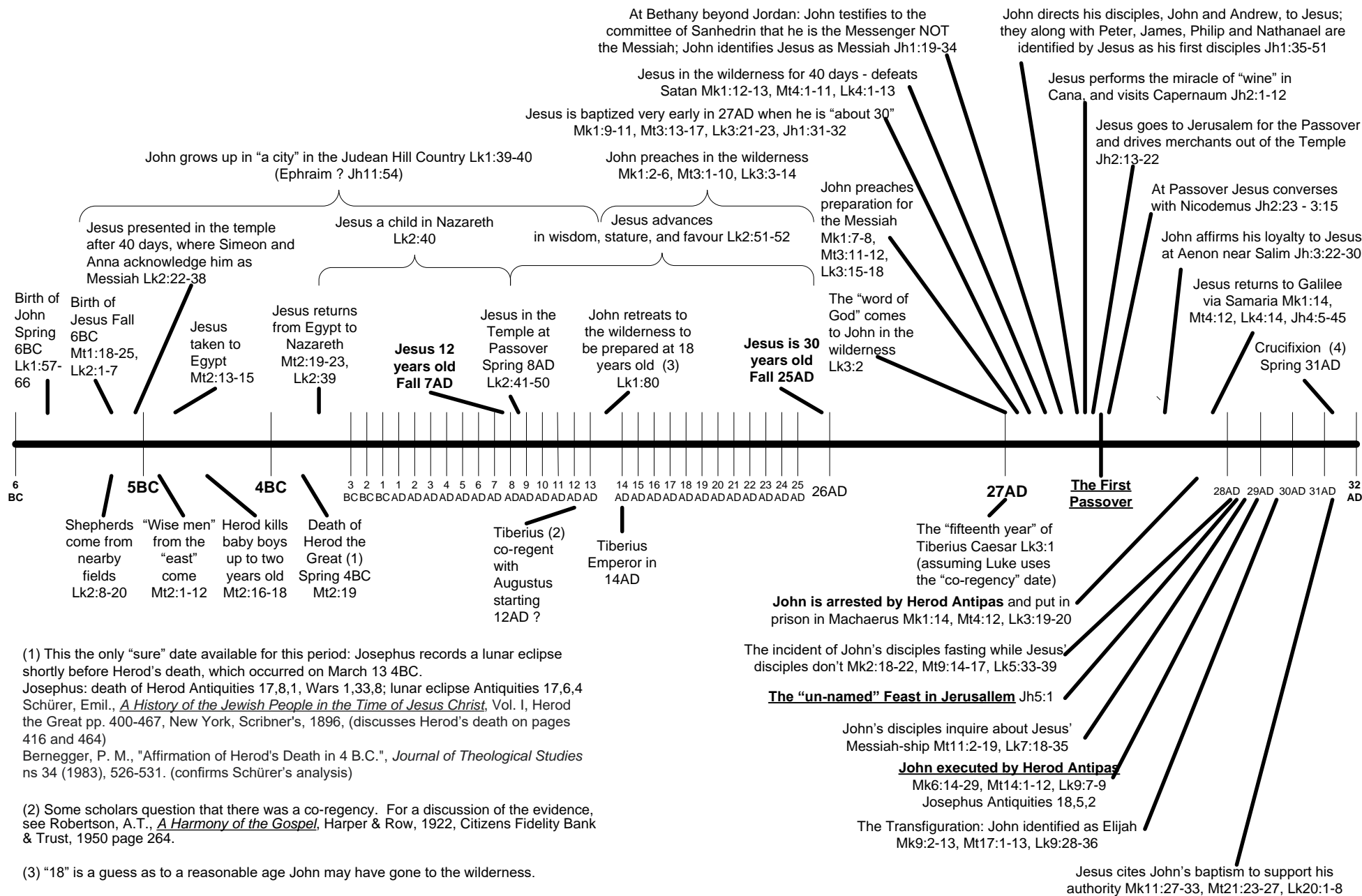
Map 5:



Map 6:



Life and Times of John the Baptist



(1) This is the only "sure" date available for this period: Josephus records a lunar eclipse shortly before Herod's death, which occurred on March 13 4BC. Josephus: death of Herod Antiquities 17,8,1, Wars 1,33,8; lunar eclipse Antiquities 17,6,4 Schürer, Emil., *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, Vol. I, Herod the Great pp. 400-467, New York, Scribner's, 1896, (discusses Herod's death on pages 416 and 464) Bernegger, P. M., "Affirmation of Herod's Death in 4 B.C.", *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 34 (1983), 526-531. (confirms Schürer's analysis)

(2) Some scholars question that there was a co-regency. For a discussion of the evidence, see Robertson, A. T., *A Harmony of the Gospel*, Harper & Row, 1922, Citizens Fidelity Bank & Trust, 1950 page 264.

(3) "18" is a guess as to a reasonable age John may have gone to the wilderness.

(4) This assumes that 31AD is the only candidate year with Passover on Wednesday.

The incident of John's disciples fasting while Jesus' disciples don't Mk2:18-22, Mt9:14-17, Lk5:33-39

The "un-named" Feast in Jerusalem Jh5:1

John's disciples inquire about Jesus' Messiah-ship Mt11:2-19, Lk7:18-35

John executed by Herod Antipas

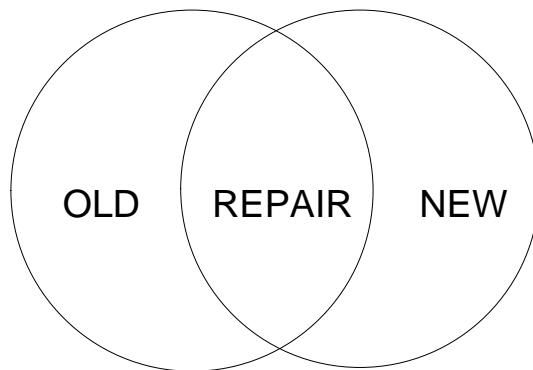
Mk6:14-29, Mt14:1-12, Lk9:7-9, Josephus Antiquities 18,5,2

The Transfiguration: John identified as Elijah Mk9:2-13, Mt17:1-13, Lk9:28-36

Jesus cites John's baptism to support his authority Mk11:27-33, Mt21:23-27, Lk20:1-8

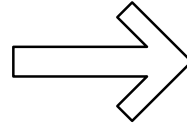
Reciprocal Parables: Unshrunk Cloth and Wineskins

CLOTH: Intersection



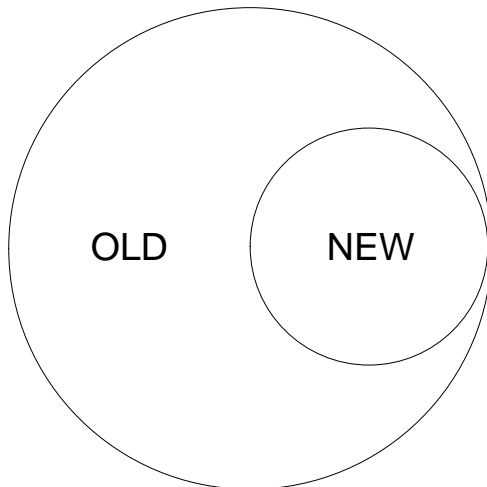
No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. (Mark 2:21 ESV)

The Old Covenant cannot be repaired by the New Covenant.



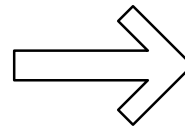
Garment is ruined

WINE: Containment



And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins. (Mark 2:22 ESV)

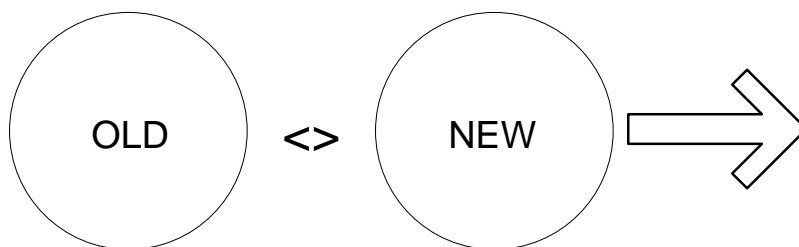
The New Covenant cannot be contained by the Old Covenant.



Wine is Lost

This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. (Hebrews 7:22 ESV)
Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant ... (Hebrews 9:15 ESV)
In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. (Hebrews 8:13 ESV)
He does away with the first in order to establish the second. (Hebrews 10:9 ESV)

Old Covenant <> New Covenant: Mutually Exclusive



**Old is obsolete;
Replaced by New**

Excursus 1 – The Judean Wilderness:

Luke asserts that John the Baptist:

was **in the wilderness** until the day of his public appearance to Israel. (Luke 1:80 ESV)

All three synoptists record the mission of John the Baptist:

“The voice of one crying **in the wilderness**:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. (Mark 1:3 // Matthew 3:3 // Luke 3:4 ESV)

What was this “wilderness” and why did John the Baptist go to the “wilderness”? Geographically the Judean Wilderness is the area to the west of the Dead Sea extending west to the Judean mountain range and extending to somewhat north of Jericho, but NOT including the Jordan Valley (see Maps 1 and 2). It is a barren and wild landscape – a natural repose of fugitives of all sorts. David spent considerable time in the Judean wilderness (1 Samuel chapters 23 and 24).

In the time of John the Baptist many Israelites who were faithful to the religion of the Old Testament felt the cities of Judea and Galilee were compromised by Hellenism. These groups tended to recluse in the Judean desert. The Qumran¹³ community was just a group. The Essenes¹⁴ were another such group. There is some evidence the men of Qumran were Essenes. John was a Nazarite. He lived an ascetic life in the desert as did the Qumran community and the Essenes – it is possible that he spent some time among these communities. He began to preach in the desert and people came to him (Mark 1:4-5, Matthew 3:5-10, 11:7, Luke 3:7-14, 7:24).

W.R. Farmer makes the following assessment:

The wilderness of Judea was the center of religious hope as well as a place of refuge. It was the symbol of the wilderness in which God had tabernacled with his people for forty years before bringing them into the promised land. In the wilderness the way of the Lord was to be made straight, and some believed the Messiah would first appear there.¹⁵

Indeed, Jesus did warn of claims he would appear in the desert:

... if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. (Matthew 24:26 ESV)

In this environment, John the Baptist spent some dozen years of his life being prepared for the day he would announce to Israel the arrival of the Messiah.

Excursus 2 – The Lamb of God:

Twice the Apostle John records John the Baptist as recognizing Jesus as the “Lamb of God”:

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “**Behold, the Lamb of God**, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29 ESV)

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “**Behold, the Lamb of God!**” (John 1:35-36)

Following the thread from the protoevangelium¹⁶ in Genesis 3:15 through the many Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament there are many allusions to the symbolism of the “Lamb”.

The symbolism of the “Lamb” begins with Abel’s sacrifice:

... and Abel also brought of the **firstborn of his flock** and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering ... (Genesis 4:4 ESV)

One or more “Lambs” would have been included in Noah’s sacrifice:

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. (Genesis 8:20 ESV)

When Abraham was directed to sacrifice Isaac, he spoke enigmatically to his son, but clearly prophetically of the “Lamb of God”:

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but **where is the lamb for a burnt offering?**” Abraham said, “**God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering**, my son.” So they went both of them together. (Genesis 22:6-8)

Note that in place of Isaac, God actually provided a “ram” not a “lamb” (Genesis 22:13) indicating that Abraham’s words are only prophetic of the “Lamb of God”. The symbolism of the “Lamb” in the original

¹³ See Bruce pages 101-121 for more information on the Qumran community.

¹⁴ See Bruce pages 82-92 for more information on the Essenes.

¹⁵ IDB2 page 960

¹⁶ Protoevangelium is a compound word of two Greek words, protos meaning “first” and evangelion meaning “good news” or “gospel”. Thus, the protoevangelium in Genesis 3:15 is commonly referred to as the first mention of the good news of salvation in the Bible. (Wikipedia article “Protoevangelium”)

Passover recorded in Exodus chapter twelve is thoroughly documented. Similarly well documented is the use of lambs in the sacrificial legislation recorded in the books of Leviticus and Numbers and the symbolism of these sacrifices.

When Samuel began to judge Israel and the salvation of the nation was in jeopardy, Samuel preached repentance and offered a “Lamb”; and God provided the deliverance:

And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, “**If you are returning to the LORD** with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.” So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only. Then Samuel said, “Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.” So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the LORD and fasted on that day and said there, “**We have sinned against the LORD.**” And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. And the people of Israel said to Samuel, “Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines.” So **Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD.** And Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the LORD thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and **they were defeated before Israel.** (1 Samuel 7:3-10 ESV)

In the Fourth Servant Song, the specific prophecy of the suffering of Christ compares him to a “Lamb”:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7 ESV)

Luke quotes Isaiah from the Septuagint in the context of Philip’s instructing the Ethiopian court official:

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” ... And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians ... and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and **like a lamb** before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.” [Isaiah 53:7b-8 LXX]

And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then **Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.** (Acts 8:26-35 ESV)

Peter makes specific mention of Jesus as the “Lamb of God”:

... knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with **the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb** without blemish or spot. (1 Peter 1:18-19 ESV)

The Book of Revelation specifically calls Jesus “The Lamb” on about 25 occasions, for example:

And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw **a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain** ... And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne ... the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders **fell down before the Lamb** ... And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for **you were slain**, and by **your blood you ransomed people for God**
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:6-10 ESV)

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, **standing before the throne and before the Lamb**, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “**Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!**” ... Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white **in the blood of the Lamb.**”

... For **the Lamb** in the midst of the throne **will be their shepherd**,
and he will guide them to springs of living water ... (Revelation 7:9-17 ESV)

Then I looked, and behold, **on Mount Zion stood the Lamb**, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads ... No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. **It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes**. These have been redeemed from mankind as **firstfruits for God and the Lamb**, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless. (Revelation 14:1-5 ESV)

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude ...

"Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,

for the **marriage of the Lamb has come**, and his Bride has made herself ready;

it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"

—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, "Write this: **Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb**."
(Revelation 19:6-9 ESV)

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from **the throne of God and of the Lamb** through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but **the throne of God and of the Lamb** will be in it, and his servants will worship him.
(Revelation 22:1-3 ESV)

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This brief article defines the term and provide references to other resources.

www.esv.org

This excellent website provides full access to the ESV text, plus many useful tools to work with the text.

www.mikewhytebiblicalresearch.ca

The location of "John the Baptist – More than a Prophet".