



John the Baptist

Preparing the Way

Part 2 - Elijah and John's Question from Prison

In Part One of this series, saw that John the Baptist had a unique calling - to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. John's message did just that by turning the people back to the fathers - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But John also became a witness of the Messiah - explaining what he would do.

In Part 2, we'll see how John came in the "spirit of Elijah" and why he had a question about Yeshua as his own ministry came to an end.

The Spirit of Elijah

So why did the angel say that in regards to Yeshua, John would -

^{ESV} **Luke 1:17** ". . . 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 . . ."

We recognize that passage as a quote from the book of Malachi which reads -

Malachi 4:5-6 ⁵ "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers . . ."

Let's begin to understand John's ministry by comparing it to Elijah's ministry.

Without any introduction, Elijah the Tishbite just appeared on the scene during the reign of King Ahab in Israel. Ahab, one of Israel's most wicked kings, was Israel's 8th king after Israel split from the Kingdom of Israel under Rehoboam. Elijah's first recorded words - which seem to have come after he warned Ahab that he must turn from his wicked ways - were simply:

^{ESV} **1 Kings 17:1** ". . . "As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

And so it was. There was a drought throughout the land of Israel that effected everyone, including Elijah. King Ahab knew that the drought would not end unless Elijah pronounced it, so 3 ½ years later, when Elijah appeared before Ahab, Ahab did not question Elijah's ability to command the rain, thus he complied with Elijah's instructions. Here's how it went -

^{ESV} **1 Kings 18:17-20** ¹⁷ When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" ¹⁸ And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. ¹⁹ Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." ²⁰ So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel.

Knowing that it was because of Elijah's word and the power of Elijah's God that Israel was suffering under a severe drought, it's interesting that Ahab agreed to this "show down" on Mount Carmel. Did he believe that this is the only way to end the drought? Did he somehow think that Baal could overpower Elijah? Or was there some other power and influence on Ahab? I believe there was. It was the power of his devious wife - Jezebel. A Sidonite princess - Jezebel brought her brand of Baal worship to Israel and promoted the worship of both Baal and Asherah. It was Jezebel who turned Ahab against Elijah. Thus when Elijah proposed a contest between the God of Israel and the Baal, Ahab - probably at the behest of his wife - agreed.

As the story goes, the prophets of Baal set up an altar and tried from morning till afternoon to get Baal to consume their sacrifice, but to no avail. Then it was Elijah's turn -

^{ESV} **1 Kings 18:36-37** ³⁶ And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. ³⁷ Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back."

God then sent fire that consumed Elijah's sacrifice as well as the altar and the surrounding water. This was a convincing sign to the Israelite people and an answer to Elijah's prayer that God would "turn their hearts back", and thus the Israelites immediately set out to destroy the prophets of Baal.

To whom did their hearts turn back? Obviously, they turned from Baal and turn to the god of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Malachi prophecy states that the Elijah to come would -

^{KJV} **Malachi 4:6** ". . . turn the heart of the fathers to the children . . ."

There are a couple of points we need to notice about this prophecy. First, the Hebrew word for *turn* in this verse is *shuwb* (שׁוּב - Strong's 7725). The most common meaning for *shuwb* is "to return, to turn back, to restore". In three places *shuwb* is translated "repent" (1 Kings 8:46; Ezekiel 14:6; Ezekiel 18:30), and in each of these cases, the context is of Israel's repentance and returning to God. Thus, the idea in this passage could be that of repentance and turning back to God's ways. Second, the word "heart" is singular, not plural as it appears in some translations. This is important because it shows that there is one heart that is being restored. Thus, a more proper translation might be -

". . . return the heart of the fathers to the children . . ."

In other words, the heart of love and belief that was exhibited by the fathers - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - through their trust and obedience to the word of God, would be returned to the children of Israel through the actions of the Elijah to come. This idea runs parallel to the previous verse of this prophecy which instructs God's people to -

^{NKJ} **Malachi 4:4** "Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, *With the statutes and judgments.*

This was the role of Elijah when he faced King Ahab . . . turn Israel back to the fathers; back to the way of life God had given all Israel. In performing his role, Elijah set the stage for the prophet Elisha who actually performed many more miracles than Elijah and had a greater following than Elijah.

The role of John the Baptist was very much like that of Elijah. Though we're told the story of John's birth, he seems to disappear afterwards, only to re-emerge with a well-established ministry and message - a call to repentance, or as it might be said to Hebrew - to *shuwb*.

^{NKJ} **Matthew 3:1** In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

In John's day, the Jewish people were suffering under the two evils - the Roman influence on the priesthood as manifest in the Sadducees, and the extra-biblical oral traditions of the Pharisees. Both of these made it difficult for the people to worship the God of Israel. John called on both groups to repent -

^{ESV} **Matthew 3:5-8** ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 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? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

Though John may not have had much influence on the Jewish elite, as noted earlier, many of the common people did turn to God - even Roman soldiers - thus setting the stage for the one who would follow after him, Yeshua the Messiah.

Another characteristic Elijah shared with John the Baptist was his willingness to challenge the secular leaders. Though Elijah faced Ahab as he challenged the prophets of Baal, Elijah's real enemy was Jezebel. It was Jezebel who killed the prophets of YHVH and brought in the 450 prophets of Baal along with 400 prophets of Asherah. In addition, she was the one who encouraged Ahab to steal a vineyard from Naboth, his neighbor, and enticed Naboth's neighbors to kill him. This ultimately led to her demise.

John the Baptist was faced with a similar situation. It seems that Herod Antipus - a man who admired John - had a half brother named Philip who ruled the area to the north and east of the Sea of Galilee. Philip had a wife named Herodias. Some historians say that on a visit to his half-brother, Herod Antipus seduced Herodias and took her as his wife (i.e. - stole her from her husband), which was an illegal marriage. John, like Elijah - spoke out strongly to King Herod in regards to this marriage and Herod eventually put him in prison. Later, Herodius - who hated John the Baptist - took occasion of Herod's weakness and had John killed.

Thus the spirit of Jezebel, who stirred up evil in Ahab's heart¹, was also in the heart of Herodius - who ultimately had John the Baptist killed.

Though there are other similar characteristics in the lives of Elijah and John the Baptist, it's clear that John's role closely followed that of Elijah. In fact, some teach that just as Elijah seemed to doubt God's purpose for him, John began to doubt whether or not Yeshua was the messiah. Let's see if that's really the case.

John Questions Yeshua

At the beginning of this message I mentioned the instance where Yeshua raised a man from the dead and that this miracle caused quite a stir. Many people were excited thinking that Yeshua was a prophet and maybe even the Messiah, and word of Yeshua's fame got back to John who was stuck in Herod's prison. This apparently raised questions in John's mind. "If Yeshua is the Messiah, and the Kingdom is at hand, why am I stuck in prison? Is my cousin truly the Messiah, or should I look for another?" So John sent disciples to Yeshua to ask Him to clarify -

^{ESV} **Luke 7:20** 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?'"

As mentioned earlier, Yeshua's ministry did not begin until John had been put in prison, and since Yeshua's first miracle (turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana) took place after He had chosen His disciples, it's unlikely John personally witnessed any of Yeshua's miracles. Yet John still had a number of reasons to believe Yeshua was the Messiah.

Certainly the circumstances surrounding his conception were obviously miraculous. I'm sure his mother shared that information with him - especially the startle she must have experienced when John "leaped" in her womb when Mary - pregnant with Yeshua - paid her a visit.

We can also assume that even though the two boys - John and Yeshua - lived in different parts of Israel - John in Judea and Yeshua in Nazareth, they visited each other from time to time, especially at each

¹ 1 Kings 21.25

year's festivals in Jerusalem. John would have surely noticed Yeshua's acute knowledge of the scripture and how He excelled above all the other boys His age.

But the clearest reason John believed in Yeshua was stated by John himself. He said -

^{ESV} **John 1:33** "I myself did not know him . . ."

Now before we continue with that passage, let's think about this for a moment. Obviously, John knew his cousin, Yeshua of Nazareth, but did he really know Him. Did he know that his cousin actually did come from God . . . that He too was sent with a mission? According to his own words, he did not. But God gave him a clear sign -

^{ESV} **John 1:33** ". . . 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 after Yeshua came out of the Jordan River, what did he see? The scripture says -

John 1:32 "And John bore witness: 'I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.'"

Thus John had miraculous proof that Yeshua was indeed the promised Messiah. Why then does it appear to some that John, while in prison, doubted? Had he lost faith, or are we not seeing something in the story. I believe it's the latter. Let's take a look.

Yeshua had just raised a man from the dead² and His fame was spreading throughout the land. Many claimed that Yeshua was "the Prophet" spoken of by Moses while others believed God had indeed visited His people just as He did at the time of the Exodus. This could certainly be the case for a people who were in "expectation" of the prophesied Messiah as the Jewish people were in the 1st century. John himself was asked if he was the promised Messiah -

Luke 3:15 As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ,

But as we've already noted, John knew He was not the Messiah, and He knew that Yeshua was. So what was John asking? To answer that question, we must understand what the 1st century Jewish leaders were expecting in a messiah.

The Jewish sages were perplexed over two seemingly opposite prophecies:

Daniel 7:13-14 I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

This prophecy foretold of a Messiah who would set up His kingdom on earth, a kingdom much like it was under King David. But on the other hand, there was this prophecy -

Zechariah 9:9 ⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

This prophecy presented a totally different view of the Messiah - one who did not ride in on a white horse, but one who arrived to Jerusalem on a donkey. These two different views of the Messiah were labeled as

² Luke 7:11-17

“Messiah ben David” and “Messiah ben Yosef”. The first depicted a mighty warrior king like David, and the other a suffering servant like the patriarch Joseph.

So the question was “Is there going to be two messiahs or will there be two comings of the same messiah?” This is the question I believe John was asking. So did John doubt? No - he clearly recognized Yeshua as Messiah. His question was more “are you Messiah the son of David or Messiah the son of Joseph?” We know that He was both, but to show John that He was going to leave and come again, He said -

Matthew 11:4-5 "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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.

Yeshua quoted from various passages³ of Isaiah indicating that because Jerusalem was not willing to receive her King, He would play out both Messianic expectations by becoming a suffering servant, then after leaving for a while, return again as a conquering king.

In our next and final installment, we'll make sense of a difficult statement made by Yeshua about John, then see how our calling is similar to John's.

Shalom Alecheim

³ Isaiah 29:13-19; 35:4-6; 61:1