



Learn Your Bible

Resources to help you learn and understand the Bible

Advanced Study AS010: Character Study 5 – John the Baptist

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Read Luke 7:25-28

Introduction: Jesus said there was no greater prophet than John the Baptist (Luke 7:28). That being the case, we shall do well to look at this enigmatic character to see what we can learn from him.

1. His Background. He was born to priestly, but ageing parents (Luke 1:5-7). He was related to Jesus (maybe a cousin), via the relationship of his mother with the Virgin Mary, (see v36). His total abstinence (Luke 1:15) marks him down as a possible *Nazarite*, and his wilderness habitation as a possible *Essene*. It would be worth reading up on both these 1stC Jewish institutions to see how they might explain John's unusual lifestyle.

2. His Mission. This was announced prior to his birth by an angel (Luke 1:17) and in a prophecy by his father on his birth (Luke 1:67-79). Principally, he was the forerunner of the Messiah (Luke 1:16-17). He called people to repentance and baptised them in ratification of their commitment. From the passages already cited and from what you know of John's subsequent ministry, consider in what ways he prepared the way for Jesus. Also consider John's own words as to the difference between his baptism and that of Jesus (Matthew 3:11. See also John 1:6-8).

3. John and Jesus. Jesus came to John to be baptised. Can you answer the question John put to Jesus in Matthew 3:14, and explain Jesus' answer in v15? John recognised and proclaimed Jesus as "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Write a one-paragraph explanation of the sacrificial lamb and how Jesus fulfils the meaning of this ancient Jewish ritual. John had his own disciples, some of whom became the first disciples of Jesus (John 1:35-40). Compare the message of John (Matthew 3:2) with the message of Jesus (Matthew 4:17).

4. His Imprisonment and Death. King Herod had John imprisoned and subsequently beheaded. Follow the sordid story in Matt 14:1-13. What do you think caused John to become uncertain of the person of Jesus (as the Messiah)(Matthew 11:2-3), about which he had confidently proclaimed earlier (in John 1:29)? Is there any significance in Jesus' departure from Judah for Galilee on hearing news of John's imprisonment?

Self-examination: John the Baptist prepared the way for people to listen to and to follow Jesus. In what way do I, or should I, do the same?

For Further Thought and Study:

(i) Compare John the Baptist with the prophet Elijah. John said he was not Elijah (John 1:21), but Jesus said he (John) was (Matt 11:14). Can you explain this apparent contradiction?

(ii) In Matthew 11:11, Jesus said "There has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he". What did He mean?