

THE WITNESS OF JOHN

John 1:19-28

The scene is the Jordan River. For 60 miles it winds its way quietly southward from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. At times there are narrow rapids, but for the most part, its progress is quite and peaceful.

At one of these serene bends in the river, a crowd of people have gathered. They have come for a variety of reasons. Some have come to hear a prophet. Others have come to have their curiosity satisfied. There are those who are present because their lives have been changed and they wish to identify themselves with this new movement. There is one group that has been sent to investigate these recent happenings. The speculation runs rampant. In a small Judean village we listen in on a conversation.

“Have you heard John the Baptist yet?”

“No, I haven’t. I understand that he is out by the Jordan River.”

“That’s right. I went to hear him preach and I want to tell you that he is my kind of preacher -- not at all like the Pharisees. In fact, he called them a bunch of rattlesnakes. He really lays it on the line.”

“That must have shaken them up.”

“It certainly did! He doesn’t speak like they do. He doesn’t try to impress the people with big theological words. On the other hand, he talks with great authority. Neither is he in it for the money. In fact, all he wears is some old camel skins and a leather belt.”

“That reminds me of the prophet Elijah. Maybe John is also a prophet.”

“Perhaps. Now that you mention it, he has been predicting the Messiah is coming soon and that his baptism will be special.”

If we can move from hear and travel north to the sun swept shores of the Sea of Galilee, we can listen in on another conversation.

“Hey, Simon! Is Andrew still down south following that new prophet?”

“Yes, he has become one of his disciples.”

“Have you gone to hear him preach?”

“Me? No, I have better things to do. Who would run the fishing business if I were to go chasing after every preacher claiming to have a vision. One religious fanatic in the family is quite enough..”

“Many of the people say that John is a messenger from God.”

“Yes, but none of the religious leaders in Jerusalem seem to think so. I will leave considerations like that up to the religious experts.”

Now let us move south to the capital city of Jerusalem where the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of Israel, is in session. Caiaphas, the high priest and president of the Sanhedrin, is speaking.

“Our next order of business concerns this man John the Baptist.”

“What do we know about him?”

“I’ve heard that he is preaching repentance.”

“That is nothing new.”

“He is against the religious establishment.”

“He is baptizing Jews.”

“He is doing what?????”

“He is baptizing Jews. He says that he is preparing them for someone who is coming. Some people think he is the Messiah.”

“I suppose we ought to get together a delegation to go down and question him...”

The Gospel of John begins with a prologue that introduces the primary cast of characters and sets forth their purpose and mission. From here, the author moves directly into the historical account, beginning with the testimony of John the Baptist.

A CHRONOLOGY OF JOHN’S ACCOUNT

The testimony of John the Baptist is given amidst a detailed account of the first few days in the public ministry of Jesus. The account takes place over a period of four consecutive days.

Day	Passage	Recipients of Message	Content of Message
1st Day	John 1:19-28	Pharisees	Explains John’s Baptism
2nd Day	John 1:29-34	The People	Describes the events at the Baptism of Jesus
3rd Day	John 1:35-42	Two of John’s Disciples	Testimony that Jesus is the Lamb of God
4th Day	John 1:43-51	Philip and Nathanael	Testimony that Jesus is the Son of God

After the fourth day, Jesus and His new disciples will travel north, eventually arriving at Cana where they will attend a wedding (John 2:1). This gives us a possible clue as to a more specific chronology. It was the normal custom among the Jews of this period that a young girl was married on Wednesday (this was different in the case of a widow in which the customary date was Thursday).

There is no indication within the account to suggest that the bride was a widow from a previous marriage, so we may be permitted to suppose that the wedding would have taken place on a Wednesday. According to John 2:1, the wedding took place on the third day after the events recorded in the previous chapter. If this is correct, then it would look something like this:

Day	Events of the Day	Passage
1st Day	John speaks to the delegation from Jerusalem about his ministry	Found in John 1
2nd Day	John publicly introduces Jesus and describes the events that had taken place at His baptism, some weeks before.	
3rd Day	John the Baptist points out Jesus to two of his disciples and they follow Him, spending the day with Him and bringing Simon to meet Him.	
4th Day	Philip and Nathanael meet Jesus	
1st Day	(Silent)	Found in John 2
2nd Day		
3rd Day	Jesus and His disciples attend a wedding in Cana of Galilee.	

If the wedding took place on a Wednesday, then we can count back to see that our account begins on the previous Thursday. Though it is not necessary to our understanding of the passage, this does fit the observation that it would have been on a Sabbath when Jesus spent a quiet day with the two disciples of John.

THE DISCLAIMER OF THE WITNESS

19 And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 And he confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, "I am not the Christ." (John 1:19-20).

John the Baptist has been sent as a witness. A witness is one who tells what he has seen or experienced. John is going to do that. He is going to tell about Jesus. He will be a witness of Jesus. But before he does that, he will first be asked about himself.

1. The Delegation to the Witness: *And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem (1:19).*

The passage opens with an official delegation coming out to meet John. This delegation was made up of representatives from two groups of people.

a. Priests.

These were the men who had been set apart to do the work of God within the temple. The priests were always taken from the tribe of Levi and, more specifically, from the descendants of Aaron.

b. Levites.

These were descendants of the tribe of Levi. They constituted a lower order of the priesthood. As such, they were not permitted to administer the sacrifices upon the altar, but they were allowed to do other work within the temple.

While all priests were Levites, not all Levites were priests. The priesthood was a more exclusive group. This delegation was sent from Jerusalem. It seems to have been an officially commissioned body sent by the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of Israel. The express purpose of this commission was to investigate the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist.

John's ministry had been having a great impact upon the land. People were coming from 30 and 40 miles away to hear him preach. Because of this growing popularity, the religious leaders of Israel wanted to know who this man was claiming to be.

2. The Disclaimer of the Witness: *He confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, "I am not the Christ" (1:20).*

John is very direct in his answer. He does not hesitate. He immediately goes to the question that was apparently on their minds: No, he is not the Messiah.

I might have been tempted to hedge this reply a bit" "I know that I am a compelling personality and I can see that it would have been easy for you to mistake me for the Messiah. That is understandable since I am on the Messianic Mission Team." The truth is that I enjoy getting glory for myself. I like it when people look at me and think that I am wonderful.

John did not give in to that sort of temptation. He is quick to answer that he is not the Messiah.

THE IDENTITY OF THE WITNESS

21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."

22 They said then to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

23 He said, "I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said." John 1:21-23).

If John was not the promised Messiah, then the Jewish delegation reasoned that perhaps he was the prophet Elijah. These men were familiar with the writings of Malachi.

5 Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. 6 And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse. (Malachi 4:5-6).

The Jews knew of this promise that Elijah would come before the coming of the Day of the Lord. They equated the coming of the Day of the Lord with the coming of Messiah.

John has been preaching that a great One is coming. He has said that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Therefore the Day of the Lord must be near. But where is Elijah? The Day of the Lord cannot come until Elijah has first appeared on the scene. Perhaps John is Elijah.

He is not. Neither is he *the Prophet*. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses promised that one day God would raise up another prophet like himself. This prophet would speak and the people would listen to him.

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him. (Deuteronomy 18:15).

The people have been listening to John. He is their countryman and they have been listening. Perhaps he is that prophet spoken of by Moses. But no, John denies this. Notice that each of John's denials becomes shorter and shorter.

- *I am not the Christ (1:20).*
- *I am not (1:21).*
- *No (1:21).*

It almost seems as though John is growing impatient with their questioning. These emissaries have come asking about John's identity, but John has bigger interests than his

own identity.

Notice that they have not asked about John's message of repentance. They have not asked him about the coming kingdom. They have not asked what they should do to prepare themselves for God's coming judgment. Instead, they seem very superficial. They are only interested in having something for the record that they can taken back to the Sanhedrin.

John gives his answer in verse 23: *I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness*. This is a striking claim when we realize the many things that John could have said about himself.

- He could have said that he was the son of a priest.
- He could have said that he was a man sent from God.
- He could have said that he was the greatest among those born of women.
- He could have said that he was a prophet.

John could have said all of these things. These are some of the things the Scriptures ascribe to John, but he does not point to any of them. Instead, he identifies himself with a prophecy found in the book of Isaiah.

*A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:3).*

John identifies himself as the voice. There is nothing special about a voice. The important thing about a voice is what it is saying. By identifying himself in this way, John underscores an important principle. The message is more important than the man who is bringing the message.

The Jerusalem delegates do not seem to realize this principle. They are more interested in the man than in his message. They are more concerned with trivia than with truth. This is brought out by their next question. It is a question about the work of the witness.

THE WORK OF THE WITNESS

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ And they asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶ John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. ²⁷ It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (John 1:24-28).

We are told that this delegation had been sent from the Pharisees. This is significant and needed to be stated. We have already noted that the delegation consisted of priests and Levites. The power brokers among the priesthood were largely Sadducees. But it was the Pharisees who had been the sending group of this delegation.

The Pharisees were the conservative party in Israel. Their name comes from the Hebrew word “to separate.” They held to a strict separation from all things foreign. In this way, they trace their roots back to the Hasidim, the “pious ones.” They held, not only to the written Law of Moses, but also to the oral traditions that had grown up around Judaism.

By contrast, the Sadducees were the liberal party within the nation of Israel. Their ranks came mostly from the wealthy aristocracy. The high priest and all of the chief priests in the Sanhedrin were almost exclusively from the Sadducees. They can be best understood when contrasted with the Pharisees.

Pharisees	Sadducees
Name means “separated ones”	Name means “righteous ones”
Held to the authority of all of the Old Testament Scriptures as well as of the oral law	Viewed the Torah as having greater authority
Believed in miracles, angels & immortality	Rejected the miraculous, angels & immortality
Held to a future resurrection	Denied any life after death
Popular in the synagogues	Ruled the Temple

The Synoptics tell us that John the Baptist had spoken out on occasion against both the Sadducees as well as against the Pharisees. Yet it is only the Pharisees who seem troubled enough to sponsor this delegation. Were the Sadducees only going along with this? What accounts for the interest of the Pharisees in this matter? I believe there are two reasons.

First, the Sadducees were more of a political body than a religious group. They were not that concerned with the preaching of any one man. As long as John did not bother them, he was of little concern to them. On the other hand, the Pharisees were greatly interested in every aspect of the Scriptures and had a love of arguing over the smallest of theological details.

A second and more pressing reason for the concern of the Pharisees was the growing popularity of John the Baptist with the common people. The Pharisees were the popular

party among the Jews and especially among the common people. The majority of their numbers did not come from the aristocracy as did the Sadducees, but rather from the common man. Someone else was now becoming popular and the Pharisees did not care for the idea that they had a rival.

I believe this is the real purpose of this delegation, It is to undermine the ministry of John the Baptist. They are going to cut him down to size. They have a plan. They will ask him who he is and they will get him to talk about himself. They will ask him leading questions and they will get him to commit himself. They will get him to say that he is the Messiah or that he is Elijah or that he is the prophet promised by Moses.

John has denied that he is any of these. He has described himself merely as a voice. Their plan has not worked, but they nevertheless come up with another question. It relates to John's practice of baptizing.

1. John's Baptism Questioned: *And they asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" (1:25).*

Notice how this question is framed. It is not so much a question about the practice of baptism as much as it is a question about John's authority to baptize. He is not the Messiah. He is not Elijah or the prophet. He has not been commissioned by the Sanhedrin. He has not been accredited by any of the Hebrew universities or seminaries. He has not been ordained by any religious ruling body. Therefore, they are implying that he has no right to be in ministry.

There are many who refuse to listen to a man unless he has been accredited by some official organization. Many would not think of having a pastor in a church who had not graduated from some approved institute of theology. There are those who refuse to accept any teaching unless the teacher has some sort of authorized degree. The problem with such a stance is that God is not limited to using seminary graduates.

John the Baptist never attended any of the Hebrew universities. He was not accredited by the Sanhedrin. He had no authority from the temple or from any of the synagogues in the land. Yet he spoke with authority. His lack of official credentials did not stop him from preaching. His authority was from God.

2. Messiah's Baptism Foretold: *John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. 27 It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." (1:26-27).*

Do you see what John has done? These delegates asked, "What makes you so special?" John replies by saying that he is not special. There is nothing special

about John. It is the One who is coming after John who is special. This is the One who has all authority. He is the One who is worthy. He is special.

John the Baptist	The One who comes after John
Baptizes in water	Baptizes in the Holy Spirit
Not worthy to untie a sandal	He is worthy of our worship

Notice that the One of whom John speaks was...

- Among them: *Among you stands One (1:26).*
- Unknown by them: *Among you stands One whom you do not know (1:26).*

The reason Jesus was unknown to them was because He had not yet been revealed. This would soon change. John would soon point out Jesus as the promised One and then they would be without excuse.

That is where you are today. You are without excuse. If you do not know Jesus, it is because you have determined not to know Him. He has been pointed out. He has made Himself known. He calls you to come to Him and to know Him and to be known by Him.

3. The Place of John's Baptism: *These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing (1:28).*

The mention of Bethany beyond the Jordan seems to be added almost as an afterthought. This is not the same Bethany mentioned in John 11:1 that was near Jerusalem. This is another Bethany. This Bethany is located on the east side of the Jordan River.

It was to this same Jordan River to which Joshua led the Israelites when he crossed over into Canaan. The Lord dried up the waters of the Jordan so that the Jews could cross into the Promised Land.

Now John the Baptist is baptizing Jews in the Jordan so that they will be able to enter into the promised kingdom.

How about you? Have you come to the place of entrance into the kingdom? Are you ready to meet the King? This is not an academic question. There is coming a day when the King is going to come and He will pass judgment upon all men.

*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,
that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body,*

according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:10).