

John the Baptist

The inspired record of Luke chapter 7 recounts our Master's appeal to the people to consider John the baptiser in relation to their expectations:

“what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously apparelled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts” (Lu. 7:25).

Evidently, John did not conform to the people's expectations: He was not a rich man dwelling in a palace – rather, he was a lone voice crying out in the wilderness. The Master continues:

“but what went ye out for to see? A Prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet ... for I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist ...” (Lu. 7:26, 28).

For a time, the people actually did see John as being a prophet: we learn this as it is given as a reason why the chief priests and elders would not openly discount John's claims to be divinely sent: “all hold John as a prophet” (Mat. 21:26). As it is written elsewhere: “he was a burning and a shining light: and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light” (Jno. 5:35). But they only followed him “for a season” – as fickle as folk often are, the people soon forgot the message of John, and the One to whom he bore witness (Jno. 1:7), they put to death.

In the example and preaching of John, we find as a consistent principle the way that man was to be brought low, and Yahweh exalted. We see this in the way in which Luke 3 introduces us to John:

“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip being tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zecharias in the wilderness” (Lu. 3:1-2).

Here we see the greatest men (by human standards) both of the world and of Israel, in all their pomp and array of glory. Yet the Word of God came to none of these. None were accounted worthy to receive divine revelation, that is, none who were “gorgeously apparelled”, dwelling in kings' courts. Rather, the Word came to John, a wearer of camel's hair and a leather girdle, whose diet was locusts and wild honey – far from the delicacies usually favoured by mighty men.

John came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Lu. 1:17), and it would seem that his appearance also was after Elijah's fashion. Of Elijah it was said: “he was a hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather around his loins” (2 Kings 1:8). And of John it was written: “the same John had his raiment of camels hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins ...” (Mat. 3:4). In neither of these two men do we see any artificial niceties possessed by those who

are great in the sight of men. In neither of these do we behold any pomp and ceremony: but though these were what the populace might have regarded as being “rough” men, they were both men with a mission, and a drive to accomplish the work apportioned to them.

The central theme of John’s message was also to do with man’s glory being brought low. Isaiah chapter 40 introduces us to “the Voice”:

“The Voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of Yahweh, make straight in the desert a highway for our God ... and the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of Yahweh hath spoken it. The Voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever” (Isa. 40: 4-5, 6).

The latter part of this citation is taken up by the Spirit through Peter, who expounds it for us:

“for all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the Word of the Lord endureth for ever” (1 Pet. 1:24-25).

Notice here, that “the goodliness thereof” is expounded to be “the glory”. The Prophet is describing how that rich men are brought low, and as the flower of grass they shall pass away (cp. Jas. 1:10). Despite the greatness of their position before men, and the transient beauty that they displayed; like all men they descended into their long home (Eccl. 12:5): the grave, which has truly been described as the greatest leveller of mankind.

The prophet declared that though men will fail, “the word of our God shall stand for ever”. So it was, that the emphasis of John’s preaching was concerning this very thing: we are told that he “did no miracle” (Jno. 10:41). Rather, as the Voice, what came through him were words only – divine words nevertheless, but words and not mighty deeds. In this, we again see an allusion to the work of Elijah:

1 Kings chapter 19 recounts how after learning that Jezebel sought his life, Elijah fled into the wilderness, where he presented his complaint before Yahweh. He was then told:

“Go forth, and stand upon the mount before Yahweh. And, behold, Yahweh passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and break in pieces the rocks before Yahweh: but Yahweh was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but Yahweh was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but Yahweh was not in the fire: and after the fire, a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, “What doest thou here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:11-13).

In these things, Elijah was taught the power of the Word. What would incline the hearts of the people back to the ways of their Fathers was not an earthquake, or fire, or winds (reminiscent of what the people experienced at Sinai following their deliverance from Egypt), but rather the things spoken by the Voice. And in order to receive those things, great diligence is required to listen carefully, as Elijah did before the still small voice. John was that Voice, calling the people to repentance and humility before their God.

TURNING HEARTS

The prayer of Elijah was:

“Hear me, O Yahweh, Hear me, that this people may know that thou art Yahweh Elohim, and that thou hast turned their heart back again” (1 Kings 18:37).

This was again alluded to in the context of John’s ministry:

“Many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lu. 1:16-17).

Though the fruits of John’s labours are not recorded, we are told that “many” of the people gave ear to the Voice, and repented (turned back) before their God. His purpose was to prepare folk to receive the Lord when he came. It would seem therefore, that through his preaching, many were looking for the Messiah at the appropriate time, when he revealed himself before them all.

By contrast to John who was “the Voice”, his father was made dumb, not being able to speak, because he disbelieved. The Word came to him:

“... behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season” (Lu. 1:20).

Though “glad tidings” was shown to him, Zecharias did not believe the words of the Angel concerning his future son. Verse 18 recounts his response:

“Zacharias said unto the Angel, Whereby shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years” (Lu. 1:18).

Notice the contrast here with Abraham, the Father of the Faithful:

“... he said, Adonai Yahweh, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?” (Gen. 15:7)

“... then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear” (Gen. 17:17).

The terms and words are similar, but the difference is that Abraham’s laugh was not one of disbelief, but of joy, being strong in faith. So the Apostle informs us:

“being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief: but was strong in faith, giving glory to God” (Rom. 4:19-20).

THE FAITH OF JOHN

Luke chapter 7 recounts how John sent two of his disciples to Messiah, with the question: “Art thou he that should come? Or look we for another?” (Lu. 7:19). This has puzzled many, for by the voice and descending dove that came when John baptised Messiah, it ought to have been clear who Jesus was. It would seem that the people took this to be a weakness in faith of John’s part, for knowing their thoughts, the Master asks them “what went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?” The answer is absolutely not! John was no reed being blown backwards and forwards with every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14). Rather, as Messiah testified: “among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” (Lu. 7:28). He fulfilled a vital role preparing the ground for Messiah’s work to commence at the appointed time.

John, we are told, came “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Lu. 1:17), to fulfil a role similar to that when Elijah shall come in person, preparing the way for the Master’s Return. There are those who suggest that John fulfilled the promise of Elijah, and that therefore there is not a future Elijah work. However, John explicitly testified that he was not Elijah “I am not” (Jno 1:21).

The prophet Malachi speaks of the future Elijah Mission:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of Yahweh: and he shall turn the heart of the Fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the Fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Mal. 4:4-6).

This is the coming day that we so eagerly desire, the day when the diaspora shall be restored to their land and their God. Let us therefore prepare by emulating the work of John the Baptist, by being a voice in the wilderness of the peoples, that some may yet find grace when Messiah comes.

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