

JOHN THE BAPTIST

I.

Introduction

The mission of God's Son and our Savior Jesus Christ on the Earth was preceded by a mission of John the Baptist. Jesus said about him that among those born of women there is no one greater than John the Baptist (Luke 7:28). Today, I would like for us to examine closer John's mission.

II.

Origin and life of John the Baptist prior to his ministry

Let's first focus on origin and life of John the Baptist prior to his ministry. First of all, his coming was prophesied hundreds of years beforehand by prophets Isaiah and Malachiah (Isaiah 40:3, Malachiah 3:23-24). He was born into a priestly family. His parents Zacharias and Elizabeth were righteous and blameless before God. John's birth was announced to his father by angel Gabriel as God's answer to Zacharias' prayers (Luke 1:11-14).

Angel Gabriel made several important statements about John:

1] Lu 1:15 "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

2] Lu 1:16 "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

3] Lu 1:17 "He will also 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 a people prepared for the Lord."

Zacharias did not believe the message of God's angel and because of it he was made mute until the day of its fulfilment. (Luke 1:18-20) It tells us that when we pray to God, we better believe that God is able to answer our prayers.

John was conceived by a miracle, for his mother was barren and both parents were well advanced in years. (Luke 1:5-7) By similar miracle Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah.

Before John was born, his mother Elizabeth filled with Holy Spirit addressed her relative virgin Mary who was pregnant with Jesus, as the mother of her Lord. (Luke 1:36, 41-45)

Shortly after John's birth another miracle took place and his father was able to speak again praising God. Further the miracles accompanying John's conception and birth convinced their neighbours of God's direct intervention in these events and filled their minds with awe for God. (Luke 1:57-66)

Zacharias filled with the Holy Spirit prophesied about Savior, salvation and his son John. - Luke 1:67-79. Here Zacharias prophesied the dignity or office, the mission and the success of John. And I will speak of this later.

The rest of John's life prior to his mission, which means some 30 years, are described by one verse: Lu 1:80 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.

This is typical for the Bible to record those moments in character's life that are relevant to salvation of mankind.

III. ***The ministry of John the Baptist***

Now, let's turn our attention to the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke tells us that it began in the 15th year of reign of Tiberius Caesar when Judea with Jerusalem were under Roman rule of the governor Pontius Pilate. (Luke 3:1) His ministry started the word of God which came to John in the wilderness and John obedient to the word of God went and preached baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. (Luke 3:3) There were many people who obeyed John's message and were baptized by John in Jordan river, confessing their sins. - Mark 1:5 But hypocrites were warned by John's prophecy of the coming judgment. - Matthew 3:7-10, Luke 7:29-30 (Matthew 21:25, 32)

The Jewish people who were full of expectations of the coming of the Messiah, were thinking about John whether he was the Messiah or not, but John responded to such speculations with his prophecy about the coming of the true Messiah who will baptize with Holy Spirit and who will save the righteous, but punish the unrighteous. - Luke 3:15-17 (Matthew 13:24-30)

The climax of John's ministry came when he identified and bore the testimony of Jesus as the Son of God. - Matthew 3:13-17, John 1:19-34 These two passages are quite interesting and can bring several questions into readers mind. Here are some of the questions:

Question # 1] How come that John denies that he is Elijah or the Prophet (John 1:21) when we have read that angel Gabriel foretold of John that he would come in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17) and when his father prophesied of John that he would be called the prophet of the Highest (Luke 1:76)? Did not John know about these prophecies?

I believe that John knew what angel Gabriel and his father spoke about him, but those people who came to inquire him had a wrong idea of OT prophecies about Elijah's coming. They thought that Elijah would come in person. That's what was on their mind when they asked John if he was Elijah. Of course, John had to deny that, for he neither came from heaven whence Elijah had been taken centuries ago (2.Kings 2:11), but he was born into the world, nor was he reincarnated prophet Elijah, for concept of reincarnation is foreign to Bible. It would be useless for John to try to explain to his inquirers that he "only" came in the spirit and power of Elijah and in this sense he was Elijah of the NT time, for this was not what they inquired him about. Jesus confirms to us that John was Elijah of the NT time. (Matthew 17:12-13)

As for John's dignity or office, he was a prophet of the Most High, that is God. Prophet is a person who can foretell future and/or teach men in the things of God (1. Corinthians 14:3) As we could see John became a prophet in both senses, i.e. prophesied events to come as well as taught people God's will. However, once again, the people who came to inquire him whether he was the prophet, had a very special prophet on their mind. Namely, they meant the prophet prophesied by Moses. - Deuteronomy 18:18 Of course, John had to deny that he is that special prophet. It would be useless for John to try to explain to his inquirers that he "only" the prophet of the Highest (Luke 1:76), for this was not what they inquired him about.

Question # 2] How come that John did not know, or recognized Jesus (John 1:29-31) when they were relatives (Luke 1:36)?

Since John and Jesus were relatives, it is reasonable to assume that they knew about one another and that they even met prior to their ministries. When apostle John writes that John did not know, or did not recognize Jesus, it is necessary to conclude from the context, that John did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, at least not in the beginning of John's ministry. One of the purposes of John's ministry was to reveal identity of Messiah to Israel. Another purpose was that Israelites repent of their sins, turn to God and are prepared to receive the Savior.

Question # 3] How come that John knew that was Jesus Messiah when Jesus came to John to be baptized? (John 1:31-34) (Matthew 3:13-17)?

I can imagine that it was Holy Spirit John was filled up with, that let John know that Jesus is Messiah when Jesus came to him to be baptized. However John publicly recognized or announced Jesus as Messiah before Israel only after he baptized him and Jesus' identity was confirmed by the Holy Spirit and the Father.

To sum it up, John and Jesus were relatives, but John did not know that Jesus is the Messiah in the beginning of his ministry. When Jesus came to John to be baptized, Holy Spirit let John to know right away that Jesus is the Messiah. John wanted Jesus to baptize him instead vice versa. Jesus insisted on John baptizing him. After John baptized Jesus, Holy Spirit and Father confirmed that Jesus was Messiah and John publicly announced to Israel that Jesus is the Messiah.

IV. The end of John's ministry

For some time ministry of Jesus and John continued in parallel. However John knew that the climax of his mission was over and one day it would end. John declared his loyalty to Jesus whose mission only began. John proclaimed that eternal life depended on believing in Son, meaning Son of God, or Messiah, and that wrath of God is consequence of unbelief. Thus he uttered the goal of Jesus' mission among people. - John 3:22-36

After John had reproved tetrarch Herod because of unlawful marriage with his brother's wife Herodias, he was cast in prison. – (Luke 3:19-20)

John's disciples were left without their teacher. Although John marked Jesus as the Son of God and eternal life connected with believing in Jesus, whose role must increase, while John's role must decrease, seems that only some of his disciples understood it, left their teacher and joined Jesus. Among those was Andrew, who became Jesus' apostle together with his brother Simon Peter (John 1:35-42). Others had hard time to leave John and join Jesus. At one occasion they approached Jesus with question: "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" To me that sounds almost like a reproach. (Matthew 9:14) It was perhaps for the sake of his disciples that John sent two of them to Jesus for reassurance that He is indeed the Messiah that nation of Israel was expecting to come. Or perhaps John himself needed that reassurance. After spending months in prison he could feel forgotten by Messiah in his present distress. Anyway, Jesus gives reassurance whether to John or his disciples based on undeniable evidence of numerous miracles that testify of Him that He is truly the Son of God, Messiah that nation of Israel expected to come. - Luke 7:19-23

V.

What Jesus said about John

Jesus said about John that he was a prophet and more than a prophet. - Luke 7:26 How to understand it? Jesus explains it in following verse – Luke 7:27 He was more than a prophet for God sent him before Messiah and his mission was to prepare the hearts of men for reception of Messiah as well as to identify Messiah. John's mission was successful, for many people believed in Jesus because of John. - John 10:40-41

And now let's read Luke 7:28. That is a bit surprising statement. Among those born of women there is none greater than John the Baptist, yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John? How to understand it?

John's office was prophet of God and his message was: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2) Did John see Christ's Kingdom to come? No, for it came after John's death and more importantly after Jesus' death on cross. The kingdom came on the day of Pentecost when Peter and other apostles were preaching Gospel to Jews for the first time. If you remember Peter in his sermon in Acts 2 called on Jews to repent – not because kingdom of heaven was at hand, but because kingdom of heaven was there. Peter just used different words to describe it when he pointed out that Jesus whom they had crucified rose from the dead and was Christ, that means Messiah or Anointed One and Lord. Messiah was the king that Jews had been expecting to come for centuries based on prophecies of OT prophets. As Peter said every one who calls on the name of the Lord - Jesus Christ, will be saved from his sins (Acts 2). As we can read in Colossians, such person will be translated into Christ's Kingdom. - Colossians 1:13

Peter preached gospel that is God's power for salvation. 3000 Jews that obeyed the gospel that day became part of Christ's Kingdom. Ministry of any Christian, that means any of us, to other people with message of gospel for their salvation in Christ's Kingdom is therefore higher than ministry of John the Baptist before the coming of Christ's Kingdom.

VI.

The Conclusion

John's ministry was very important as it prepared the way for ministry of our Savior Jesus Christ and for the coming of salvation to us. John's voice was crying in the physical wilderness and many were willing and came to hear and obey his message about coming of the kingdom. The Christ's Kingdom is now here and it is opened for everyone to get in it right here, right now. For Christ's Kingdom is figurative expression for fellowship between God and a human being whose sins were forgiven through Jesus. In order that one could have his sins forgiven he must obey the Gospel. In order that one can obey Gospel, it must be preached to him. Therefore now is the time for our gospel ministry for those who are outside of Christ's Kingdom. Now, it is time for our voice to cry the Gospel in the spiritual wilderness of the present world. Maybe some people will be willing to come to hear and obey our message of Christ's Kingdom.

VII.
Invitation

The law and the prophets proclaimed until John, but beginning with John the gospel of the kingdom of God was preached for the first time. John was the first prophet living under the Old Covenant who for the very first time preached to the people the New Covenant followed by Savior Himself. (Luke 16:16) And guess what, both John and Jesus were under siege of multitudes who came to hear their message of the kingdom and who wanted to get into that kingdom.

Do you have the desire to get in Jesus' Kingdom?

Prague, July 13, 2007
Last revision May 27, 2010

Robert Hodanko