

John the Baptist

There are just 3 Old Testament prophecies about John the Baptist -

Isaiah 40:3 - The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.

Malachi 3:1 - The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.

Malachi 4:5-6 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

So what were the similarities between John the Baptist and Elijah? Well, similar tastes in fashion for a start. 2 Kings 1:7-8 and Matthew 3:4. More importantly Jesus tells a crowd it was the persona that Jesus tells us was the greater similarity. Matthew 11:7-14.

Let's look at the beginning of the fulfilment of these three prophecies. Luke 1:1-25.

Elizabeth was years past menopause and without children despite trying. In the Bible infertility was called being barren and there are quite a few examples of women conceiving after many years of trying and being visited by God, an angel or a prophet who were told that they were about to have a child. Abraham's wife, Sarah was the first. Can we name any more?

For women in those days infertility was a shameful thing for a woman and she was often looked down on as defective and called out with bitchy remarks and that was what Elizabeth had experienced, Luke 1:25.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were both of the Jewish tribe of Levi and Zechariah could trace his ancestry back to King David. That entitled him to have his name put in the hat each year to act as High Priest for the purposes of the dedication of the Festival of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. This tradition started in 1 Chronicles 24:31. Atonement was introduced by God in Leviticus 16:1-3.

Zechariah was performing his rituals when he was interrupted by the Angel Gabriel with some really good news, Luke 1:11-19. Zechariah found it quite unbelievable, he'd forgotten about the story of Abraham and Sarah Genesis 17:15-19 or thought it was a Biblical legend or myth that had grown up. This annoyed Gabriel and so he punished Zechariah rendering him unable to speak until the birth.

Let's look at Gabriel's promise in more detail -

Verses 13-14, But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. (Luke 1:57-63).

Verse 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. (Luke 7:24-28) (Numbers 6:3) (Luke 1:41). This is the first time in the Bible in which the Holy Spirit was given to a fetus, hitherto the Spirit came upon a hero just prior to undertaking God's work.

Verse 16, And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. (Luke 3:3)

Verse 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." (Luke 3:4-6).

To get a picture of John, Matthew 3:4. He wore clothes that would make us itch like crazy and he lived off the land rather than the shops. It was God that fed him, pretty unappetising stuff but that wasn't a problem for John, He was focused on his message that he had to get out.

Let's look at John the Baptist in action. Luke 3:7-15. Starts with a reality check and a warning, things cannot carry on as they are going, everything is about to change and if you don't change the consequences are going to be dire. This message gets through to lots Luke 3:10 and there's good responses from some unlikely people. Tax collectors, traitors who served the occupiers and Roman soldiers, both were given advice to change their attitudes and behaviour but not necessarily their career. Then they are baptized.

This was a concept that was completely new to Israel. Matthew 3:6. This was a public enactment of confessing sin and turning from selfish lifestyles to a more loving, God focused life with respect for the poor and needy. This message resonated with lots of people who came forward for baptism in the River Jordan. A few became disciples of John. Mark 2:18, John 1:35, the most notable was Andrew who moved across to be a disciple of Jesus.

John did not pander to authority and was quite prepared to make enemies. Matthew 3:7, John 3:18.

John's function in God's plan was similar to what we call now, a warm up artist. He prepares the crowd for the star attraction, in this instance it's Jesus. John was at pains to explain that he wasn't that star attraction but that He was coming shortly. Luke 3:15-18. The climax to John's career was when he baptized Jesus John 1:29-34. This was a totally different baptism than what he'd baptized others with for two reasons. 1) There was no repentance or remission of sin, Jesus had no sin to repent from, rather Jesus was identifying with sinners, bringing Himself down to their level. 2) The Holy Spirit was involved in this baptism as predicted by John in John 1:26. The Holy Spirit was still not widely given to believers, rather He was given only to certain heroes to aid them in performing the work that God had called them to. So you can imagine how totally awestruck John was when he witnessed the Holy Spirit falling down onto Jesus Matthew 3:13-17.

Following Jesus's ascension, there was a stronger connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit Acts 19:2-7. Is it possible that a believing Christian can receive the Holy Spirit without being baptized? If so, what is the connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit?

Let's read John's plan for semi-retirement. John 3:22-30. John's purpose was drawing to an end. There was no rivalry between them, John is quite content to sink into the background.

God however had other plans. Presumably upon God's instruction John spoke out about Herod's marriage to Herodias who'd previously married and divorced his brother Philip. God set out in His law marriages and intimate relations that He did not approve of.

Leviticus 18:16. This was unique, a one off. Why? God's law was given by Moses to Israel, Romans 3:19. The advice, as opposed to regulations or laws in the epistles was given to churches or believing individuals. I can find no other instance of an Old Testament prophet castigating a gentile for breaking a law of God or in the New Testament, criticism of a non-believer's ethics or morality. So why did John the Baptist deliberately upset Herod and his wife? This was a tactical manoeuvre by God to move John out of the limelight and into Herod's jail.

John was kept in prison by Herod out of harms way. Poor John started to have doubts. Matthew 11:2-6. He sends disciples to ask Jesus for reassurance and Jesus gives it - "And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." Matthew 11:6 John more than qualified for that one. After the disciples leave. Jesus gives high praise indeed to John the Baptist - Matthew 11:11-15. "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.

We don't know how long John was imprisoned for, weeks, maybe months but he would not come out alive. Matthew 11:1-9.

Lessons from the life of John the Baptist-

John's passion was his message that God gave him to preach, get ready, Jesus is coming. We have an even better message, Jesus is here. We need to reach out to more people with passion and enthusiasm.

John 3:30 - He must increase, but I must decrease. Is a good mantra for us all.

If we have a strong faith, it will be tested.