

John the Baptist

Forerunner of Jesus

*“Behold, I will
send my messenger,
and he shall
prepare the way
before me.”
—Malachi 3:1*

THE WORDS OF OUR

opening text were spoken by God through his servant Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets. This prophecy is quoted in Mark 1:2, and applied to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. In Mark 1:3, John is identified as the one fulfilling another prophecy, found in Isaiah 40:3, which speaks of “the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” In John 1:23, the Apostle John also applies this latter prophecy to John the Baptist.

The Lord’s statement, “Behold, I will send my messenger,” is significant, for John the Baptist’s birth was a direct result of the overruling providences of God. The account of this is found in Luke 1:5-25. The circumstances parallel to some extent the experience of Abraham and Sarah in connection with the birth of Isaac, in that Zacharias and Elizabeth, who became the parents of John, “both

were now well stricken in years,” and “Elisabeth was barren.”—Luke 1:7

The miracles associated with the birth of John convinced Zacharias, his father and a priest in Israel, that momentous things in the plan of God were happening. This conclusion was confirmed when his wife’s cousin, Mary, visited them and they learned of the angel Gabriel’s announcement to her that she was to be the mother of Jesus, who would be the promised king to sit on “the throne of his father David.” (vs. 32) Following John’s birth, Zacharias prophesied concerning his son: “Thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”—vss. 76-79

The only information in the Bible furnished concerning John from the time he was a baby until he began his ministry is contained in Luke 1:80. This text reads, “The child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.” It is safe to assume that during his maturing years in the desert he prepared himself for his coming ministry by self-discipline and communion with God. Desert life would naturally have called for courage and strength of character.

JOHN’S MINISTRY

Matthew 3:1 reads, “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea.”

Verse 5 says, “Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan.” This indicates that John did not go from place to place in the conduct of his ministry, but that the people came to him. When they did, they found a man with “raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.”—vs. 4

Jesus made a revealing observation concerning John’s desert ministry, and his clothing. After John’s disciples departed from an interview with the Master, “Jesus spoke to the crowds about John: What sort of person did you go out into the desert to see? Was he like tall grass blown about by the wind? What kind of man did you go out to see? Was he someone dressed in fine clothes? People who dress like that live in the king’s palace. What did you really go out to see? Was he a prophet? He certainly was. I tell you that he was more than a prophet. In the Scriptures God says about him, ‘I am sending my messenger ahead of you to get things ready for you.’”—Matt. 11:7-10, *Contemporary English Version*

The miraculous circumstances associated with the birth of this “more than a prophet,” his manner of life, and the general expectation that some great one was about to appear, caused many to be attracted to him. He called upon his hearers to repent, and those who did he baptized “in Jordan, confessing their sins.”—Matt. 3:6

John the Baptist was outspoken in his ministry. Taking note of the Pharisees and Sadducees in his audience, he said to them, “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to

come?" Then he told them the only way they could escape from this wrath, saying, "Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance."—Matt. 3:7,8

The "wrath to come" mentioned by John was not eternal torture in a fiery hell, but the baptism of fire and destruction which was to come upon the nation of Israel because of their ultimate rejection of their Messiah. This wrath fell upon the nation in A.D. 70-73 when Jerusalem was destroyed and the people scattered. Continuing his symbolic prophecy concerning the destruction of the nation, John said, "The ax is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire."—vs. 10

WHO WAS JOHN THE BAPTIST?

"The Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem" to ask John, "Who art thou?" (John 1:19) He made it clear to these investigators that he was "not the Christ." (vs. 20) Then they asked, "What then? Art thou Elias?" Again his answer was, "I am not." Their final question was, "Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No."—vs. 21

The question they asked John, "Art thou Elias?" was based on the prophecy of Malachi 4:5,6, which reads: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse." This prophecy describes a work of reformation such as John was conducting in Israel, and so it was natural that he should be asked whether or not he considered himself to be this foretold Elijah.

Those who believe the false teaching of reincarnation have seized upon this prophecy to indicate that the Bible supports their belief, claiming that it suggests the return of the Prophet Elijah as another personality. However, this is not the correct thought. The Prophet Elijah was a great reformer in Israel, and because of this, his name is used in the prophecy of Malachi to indicate the nature of the work to be attempted by the one which it foretells.

John denied that he was the foretold Elijah, yet Jesus said to his disciples, referring to John, that “Elias is indeed come.” (Mark 9:13) This does not contradict John’s statement concerning the matter. The more complete viewpoint is expressed in Matthew 11:14, where Jesus is quoted as saying to his disciples, “If ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.” This means, that to those who had been prepared to accept Jesus by showing their repentance under the ministry of John, he was the promised “Elijah,” for he had accomplished the prophesied work of reformation in their hearts and lives.

ANOTHER FULFILLMENT

Malachi’s prophecy of the coming Elijah suggests an additional fulfillment than only John the Baptist. The prophecy ends with the words, “Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.” In other words, if the attempted work of reformation were to fail, the foretold “curse” would come upon the nation of Israel. This curse was in reality what John referred to as the aforementioned “wrath to come.” (Matt. 3:7) In verse 11 of the same chapter he also described it as a baptism “with fire” which, as we have noted,

came upon the Jewish nation in A.D. 70-73. While a few were converted and prepared to accept Jesus by the ministry of John, the nation as a whole was not, so the foretold "curse" fell upon them.

Since John himself denied that he was actually the foretold Elijah, we are warranted in looking for a larger fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. We believe that the larger fulfillment began with Jesus' ministry, and has involved his true followers throughout the entire Gospel Age. Just as John preached repentance, so also did Jesus. Matthew 4:17 reads, "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Similarly, when Jesus sent his disciples into the ministry, we read that they "went out, and preached that men should repent." (Mark 6:12) Speaking on Mars' Hill, Paul said that God "now commandeth all men every where to repent." (Acts 17:30) In proclaiming the message of repentance, Jesus and his true followers have continued this "Elijah" work throughout the entire age.

It seems that general failure has also accompanied the effort in this larger application of the prophecy. A few have repented, even as did a handful under the preaching of John the Baptist, but the world as a whole has continued on in its sinful, selfish ways. So, again, the alternative fulfillment of the prophecy—"Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse"—must come. However, in this larger fulfillment, it does not come upon only one nation, but upon all nations. This foretold "curse" is, in fact, already upon the world in the form of a "time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation."—Dan. 12:1

These apparent failures do not mean that the foretold Elijah work of repentance and reformation will never be accomplished. It will be accomplished completely during the time of Christ's kingdom. Under the typical Elijah, the people of Israel were led to repentance and to a return to the true and living God. (I Kings 18:36-39) So it will be under the administration of Christ's kingdom. A "pure language," or message, will be given to the people. The "knowledge of the LORD" will fill the earth, and as a result of that enlightenment, the people will "call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent."—Zeph. 3:8,9; Isa. 11:9

"THAT PROPHET"

As previously noted, the priests and the Levites who were sent to interview John the Baptist inquired of him if he were "that prophet," with the reply from John that he was not. (John 1:21) This question evidently related to a prophecy of Moses in which he said, "The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken."—Deut. 18:15

The Apostle Peter quoted this prophecy and applied it to the kingdom work of Christ to be accomplished during the "times of restitution of all things," when "every soul" will be given a full opportunity to "hear that prophet." (Acts 3:20-23) John the Baptist knew that he was not this great Prophet which Moses had promised, and so in response to the question, "What sayest thou of thyself?" he replied, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way

of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.”—John 1:22,23

John had a humble opinion of himself and of his place in God’s plan. When asked why he was doing a baptizing work, since he was “not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet,” he replied, “I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose.”—vss. 25-27

We read that “the next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” (vs. 29) John explained further that God, who had instructed him to baptize with water, told him, “Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Spirit.”—vs. 33

John did not understand the full implications of this, but he did take it to mean that the one upon whom he saw the Spirit descend would be the promised Messiah—“the Son of God.” (vs. 34) Later there arose a discussion between some of John’s disciples and the Jews, “And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him.”—John 3:26

This was a statement more than a question—implying that Jesus was attracting more followers than John. John was quick to catch the implication, and replied, “A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ,

but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease."—vss. 27-30

"HE MUST INCREASE . . . I MUST DECREASE"

If those questioning John thought that he would be disturbed or discouraged over the fact that Jesus was securing a larger following than he, they were wrong. John was willing, and "rejoiced greatly," to have it this way. It was just what he expected, for, as he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." He knew that having announced the presence of the Messiah, his own mission was now practically fulfilled. Since the one for whom he had been commissioned to prepare the way had come, the work of preparation was coming to an end.

We are not to suppose that John the Baptist understood clearly all the details of God's plan. Doubtless much that he said was under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This might well be true with respect to his observation concerning the "bridegroom" and the "bride." In Revelation 19:7, reference is made to the "marriage of the Lamb," to whom John had referred as the "Lamb of God." (John 1:29) Under this symbolism Jesus—the Lamb of God—would also be the Bridegroom, and his "wife" would be the bride. This bride class is composed of his faithful followers of the Gospel Age, beginning with the apostles who received from Jesus the "baptism" of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

John did not live until Pentecost, and so did not have an opportunity of becoming a part of the bride class. All he claimed was the great joy of being the “friend” of the Bridegroom—the one who had heard his voice. “This my joy . . . is fulfilled,” John said. He was content with this happy part in the divine arrangement. He did not complain because he could not be part of the bride.

Jesus also recognized that John would not be one of the “called out” ones of the Gospel Age who, if faithful, would live and reign with him in the heavenly phase of the kingdom. Jesus said, “Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Matt. 11:11) Jesus explained the reason for this. He said that “all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.” (vs. 13) John was the last of the prophets. Beginning with Jesus, a new age in the plan of God began—the age during which the kingdom of heaven class, the “bride” of the Lamb, has been called from the world through the Gospel, and made ready to live and reign with Christ a thousand years.

JOHN’S FAITH TESTED

John, in his righteousness, reproved Herod the tetrarch for marrying Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, and because of this was cast into prison. (Matt. 14:3,4) This was a severe test of his faith, for, having announced Jesus as the promised Messiah, he doubtless believed, even as Jesus’ disciples later supposed, that the kingdom of Christ would “immediately appear.” (Luke 19:11) This being his

expectation, he naturally would wonder why he should find himself in prison when he was dedicated to be one of the faithful subjects of the new kingdom, a “friend,” indeed, of the king.

It would seem that John had perhaps begun to wonder if Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah. However, as he remained in prison, word reached him that the “works” of Christ were continuing. To get confirmation of this, he sent messengers to inquire of Jesus, “Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?” Jesus instructed these messengers to “Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.”—Matt. 11:2-6

The Scriptures do not inform us whether or not this reply gave John the reassurance which he sought. We presume that it did, for he would know that miraculous works were to be expected of the Messiah. He could not know, however, that the real age of worldwide miracles was two thousand years in the future. Jesus was then performing miracles, even raising the dead, and for all John knew, this work would continue and increase. Had he not said concerning Jesus, “He must increase”?

Although probably reassured, John was still without a clear explanation as to why the miracle-working Christ allowed him to remain in prison. Jesus had said in his reply, “Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.” This suggested the possibility of a test, and most likely John determined

that he would not be “offended” even if Jesus did not come to his aid.

Like all the other faithful prophets of God, John “died in faith, not having received the promises.” (Heb. 11:13,39) It was on Herod’s birthday, when the daughter of Herodias danced before him, that he was so pleased with her he promised to give her anything she asked. The depraved mother instructed her daughter to request that the head of John the Baptist be given to her. Herod expressed sorrow over this, “nevertheless for the oath’s sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her.”—Matt. 14:6-12

This may seem an inglorious end to a faithful career in service to the Lord, but such was not the case. John the Baptist was loyal to God and his divine principles. Being put to death gave him a further opportunity to prove his faithfulness. When, in that “better resurrection” promised for all the ancient prophets who “died in faith,” he is brought forth to be one of the “princes in all the earth,” he will rejoice. John will continue his faithful service, not as the forerunner of Christ, but as one of the human representatives of Christ’s kingdom.—Heb. 11:35; Ps. 45:16 ■

*“Who shall ascend into the hill of the
LORD? or who shall stand in his holy
place? He that hath clean hands,
and a pure heart. . . .
He shall receive the blessing
from the LORD, and righteousness from
the God of his salvation.
—Psalm 24:3-5*