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A Biographical Study of John the Baptist

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John the Baptist

CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY

I. The mission of John

A. As foretold by the angel of God

1. The declaration (Luke 1:5-17)—Zacharias the priest was visited by the angel Gabriel while offering incense. He heard a sixfold prophecy by this heavenly messenger.
 - a. He and his wife, Elisabeth, would have a son (Luke 1:13).
 - b. His name would be John (Luke 1:13).
 - c. He would become a Spirit-filled Nazirite (Luke 1:15).
 - d. He would have a successful ministry (Luke 1:16).
 - e. He would prepare the way for the Messiah (Luke 1:17).
 - f. His style would be similar to that of Elijah (Luke 1:17).
2. His doubts—“And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years” (Luke 1:18).
3. The dumbness (Luke 1:19-20)—“And, 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” (Luke 1:20).
4. The delay (Luke 1:21-22)—“And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he tarried so long in the temple” (Luke 1:21).
5. The devotion (Luke 1:23-25)—“And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men” (Luke 1:24-25).

B. As foretold by the Spirit of God

1. The witness of the Holy Spirit prior to John’s birth—“And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost” (Luke 1:41).
2. The will of the Holy Spirit at John’s birth—“Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her. And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John. And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all. And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God” (Luke 1:57-64).
3. The words of the Holy Spirit following John’s birth—“And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost . . . saying” (Luke 1:67).
 - a. The praise of Zacharias

- (1) He thanked God for the Davidic covenant—“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us” (Luke 1:68-69, 71).
- (2) He thanked God for the Abrahamic covenant—“The oath which he sware to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:73).
- b. The prediction of Zacharias—“And 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” (Luke 1:76-79).

II. The message of John

A. As predicted by Isaiah and Malachi

1. Isaiah’s prophecy (Isa. 40:3-5)—“And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:3-6).
2. Malachi’s prophecy (Mal. 3:1)—“For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee” (Matt. 11:10).

B. As proclaimed by John

1. To the crowds
 - a. His message to their hearts—“Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. . . . Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Matt. 3:2; 3b).
 - b. His message to their hands—“And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise” (Luke 3:10-11).
2. To the Pharisees and Sadducees—“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe 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” (Matt. 3:7-10).

3. To the tax collectors—“Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you” (Luke 3:12-13).
4. To the soldiers—“And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages” (Luke 3:14).
5. To the world—“The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

I. The ministry of John

- A. He baptized the converts of Israel—“Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matt. 3:5-6).
- B. He baptized the Christ of Israel.
 1. The acquiescence—A reluctant John agreed to baptize Christ. “Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him” (Matt. 3:13-15).
 2. The anointing—“And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him” (Matt. 3:16).
 3. The approval—“And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17).
 4. The assurance—“And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said to me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God” (John 1:33-34).

II. The measure of John—Just what kind of man was John the Baptist?

A. His private life

1. He was a rugged and simple man—“And the same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey” (Matt. 3:4).
2. He was a man of prayer (Luke 11:1).
3. He was a Spirit-controlled man—“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John” (John 1:6). “And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel” (Luke 1:80). “And the hand of the Lord was with him” (Luke 1:66).

B. His public life

1. He was a controversial man.
 - a. Most looked upon him as a prophet (Matt. 21:26).
 - b. Some, however, felt he was demon possessed (Matt. 11:18).
 - c. Jesus compared him to Elijah (Matt. 17:12-13).

- d. A few thought he had come back from the dead in the person of Christ—“At that time Herod the tetrarch heard of the fame of Jesus, And said unto his servants, This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him” (Matt. 14:1-2). “When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets” (Matt. 16:13-14).
2. He was a fearless man—John preached his message of repentance or judgment equally, to potentates, publicans, Pharisees, and the public in general.
3. He was an effective man—Although he worked no miracles, his ministry moved the masses (John 10:41).
4. He was a faithful man—“Ye sent unto John, and he bare witness unto the truth . . . He was a burning and shining light: and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light” (John 5:33, 35).

III. The magnificence of John—Christ himself delivered the greatest eulogy concerning John ever bestowed upon a mortal man. “And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, 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. 11:7-11). “Ye sent unto John, and he bare witness unto the truth . . . He was a burning and a shining light: and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light” (John 5:33, 35).

IV. The Messiah of John

A. John's loyalty to Christ

1. He correctly described his Savior to the public—“John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me. And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” (John 1:15-18).
2. He corrected described himself to the Pharisees—“And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord,

as said the prophet Esaias. And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet? John answered them, saying, 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" (John 1:19-27).

B. John's love for Christ—"Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying. 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 answered and said, 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" (John 3:25-30).

V. The martyrdom of John

A. The detainment of John—John was cast into prison.

1. The who of the matter—"For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her" (Mark 6:17).
2. The why of the matter—"For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not: For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly" (Mark 6:18-20).

B. The doubts of John

1. His request to the Savior—"Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" (Matt. 11:2-3).
2. His reassurance from the Savior—"And in that same hour he cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind he gave sight. Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached" (Luke 7:21-22).

C. The death of John

1. The party—"And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee" (Mark 6:21).
2. The performance—"And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. And he swore

unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom” (Mark 6:22-23).

3. The plot—“And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist. And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison, And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother” (Mark 6:24-28).

THEOLOGICAL SUMMARY

- I. Christ referred to John just prior to His ascension—“For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence” (Acts 1:5).
- II. Peter referred to John on two occasions:
 - A. During his address to the 120 in the upper room (Acts 1:22)
 - B. During his dealings with Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10:37).
- III. Paul referred to John on two occasions:
 - A. During his address in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:24-25)
 - B. During his conversation with John’s disciples in Ephesus (Acts 19:3-4).
- IV. Apollos referred to John in Ephesus—“He spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25).

STATISTICS

Father: Zacharias

Mother: Elisabeth

First mention: Matthew 3:1

Final mention: Acts 19:4

Meaning of his name: “Grace of God”

Frequency of his name: Referred to 90 times

Biblical books mentioning him: Five books (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts)

Occupation: Prophet and Nazirite evangelist

Place of birth: Hill country in Judaea

Place of death: In a dungeon near the Dead Sea

Circumstances of death: He was beheaded by the sword.

Age at death: Approximately 35

Important fact about his life: He was the forerunner of Christ; he both introduced and baptized the Messiah.