Bible Study

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19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but he confessed, “I am not the Messiah.”[a] 21 And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” 22 Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23 He said,

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ ”

as the prophet Isaiah said.

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, “Why, then, are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah,[b] nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” 26 John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal.” 28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

In the Gospel of John, a new section begins after John 1:1-1:18, traditionally called the prologue. Chapter 1 is more of an overview of the entire Gospel of John, but starting at verse 19, we see a shift in emphasis to the person of John the Baptist. John the Baptist (again never called “The Baptist”) has already been mentioned in John 1:6-8 and 15.

John 1:6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

15 (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ ”)

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”

We heard that John the Baptist was sent to testify to the light, and now here is his testimony.

The testimony spoken here is essentially a record of a trial. It is the testimony that serves as evidence of Jesus' innocence, rather than the corruption of the world. Testimony and witnesses are a large part of Johannine literature. John’s testimony to Jesus will lead others to faith, but it is also offered as evidence in a trial. The withness/trial theme runs throughout the Gospel and reaches its climax in the trial before Pilate. John bears witness to a delegation of priests and Levites, and the interrogation centers on the question, "Who are you?"

“Jews” is an expression used in the Greek text of John to either show the group as neutral, positive, or hostile opponents of Jesus and the people who followed those hostile opponents. The phrase rarely means all jews. John wants the readers to know that Jewish opposition started at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, but many Jews believed him anyway. Usually, you should take “Jews” as “the Jews who opposed Jesus.” So, in short, for the Johannine (When in the books of the Gospel of John, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, or Revelation) use of this term, it should be taken as the religious authorities hostile to Jesus, particularly those in Jerusalem.

The priests and Levites who were sent were specialists in ritual purification. This is interesting because Luke is the son of a priest.

Luke 1:5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section’s turn of duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense.10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

Normally, “Levites” refers to an inferior priestly class, but in rabbinic documents it sometimes refers to temple police. Levites are pretty rare on the New Testament scene.

20 He confessed and did not deny it, but he confessed, “I am not the Messiah.”

John denies being the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet. The terms " Messiah and " Christ " both mean “anointed. In the New Testament and early Judaism, “Messiah” is a summary term that

gathers up many strands of Old Testament expectations about a coming “anointed one” who would lead and teach and save God’s people, especially the great King and Savior in the line of David, who the Old Testament Promised.

A better interpretation of this verse could be

“He declared without any qualification, avowing, “I am not the Messiah.”

Confess is a good interpretation, but the word avow means to assert or confess openly. So it was more than an internal or discreet confession, but a public and open one that he was not the Messiah.

A majority of Jews at the time of Christ expected the Messiah to come. As far as the hierarchy of Messiah Elijah and the prophets, it is difficult to discern which one was more important to the people at the time (the prophets had been silent for over 400 years. This is the same timeframe as the enslavement of the Israelites)

Genesis 15:13-16 Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years, 14 but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

Exodus 1:8-14 Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. 9 He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” 11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 13 The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude 14 and made their lives bitter with hard servitude in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

21 And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.”

Elijah, who never died, was expected to return in the end times.

Elijah had been taken up to heaven in a chariot, and the idea that he was still alive and active was fostered by the appearance of a letter after his disappearance.

2 Kings 2:11

As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.

2 Chronicles 21:12 A letter came to him from the prophet Elijah, saying, “Thus says the Lord, the God of your father David: Because you have not walked in the ways of your father Jehoshaphat or in the ways of King Asa of Judah

The expectation of Elijah was evidently widespread in Palestine at the time of Jesus and continued into the Judaism of the post-Christian era.

Malachi 4:5

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.

John the Baptist denied being Elijah, though Jesus understood John as fulfilling the prophecy about Elijah.

Matthew 11:13

For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John came, 14, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.

The coming of the prophet was predicted by Moses and was expected in Jesus' Day.

Deuteronomy 18:15 "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.

John 6:14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

John 7:40 When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, "This is really the prophet."

22 Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), John is neither identified with Eligja nor the expected messianic Prophet.

Matthew 11:14, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.

Mark 9:13 But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him."

23 He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord,' "

as the prophet Isaiah said.

Instead, John claims the role of withness for himself through the word of Isaiah 40:3:

A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

By preaching a word of repentance and divine judgment, this messenger of God was to prepare the way for the Lord God of the Old Testament to come to his people in the wilderness.

John the Baptist was a voice for a little while, but Jesus is the eternal voice.

The symbolism of preparing a road for YHWH is probably drawn from the preparations for processions in honor of the statues of gods or visiting potentates (a monarch or ruler, especially an autocratic one).

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.

The reference to the Pharisees underscores the official nature of this inquiry. Pharisees are a relatively small but highly influential group of Jews who emphasized meticulous observance of God's law (as understood both from the Old Testament laws and from their accumulated extrabiblical traditions) as a means by which one attains righteousness before god and retains his favor. Many Pharisees opposed Jesus, but some followed him.

Pharisees who followed Jesus

John 1: 1-4 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." 3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

John 7:50-51 Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus[a] before and who was one of them, asked, 51 "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?"

John 19:38-40 After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and removed his body. 39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. 40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.

Acts 23:6 When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead."

25 They asked him, "Why, then, are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?"

26 John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,

27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal."

John shifts the attention away from himself unto Jesus.

The phrase“The one who is coming after me” marks John the Baptist’s expectations both in the Gospels and Acts. It could be deduced that John the Baptist expected Elijah to come based on Malachi 3:1, which was frequently associated with the prophet Elijah at the time of Jesus:

3 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

There was a misunderstanding of what was to happen, and John the Baptist, not understanding that he himself was the new Elijah, might have made it possible to believe that “the one who is coming” was Elijah.

Leather Sandals with ties are pictured in ancient art, representing Judeans from various eras. Some archaeological examples of sandals are known from the period.

To unfasten the straps at the times of Jesus was the task for a slave. St. Bernard cites a rabbinic (From the Rabbis) axiom (a statement or proposition which is regarded as being established, accepted, or self-evidently true) that a disciple might offer to do any service for his teacher which a slave did for his master, except that of unfastening his sandals.

28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

John’s baptism was an outward sign of cleansing, reflecting inward repentance from sins.

Matthew 3:6 and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

This particular Bethany is not the town near Jerusalem, but a site in the Transjordan of which no trace remains.

Comments:

The Gospel proper begins with the testimony of John the Baptist given on three days.

John 1:29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

John 1:35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples,

The three days have both symbolic and chronological importance.

On the first day, John the Baptist’s testimony about his own role is largely negative; on the second, John the Baptist testifies positively towhat Jesus is; on the third, John the Baptist sends his own disciples to follow Jesus. This pattern is exactly the same as we see in John 1:6-8

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

First, John the Baptist himself was not the light; second, he was to testify to the light (Jesus); third, through him (Jesus) all men might believe.

In the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke), we have one great trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin (the supreme Jewish legislative, judicial, and religious council in ancient Israel) on the night of his death. One of John's techniques is to show that themes that occur in one part of the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke) are true throughout the life of Jesus, especially the theme of Jesus being on trial.

Legal vocabulary like confession, interrogation, testimony, is found throughout John, and in John 1:31-40, Jesus brings forward a whole series of witnesses to the truth of God's word: God himself, the scriptures, Moses, and John the Baptist.

John the Baptist attracted great crowds with his ministry. John administered baptism with water, but little of this appears in John; instead, the writer of John is more focused on John the Baptist as a herald of Jesus. and the first withness in the great trail of the Word. When we get to John 1:26, "John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know." it is already assumed that we knew that John is a baptizer.