

John the Baptist: Saint or a Sinner?

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"Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matthews 11:11)

Is John the Baptist a Failure?

Before beginning this blog post, I must first emphasize how extremely important John the Baptist's total unity with Jesus was in God's plan for salvation. John was sent by God not only to witness to Jesus but to completely unite with Jesus, bring his followers and merge with Jesus and become his chief disciple. As the Bible says, John was sent ahead of the messiah "to make people ready for the Lord." The prepared people that John formed were technically his, but in reality they were prepared for the Lord. John's total unity with Jesus is necessary for God's plan of salvation.

There is one matter that we must delve into deeper, and that is God's dispensation of having Jesus go the way of the cross. As we will examine later, it wasn't God's original plan that Jesus die on the cross. Rather, it became God's painful secondary arrangement necessitated because of the people's faithlessness. The Jewish people failed to believe in him and demanded he be crucified.

Why couldn't the Jewish people recognize Jesus when He came to them? Why did they fear him so much that they allowed him to endure a horrible death? There were several reasons for the disbelief and hatred. Aslan described Jesus as a zealot who was so threatening to the Roman way of life that he was captured and executed as a state criminal. But this is not it! There were two issues that prove to be the most significant reasons for the Jews disbelief: The return of the prophet Elijah, which is mentioned in Mal. 4:4-6, the last Book of Prophecy in the Old Testament; and the issues that concern John the Baptist.

This is what Malachi's prophecy said:

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day when the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction" (Mal. 4:4-6 NIV).

Elijah on a chariot of fire(II Kings 2:11)



Who was Elijah? He was one of the prophets God sent to Israel 900 years before Jesus. In II Kings 2:1-11, there is a tale about him ascending into heaven on a chariot of fire. The Israelites, who were longing for the messiah, were actually focused on the second arrival of Elijah. The Old Testament did not foretell when the messiah would come. In Mal. 4:4-6, however, it clearly says that Elijah would precede him. Here, we must understand how crucial the Second Coming of Elijah was for the Jewish people. This prophecy was the chosen people's greatest and, perhaps, most accurate sign that God had given them. Elijah was to be sent ahead of the messiah to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. Malachi also warned that if people didn't receive him, God will "strike the land with total destruction." So, it is clear that the Second Coming of Elijah was so vital to God's dispensation and to serve as a sign that the Lord is coming.

Why didn't God send Elijah in the way the Israelites expected, descending from heaven on a chariot of fire? God didn't forget to do this. There was no literal chariot of fire! We must remember that, according to Malachi's prophecy, there was no information on how Elijah would come, nor was there any information about Elijah's purpose. Jewish scribes, Pharisees and those who interpreted prophecies, made a huge mistake when they expected Elijah to return that way. This misconception about Elijah's literal return to Earth is the same misconception Muslims have of Jesus' return on the clouds from the sky. This is also the same misconception held by Christians. It is extremely important that we learn the lessons of history. God never works the way these religions suggest.

Jesus' problem with the Israelites began when He appeared and proclaimed Himself to be the Messiah, telling the people that they should believe and follow him. Since they considered him to be a simple man from Nazareth, and there was no evidence that Elijah had returned, they questioned how he could be the messiah? One day, Jesus' disciples went out among the Jewish people to testify, and the people, doubting that Jesus was the messiah, asked them where Elijah was. When they returned to Jesus, they asked him: "Then why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" (Matt. 17:10). Jesus replied:

"Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased" (Matt. 17:10-12 RSV).

It was then that the disciples understood that He meant John the Baptist.

When Jesus said John the Baptist was Elijah, his disciples had no problem accepting it. But, the Israelites could not. John did not come from heaven, and he himself denied that he was Elijah (Jn. 1:21). Jesus knew that people were not ready to accept it, and said: "if you are willing to accept it, he (John) is Elijah who is to come." (Matt. 11:14). Christians have traditionally believed that John the Baptist was a great saint, but new studies have disproven that. John the Baptist turned out to be the greatest failure! So, who shall the people believe, Jesus or John the Baptist? Naturally, it depended on how these men were compared by the people of that time. Let us examine these two men according to how the Israelites viewed them.

Jesus

Let us take Jesus first. How did Jesus appear to the Israelites of His time? The Bible says that Jesus was an obscure young man who was brought up in the house of a humble carpenter. He had no formal education and was not schooled in spiritual discipline. There were questions about his paternal legitimacy (Jn. 8:41). Yet, Jesus claimed himself "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:8), known as one who abolished the law (Matt. 5:17), was friend of tax collectors and sinners, and known to be a glutton and drunkard (Matt. 11:19). He put Himself on an equal status with God (Jn. 14:9-11), and told the people that they had to love him more than anyone else (Matt. 10:37). Because of this, the Jewish leaders labeled him a blasphemer and claimed He worked by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Matt. 12:24).

John

On the other hand, how did the Israelites see John the Baptist? He was the son of a prominent rabbi and the miracles that surrounded his birth were known throughout the country (Luke 1:5-66). John had a formal education and, when he was older, he lived like a beggar in the wilderness.

In the eyes of the Jews, John led an exemplary life as a man of faith. In fact, John was held in such high regard that people even asked him if he were the messiah (Luke 3:15, Jn. 1:20). Given this evidence, it seems that the Israelites believed more in John the Baptist. The Jewish people decided that Jesus only said John the Baptist was Elijah so people would believe he was the messiah.

Unfortunately, by denying he was Elijah, John the Baptist made Jesus look like a liar. Had John the Baptist truly understood his mission and fulfilled what God had wanted -- to completely unite with Jesus - the prophecy of Zech. 8:7-8 and 20-23 would have come true. The Jews would not have suffered the way they did and human history would have been different.

The Mission of John the Baptist

Why did Jesus say that John the Baptist was Elijah? In Zech. 8:7-8 and 8:20-23, there is a prophecy about God and His plan for His people, which was to be accomplished during the time of John the Baptist and Jesus. It says:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness" (Zech. 8:7-8 RSV).

Zech. 8:20-23 says:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: People shall yet come, even the inhabitants of Almighty many

cities; the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts; I am going.' Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'In those days, ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you''' (RSV).



By reading the above prophesy, we can see that Zechariah received this vision approximately 500 years before Jesus. In his vision, Zechariah emphasized the restored Jewish community that was to come. These visions revealed God's plan to bring a great blessing on the Jewish people. God clearly told his people of the great blessings He would bestow on them. They will be His most special people. People of other nations will be begging to have a Jew in their midst so they, too, could be blessed. The Jewish people were meant to be the most precious, most blessed and advanced people in the world. Had they listened and obeyed their God and believed and accepted Jesus Christ, they would have been blessed. But, instead, they were caught sleeping! They were so occupied with other matters and political issues that the messiah's imminent coming wasn't a priority at the time.

It is like Christianity today! The United States, which is considered the center and leading nation of Christianity, has been asleep as well. The country is in dire straits. Americans are so busy, occupied by wars and divided politically at home and abroad, that there is hardly any concern for Jesus' return, or the End Times.

Christians are also divided in their views about God and the return of Christ. They, too, are occupied with competing at home and abroad over denominations and spreading the gospel to other nations, just as the Israelites did. The priority focus of Christians is on matters other than the return of Christ. They don't think the messiah will visit them anytime soon!

After Zechariah, God sent the prophet Malachi. The 400 years between Malachi and Jesus' birth was the period God used to prepare the chosen people and the world for the messiah's arrival. During Jesus' time, the world was prepared and had become polarized between a godless Cain-type Roman Empire in the West and multiple developing religious cultures in the East. Jerusalem stood in the middle of these two worlds.

God sent Malachi with another prophecy, informing the Israelites of the coming of the messiah and the return of Elijah.

"Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments. 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" (Mal. 4:4-6 NKJV).

Malachi, in the above quotes, reminded the Israelites of God's promise to them that the messiah would soon arrive. He also gave them a clear sign when and how He would send the messiah. He would send the prophet Elijah back to Earth to help prepare for His coming.

How could John the Baptist miss the most important point of his mission and not recognize Jesus as the messiah!? Despite everything that God did, what happened to Zechariah's testimony? Wasn't he told by the angel that his son, John, will be given the mission of Elijah?

"And he (John) will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous -- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17 RSV).

Read Mal. 4:5-6 again, and notice how identical this verse is to that of Luke 1:17.

Let's look at Zechariah's own prophecy regarding his son, John.

"And you, child (John) will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (Luke 1:76 RSV).

Even though John flatly denied he was Elijah, we can see through his choice of clothing that he completely imitated the Elijah's lifestyle. Let's look at the following two biblical verses.

"Now John wore a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey" (Matt. 3:4 RSV).

"They answered him, 'He wore a garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather about his loins.' And he said, 'It is Elijah the Tishbite'" (II Kings 1:8 RSV).

It seems rather odd, that in spite of all the signs and miracles that were invested in John the Baptist, and despite the fact that he once confessed that he was sent to make straight the path for the Lord, he still refused to accept that he was Elijah!

"For this is he [John] who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make a paths straight' " (Matt. 3:3 RSV).

What happened to John? Why did he deny being Elijah when he dressed like him, lived like a beggar in the desert and did the work of Elijah? What more does John need to convince himself that Jesus was right about him.

Malachi warned God would "strike the land with a curse" if Elijah was not heeded. Jesus indicated that the people did not recognize John as Elijah, and, as a result, Jesus was going to suffer at their hands. By denying he was Elijah, would not John bear the burden of the responsibility for that circumstance?

Many Christians, when they heard about John, said: "But John was a good saint. He had already testified to Jesus, what more could he have done?" They point to the biblical verse where John gave his testimony:

"And John bore witness, saying, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' 'And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God'" (Jn. 1:32-34 NKJV).

Also, John the Baptist, when speaking about the messiah, said, he, himself was "not worthy to untie His sandals." (Jn. 1:27). In spite of the spiritual vision, he heard God's voice telling him who Jesus was and saw the dove descend and remain on Jesus. John testified to it all, but, in the end, he lost his faith and became one of history's worst failures!

As John moved away from his responsibility, Satan came and invaded him! He pushed John out of his mission's priority and got him involved in a political controversy that got him in trouble with King Herod. He was put in jail and later beheaded (Mark 6:14-29). Because of John's failure, Jesus had nowhere to go. John also made Jesus appear to be a liar and turned the People of Israel against Jesus (Matt. 17:10-11 and Matt. 17:12-13).

Let's look at Jn. 1:19-23 (RSV):

"And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' And he answered, 'No.' They said to him then, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said.'"

We must understand John created a big problem for the Israelites when he denied that he was Elijah. This only tells us that John, despite all the confessions he made about Jesus, didn't really mean the things he said. It's as if the Holy Spirit pushed him to testify to Jesus against his will! John would have not testified otherwise! This shows that John must have struggled with the same problems as the Israelites: How could Jesus be the messiah if Elijah had not come? And, worst yet, John, like the scribes, judged Jesus externally and accused him of being all sorts of things.

John had a great national impact on the People of Israel. In Matt. 16:13-14, the Israelites saw him as a great prophet. Some saw him as Elijah and others thought he might be the messiah. John's influence and power had even reached King Herod (Mark 6:19-20).

Death of John

Had John done his mission effectively, he would have influenced the Jewish people and persuaded them to follow Christ. Jesus would not have died a merciless death on the cross. God's plan would have been completed successfully and the Jewish people would have NOT been destroyed by the Romans and scattered all over the world! What's more important is that the Kingdom of God would have been established on Earth and the world today would be a joyful and peaceful place.

When John was in prison, he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask the following question:

"Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples, and

said to him, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" (Matt. 11:2-6 RSV).

From this verse, we understand that John was confused. Jesus was offended by John's question and answered in the following manner:

"And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.'" (Matt. 11:4-6 RSV).

After the disciples left, Jesus began to talk to the crowd that gathered around him, saying:

"Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He, who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matt. 11:9-15 RSV).

Christians have held the strong belief that John the Baptist is one of the greatest saints because they only looked at his testimony to Jesus:

"Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matt. 11:11 RSV).



In truth, John was the greatest of all the prophets. Why? Because he was the one who would not only testify from the other side of the street, causing friction between his and Jesus' disciples (John 3:22-30), but he should have been Jesus' right-hand man and chief disciple. Other prophets could only prophesy from a long time before him, which is why John was greater than a prophet.

Destruction of the Temple

Christians conveniently overlooked the rest of Jesus' statement about John, which says, "yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matt. 11:11). I am shocked that even my favorite talk show host, Fox News' Bill O'Reilly, political commentator and host of "The O'Reilly Factor," missed that point. In his book, *Killing Jesus*, he not only missed that point, but he seemed to deliberately stop in the middle of that verse and skipped the part that states the above phrase. This is how he quoted it:

"I tell you the truth: among those born of a woman, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (O'Reilly and Dugard, Page 150).

Period. He moved on to another topic.

What did Jesus mean when he said these words about John? How does one qualify to be placed in such a position? Jesus explained it this way:

"Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:19 RSV).

Unfortunately, because of John's failure, the messiah's mission was incomplete and was postponed until the Second Coming of Christ.

Now, this is important. My purpose for presenting this seemingly controversial, yet thought-provoking, idea is to offer a greater understanding of God's work. Had Jesus remained alive, he would have brought the complete salvation that was foretold and His return would not be necessary. Jesus said a new truth would be given, and he hinted that this truth would not be easily accepted. He said:

"I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come (Jn. 16:12,13 RSV).