

5. His Baptism

The life of Jesus of Nazareth is not a fairy tale, a story that begins “Once upon a time in a faraway land...” On the contrary, the gospel of Luke is very precise as he presents the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Like the three other gospel writers, he tells us about John the Baptist, who announced the coming of the Christ to the Jewish people. He said that John began to preach: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness” (John 3:1,2). All these persons are known to historians, even from sources other than the Bible.

Similarly, John the Baptist is mentioned by non-Christian writers of that time period. So let's talk about this man, John the son of Zacharias, and the way in which he made Jesus known to all the Jewish people.

JOHN PREACHES AND BAPTIZES

Just as the coming of Jesus had been predicted by the prophets of God centuries before his birth, the same prophets predicted the coming of John. For example, Matthew quoted the prophet Isaiah, who had lived seven centuries before the time of Jesus and John:

“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.”’” (Matthew 3:1-3)

Of course, John did not prepare a physical road, but this language is used to make us think of a VIP, a “very important person.” Even today in many countries, when a president or government minister is scheduled to go somewhere, the custom may involve repairing and cleaning the road by which he will travel. Messengers are also sent to announce the coming of the chief of state and to get the pop-

ulation ready to receive him in an appropriate manner. Now, John came to prepare for the arrival of the greatest king that could ever be. But the manner of preparing for the coming of this king does not involve sweeping streets and painting houses. It is rather a question of calling on people to repent of their sins.

One act by which John emphasized his message of repentance was baptism. Luke said that John “went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Luke 3:3). In being baptized, a person admitted his or her need to repent and intention to change. Being baptized—literally immersed in water—carried the idea of a bath of purification from sin. According to John 10:41, John did not perform any miracles, but by the force of his preaching, he convinced many of the Jews of their need to change their behavior and to ask forgiveness from God. Most of them came to John to submit to baptism.

The Jewish authorities sent men to John to inquire about this preacher who was drawing such big crowds. They wanted to know what he was saying and why he had come. Three possibilities occurred to them: John was pretending to be the Messiah himself, the one for whom Israel had been waiting; or Elijah who was supposed to return to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah (Malachi 4:5); or “the prophet” spoken of by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15 (and who was in fact the Messiah according to Acts 3:20-24). John, nevertheless, denied that he was any of these three. According to him, he was the voice who called men to prepare the way for the Lord, according to the words of Isaiah which we have heard. He wanted to say, in effect: “I am not anyone of importance. I am only a voice telling the people to prepare themselves, because the king is coming.”

It is true that Jesus later said that John was the one Elijah said would come (Matthew 11:14; 17:12,13). If John denied being Elijah, it may be that this was in the sense that he was not resurrected or reincarnated as Elijah. He was not Elijah in person,

but rather this was the one who came “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17).

The Jewish leaders wondered why John baptized people, particularly Jewish people. “And they asked him, saying, ‘Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?’” (Luke 1:25). They understood the idea of a baptism of purification for those who were converting to Judaism. They were already used to imposing this on those people. But John's actions suggested that the chosen people, the Jews, needed to be cleansed. These Jewish leaders considered themselves to already be more just than other people.

John did not directly answer their question. “John answered them, saying, ‘I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose’” (Luke 1:26,27). The one who would come after him was so much more important than John that he did not even deserve to serve him as a slave would. In other words, John was saying: “The king is coming. And for his coming, you need to be purified, as much as any non-Jew.”

JESUS IS BAPTIZED

One day someone presented himself to John to be baptized, but John said that this person did not need this purification.

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?’ But Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he allowed Him.” (Matthew 3:13-15)

It is interesting to know that in the Qur'an, the sins of Mohammad are not mentioned, but it is said of him in the Surah 40 – *Chafir*, aya 55, “O Mohammad, the promises of God are the truth. Ask for forgiveness of your sins in the morning and in the evening and this will be granted to you.” In the 114 surahs of the Qur'an, no sin is attributed to Jesus, that is, to Issa.

Many passages in the Bible flatly declare that Jesus was without sin. First Peter 2:22, quoting Isa-

iah, describes him as one “who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth.” Being thus without sin, he had no need to be baptized for the remission of sins. He did not need to repent. John recognized this, but Jesus explained to him that he was doing it “to fulfill all righteousness.” In being baptized, Jesus validated John's ministry—he recognized that it really was God who had sent him. In addition, Jesus submitted himself as a man to all of God's commandments that concern men, and he gave a positive example that all must follow.

Jesus made a long journey by foot to be baptized, though he did not need it, as we do, for his personal salvation. Water is not always nearby for baptism. Because Jesus left Nazareth to go to the desert of Judea near the Jordan, that is near the place where the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea, we know that the distance he traveled to be baptized was about 105 kilometers one way. So if one had to travel 100 kilometers on foot to be baptized, this would not be more than Jesus did, he who had no sin. We must not try to make excuses for avoiding this duty because of distance or any other obstacle. We have no right to modify God's command by substituting sprinkling for immersion in order to make it easier for ourselves. Jesus did not look for the easy way. He looked for what was right... what was according to the commandments of God.

In his baptism, Jesus gave us a good example of obedience to God. But in his baptism he was, at the same time shown to be the one that John the Baptist had announced. When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:16,17). So God himself gave testimony to the identity of Jesus by the voice from Heaven and by the Spirit in the form of a dove. John also bore witness of Jesus: “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!... 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." (John 1:29,33,34)

JOHN DECREASES

John continued to preach for a few months after baptizing Jesus. Then he was arrested and put to death by King Herod Antipas, because John had condemned his sin. But before his arrest, the disciples of Jesus had become more numerous than those of John. Rather than being jealous, John rejoiced in this. He reminded his followers that he had always told them that he himself was not the Christ. Instead, he was like the friend of the bridegroom. He said, "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:29,30).

The *shoshben*, or friend of the bridegroom, had a special role in a Jewish wedding. He served as liaison between the bridegroom and the bride. He made preparations for the feast. He sent out the

invitations. And he presided over the festivities. He also had the responsibility of guarding the bridal chamber and preventing any man except the bridegroom from entering it. He would not open the door until, in the darkness, he heard and recognized the voice of the bridegroom. Hearing this voice, he let him in and went away rejoicing because he had finished his task and the lovers were together.

John the Baptist had had the role of bringing together the husband, Christ, and the wife, Israel. It was not with regret that he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

CONCLUSION

John was a great servant of God. Jesus said that he was more than a prophet (Matthew 11:9). But Jesus was infinitely greater. He is our king (the one whose path it was necessary to prepare), our savior (the lamb without blemish), and our example in all things. It is toward him that John directed the attention of Israel. It is toward him that we must direct the attention of all men today. So we invite you to continue to follow these lessons to know Jesus better and to better follow him.