

John the Baptist
Matthew 3:1—6

Background

Amos was a prophet sent by God to the Northern Tribes of Israel under the rule of King Jeroboam II around 750 B.C. Jeroboam was a wicked king who wanted nothing to do with God. The king and high priest rejected the words of Amos and they told him that the land is unable to endure all his words (Amos 7:10). They told Amos to go back to Judah and leave them alone.

Amos prophesied that God would send a famine of God's word. God will withhold His word from Israel and no longer communicate with them. Before this happened, God was very active and vocal through the prophets. Most of the written prophecies were penned between 800 B.C. and 400 B.C. In contrast, from 400 B.C. until the birth of Jesus God was silent, in fulfillment of Amos' prophecy. Israel wanted nothing to do with God so God fulfilled the prophecy spoken by Amos and cut off His relationship with them. There was no communication from God to Israel until John the Baptist came on the scene.

Malachi was the last prophet to present God's word to Israel. Malachi 3 warns Israel of the coming tribulation but for those who fear His name they have the glorious Kingdom to look forward to. Verse 1 foretells of the coming of a prophet that would break the silence from heaven. This prophecy was fulfilled some 400 years later when John the Baptist began his ministry. We know from Daniel 9 and from Malachi 3 that when John the Baptist began his ministry that the Tribulation would be just around the corner.

According to Luke 1:80 and 3:2 John grew up in the wilderness. This is also where his ministry began. Prophets often did things that had deeper meanings. Hosea married a prostitute to create a picture of Israel's standing with God. Ezekiel dug a hole in his house to symbolize Israel's future exile, Jeremiah bought an earthenware pot, broke it in front of some of the elders of the city of Jerusalem and said God was going to do the same to them. John was preaching in the wilderness to symbolize Israel's condition. They have been in a wilderness, away from the living water of God's word for 400 years until God broke that silence with John.

His preaching in the wilderness was probably also a picture of the remnant. John was preaching outside the camp, outside the city gates of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was supposedly the center of the Jewish faith with the Pharisees and Sadducees as their spiritual leaders but these leaders, the shepherds of the flock of Israel, were not doing their job (Jeremiah 23). Instead of leading the people to God they were taking them away from Him. John had a message that would bring the people back to God. He was calling all Israel to repentance—to turn around and go back Him. Only a remnant would respond to his message.

Luke 1:16—17 ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ It is he who will go as a *forerunner* before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

In the Tribulation a remnant of Israel will flee Jerusalem and go out into the desert to be protected and fed by God.

John and Elijah

John is not only compared to Elijah, he is called Elijah.

Matthew 11:14 And if you are willing to accept *it*, John himself is Elijah who was to come.

Matthew 17:10—13 ¹⁰ And His disciples asked Him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?"

¹¹ And He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; ¹² but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." ¹³ Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

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There were a number of similarities between Elijah and John. Both were clothed in rough attire, both spent time in the desert and both were called to turn Israel back to God.

2 Kings 1:8 They answered him, “*He was a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins.*” And he said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite.”

1 Kings 17:3 “Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan.

John 3:4 Now John himself had a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

Matthew 3:1 Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying,

Luke 1:80 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.

Malachi 4:5 says that Elijah will come before the Tribulation. This is a reference to John the Baptist coming on the scene. Malachi 3:1 makes an obvious reference to the messenger who would announce the coming Savior. This is why the Scribes said that Elijah would come first.

Matthew 17:10—12 ¹⁰And His disciples asked Him, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” ¹¹And He answered and said, “Elijah is coming and will restore all things; ¹²but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”

John recognized that he was not Elijah (John 1:21) but he did come in the power and spirit of Elijah (Luke 1:17). Both prophets are closely linked because both have the same focus in calling Israel back to God. This is also true of the two witnesses from Revelation 11. I believe Malachi 3 speaks of the coming of John the Baptist while Malachi 4’s primary focus is of the prophet who will come on the scene before the Great Tribulation—although I believe it can also reference John the Baptist and his ministry. This prophet could very well be the Elijah of the Old Testament but could also be another man who, like John, comes in the power and spirit of the man Elijah.

John’s Message

Luke 1:16 says that John will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. If Israel is to turn BACK to God they must have been walking with God at one time. God laid out His requirements to Israel with the giving of the Mosaic Law. Israel (as a nation) was considered righteous and would experience God’s abundant blessings when they followed the Mosaic Law. This would happen when godly kings who desired to serve God led them. King David is a good example of a leader who, in general, led Israel to follow God and therefore God’s blessings were poured out on Israel. Unfortunately, Israel often wandered from God to serve strange gods. God was continually working to get them to repent and come back to Him. Malachi writes about Israel’s condition saying they were not following the Law and needed to return to God in order for God to return to them. These verses are to be understood on a national level realizing that Israel was a nation under a covenant. This is not about individual salvation.

Deuteronomy 10:12—13 ¹²“Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³and to keep the LORD’S commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?”

Malachi 3:7 “From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes and have not kept *them*. Return to Me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD of hosts. “But you say, ‘How shall we return?’”

John specifically preached repentance to Israel because the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand (Matthew 3:2). This is the exact message Jesus preached according to Matthew 4:17 and the same message was given to the Disciples to preach as they were sent out (Matthew 10:7). This was the good news (or gospel) of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:23) and is also called the gospel of God (Mark 1:14). This was a very specific message that began with the preaching of John the Baptist (Luke 16:16) in preparation of Israel for the soon to come Kingdom. When the word *gospel* is used in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John it usually must

be understood to be the good news of the soon-to-come Millennial Kingdom but never the gospel of the Grace of God preached by the Apostle Paul. Before John, the good news to Israel was that there was going to be a future Kingdom and that they could be a part of that Kingdom if they believed God. The good news changed when John began his ministry preaching the Kingdom is at hand. The King was in their midst and the Kingdom was not far behind. (Note: even though the King was right there, the Kingdom could not be set up until after His death, burial and resurrection according to Luke 19:12; John 14:3.)

Those who accepted John's preaching and were baptized would have probably known from Malachi 3 that they would soon go through a time of testing and purification. It was only after Israel's purification that she would be able to present an offering that would be acceptable to the Lord (Malachi 3:4). These converts were preparing themselves for the coming judgment. When Peter said to Israel not to think it strange that you are going through a fiery trial (1 Peter 4:12) since it was prophesied that this trial would come. On the other hand, it would be strange for the Body of Christ to go through the fiery trial. There is no reason for us to be purified because we are already perfected in Christ.

Elements of John's Message

Repentance (Matthew 3:2)

Repentance is not feeling sorry for your sins as many assert but is the action of turning away from what you are doing and do the opposite, to change your mind. When Israel is called upon to repent they are very specifically to repent of not following God. John's ministry is one of calling Israel back to God (Luke 1:16), to turn away from forsaking God and start following Him. There was individual repentance and national repentance. Nationally, the leadership of Israel (Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes) were in charge of the people. If they turned to God then the nation was considered to have repented. We see this in Acts 3:19 with Peter pleading for the nation to repent so that the times of refreshing may come (the Millennial Kingdom).

Today, our salvation is not contingent upon us turning BACK to God because we have not yet been with Him. We don't repent to be saved but we repent when we are saved. It is a by-product of believing. When we believe, we have become saved and by doing this we have turned from our old life and are now following Christ.

Confession (Matthew 3:6)

Confession literally means to say the same thing. When they confessed their sins they were saying the same thing or agreeing with God about their sins. The opposite would mean they do not agree with God that they are sinners. We see this in 1 John where those who confessed their sins were in agreement with God while those who did not confess were deceived and making God a liar.

1 John 1:8—10⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

Leviticus lists five levels of chastisement that are linked to five levels of Israel's rebellion (Leviticus 26:16—39). Israel continued to disregard God so God continued to heap on the punishments. Verse 40 gives the remedy for Israel to get back into God's good favor—to confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors. While Daniel was held captive in Babylon he was praying, confessing his sin and the sins of his people Israel (Daniel 9:20). We see this same thing happening with John the Baptist. With confessing came the promise of God's blessing.

In contrast to Israel under the Kingdom program, the members of the Body of Christ have already been forgiven of all sins. There is no reason for us to confess our sins or the sins of our nation.

Ephesians 1:7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace

Baptism (Matthew 3:6)

Anyone who did not submit to John's preaching by repenting, confessing and being baptized by him rejected God and condemned themselves to eternal damnation. Today, members of the Body of Christ only need to believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ and then by faith do absolutely nothing more. Israel, under the Gospel of the Kingdom beginning with John the Baptist, needed to believe his message and by faith come to John to be baptized after they had repented and confessed. Many churches that observe water baptism will say it is optional and has nothing to do with salvation. They are merely following the example of Jesus when He was baptized and the act of baptism is simply an outward sign of an inward work. Unfortunately, they are following the traditions of men instead of operating from Scripture for nowhere in Scripture are we told that baptism is an outward sign of an inward work. To the contrary, it can be shown that baptism was an absolutely necessary for salvation under the Kingdom Gospel (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38).

Luke 7:29—30 ²⁹When all the people and the tax collectors heard *this*, they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. ³⁰But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John.

This baptism of John had another purpose. According to Exodus 19:6 Israel was to become a kingdom of priests. This is reiterated in Isaiah 61:6 and Peter calls believing Israel a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). Entrance into the priesthood required several things including baptism according to Exodus 29:4. John's baptism was done to prepare Israel for these priestly duties.

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