

COMMENTARY ON JOHN

LESSON NUMBER 9

“JOHN 1:19 *And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? 20 And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. 21 And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.*” John 1:19-21)

WHAT JOHN SAID TO THE JEWS

INTRODUCTION

In the Divine economy, it is vitally important that men know who God has sent. So far as the record is concerned, the first person God sent on a specific mission to a body of people was Moses. Noah was chosen by God, but he was not sent out with a message for the people. Abraham was chosen by God, but he was not sent to the people with a message – words he was to speak in the name of the Lord. We assume that Enoch did speak the message to which Jude refers (Jude 1:14-15). But Moses was the first person of record to whom God said, “*Say unto them*” (Ex 3:16), “*speak unto*” (Ex 6:11), “*speak thou*” (Ex 6:29), “*Thou shalt speak*” (Ex 7:2), “*speak now in the ears of the people*” (Ex 11:2), “*speak unto the congregation*” (Ex 12:3), “*speak unto the children of Israel*” (Ex 14:2), etc. All of the prophets were also sent to say something (2 Kgs 17:13; Jer 7:25; 44:4; Zech 7:12). In every case, it was essential for the people to know who these prophets were and who they represented. This is how the Lord works, leaving the people to whom these men were sent responsible for hearing and heeding what these men said. The men themselves were keenly aware of who they were, and of the message they were to declare.

Now we come to the first man “*sent from God*” to the people with a special word for nearly half a century (John 1:6). He was not an anonymous man, and was not intended to be. People knew his name, knew where he was preaching, who He represented, and the One whose coming he was announcing. Our text reports the response of religious officials, into whose agenda John did not fit. His objective differed radically from their’s, and they wanted to know his identity – the identity that was made known in the Scripture. John will answer them truthfully and with candor. There is also confidence, or boldness, in his answers. Later John reports, “*the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness*” (Luke 3:2). He is in the process of speaking that word during the time of our text, which, at this point, is introductory to the ministry of Jesus.

THE PRIESTS AND LEVITES ASKED JOHN, “WHO ART THOU?”

“*John 1:19 And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?*”

THIS IS THE RECORD OF JOHN. Other versions read, “*testimony of John,*”^{NKJV} “*witness of John,*”^{NASB} “*John's answer,*”^{GWN} “*This is the proof that John gave,*”^{LIVING} “*He told them the truth,*”^{ERV} and “*he was completely honest.*”^{MESSAGE}

John had been living in the wilderness, outside the normal circumference of social life. His entire ministry is a gigantic contradiction of the notion that to be effective you have to become

identified with the people in some practical way. The effectiveness of a message from God is not determined by the popularity or acceptance of those who deliver it.

By saying this was the record of John himself, I do not doubt that the apostle John himself heard this exchange. When John pointed Jesus out as *"the Lamb of God,"* it is written that John *"stood, and two of his disciples."* Upon hearing that word, *"the two disciples heard him speak and they followed Jesus,"* and stayed with Him that day (John 1:35-40). One of those disciples was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. The other is not named, but is generally assumed that it was John himself.

THE JEWS SENT PRIESTS AND LEVITES FROM JERUSALEM. Other versions read, *"the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent."* ^{CEB} Although the text does not specifically say so, several versions read *"the Jewish leaders,"* ^{CEB/NET/NLT/E/ERV} and *"Jewish authorities."* ^{GNB} This is no doubt a proper representation, for I cannot see the populous sending the priests and Levites to find out the identity of John the Baptist.

John uses the expression *"the Jews"* more than any other writer: sixty-seven times. Matthew uses it five times, Mark six times, and Luke five times. Many of those times John is referring to the opponents of Jesus, and those who sought His life (2:18,20; 5:10,16,18; 6:41,52; 7:1,13; 8:48,52,57 . . . etc).

This is the only verse from Matthew through the Revelation that mentions the word *"Levites"* – every major version. It is mentioned here to denote the entire priesthood in all of its varied functions. These would be considered experts in the text of Scripture, and would be competent to ask the right questions, and make the proper associations.

The purpose for this mission is not spelled out, but I cannot believe it was a noble one. John was no ordinary man, and his ministry had interrupted the status-quo. Later Christ's enemies will admit that all the people *"hold John as a prophet"* (Matt 21:26; Mk 11:32). It is written that *"Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man, and an holy [man]"* (Mk 6:20). The people had been flocking out *"from Jerusalem, Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins"* (Matt 3:6). Nothing remotely like this had occurred as a result of the activities of the religious leaders. They had carved out a place for themselves to maintain an elite status, and yet here was an unknown man realizing more genuine results in a few months than they had for centuries. They needed to know who he was!

TO ASK HIM, "WHO ART THOU?" The Law had taught them to make such inquiries: *"And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him"* (Deut 18:21-22). Of course, they could not follow that text to the letter, for John had produced fruit that proved his legitimacy. However, that was not enough for *"the Jews from Jerusalem."* Perhaps some among them, like Nicodemus, really wanted to know more about John.

Mind you, they are not asking for the identity of his parents, or to know who he was as a person – unless they sought to know his genealogy to determine whether or not he could be a legitimate leader among them. They knew he was extraordinary, but did not know why. They knew he was unusually effective, but could see no reason why. Perhaps with a little more information they could sort it all out, finding a way to justify themselves, and maintain their own offices and pretentious dignity without interruption. It is estimated that their journey to John was approximately twenty-six miles – so, to them, this was an important mission. This also means that the success of John had traveled from the wilderness to Jerusalem – the same distance, and it must have been disconcerting to these career-minded men.

Since John had been speaking, the Kingdom of God had been preached, and *"every man presseseth into it"* (Lk 16:16). Later Jesus told these Jews, *"For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him"* (Matt 21:32). Jesus said, *"from the days of John the Baptist until the present time, the kingdom of heaven has endured violent assault, and violent men seize it by force [as a precious prize—a share in the heavenly kingdom is sought with most ardent zeal and intense exertion]"*^{AMPLIFIED} (Matt 11:12). Thus, the Jews from Jerusalem want to know who he is. He is too intimidating to them!

I AM NOT THE CHRIST

^{1:20} ***"And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ."***

John must have known the climate his ministry had created: *"And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not"* (Luke 3:15). His ministry was like a revolution that altered the entire perspective of the people. Never had they heard such a powerful and confident preacher or teacher. Also, the people were aware of the Scriptures, and of the promised coming of a Prophet to whom the people would hearken (Deut 18:15,18) – the Redeemer (Isa 59:20), Deliverer (Psa 14:7), Protector (Isa 32:2), Savior (Jer 23:5-6), and one to whom the people would gather (Gen 49:10). Centuries had passed, and still the flame of hope was within many people. For the first time in their lifetime, there was a holy man that was not identified with the norm – a man who excelled in character and speech. A carnal man would exploit this situation – but not John. He will immediately dispel any notions that he was the promised Christ.

HE CONFESSED AND DENIED NOT. Other versions read, *"He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely,"*^{NIV} *"said quite openly and straightforwardly,"*^{BBE} *"he was very straightforward and stated clearly,"*^{CJB} *"acknowledged and denied not,"*^{DARBY} *"admitted and did not deny it,"*^{NAB} *"came right out and said,"*^{NLT} *"He avowed - he did not conceal the truth,"*^{WEYMOUTH} *"frankly admitted, and did not try at all to deny it,"*^{WILLIAMS} and *"admitted the truth) and did not try to conceal it."*^{AMPLIFIED}

The word *"confessed"* has the following lexical meaning: *"TO SAY THE SAME THING AS ANOTHER, I.E. TO AGREE WITH, ASSENT."*^{THAYER} In other words, John is acknowledging who he really is – or, in this case, who he is not. He is articulating his total agreement with the reality of the situation.

John is confessing this while, at the same time, he is getting the attention of the people. This is not an isolated man concerning whom people have no real interest. It is said of this man, *"Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan"* (Matt 3:5). And again, *"And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins"* (Mark 1:5). This is the man who freely and unhesitatingly declares who he is **not**.

I AM NOT THE CHRIST. Other versions read, *"the Messiah."*^{NRSV} In our English Bibles, the word *"Christ"* and *"Messiah"* do not occur in Genesis thru Malachi. The word *"Messiah"* is found two times in the NKJV and NASB. Isaiah spoke of one who would be *"anointed to preach good tidings"* (Isa 61:1).

The coming Christ was said by the prophets to be *"a Branch"* (Isa 11:1), *"a Foundation Stone"* (Isa 28:16), God's *"Servant"* and *"Elect"* (Isa 42:1), *"The Lord Our Righteousness"* (Jer 23:6), *"The Sun of Righteousness"* (Mal 4:2), *"A Branch"* (Isa 11:1), *"A Righteous Branch"* (Jer 23:5), *"The Branch of Righteousness"* (Jer 33:15), *"My Servant the Branch"* (Zech 3:8), *"Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace"* (Isa 9:6), *"a King"* who would *"reign in righteousness"* (Isa 32:1). But, in our English Bibles, from Genesis through Malachi, *"Christ"* or *"Messiah"* are never applied to the promised *"Seed."* The NIV refers to

the Messiah as *"the Anointed One"* in Daniel 9:25-26).

Most of the references to the coming Christ referred to what He would do rather than what He would be called. *"Bruise the serpent's head"* (Gen 3:15), *"feed His flock"* (Isa 40:11), *"bring judgment to the Gentiles"* (Isa 42:1), *"in His days Judah shall be saved"* (Jer 23:6), *"purify the sons of Levi"* (Mal 3:3), *"make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness"* (Dan 9:24), etc.

The point is that the terms *"Christ," "Messiah,"* and *"Anointed One"* **were actually more conclusions than statements.** They accented the fact that only one person would be able to fulfill everything that was said about the ultimate *"Seed"* of the woman and of Abraham. The things that God had promised could not be accomplished by anyone other than someone special that God sent into the world. **The people knew this because they knew the Scriptures.**

Now, John appears, and he is so radically different from every other person that some wondered whether or not he was the Christ. Therefore, John dispels all doubt and clearly states *"I am not the Christ."* As much as John did, unknown until his time, *"the Christ"* would do more. Jesus told His disciples that after His departure many would say *"I am Christ"* (Matt 24:5) – but John did not do so, and it took Jesus Himself to overshadow John's ministry and effectiveness.

We can learn something here. **More must be declared about what Christ does** – as seen in the manner of the Prophets. Too much is being said about what people should do. While that must be told to the people, the burden must be placed upon what Jesus actually has done and is now doing. **Such a message will assist people in identifying whether or not the real Jesus is in the people and in the churches.** Other Christ's do not, and cannot, do what Jesus does. Further, if what Jesus does is not being accomplished in the people, it can only be because either He is not there, or He is about to leave.

WAS HE ELIJAH OR "THAT PROPHET"?

^{1:21} *"And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No."*

It appears as though the interrogators received what John confessed about not being *"the Christ."* However, the people are not willing to let the matter rest there, because they knew he was most unusual – not at all like the religious leaders to which they had grown accustomed. It must be remembered that John was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Lk 1:15). He correctly identified who he was not, and it is sure that he will be as accurate in his other answers.

ART THOU ELIAS (ELIJAH)? In this, they were referring to the prophecy of Malachi: *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse"* (Mal 4:5-6). This is the only reference to Elijah in the prophets (Isaiah thru Malachi). Elijah's father and mother are not made known in Scripture. All that we know about him, apart from his ministry is that he was *"Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead"* (1 Kgs 17:1). His prophetic ministry was to awaken Israel to the conviction that God alone is God.

The Elijah of Malachi's prophecy could be this Elijah, but no one can be certain about it. Jesus did say there was a sense in which John the Baptist was Elijah, in that he came *"in the spirit and power of Elijah"* (Lk 1:17). But Jesus said he did not accomplish what the Elijah of Malachi is said to do. He continued, *"But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed [wished]"* (Matt 17:12).

There is no need for anyone to speculate about this, for John answers their question: *"I am*

not. "It is possible that he could be full of the Holy Spirit and not know who he was? He answered the question for them, and we must let that answer satisfy us also.

ART THOU THAT PROPHET? This is the Prophet of whom Moses spoke. *"The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto Him ye shall hearken . . . "I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put My words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him"* (Deut 18:15,18). It looked on the surface as though John could be this *"Prophet."* He suddenly appeared, having been raised up by God. The people were hearkening to him. He was certainly speaking the words of God, and with confidence and great power. Because the questioners were priests and Levites sent out by the Jewish leaders, they were probably trying to trap John in some way. If he claimed to be Elijah, I do not doubt that they had some arguments designed to offset his claims. But John is not intimidated by them, and he has no interest in seeking his own glory, or making claims that were not true. He sticks with the truth, which is very difficult to oppose, and impossible to rebut. That is precisely one of the reasons why there is such a thing as persecution.

Some had thought that in Jesus *"Elias had appeared; and of others, that one of the old prophets was risen again."* (Luke 9:8). When Jesus asked His disciples who people thought He was, they answered, *"John the Baptist; but some say, Elias; and others say, that one of the old prophets is risen again"* (Luke 9:19).

However, in this text, the *"prophet"* reference is the One Moses foretold, saying that the people would hearken to Him – like it appeared the people were listening to John.

AND HE ANSWERED NO! Short, and to the point. No further explanation is required because John's only purpose is to do the will of God, and fulfill the work he has been given to do. Actually, whether you are John the Baptist, or one of Jesus' contemporary disciples, when you know, and acquiesce to, the fact that you are serving Jesus, maintaining a fellowship with Him, and looking forward to His return, it impacts directly upon why you are living, and what you do with your life. Such a person has no interest in the evaluations of mere men, and certainly is not living to please them.

This, however, was not how the priests and the Levites, at least for the most part, looked at life. Jesus said, for example, that *"the chief priests"* would betray and condemn Him (Matt 16:21; 21:15). When they heard the children praising Jesus, *"they were sore displeased"* (Matt 21:15). They even questioned the authority of Jesus (Matt 21:23). They were among those who consulted how they might take Jesus and kill Him (Matt 26:3). It is not possible that such men had noble motives, for a *"corrupt tree"* cannot bring forth *"good fruit"* (Matt 7:18).

Today, God's people must be discerning people, not allowing themselves to be drawn into fruitless dialog. There are people who may appear to be interested in knowing more about you, but who will seek to use what they learn against you. It is good to learn when it is proper to give brief and pointed answers.