

## Newsletter June 2013

This newsletter about John the Baptist contains edited excerpts taken from Book I, Chapter 4.3, *Jesus the Anointed One*. Prior to the birth of Christ, Zacharias, John's father and Elizabeth, his mother, lived near Jerusalem in the hill country of Judea where Zacharias served in the Temple (Lu.1:8,9). Elizabeth had been barren and was then far beyond childbearing age. The angel Gabriel suddenly appeared to Zacharias in the Temple announcing Elizabeth's pregnancy and stating that the son born of her would be named John (Lu. 1:14). "And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Lu.14-17). Elizabeth was a cousin of Mary of whom Jesus would soon be born. John was born six months before the birth of Jesus (Lu.1:36), which means that John's ministry could have begun as much as six months before the ministry of Jesus. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth about seventy miles to the North of John and his family. Therefore, while John and Jesus would likely have met each other (especially on the occasion of visits to the Temple in Jerusalem) they were not constant companions. When Jesus was about thirty years of age, God called John forth as his spokesman to pave the way for the ministry of the Messiah (i.e. the Christ) (Lu.3:2).

The Jews at that time were diligently searching for the coming Messiah to free them from the political and military yoke of Rome and were also expecting the return of Elijah (*Elias* in the Greek) who had been predicted to precede the coming of the Messiah (Mal.4:5). The wild appearance and manner of John was quite indicative of the prophet Elijah, who was also a man of the wilderness in his time. That resemblance was not lost upon the Jewish people such that when John began baptizing and calling upon Jews to repent and began witnessing that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, he understandably drew quite a crowd. His great popularity caused the Jewish leaders to send priests and Levites to determine just who this man was (Jn.1:19). When they asked John if he was the Christ (i.e. the Messiah), John immediately replied that he was not (Jn.1:20). When asked if he was then Elijah, he said that he was not the prophet Elijah in person (Jn.1:21). Nevertheless, he said that he was "...the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord" as said the prophet Isaiah (Jn.1:23; Is.40:3). Therefore, while denying that he was Elijah returned to the earth in the flesh, he affirmed that he was indeed the forerunner predicted by Isaiah to come in order to prepare the way for the coming of their Messiah, the Christ (cf. Lu.1:17). In this role, John was actually the last of the Old Covenant prophets, in the manner of Elijah, inasmuch as God was soon to speak his final Words not through the prophets as he had before, but through "...his Son whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (He.1:1,2).

Ritual baptism in water was an act ordinarily performed by Jews under the Mosaic laws of purification (Ex.30:17-21; Le.11:25). Its implication was that of washing or cleansing the body to make it ceremonially presentable to come before God in acts of worship and especially for Temple service. Jews also baptized Gentile converts to the Jewish faith. The baptism of Gentiles symbolized a cleansing from sins committed in their former way of life, and it also served as an act of identification (a seal) with the Jewish faith and nation. Although ritual baptism was commonly practiced, the widespread general calling of Jewish multitudes to repent and be made ceremonially presentable to God, implied that some momentous event was about to take place. Prior to God appearing before the people in the mountain of Sinai, He said to Moses, "...Go unto the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow and let them wash their clothes" (Ex.19:10). At that time, the Law (i.e. the Ten Commandments) was given. Once again, God was preparing to visit his people, not in the fire and smoke of Sinai as before, but with his glory hidden in the cloak of human flesh in the person of his own Son sent down out of Heaven. This time, it was not Moses who gave the message to the people to cleanse themselves in preparation, but a man named John.

The purpose found in John's practice of baptism was three-fold. First, through the act of baptism, John enjoined those who came to him to repent of their sins, and turn toward God (Lu.3:3). It cannot be said

that John's baptism had the power to bring forth this repentance, for he admonished both Pharisees and Sadducees who came without minds and thoughts already in a state of repentance (Lu.3:7,8). Prior to the symbolic cleansing of the bodies of Jews was the necessary washing of their minds with thoughts and deeds of genuine repentance. In fact, ritual baptism had no power to cleanse a person in order to make him presentable before God; it was only symbolic of an inner preparation of cleansing that must first take place in hearts and minds. Baptism was but an outward response symbolizing the heeding of John's message (He.10:22). John certainly did not over value his baptism in that he said "I indeed baptize you with water...", for he knew that the one who would follow him would baptize "...with the Holy Ghost and with fire" (Mt.3:11; Lu.3:16). The outward cleansing of the body with water cannot compare on the same level with the inner cleansing of the soul with the Holy Spirit of God, which only God can administer through his son Jesus Christ. The first is merely symbolic while the other is actual and based in firm reality.

The second purpose for John's baptism was that, through this simple ritual, the Christ would be revealed to him, and then through John's testimony of that revelation He would be openly announced to all of Israel. God had told John that he would recognize the Messiah (the Christ) by seeing the Spirit of God descending from heaven like a dove and remaining on Him (Jn.1:31-34). John was acquainted with Jesus and surely must have recognized his sinless nature. Nevertheless, it was not up to John to affirm Jesus as the Messiah; it was up to God. Any doubt that John may have had was set to rest when God Himself identified Jesus as his "beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." When Jesus came forth from the water, that event occurred exactly as John had been fore-told that it would (Mt.3:16,17). John was with absolute certainty enabled to identify Jesus as the awaited Messiah, and he so declared Him to all Israel saying that "...this is the Son of God" (Jn.1:34), "Behold the Lamb of God" (Jn.1:36), and in very plain terms, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (Jn.1:29).

Thirdly, through John's baptism, signifying repentance, Jesus was anointed to take upon Himself all of the sins of the world as our true and eternal High Priest (Jn.1:29). Until the time of his baptism, Jesus had lived a blameless life, walking perfectly before God. Yet, the great ministry that Jesus was sent to perform had not yet begun. When Jesus came to John to be baptized, we find that John at first refused Him saying, "...I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me" (Mt.3:14)? John realized that Jesus was perfect in the sight of God and had nothing of which to repent. Furthermore, John understood that Jesus would unite his own followers to Himself through an inward baptism of the Holy Spirit not merely symbolically by an outward ritual of baptism in water (Mt.3:11). "And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt.3:15). Jesus at that time began the work for which He was sent by suffering Himself to take upon his person the repentance of the sins of many that he may later act as their surrogate in an atoning death on a shameful Roman cross.

Jesus was anointed of God, his Father, to take upon Himself the sacred office of the Messiah. The anointing did not take place in his baptism but rather occurred immediately following the baptismal act as the Holy Spirit descended and rested upon Jesus. The Levitical High Priest represented the Jewish people before God; Jesus, our Great Eternal High Priest, took it upon himself to represent every sinful man on earth before God. Then came the Spirit of God from heaven and a voice, which said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt.3:17). When the Spirit descended upon Jesus, it was given without measure (Jn.3:34) that in Jesus was "all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col.2:9), that is, fully God in the flesh (Jn.1:14). The "God-man" (cf. Da.7:13,14) had come to take upon Himself the sins of the whole world, to suffer the just punishment for those sins, and in so doing to impart his own righteousness, by grace alone, to all who would receive Him. God's anointed had come out of eternity and had appeared in time upon the pages of man's history thus fulfilling God's promise that had begun back in Genesis 3:15.

Surely, of all the mortal men that were born of woman there is none greater than was John the Baptist for he announced to an anxiously waiting world the coming of the Messiah, and through his God-given ministry the work of Christ on earth had its beginning (Mt.11:11). What previous prophets of old had only foretold by seeing the future afar off, John was privileged to experience the culmination and make known in his own lifetime. Nevertheless, John the Baptist was but the forerunner to the Messiah, the last in a long line

of prophets belonging to the Old Covenant of law, while Jesus, the Christ, ushered in the beginning of an entirely New Covenant of grace in his own person through the shedding of his own blood.

Many Baptist churches today view themselves as having descended from a line of independent first-century churches, which they claim later existed hidden on the fringes of the powerful Roman Catholic Church during the vast era of its formidable supremacy (cf. Book III, Chapter 17.7 *The Roman Political Transition & ff.*). Since they suppose that they had never succumbed to the errors and apostasy of Romanism, they do not consider themselves to be of the reformed faith (cf. *The Reformation Movement*, Book III, page 214). They practice Baptist secessionism stemming from John the Baptist much as the Roman church practices apostolic secessionism stemming from the apostle Peter (cf. Book III, page 111). This identification with John the Baptist provides them with their unique claim to the title “Baptist.” However, neither a line of succession from the Apostle Peter or from John the Baptist can be successfully proven biblically or historically. The first church congregation that is actually known to have referred to themselves as Baptists was established in Amsterdam Holland in 1610 founded by a man named John Smyth within a broader Anabaptist movement in opposition to the practices of the Roman church and the Church of England (cf. Book III, page 255). A man named Roger Williams later established the first recognized Baptist church in the American colony of Providence (Rhode Island) in 1639 (cf. Book III, page 282).

There was a brief period (perhaps one or two months), before John was thrown into prison, in which the ministries of John and Jesus overlapped (Jn.3:22-24). Both John’s disciples and Jesus’ disciples were baptizing as a symbolic act of purification in preparation for the coming Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Jn 4:2; Mt.10:7). The fervent activity of this transitional period, culminating with Jesus’ crucifixion, most likely accounts for modern-day Baptists’ hard-and-fast preoccupation with ritual baptism through emersion. John indeed baptized with water much as many Christians are ritually baptized as far as a general methodology is concerned (Jn.1:26). However, it is important for us to realize that the purpose of John’s baptism was not at all the same as that practiced today by Christian believers who submit to water baptism as a symbolic act to identify themselves with Christ as witnessed by the Holy Spirit within them, or regrettably as a mere ceremonial initiation required to join a temporal church. (The Christian tradition of ritual baptism was briefly considered in the August 2012 Newsletter, and it is very thoroughly discussed in Section 15, Chapters 15.1, 15.2, and 15.3 of Book II).

King Herod had John the Baptist beheaded thus bringing his ministry to an end some time prior to the peak of Jesus’ ministry and well before his crucifixion and resurrection (cf. Mt.14:1-12). Therefore, John never baptized any Jews who came to him as followers of Christ — he also lacked that authority (Mt.3:11); he only baptized them to signify their state of repentance in order to prepare the way for the kingdom that was to be later offered to the Jewish nation by Jesus Himself (cf. Mt.5:1-48). That preparation was John’s sole mission. In fact, we find that some of John’s early converts were totally unaware that Jesus was the Christ and knew nothing of the Holy Spirit having only received the ritual baptism of John (cf. Ac.19:1-19:5). As enlightened Christians we must diligently strive to follow Jesus as our savior and Lord, not allowing ourselves to become entangled again in Old Covenant traditions of repentance from dead works through ceremonial washings, which could only covered guilt for a short time, and whose foundational purposes have now been superseded by the everlasting supremacy of the redemptive New Covenant of Grace anchored in Christ alone (cf. He.6:1-3). John’s work was completed in his own lifetime: through his ministry the Jewish people had been awakened, the Messiah had been revealed to them, and Jesus had taken on the eternal office of our Great High Priest. As Jesus’ ministry had begun out of the ministry of John, so the New Covenant would be built upon the fulfilled foundations of the old. The Old Covenant would not be destroyed by the new, but it would soon fade into insignificance inasmuch as its past purpose was fulfilled when the New Covenant was built upon it. Today the person and work of Christ must greatly continue to increase throughout the world as we anticipate his sure return, leaving John’s transitional ministry in the past to which it belongs as an important but completed work. (Jn.3:30-36).

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