

John the Baptist

A Voice in the Wilderness

Introduction

- Before we dig into John's message, we need to understand some of the factors that made his message so powerful and relevant.

The "Wilderness" of the Past

- Much has happened since the closing of the Old Testament canon ~440 B.C.
 - As the Old Testament closes, the Medo-Persian or Achaemenid Empire is the ruling power over Israel – Daniel 2:39, 7:5, 8:3
 - The Persians are conquered by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C.
 - After Alexander's death in 323 B.C., his generals divide the empire among themselves – Daniel 8:8,22; 11:4.
 - Israel is caught between two of these divisions, the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Mesopotamia – Daniel 11:1-35
 - Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (r. 175-164 B.C.) persecuted the Jews – Daniel 8:9-14,23-25; 11:21-35
 - Judas Maccabeus led the Maccabean Revolt from 167-160 B.C.
 - A semi-independent Jewish state is established in 140, ruled by the Hasmonean dynasty.
 - In 63 B.C., the Romans intervene in Hasmonean civil war and absorbed the Jews into their growing influence – Daniel 2:40, 7:7
 - Herod the Great was made king by the Romans and reigned from 37-4 B.C.
- Luke 3:1-2 sets the historical and political stage:
 - Roman Emperor: Tiberius, ruled 14-37 A.D.
 - Imperial Prefect over Judea: Pontius Pilate, in office 26-30 A.D.
 - Tetrarch of Galilee: Herod Antipas, reigned 4 B.C.-39 A.D.
 - Tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis: Herod Philip II, reigned 4 B.C.-34 A.D.
 - Tetrarch of Abilene: Lysanias, unknown except for a couple of inscriptions.
 - High Priests: Annas (acting High Priest from 6-15 A.D., then *de facto* High Priest through his sons) and his son-in-law Caiaphas (18-36 A.D.)

The "Wilderness" of Prophecy

- The Old Testament closes with the promise in Malachi 4:5-6 that Elijah would appear before the End Times.
- Other periods of Israel's history are likewise marked by a lack of divine revelation – I Samuel 3:1, Amos 8:11-12

- The political, social, and ecclesiastical turmoil of the day created a hunger for truth.
- There is also likely an expectation that something tremendous was coming as the fulfillment of the 69th week of Daniel 9:24-26 drew near.
- The rabbi's teachings had become dry and usually were on the multitude of interpretations of the Mosaic Law. John preaches with the authority of a prophet.
 - Though John is often characterized as a prophet, Christ regards him as something different - a preacher of the kingdom of God – Luke 16:16

The “Wilderness” of Places

- “John the Baptist appears in the wilderness. He is not in the temple in the midst of the learned and the great. There was no room for him there. He is outside of the camp, and the people too have to leave Jerusalem and go out to him. This is once more significant. It shows what the end will be.” – Gaebelien
- John is called out of the wilderness of Judea – Luke 3:2
- John's initial ministry is in the wilderness along the Jordan River, likely near Jericho – Luke 3:3
- The Gospel of John names two places John baptized, but the precise locations are debated.
 - Bethabara beyond Jordan – John 1:28, 10:40 also?
 - Aenon near Salim – John 3:23

The “Wilderness” of People

- John is very much an outsider in his preaching, personality, message, and person.
- His clothes are made from camel hair and leather – Matthew 3:4, Mark 1:6
 - Not the white linen typical of his priestly family, but that of the common Jew.
 - It is similar to the wardrobe of Elijah or other prophets – II Kings 1:8, Zechariah 13:4.
- His meals were locusts and wild honey – Matthew 3:4, Mark 1:6
 - Locusts are kosher to eat – Leviticus 11:22
 - This is essentially “living off the land”.
- John's clothes and meals were an object lesson against the opulence of the religious and ruling elite, and also symbolic of his call to repentance – Matthew 11:8
 - I do not see these as a form of asceticism because they are many common or poorer people living in the same manner.