

Agents of Hope: God's Great Missionaries
John the Baptist: Preparing the Way for Jesus

Lesson #3 for July 19, 2008

Scriptures: Matthew 14:1-12; Luke 1; Colossians 2:8; Revelation 14:6-12; Malachi 4:4-6.

1. The Old Testament ends with this somewhat startling message from God:

“⁵...before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes, I will send you the prophet Elijah. ⁶He will bring fathers and children together again; otherwise I would have to come and destroy your country.” (Malachi 4:5,6, *GNB*)

This prophecy was given more than 400 years after Elijah lived on this earth. This lesson focuses on “the Elijah message” of John the Baptist. Is our message to be the same?

2. The fact that Elijah suddenly disappeared, carried by a chariot of fire, led people to speculate that someday he might come back. The Jewish people themselves believed that Elijah would reappear before “the great and terrible day of the Lord.”
3. More than 400 years after Malachi’s prophecy, Jesus identified John the Baptist as a type of Elijah who was to come to prepare Palestine for His coming.
4. What sticks out in your mind when you think of John the Baptist? There is a religious group called Mandaeans centered mostly in Iraq and Iran that believes that John was the greatest of all the prophets. Why do you suppose they think that?

Mandaeans (the word means *gnostic* in Aramaic) is the name for a religious group living in the marshy southlands of Iraq and Iran. They originated in the 1st century on the eastern borders of Syria and Palestine. There were about 15,000 of them in the late 1970s before the war between Iraq and Iran began. They call themselves *Nasoreans* (observants) and the *Qur’an* calls them *Sabaeans*. They are considered to be like Christians and Jews in that they are a “people of the book,” that is, a book-based religious group.

They are an emanative gnostic group. That is, they believe in a preexistent, step-by-step downward movement or descent of the divine (emanations). They have also been influenced by the dualism of Iranian Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism which holds that there are two opposing powerful forces in the universe which conflict with each other.

The Mandaeans believe that John the Baptist was not Christ’s predecessor, but rather, His competitor. Thus, they feel antagonism to both Judaism and Christianity. Their writings are quite extensive, are somewhat disorderly, and are hard to categorize. (For more information see *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 3, p. 393 ff.)

5. Review in your mind the “time” when John’s ministry began. Hundreds of years had gone by since the last prophets of the Old Testament. People were suffering under the “heavy yoke” of Roman oppression. They prayed that “the great and terrible day of the Lord” would come soon. And then, a “voice crying in the wilderness” appeared calling for repentance from sin, forgiveness, and social justice. It seemed like the right time for a Jewish Messiah to appear.
6. What do we know about John’s preparation for his ministry? John’s birth was predicted by an angel sent especially to speak to his father, Zechariah. Only a very few others—Jesus, Samson,

maybe Samuel, and maybe Isaac—had similar predictions in Scripture. Luke described in some detail what John’s lifestyle and ministry was to be. He was to drink no alcohol. He was to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He was to bring many Israelites back to God. Like Elijah, he was to go ahead of the Lord. He was to bring fathers and children together. He was to turn the disobedient back to thinking about righteousness. He was to get the Lord’s people ready for His coming. The Lord’s power was to be upon him. He was to be a prophet of the most high God. He was to preach forgiveness of sins leading to salvation, bringing the “Dawn of Salvation” to us.

7. Thinking over John’s entire life, would you say it was a success? What did he actually accomplish? Why didn’t John travel to Jerusalem and preach in the temple? Why do you think both John and Jesus ended their public ministries in desert areas on the “other side” of the Jordan? Was it safer there? Although it was not far from Jericho, it was certainly not a densely-populated area.
8. What is “the Elijah message”? Did John the Baptist clearly carry “the Elijah message” to the people of Jesus’ day?
9. What do you think Jesus meant by saying that John was greater than anyone who had ever lived before him? In light of Malachi’s prophecy, would you consider the first coming of Jesus to be “the great and terrible day of the Lord”? Was Malachi intending to predict the first coming of Jesus or the second coming? Did John live in “the great and terrible day of the Lord”? Or do we? What similarities do you see between “the Elijah message,” John’s message, and the message Seventh-day Adventists are supposed to be “carrying” in our day?
10. John clearly spoke about social justice to a variety of people. Based on what you read about his ministry, would you consider him to be popular or unpopular? What do you think Jesus was implying when He said, “But the one who is the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.” (Matthew 11:11, *GNB*) According to the records which we have, John only met Jesus two or three times in his entire life. Each of those encounters seems to have been fairly brief. In what way could we then say that John prepared the way for Jesus? Was it his job to “stir up” the thinking of the people so they would be attracted to the preaching of Jesus? Was the purpose of John’s ministry to start a paradigm shift?
11. Because John’s birth and life were predicted quite precisely and in detail by the angel, does that suggest that John had no freedom in those areas? Did God’s foreknowledge limit John’s freedom? Does God’s foreknowledge limit our freedom?
12. How early in the life of John do you think his parents died? There are those who believe that because of John’s austere lifestyle, he may have been—at least for a time—a member of the Essene community. Do you think that is possible? How might that have affected his message? Apart from preparing the Dead Sea Scrolls and preserving them for us, what else is the Essene community remembered for?
13. Why do you think John chose to spend his time in that desert place?
14. We know from the Bible and from other ancient sources that there were numerous people about the time of Jesus who appeared, claiming to be the Jewish Messiah. In general, those people would stir up a lot of agitation and get a lot of attention briefly, and then their movements would fizzle. Is that what you think happened to John and his message? Was he, in fact, any different from those claiming to be the Messiah? Why do you think people went out to hear John? Why do you think Jesus warned us—and others in His day and later—not to go out to listen to such people? (Matthew 24:26)

15. John was one of those relatively few prophets who saw his prophecies fulfilled. He did not get to spend a significant amount of time with Jesus, but he knew that He had come. Why do you think he later questioned whether Jesus really was the Messiah? (Matthew 11:2,3)
16. Looking over our current experience as Seventh-day Adventists, would you say that we have advantages that John the Baptist did not?
17. How would you summarize “the Elijah message”? Ellen White summarized “the Elijah message” simply as “prepare to meet thy God.” (*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1184) Does such a promise give you hope or throw you into fear?
18. Revelation 19:10 says: “Those who bear testimony to Jesus are inspired like the prophets.” (**NEB**) [Footnote: “For testimony to Jesus is the spirit that inspires prophets.”] If God’s true people at the end of time speak the truth about Jesus and the Father, will they be inspired like the prophets? Is that “the real Elijah message”?
19. Are you excited about the three angels’ messages? Do you feel a sense of ownership? Do you think that it is your special responsibility to understand those messages and explain them to others?
20. Summarizing the messages of Elijah and John the Baptist, we might say that each of them was calling for a complete change in the way people thought. In Elijah’s day, people were wrapped up in the fertility cult worship of Baal and Ashtoreth. In John the Baptist’s day, people were completely consumed with trying to follow all the man-made rules in Judaism. In both cases, they needed a radical paradigm shift. Is that what we need?
21. Read Luke 3:10-15. (Compare James 2:14-26) How would you describe what John’s message was. Did people go out to hear John because his message was startling and new? Do we have a startling new message in our day? Are people traveling significant distances to hear us preach? Or are they ignoring us?
22. If we look over John’s message, is it clear that he was standing up for the rights of the poor and disenfranchised. Like Jesus, he clearly was opposed to the many man-made rules of the Pharisees.
23. Did John move to the desert to avoid the corrupting influences of the “big city”? Is God calling us to do something similar today?
24. In what ways do you think God is calling us to be more like John? How can you carry an Elijah-type preparation-for-the-day-of-the-Lord message in your work or in your situation today?
25. Both Jesus and John had to fight against the man-made rules and traditions rampant in their day. What man-made rules, traditions, and conditions still exist in the Christian church today? In the Seventh-day Adventist church?
26. Did John understand and teach anything important about the great controversy and “the larger view”? Do we have any evidence that he even knew about the great controversy?

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