

John Lesson # 2 Articles

The setting for this narrative is at Bethabara (v. 28) which means ‘house of the crossing.’ We do not know precisely where this place was; however, it was on the east bank of the Jordan within ten miles of its junction with the Dead Sea (the length of Judah’s Jordan River boundary), so seems to have been more or less due east of Jericho, probably at a ford in the Jordan River (such fords near Jericho are mentioned in Josh 2:7). Fords, by nature, are in relatively shallow and calm water, and so make suitable places for baptisms. John had first preached the baptism of repentance in the wilderness of Judea. It seems that when his message took effect he led his growing band of disciples to the Jordan River and baptized them there, and continued his ministry in this locale. This may well have been the identical locale through which Joshua led Israel into the Promised Land. If so, God chose the same spot for John to introduce the latest generation of Israel to the new Joshua (‘Jesus’ is Greek for ‘Joshua’), who, he assured them, would lead them into the spiritual Promised Land!

The first question this committee asked, obviously the one uppermost in the nation’s mind, was, “Are you the Messiah?” (‘Christ’ is the Greek word for the Hebrew ‘Messiah’ which means ‘anointed one’; i.e., the one anointed by God to rule the earth.) John denied this. By quoting Isa 40:3, John endeavored to turn the attention from himself to the One he was announcing, for Isa 40:9–26 asserts repeatedly that the Coming One is God Himself, the creator of all material and spiritual being. With such an incredibly spectacular arrival imminent, no one should be concerned over the identity of the herald. John simply was saying, “Forget me, concentrate on the Coming One, One who is already in your midst. I am nothing, He is everything, no one can compare with Him”

The next question the nation’s leaders put to John was whether he was the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah, Elijah. John denied this, too. Now this seems to be wrong, but we need to understand the question, for the Jews believed that Elijah, who did not die (2 Kings 2:11), was himself to return. Now, as John came in the spirit of Elijah (Luke 1:17), he was thus not the literal, physical Elijah whom the Jews expected. So his answer was meticulously correct to a meticulous question asked by meticulous questioners.

The third question, “Are you the prophet?” refers to Deut 18:15, for the Jews recognized that ‘the prophet’ Moses had promised was the coming Messiah. However, as they studied and pondered the Old Testament revelation they concluded that it was impossible to reconcile all the prophesied characteristics of the Messiah in one person, for some prophecies foretold a suffering Messiah, while others predicted a triumphant king, a victorious, all-conquering Messiah. Consequently, the Judaism of John’s day had concluded that there would be two Messiahs, one a suffering Messiah from the tribe of Levi (like Moses), the other a ruling Messiah from the tribe of Judah (like David), but opinion was divided over which Messiah would come first. John answered this question on two successive days, and by linking Isa 40:3, 9 with Isa 53:7, he indicated clearly that there would be only one Messiah, who, in His person, would fulfill both sets of prophecies, both specifications, in one man! So this was intended to dispel the confusion in Jewish opinion as to whether there would be one or two Messiahs, a Davidic Messiah and a Levitical (priestly) Messiah, which explains how the first and last questions were posed as distinct questions. Moses was a Levite, so a ‘prophet like me’ could be interpreted to mean a Levite, a priestly Messiah, while the Davidic Covenant pointed to a Judahite, a royal Messiah.

The important point of these questions is that both the Pharisees and the Sadducees recognized the messianic connection of John’s ministry and recognized the significance of his baptism (v. 25). This establishes that the nation clearly understood what John was pointing to. John, in his answer to their last question, told them that the Messiah was on earth at that time, that He was among them, and that He was considerably elevated above John’s own status. He hinted that Jesus has a baptizing ministry to perform (v. 25), and so reminded them of his own preaching in which he had prophesied that the coming One would baptize with the Holy Spirit. So John said, in effect, “Entrance into the Messianic Kingdom is by Holy Spirit baptism.” John’s statement that the Messiah, though not then known to the people, was actually standing in their midst must have engendered considerable excitement, anticipation, and speculation. The people and the nation would not have long to wait!¹

¹ Mills, M. S. (1999). *The Life of Christ: A Study Guide to the Gospel Record* (Jn 1:19–28). Dallas, TX: 3E Ministries.