

BASIC NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 4--JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS

John the Baptist appears in the Gospels without any introduction, except in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 1. This Gospel gives the story of his birth. His parents were of priestly descent, and his mother was a cousin of Mary the mother of Jesus. An angel appeared to his father, Zechariah, while serving in the Temple and announced that "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." (Luke 1:13) As the son of a priest, John would have been well versed in traditional lore, and especially well acquainted with the Scriptures. Also, John probably spent part of his youth in the Essene community at Qumran.

JOHN'S CHARACTER AND AIMS

John the Baptist resembled the early Hebrew prophets in character and teachings. The content of his message was similar to that of Amos. In his dress and habits, he reminded the people of Elijah; this resemblance had been prophesied by the angel who announced his birth. It had been prophesied in the Old Testament Book of Malachi that Elijah would return. Therefore, it is not strange that many people believed that John was the reincarnation of Elijah.

There were indications of a reaction against the formalism and corruption that prevailed in Palestine, and in Jerusalem itself under the very shadow of the Temple. When John began his teaching, virtually all classes in Judaism were chafing under the yoke of Rome. They waited expectantly for the dawning of a new era--the fulfillment of the Messianic Expectation.

Although John appealed to the popular hopes for a new order, he did not encourage them to expect a miraculous transformation. He taught that they had a vital part to perform in inaugurating the kingdom of Heaven of God, as the new era was popularly called.

John drew few followers from the priestly classes. Following an Essenian precedent and concept, he required them to show signs of repentance in their own lives, before he would agree to baptize them. He declared, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance." (Matthew 3:8, cf. Luke 3:8) Also, the priests prided themselves because of their descent from Abraham. John declared that God could raise as good sons of Abraham from the stones of the desert. (Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8))

John proclaimed the brotherhood of man, and preached integrity and justice in the daily contacts of life. The theme of his preaching was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:2, RSV)

He realized his limitations, but felt that his work was to prepare the way for one greater than he. He sought to help people free themselves from wrong habits of thought and life.

John the Baptist gained his title from the use of the symbol of baptism. There were several Jewish baptismal sects, but the affinities between Essenian ritual baths and John's baptisms are especially apparent.

THE RESULTS OF JOHN'S WORK

John the Baptist was an example of partial divine illumination. He was the forerunner of Jesus, and prepared the way by arousing the conscience of the nation. He showed how empty and valueless form and ceremony had become, and emphasized the importance of righteous deeds and loyalty to God. He declared that the essentials of religion were not creeds and ceremonials, but character and acts.

Men of all classes, Jews and Gentiles alike, came to hear this uncompromising preacher of justice and ethical religion. Some of his disciples became followers of Jesus. As late as 100 A.D., however, there were still people who followed the teachings of John but not of Jesus.

The material in the Gospel of John, relating to John the Baptist, supplies information not available elsewhere. When the Dead Sea Scrolls, including the Qumran Manual of Discipline, are also consulted, there is a strong likelihood that John the Baptist was an Essene before he became convinced that the Messiah had, in fact, arrived. From the Gospel of John, also, it appears likely that Jesus was himself a disciple of John for a time, before he began his own work. This does not, of course, prove that Jesus was ever an Essene. Jesus certainly did not limit himself to Essenian concepts in his teaching. The evidence does, however, raise valid questions about Jesus' possible early education.

THE LIFE OF JESUS

The story of Jesus' birth is given only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In Matthew, the angel that announced his birth appeared to Joseph, in Luke to Mary. In Matthew, the announcement of the birth of the child was made to the Magi by means of a star, while in Luke it was made to the Shepherds. In Luke, the child is taken to the Temple to be presented to the Lord. There the aged Simon and prophetess, Anna, rejoiced at his coming and blessed him. Matthew records the hurried journey of the Holy Family to Egypt.

After the death of Herod, Joseph brought his family back to Palestine. Perhaps fearing Herod's son, Archelaus, who reigned in Judea, he journeyed north into Galilee and lived in Nazareth.

The Gospel records are confusing as to whether Bethlehem or Nazareth was the family home, although Nazareth is more probable. According to Luke, Joseph and Mary had gone to Bethlehem to register for a tax which Rome had ordered. Both Gospels agree that Jesus was born of humble parentage and amidst humble surroundings.

There is no proof of anything miraculous in Jesus' birth. He does not mention it, and emphasizes spiritual kinship more than physical relationship. The question regarding the manner of Jesus' conception must be answered according to each individual's point of view. If we accept the Divine Science principle that every birth is divine, and that God is the Creator and Father of all, there seems to be no need of a miraculous conception. However, each one must settle this question for himself or herself.

It is significant that our understanding of God as the Universal Father, the Source of all Good, is almost wholly derived from the life and teachings of Jesus. He so completely identified himself with his Source that he was able to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and raise the dead.

THE DATE OF JESUS' BIRTH

The exact date of Jesus' birth is unknown. Owing to an adjustment in the calendar, it falls before 1 A.D. Since Herod the Great probably died in 4 B.C., a birth date two or three years earlier than 4 B.C. is plausible.

The early Church celebrated Jesus' birth on January 6, and Greek Orthodox Christians continue to do so. It is definitely known that in the fourth century A.D., the Church in Rome began to observe the anniversary of Jesus' birth on the 25th of December. They thus pre-empted the date of the Roman festival of Saturnalia, which celebrated the time of year when days begin to lengthen. Jesus' association with the "lamb of God" image may refer, in part, to the sign of Aries the Ram, indicating a birth date in the early Spring.

JESUS' HOME LIFE

Jesus probably spent his childhood in Nazareth. We do not have any firm evidence regarding Jesus' early training. In addition to Aramaic, which was his native tongue, he would have learned Hebrew and Greek. According to tradition, Mary's home town was Sepphoris, a Greek-speaking city located about three miles from Nazareth.

Except for the visit to the Temple in Jerusalem, as recorded by Luke, there is no mention of any incident in Jesus' life prior to his baptism by John. Occult records tell of trips to Egypt and India, where he is said to have received high spiritual teachings, and later to have taught in these countries. There is, however, no documentary evidence for these claims that can be checked by scholars.

Matthew 12:46 refers to "his mother and his brothers," so there were several other siblings in his family circle. It is commonly assumed that Jesus was the oldest of the children. Since there is a well established tradition that Joseph had died before Jesus began his ministry, the responsibility of the family rested upon his shoulders at least for a time.

In the Gospel narratives, Jesus is spoken of as a carpenter and the son of a carpenter. He may also have been a building contractor. His teachings indicate that he had had the experience which gave him an understanding of the problems of both employer and employee.

We do not know very much, from the Gospel records, about the mother of Jesus. The incident of the visit to the Temple gives us a picture of a normal, loving mother, solicitous for her child's welfare. From the Gospel picture as a whole, one gets the impression that the relationship between Jesus and his mother was a beautiful and intimate one.

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

Jesus lived in close touch with the people, and moved among the throngs that filled the crowded cities of Galilee. He realized their urgent need for spiritual guidance, and longed to give them the peace and joy that had come to him through his personal communion with God.

There is no doubt that the baptism, with the great illumination that occurred at the time, was a basic turning point for Jesus. However, while each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) records Jesus' baptism, there are marked differences in the three accounts. In Mark, only Jesus receives the vision, who hears a heavenly voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11) In Matthew, the voice speaks in the third person. (Matthew 3:17) Luke follows the Markan version, except that the Lucan account implies that many people were present. He adds the important point that Jesus was praying when the vision came to him. (Luke 3:21-22) In the Gospel of John, the Baptist receives--and then shares--the proclamation of Jesus' messiahship. (John 1:32-34)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BAPTISM

Outwardly, Jesus' baptism was one of complete immersion in the River Jordan. The important point, however, is what occurred within him, and the subsequent actions he took. At that time, he gave up his former occupation and accepted his divine call. Of course, he had prepared himself for this illumination by years of study and meditation. In what must have been a deeply moving spiritual experience, Jesus became conscious of his own divine sonship. He accepted the call to share his realization of God with his people--and subsequently, with all people--and to show them the way of life and thought that alone can bring true satisfaction.

In a spiritual sense, the baptism of water has a twofold meaning: purification and inner renewal. Water cleanses and washes away. This refers not only to eliminating sin, but also to being cleansed of any limiting beliefs about God and about ourselves. Flowing water or "living water," further, represents the living experience of the Divine Presence and Power. We become strengthened and inspired by an inflow from Spirit, into and through the deeper levels of our being.

Nevertheless, John the Baptist distinguished between his own baptism by water, and a higher illumination which Jesus represents. He does not share Paul's later view of baptism as a symbolic burial and resurrection:

John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Luke 3:16, cf. Matthew 3:11)

THE TEMPTATIONS

The temptations, as recorded in Matthew 14:1-11 and Luke 14:1-13, follow the accounts of Jesus' baptism. Many questions have been raised about the story of Jesus' temptations. Actually, these texts are open-ended and suggest a variety of insights, both spiritual and historical. As such, they tend to generate a surplus of meaning that is unlikely to be exhausted.

Our starting-point will be that their imagery does not refer to an actual encounter between Jesus and a literal adversary. The real contest was within the mind and heart of Jesus himself. They also tell us, in a general way, that after receiving illumination from God, it is still necessary for us to confront and overcome adverse beliefs that have become established in our souls. Even Jesus had to work things out in this sense. The fact that the temptations followed Jesus' baptism is therefore of great significance.

After the period of fasting and temptation was over, it is said that "Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee." (Luke 14:114) In reviewing the temptations, it is necessary to consider both the inner challenge of Jesus, and the relationship of that challenge to the actual work that lay before him. In this sense, the spiritual and historical aspects are to be considered in a synergic relationship.

Remember that in the context of the times, being a son of God meant, in part, to be empowered to do the works of God. A basic issue is how, and according to what principles, Jesus would choose to use the empowerment that was his. The power of Spirit is not personal power, but is realized through earnest prayer and meditation, through overcoming personal fears and limitations, and by unselfish service to others.

This chart, and the following discussion, follows the sequence in the Gospel of Matthew:

<u>TEMPTATION</u>	<u>MATTHEW</u>	<u>LUKE</u>	<u>QUOTED BY TEMPTER</u>	<u>QUOTED BY JESUS</u>
First	4:3-4	4:3-14		Deut. 8:3b
Second	4:5-7	4:9-12	Ps. 91:11-12	Deut. 6:16
Third	4:8-11	4:5-8		Deut. 6:13

THE FIRST TEMPTATION - "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Jesus had fasted for an extended period and was no doubt hungry. The temptation, in a broader sense, apparently was to conduct his ministry primarily to meet the public's need for food and other tangible goods. His reply reflects a decision to give primacy to spiritual consciousness, which would in turn provide a reliable basis for meeting everyday needs. "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Later he declared: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33)

THE SECOND TEMPTATION - This temptation, expressed literally, was to levitate from the pinnacle of the temple. In a broader sense, it meant to present himself as a magician and thus to win a following by display. In rejecting this temptation, Jesus dedicated himself to a healing purpose.

In other words, Jesus never performed miracles from a self-centered motive. He knew that work done in this way would have no lasting value, even though his popularity might be increased for a time. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" was his stern reply. Jesus knew the spiritual power that he had released through conscious contact with the Father, but he was not willing to use that power to draw attention to himself. His work was to touch the beliefs and lives of people, and to bring them into conscious oneness with God.

THE THIRD TEMPTATION - The third temptation was to receive all the kingdoms of the world. "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." The third temptation, as hyperbole, probably refers to an opportunity to use political and military means to create a Messianic Kingdom, with himself at the head. That this was a real option is shown by the messianic expectations of the Jewish people at the time, and the desire of many of them to specifically involve Jesus in a political and military sense. For example, John 6:15 states, "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself."

His reply to the third temptation, in effect, affirms the Allness of God: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only." In his ministry that followed, Jesus' keynote was the inner kingdom of God.

JESUS BEGINS HIS MINISTRY

In order to understand the conditions under which Jesus carried on his ministry, one must consider the religious as well as the political and cultural background of Palestine. For Jewish society was well stocked with religious institutions.

There were the ancient ceremonies perpetuated with great splendor in the temple at Jerusalem. The Scriptures were read regularly at the synagogues, and well-trained scribes interpreted them. The oral tradition had been developed by successive generations of teachers, until there was no area of life where one needed to be ignorant of what God desired.

The prophet functioned outside the mainstream, and the priest was all-powerful at the time that Jesus began his public ministry. The influence of broad-minded and tolerant men such as Hillel was waning; the prevailing trend was toward ceremonialism. There was little spirituality in Jerusalem, emphasis being placed upon observing the letter of the law.

The high priests of the period, who belonged to the Sadducean party, controlled the temple and were influential in the Sanhedrin. They were generally considered avaricious and unscrupulous, and preyed upon the helpless and overburdened people.

The Pharisees had no comforting message for the masses. For the Pharisees tended to overvalue external forms. Their reverence for the Sabbath was so overemphasized that it became anything but a day of rest.

Although the Pharisees objected to Jesus' teaching, at first because he lacked rabbinical training, many of them were found in Jesus' audience; and they invited him to their homes. However, many of them became hostile when Jesus denounced their hypocrisy and ceremonialism.

REQUIRED BIBLE READINGS

Matthew 1:1-4:11

Mark 1:1-15

Luke 1:1-4:15

John 1:6-9, 15, 19-51 (restoring the sequence of what was probably the original opening of the Gospel of John)

John 3:22-4:3

QUESTIONS

1. Give a brief characterization of John the Baptist.
2. What was the work and contribution of John the Baptist?
3. What do we know about the birth and early life of Jesus?
4. What is the spiritual significance of Jesus' baptism?
5. What lessons can we learn from Jesus' temptations that apply to ourselves?