

“The Ministry of John the Baptist”
The Bible Student 1:26-32. [1900]

The significance of the ministry of John the Baptist may be gathered from our Lord's own statements regarding him. He calls John “a prophet” and “much more than a prophet,” and declares that among them that are born of women there has not arisen a greater than he. He applies to him the prophetic words of Malachi (3:1): “Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.” The precise rendering and meaning of the statement in Matthew 11:12 and Luke 16:16 may be somewhat obscure, but there can be little doubt that in general it is intended to describe John's superiority over all preceding prophets, and that it places this superiority in his close connection with the actual appearance of the kingdom of heaven as a present reality engaging the thoughts and stirring the interest of men: “The law and the prophets are until John; from that time the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and every man entereth violently into it.”

Notwithstanding the preeminence thus ascribed to John, it is plain from the reason given for this preeminence that he was not so much a revealer of new truth as a recapitulator of the old. At the point where the old covenant is about to pass over into the new, John once more sums up in his ministry the entire message of all preceding revelation and thus becomes the connecting link between it and the fulfillment which was to follow. From this must be explained the stern character of his work and preaching. This was not the result of John's holding a lower and less spiritual conception of the kingdom of God than did Jesus, but simply of his position as last representative of a dispensation in which the holiness and righteousness of God were strongly emphasized. In John's call to repentance the burden of both the law and the prophets found its final utterance. Almost every feature in the Baptist's appearance bears witness to the intimate connection between him and the old covenant. He led the life of a Nazirite, one of the Old Testament forms of consecration to Jehovah's service (Luke 1:15). His desert surroundings were symbolic of the dead, barren, unspiritual state of Israel (Hos. 2:14, 15; Isa. 40:1-4); his approach to asceticism in the matter of fasting points in the same direction (Matt. 11:10). He was, as it were, a re-embodiment of Elijah, the stern Old Testament prophet, from whom he also borrowed his garb; not only the imagery but to a large extent even the phraseology of John's preaching were derived from two Old Testament prophets, Isaiah and Malachi. Besides this we have the express declaration of our Lord which places John outside of the limits of the kingdom of heaven, i.e., outside of the New Testament realization of this kingdom historically inaugurated by Jesus Himself. Our Lord did not mean that John was not a believer in the Old Testament sense, but simply that officially and personally he did not share in the far greater privileges of the new covenant: He that is lesser in the kingdom of heaven, i.e., occupies a relatively lower place than John under the Old Testament, is nevertheless absolutely greater than John, because the kingdom itself is far superior to the typical stage of the theocracy (Matt. 11:11).

Besides reasserting the legal and prophetic summons to repentance, John also repeated at the eleventh hour the Old Testament predictions of the coming messianic salvation. The organic connection in which these two elements of Old Testament revelation stand to each other is strikingly reflected in the way in which John links together the two parts of his message: “Repent ye, *for* the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” But the logical force of the appeal is increased by the critical character of the time; the *nearness* of the kingdom becomes the motive for repentance. The nature of the approaching kingdom John describes by calling it a baptism with the Holy Ghost and with fire. In this saying

the “fire” evidently refers to the judgment, which from ancient times had been associated with the coming of the kingdom (Matt. 3:10, 12). But it has been asserted without foundation, that the baptism with the Holy Ghost likewise refers to the judicial aspect of the coming crisis. Though laying the chief emphasis on sin and judgment, we cannot believe that John left entirely out of account the saving character of the kingdom he was sent to announce. The Spirit stands rather as the source of all spiritual influences and benefits connected with the kingdom. Another misconception frequently met with in modern interpretations of John’s work is that his idea of the coming order of things was largely modeled after the prevailing Jewish expectations, and therefore carnal and political like these. The very fact that John announces the judgment and sifting of Israel as the most important result of the approaching crisis, and that he warns against false pride and reliance on natural descent from Abraham, as well as his significant declaration that God out of stones can raise children unto Abraham, proves that his ideas concerning the kingdom of God were radically different from those of contemporary Judaism. In one respect only does John reveal in connection with this subject the limitations which were necessarily inherent in his viewing the kingdom from the Old Testament standpoint. Like unto the Old Testament prophets, he does not sharply distinguish between the successive stages and phases in the realization of the messianic promises. The baptism with fire and with the Holy Ghost are represented as two sides of the same act. The fulfillment itself could clearly teach that these two sides, thrown together in John’s picture, would in reality be separated by a long interval of time.

As John’s ministry summed up in itself the substance of all Old Testament truth, so his ministry in its turn was summed up in his baptism. This rite attached itself to the Old Testament ceremonial ablutions and to the figurative use made by the prophets of the cleansing and vivifying power of water. Nevertheless it was a new institution for the introduction of which John’s critics demanded and the Baptist himself claimed special divine authority. Some have endeavored to explain it as an imitation of the washing required of every convert from paganism to Judaism, the so-called baptism of proselytes, but, while such a washing may have been customary as early as John’s time, it cannot have possessed in his days its later prominence as a rite of initiation into Judaism, so that conscious imitation seems excluded. John’s baptism was “a baptism of repentance unto the forgiveness of sin.” It presupposed, expressed, and strengthened the grace of repentance and had attached to itself for those who received it in faith the forgiveness of sins. Two extremes should be avoided in estimating the value and efficacy of this sacrament. On the one hand, some have well-nigh emptied it of all significance by giving it a purely negative character as relating to repentance without faith, and having only prospective reference to the forgiveness of sins in the messianic future (pressing the “unto”), or by denying that the gift of the Spirit was in any sense connected with it. It is true John says: “I indeed baptize you with water; but there cometh he that is mightier than I. . . . He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.” But this is to be understood from the point of view that John’s baptism, belonging to the old covenant, shared with all the ceremonies of this dispensation the character of a type pointing forward to the fulfillment in Christ. As this does not hinder the fact that in another sense the Old Testament ceremonies were real means of grace, so it does not prove that John’s baptism was a mere type. On the other hand, we need not go to the opposite extreme of placing it entirely on a line with Christian baptism, for the latter rests on the finished work of Christ. The true view is that John’s baptism was a true sacrament of the old covenant and conveyed to all those who received it in faith the Old Testament manner and measure of grace. The difference was one of degree, not of substance.

John's baptism became of special importance as the means by which our Lord was officially introduced into His public ministry, or, to speak in scriptural language, as the instrument for the *messianic anointing of Jesus*. Apart from announcing the nearness of the kingdom in general, John had the special task of bearing witness to the Messiah in person. Our Lord Himself attached great importance to this testimony, for, when later the Jewish leaders asked Him by what authority He performed His messianic acts, He put to them the counter-question, whether the baptism of John was from heaven or from men, indicating thereby that they were not able to judge of His claims until they should first have taken a definite position with reference to the claims of John. Two stages may be distinguished in this witness born by John, the one, of which the record has largely come to us in the Synoptical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, preceding the baptism of Jesus, the other recorded in St. John's Gospel, belonging to the time subsequent to this event. During the first stage John spoke in general terms of the Messiah as "the Mightier One" who was to come after him. He emphasizes His absolute right and power to judge the people of Israel. He calls the theocracy *His* threshing floor, and thus ascribes to Him an ownership in regard to it such as could be ascribed to Jehovah alone. In this John attached himself to a mode of statement which had been observed in the very first revelations of the New Testament, given to his parents at the time of the incarnation, and in which one of the two main currents of Old Testament messianic prophecy, that which spoke of the coming of Jehovah Himself to His people, was reproduced. During the later stage his testimony became more personal and definite, and in some of its declarations we catch the echo of the momentous event of Jesus' baptism, which had intervened. John's designation of Jesus as "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) throws light on his own interpretation of the inner meaning of this act. As in the prophecy of Isaiah 53, the suffering Servant of Jehovah was portrayed under the figure of a lamb, to indicate that, while in one sense identical with the wayward flock, He was yet in another respect different from them, because innocent Himself and willing to bear in patience the punishment the others had deserved, so Jesus had come to the baptism of John, an Israelite of Israelites, identifying Himself with the people of God, yet not because He needed this cleansing for His own individual sin, but because He vicariously took upon Himself the penalty they had incurred. In another declaration attaching itself to Malachi 3:1, the Baptist ascends to the idea of the preexistence of Christ not merely during the Old Testament dispensation, "which is become before me," but in an absolute sense "for he was before me" (John 1:30). The last testimony of John is recorded in 3:27-36. Here he contrasts his own official position with that of the Savior and shows that all rivalry is thereby in principle excluded. Jesus is the Bridegroom, he simply the Bridegroom's friend, whose task it is to bring Him and the bride, Jesus and Israel, together. Hence by the report that all come to Jesus, *his* joy, i.e., the specific joy belonging to him as forerunner, has been fulfilled. In reference to verses 31-36 it is somewhat difficult to decide whether these words are a continuance of the Baptist's discourse or constitute some remarks of the evangelist John suggested by the former. There is much to favor the view that the Baptist is here still speaking. If so, the statements in verses 34 and 35 become significant as reminiscences of what had occurred at the baptism of Jesus: "He giveth not the Spirit by measure. The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand." The 36th verse also seems to point back to the synoptical statement of John concerning the twofold future baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Here the promise of the Holy Spirit has become a present "eternal life" and "wrath to come," a wrath that "abideth." Thus the latest closely corresponds with and reaffirms the earliest.

The figure of the Baptist, as it is drawn for us in the Gospels, is an intrinsically great and noble one. But it has necessarily been eclipsed by the far more illustrious figure of the Son of God Himself. As one of the ancient writers says: "When the radiant light of the sun appears, that of the stars not only but that of the moon also must wax pale." To our ordinary human judgment it is almost impossible not to find something pathetic in this eclipse of a great character. We shall not be able to appreciate, however, the real greatness of John until we realize that his effacement was of the nature of a self-effacement, willingly nay joyfully made by him, in order that he might serve by it his Lord. If nothing else, then this will show that John, while standing officially outside of the kingdom, had understood and assimilated the great principle on which the kingdom is built, that of self-denial and service. Some modern writers have fallen into the habit of saying harsh things about John and are unwilling to credit him with anything higher than the current Jewish expectation of a political messianic kingdom. We presume that such writers deny the authenticity of that beautiful saying: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). It is a satisfaction to know that Jesus Himself appreciated and honored His forerunner and gave expression to this feeling on more than one occasion. He calls him the lamp that burneth and shineth, that consumes itself in order to give light to others. And even in the hour of weakness, when John's own faith had begun to waver and he had sent to Jesus his doubting inquiry, our Lord took pains to defend him from the unjust suspicion, as if any selfish motive had inspired the doubt, thus shielding the nobility of his character, because it was precious to Himself and because He could not suffer that others should think meanly of it. There is to us something unspeakably touching in this loyal gratitude to a faithful servant on the part of Him who had Himself come to serve all others. And we may rest assured that, whatever modern judges may say, John has received his reward and experienced the truth of that other saying of our Lord: "If any man serve me, him will the Father honor."