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# John the Baptist

**from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia**

## Sources

For trustworthy information concerning the life and work of John the Baptist we must go to the NT and Josephus. The Synoptic Gospels tell of his origin, ministry, message, and death. The Fourth Gospel focuses on his relation to Jesus. Josephus (*Antiquities* xviii.5.2 [116–19]) reports his popularity, relation to Herod Antipas, and death.

## Parentage

Although in his ministry John was widely recognized as “a real prophet” (Mark 11:32), he was of priestly descent (as were Jeremiah and Ezekiel). His mother Elizabeth was one “of the daughters of Aaron” and his father was a priest “of the division of Abijah” (Luke 1:5), one of twenty-four divisions that took turns serving in the temple at Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 24:10). “They were both righteous before God ... had no child ... and both were advanced in years” (Luke 1:6f). Their home was in “the hill country of Judea” (Luke 1:65).

## Early Life

Luke 1:36 indicates that John was born about six months before Jesus, whose birth cannot be dated later than early in 4 B.C. This suggests that John, like Jesus, began his ministry when he was about thirty years old (cf. Luke 3:23). His father, an upright priest, lived in the hill country of Judea near the Qumrân sect, which was located in the wilderness of Judea near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. This community had as its nucleus earnest priests who expected God to act soon to establish His rule. It has been suggested that Zechariah was in sympathy with the Qumrân group, and that when he and his wife died - both were already old when John was born - John was brought up at Qumrân and there was taught that the Scriptures promised God’s early action to judge and redeem His people. What is clear is that “the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he

was in the wilderness [of Judea] till the day of his manifestation to Israel” (Luke 1:80). It was a period of silence, study, thought, and preparation.

## Ministry

John was still in the wilderness of Judea when “the word of God” called him to preach (Luke 3:2), and there in the wilderness he began his ministry (Mt. 3:1). This wilderness included not only the wild rocky region west of the Dead Sea but also the lower region of the Jordan Valley. At first John preached in the Jordan Valley just N of the Dead Sea; John 1:28 places part of this ministry at Bethany beyond Jordan, which may be located E of Jericho on the east bank of the Jordan River, perhaps in the Wādī el-Kharrâr. But John moved about; John 3:23 speaks of a later ministry at Aenon near Salim, which may have been in Samaria, a few miles E of Jacob’s Well, or further N, a few miles S of Scythopolis. At the end of his ministry he must have been either in Galilee or (probably) Perea, for Herod Antipas, who arrested him, ruled only these regions.

Luke 3:1f gives an elaborate dating for the beginning of John’s ministry. For Luke this event was important not only because John’s prophetic ministry was influential but also because it heralded the new decisive action of God. The date cannot have been before A.D. 26, when Pilate became governor of Judea (cf. also John 2:20), nor later than A.D. 28, for Jesus’ ministry must have begun by then.

John dressed in rough garb, and ate the simple food available in the wilderness (Mark 1:6); the leather girdle recalls the dress of Elijah (2 KINGS 1:8), and may suggest that John was conscious of a call to a ministry like that of Elijah. He did not go to Jerusalem or any city, but stayed in the wilderness and preached in the open. For his baptism he wanted running water, which was one factor in determining where he preached, and John 1:28; 3:23 indicate that he preached where people passed by and he could easily be found. To fulfill his God-given mission he lived a life of stern hardship. That “John came neither eating nor

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drinking” (Matt. 11:18) is a dramatic way of describing his simple, self-denying way of life.

His preaching made no mention of ceremonial or priestly requirements. He addressed it to Jews (Matt. 3:9; Luke 3:8), and announced the imminent coming of the messianic age, “the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 3:2). He made no claim to be the Messiah, and even denied being Elijah (Mal. 4:5) or the prophet (Deut. 18:15); he was simply the warning “voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Mark 1:3; Luke 3:15f; John 1:20–23).

The warning was urgent, for preliminary to the coming of God’s final kingdom would be stern judgment, carried out by One mightier than John; it would bring blessing to those ready, but the fire of devastating judgment to the wicked (Mt. 3:11f; Luke 3:16f). And instead of delivering the Jews from the foreign oppressor and honoring them, it would strike Israel first of all. Descent from Abraham would be no protection; Jews as well as Gentiles were sinners.

The only escape was to repent, turn from sin, and change one’s entire attitude and way of life. Those who did this and were baptized received forgiveness. But the repentance had to be real and thorough; the repentant person had to “bear fruits that befit repentance” (Luke 3:8). All must share their goods and food, tax collectors must be honest, and soldiers must refrain from extortion and be content with their pay (Luke 3:10–14).

John’s method and message were urgent. He had no time for long discussions. Whether he addressed his warning of imminent judgment to “the multitudes” generally (Luke 3:7), or particularly to “the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matt. 3:7), it was a stern, fiery, fearless warning of imminent doom from which escape was possible only by prompt and genuine repentance matched by thorough obedience to God’s will.

## Baptism

Though John was a prophet and gave no teaching requiring ceremonial priestly practices, he gave such prominence to baptism that his distinguishing title was “the Baptist” (ho baptistés, Mt. 3:1; etc.)

or “the Baptizer” (ho baptizōn, only in Mark 1:4; 6:14, 24), and his message was called “a baptism of repentance” (Mark 1:4). This distinctive rite, evidently administered in the running water of the Jordan River (Mark 1:5) or at springs (John 3:23), was a symbolic expression of John’s message.

## Origin

The practice of ceremonial baths and washings was common throughout the ancient world, and persistent search has been made for the background that best explains why John gave baptism so prominent a place. Various washings were prescribed in the Mosaic law to remove defilement and infection and restore the normal clean state (Lev. 11–15). The messianic promises of the OT mention “a fountain opened for the house of Israel and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness” (Zech. 13:1); God was to “sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses” and receive “a new heart” and “a new spirit” (Ezekiel 36:25f).

By the time John began to preach, the Jews were requiring of proselytes from the gentile world not only circumcision but also baptism. This proselyte baptism was regarded as a cleansing from the ceremonial defilement that in Jewish eyes affected every Gentile. Frequent washings also were known among Jews. Josephus went into the wilderness and spent some time with Banus, an ascetic who “bathed himself in cold water frequently”. Josephus also reported that the Essenes “bathe their bodies in cold water”. The Qumrân Scrolls contain references to ritual lustrations, and some think that the reservoirs found at Qumrân attest frequent lustrations.

The Jewish community at Qumrân probably was an Essene or Essene-type community, but it is doubtful that there was repeated ritual washing in such rather small reservoirs. In any case, a single initiatory baptism or bath is not attested at Qumrân, though no doubt some ritual washings were carried out there by this Jewish sect.

None of these ancient practices really explains the origins of John’s baptism. They show only that such a baptism would not have seemed strange in the ancient Near Eastern world, and they give

clues to what John's baptism meant to the Jews; but his baptism was something new.

### Significance

This baptism was administered but once to a person, and thus differed from the repeated washings so widely practiced. It was administered to Jews and so differed from proselyte baptism of Gentiles. It was not accompanied or immediately followed by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and so was not a full parallel to Christian baptism; John only promised the gift of the Spirit at some future time.

John's baptism had an eschatological focus. God's decisive action was imminent; judgment would strike all sinners, including unprepared Jews. Earnest repentance, divine forgiveness, and complete change of life were urgently necessary to escape judgment and enter the coming kingdom (Mt. 3:10; Luke 3:9). Baptism was for penitent Jews, who thereby confessed their sins, renounced their old way of life, received forgiveness, dedicated themselves to a loyal and upright life, and looked expectantly for the coming of God's Mightier One to establish the divine kingdom. Contrary to Josephus (Ant. xviii.5.2 [117f]), it was not merely for physical cleansing; it symbolized the spiritual cleansing and renewal of the repentant and reformed sinner.

### Baptism of Jesus

It is historical fact that Jesus was baptized by John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke say so, and John 1:31–33 implies it. But John baptized repentant sinners. Did Jesus confess personal sin? The NT rejects such an idea. Mt. 3:13–15 explains why He asked to be baptized: "to fulfill all righteousness." This means not that it was a hollow form to Him, but that He was so loyal a member of His people and so identified with them that He had to join with them in their confession and dedication (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21).

### Imprisonment and Death

The exact date of John's imprisonment cannot be determined, but it occurred before Jesus returned to Galilee to open His ministry there (Mark 1:14), and so ca A.D. 28. The length of imprisonment is likewise uncertain. Since John died before Jesus' ministry ended (Mark 6:14–29), it occurred not

later than A.D. 29. Josephus reports a defeat of Herod Antipas in A.D. 36 which people thought was divine retribution on Herod for executing John (Ant. xviii.5.2 [116f]). This might suggest a date later than A.D. 29. But John clearly died before Jesus did, and the story Josephus tells simply shows how deeply John impressed the people and how vividly they remembered him seven years after his death.

According to Josephus, Herod Antipas feared that John by his fiery preaching might stir up a revolt, so he seized him, imprisoned him at Machaerus E of the Dead Sea, and had him put to death. In the Gospels John's rebuke of Herod for marrying his brother's wife Herodias caused Herod to arrest him (Mark 6:17f; Mt. 14:3f; Luke 3:19f). Quite possibly both explanations contain truth. Herod's fear of political results from John's preaching would explain the imprisonment; the scheming of Herodias explains best the extreme step of executing John by beheading him.

### John the Baptist's Disciples

Most hearers of John, even those baptized, returned home after a time; but some became his disciples and lived as a group under his leadership. Even after his imprisonment they kept in touch with him; once a group of them came to Jesus with a question from him (Mt. 11:2; Luke 7:19). Later, when John was executed, they buried his body and reported his death to Jesus. As during his ministry, they followed his teaching, fasted regularly (Mark 2:18), and prayed as he had taught them (Luke 11:1).

Little is known of their continuing work. Their loyalty to him during his imprisonment shows that they continued to live as his disciples. About twenty-five years later, when Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus, "he knew only the baptism of John," though he knew the OT prophecies of Jesus or some facts about Jesus' earthly life (Acts 18:25). Did he learn of John's message and baptism in Alexandria or in Jerusalem?

At least the incident shows that John's movement continued and spread. The twelve men at Ephesus who had not heard of the Holy Spirit but had been baptized into John's baptism (Acts 19:1–7) are

further evidence of this. The pointed insistence in John 1:20; 3:28 that John was not the Messiah but had directed men to Jesus indicates that when the Fourth Gospel was written, probably late in the 1st cent A.D., John's movement still continued, especially in Asia Minor, and some of his followers were claiming that John was the promised messianic leader. Some but by no means all of John's followers became followers of Jesus (Mt. 14:12?; John 1:35–42).

### John and Jesus

Though many of John's followers gave John a rank superior to Jesus, John himself clearly claimed a preparatory and secondary role. He was sent by God but was subordinate to the Mightier One to come, and so could only hold the center of the stage for a limited time. His task was to proclaim the imminent coming of God's righteous kingdom and to call his hearers to repent and be baptized to escape the impending judgment and find a place in that kingdom. He announced the coming of the Mightier One, who would execute God's judgment, establish God's perfect order, and bestow the Holy Spirit on God's loyal people. Matthew 3:14 suggests that John knew clearly that Jesus was the Greater One, and in John 1:29, 33, 36 John explicitly identifies Jesus as the Greater One, the Lamb of God, and the Son of God. But in Mt. 11:2f and Luke 7:19 John sends from prison to ask Jesus if He is the Coming One, and Peter is said to have expressed a new, God-given revelation when at the end of the Galilean ministry he identifies Jesus as the Messiah (Mt. 16:17). These two groups of evidence are not contradictory.

John sensed the greatness in Jesus without explicitly and immediately grasping and stating the full Christian gospel; the Fourth Gospel, in which men ascribe explicitly to Jesus in the first week of His ministry every great title the gospel story will contain, legitimately dramatizes the essential meaning of John's message and relation to Jesus without waiting for it to become clear, as it does in the other Gospels, in the ongoing development of His ministry.

The Synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel are in essential agreement. The latter's concern is

always to bring out the full meaning of the story; John the Baptist had really pointed to Jesus without fully understanding what God was doing through him. Hence John's followers could think that they were true to him by continuing his independent movement, while the disciples of Jesus could rightly claim that they had grasped the final meaning of John's preaching and attitude.

Jesus' estimate of John was both positive and reserved. By coming to hear John preach and by being baptized Jesus recognized John's God-given mission. To Jesus, John was a true prophet of God, and more; he was Elijah who had come to prepare for God's final judgment and redemption (Mal. 4:5; Mt. 11:9–14). No greater man had lived. John's message and baptism, Jesus held, were as surely prompted by God as was His own ministry (Mark 11:27–33). "Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matt. 11:11), for John did not fully grasp the whole gospel and did not disband his followers when Jesus appeared, but continued to preach independently about the coming crisis, divine judgment, and the need of repentance and baptism. John prepared the way; the kingdom began to come in the ministry and work of Jesus. John had been divinely sent and was not repudiated, but once Jesus appeared John had to decrease while Jesus increased (John 3:30).