

John the Baptist is a unique figure in Christian history, a hinge between the Old Testament prophets and the first Christians. His great importance lies in the fact **that he bridged the old era and the new** and was the link between the two.

In the gospel stories he recognizes Jesus as the one who is greater than himself, one for whose coming John prepares the way.

John the Baptizer is a renowned figure who closes out the prophetic era and points toward Jesus' ministry. He is the person who helps us understand the transition, the interim, if you will. Perhaps you could think of him as the one who prepares for the paradigm shift.

More than other gospels, Luke associates the Baptizer with Israel's historic prophets and portrays his ministry as concluding just when Jesus' ministry begins.

There is a contrast between John's and Jesus' baptisms:

- John's is associated with water and repentance, but
- Jesus' with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The Jewish historian **Josephus** indicates, the Baptizer was popular in first-century Judea (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.5.1-3), and Acts implies it was not limited to Judea (18:25; 19:4).

The Jewish historian Josephus gives an interesting account of John the Baptist in his *Antiquities* (18.5.2):

- *Some of the Jews believed that Herod's army was destroyed by God, God punishing him very justly for John called the Baptist, whom Herod had put to death.*
- *John was a pious man, and*
- *he was bidding the Jews who practiced virtue and exercised righteousness toward each other and piety toward God,*
- *to come together for baptism. For thus, it seemed to him, would baptismal ablution be acceptable, if it were not used to beg off from sins committed, but for the purification of the body when the soul had previously been cleansed by righteous conduct. And*
- *when everybody turned to John—for they were profoundly stirred by what he said—Herod feared that John's so extensive influence over the people might lead to an uprising (for the people seemed likely to do everything he might counsel).*
- *He thought it much better, under the circumstances, to get John out of the way in advance, before any insurrection might develop, than for himself to get into trouble and be sorry not to have acted, once an insurrection had begun. So*



*because of Herod's suspicion, John was sent as a prisoner to Machaerus, the fortress already mentioned, and there put to death. But*

- *the Jews believed that the destruction which overtook the army came as a punishment for Herod, God wishing to do him harm.*

Josephus presents John as a humanistic philosopher advocating virtue, but suppresses the messianic overtones to his ministry, just as one would expect from Josephus writing for Roman and Greek readers. Josephus merely supplements what is known already from the Gospels.

His account brings out the political side to John's ministry as Herod saw it, whereas the Gospels emphasize the moral and religious side.

Undoubtedly Herod feared the political consequences of John's popularity. His moral charges only added fuel to the flames. The testimony of Josephus reminds us that the memory of John lasted a long time after his death.

**John the Baptist is a pivotal character** in our salvation story. In the Christian tradition, he lives between the Testaments and is the piece of the story that tips the scales. His role is to make Jesus obvious, to lay bare the great reveal—Jesus is the Messiah.

In its historical context, this was no small thing. Centuries of longing and imagining preceded John's life. There had been generations-worth of theological sorting, of trying to make sense of life as both God's chosen and, too often, as a people besieged, conquered, enslaved, exiled.

After so long, **how could (how would) Jesus be recognized in this first century?**

This, of course, is the primary grist for New Testament writings, because Jesus didn't look much like a conqueror.

John's role, then, is to point to him and speak clearly. Luke skillfully highlights all the important linkages to the tradition:

- John comes from a priestly line that, by definition, stretches back generations.
- There is miracle in his conception and birth—the barren bears (Elizabeth is eighty and no children); the mute (Zechariah who cannot speak) speaks.
- There is a break in the expected—he is named John, not the expected father's name or the name of any other relative.
- His mother and Jesus' mother were related, and met when they were both pregnant. Scripture suggests they are cousins.
- He lived in the wilderness, where his people had historically languished.
- He, like so many prophets before him, called the people to repentance.
- And finally, he pointed to Jesus, so that he might be seen as the long-promised messiah.



As we might expect, people may have imagined that John himself was the promised one.

But, He always points to Jesus, *who is the real deal*, whose life will not be tidy, and whose death certainly was not.

John reminds us that life is not a bed of roses, but that there is light, and hope, and joy, because life is deeper than this time and place. John turns us to Jesus, who embodies God's steadfast love for us and the whole creation.

John and Jesus are both important to our faith. They go hand in hand; they are a team; they are yoked.

John was the greatest figure produced under the old covenant, according to Matthew 11:11.

Jesus said of John in Luke 7:28, "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John."

And Hebrews 11:39 tells us John is epitomized of all the Old Testament saints who stood at the threshold of the new order without entering in.

John was born into a pious Jewish home, grounded in the messianic promises of the Scriptures and looking for the hope of Israel.

His parents recognized from the outset the relative greatness of Jesus over John. And because Mary was related to Elizabeth, Jesus had not only a tie with the house of David through Joseph, but also with the line of Aaron through both Zechariah and Elizabeth.

John entered dramatically onto the stage of history probably in A.D. 28. Clothed in a cloak of camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey, he proclaimed to all who would hear the need for repentance and rectitude of life.

Everything about him recalled the prophet Elijah—his mantle, his living in the wilderness, his message—and people flocked to hear him.

*John withdrew from society; but he sought to reform society by his preaching.*

John lived in the wilderness which represented more than a solitary place to John. It was the place to which Elijah had fled, and the place where God led his people to the Promised Land.

The wilderness was also a place where the Lord revealed himself, and where some believed the Messiah would appear.



He did not go to the desert to hide from people. In fact he attracted large crowds, according to Luke 3:10.

### **John the Baptist Baptizes people**

The Baptismal rite that John performed on penitent sinners was the outstanding feature of his whole ministry; yet he was by no means its originator.

John's water baptism was a sign of a greater baptism of the Holy Spirit that the Messiah would administer.

1. John's baptism was a once-and-for-all, final act of repentance, not to be repeated.
2. The whole tenor of John's preaching was urgent.
3. His message was offered to the whole nation, not to exclusive members of any one sect or group of people.

### **The relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus**

The earliest part of Jesus' public ministry was spent in the circle of John the Baptist.

There was one joint ministry. It is not only that their work overlapped or that they worked in the same area.

### **The death of John the Baptist**

The account of John's death is the only major story in the Gospel of Mark that is not about Jesus.

It is clear from both the Gospel of Mark and Josephus that Herod Antipas regarded John as a prime instigator in the messianic ferment that gripped Judea.

John constituted a political threat to Herod's reign, and when John also criticized the morals of Herodias, his bride, Herod locked John in prison.

John's death had an effect on Jesus himself. When he first heard of the arrest, he withdrew into Galilee, sensing danger to himself. Later, when he learned of John's execution, he went into a lonely place, doubtless to contemplate the dreadful meaning of this for his own future.

John and Jesus both gathered a band of disciples, and some of John's disciples came to Jesus and joined his group. In a short ministry of six months, John had gained great



popularity. According to Mark 1:5, “The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.”

Loyalty to John’s memory was still strong several years later when Jesus played upon it to avoid answering a loaded question:

*Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”*

*Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”*

*They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”*

*So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.”*

*Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.*

John the Baptist was a profound influence upon the people of his day and upon the birth and growth of the church. His prophetic passion and burning zeal set the stage for the emergence of Jesus Christ.

