

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **John the Baptist: A Biblical and Historical Profile**

When Jesus—or Yeshua, as he’s called in Hebrew—began his ministry, he was baptized by a man who the Scriptures call “John the Baptist.” Most readers of the Bible are familiar with John the Baptist, but in this teaching, we are going to take a closer look at his life. Where did he come from? What did he teach? Why was he called “the Baptist”? What impact did he have on the people of first century Israel? And, what lessons can we learn from his life? Let’s begin.

#### **John’s Birth**

John’s parents are the first people described in Luke’s gospel:

##### **Luke 1:5-7**

*In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.*

So, John’s father was a priest of the division of Abijah. The priests were descendants of Moses’ brother, Aaron (Leviticus 6:22; Numbers 3:3), who was from the tribe of Levi (Numbers 26:59), and the “division of Abijah” was one of twenty-four groups of priests who would take turns serving at the temple in Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 24:1-19). John’s mother, Elizabeth, was also a descendant of Aaron. So, John’s parents were part of a priestly family that was faithful to God.

One day, when Zechariah was serving in the temple, he saw a vision from God. An angel appeared to him and said this:

##### **Luke 1:13-15**

*...your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his*

name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord...

Zechariah was unable to speak after seeing this vision. After Zechariah returned home from his service at the temple, his wife Elizabeth miraculously conceived. The baby, John, was filled with the Holy Spirit even in his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). Even as an unborn child, John jumped for joy when he heard the news that Yeshua had been conceived (Luke 1:41-44). After John was born, on the day he was to be circumcised, his father regained the ability to speak. He prophesied, and speaking to John, he said this:

### **Luke 1:76-77**

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins

Clearly, John had been born for a special purpose. When Zechariah had his vision, another thing he was told was that John “**must not drink wine or strong drink**” (Luke 1:15). This was a rule that John followed for his entire life (Luke 7:33). This is likely an indication that John was under a *nazirite* vow. Nazirite vows are described in Numbers chapter 6. A nazirite is set apart for God for a period of time (Numbers 6:2). A nazirite could not get a haircut (Numbers 6:5), touch a dead body (Numbers 6:6), or drink alcohol (Numbers 6:3). Usually, a person would choose to become a nazirite, and the vow would only last for a limited time. However, sometimes prophets were born as nazirites, and they remained under that vow for their entire life. Two examples of these “nazirites for life” were Samson (Judges 13:3-7) and Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11). In fact, the circumstances of Samson's birth were very similar to John's, as we see in the book of Judges:

### **Judges 13:3-5**

And the angel of the LORD [YHWH] appeared to the woman and said to her, “Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.”

So, just like Samson and Samuel, John was set apart for God from the moment he was conceived.

## **John's Ministry**

John began his ministry in the wilderness, where he ate locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6). John's teachings were very similar to the prophets of old. He instructed the leaders of Israel to “**bear fruit in keeping with repentance**” (Matthew 3:8). He told the common people to care for the poor (Luke 3:11), and to conduct their business with honesty and integrity (Luke 3:12-14). As Luke recorded:

### **Luke 3:10-14**

And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

It is noteworthy that John's teachings were effective at converting tax collectors and soldiers. Israel was under Roman rule at this time, which religious Jews greatly resented. The soldiers were the people who enforced this Roman rule, and tax collectors were the people who collected money in order to keep the Roman empire going. Also, both tax collectors and soldiers in Israel were frequently Jews who the Romans had hired (John R. Donahue, "Tax Collectors and Sinners: An Attempt at Identification, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol. 33, No. 1 [January 1971], p. 48; Gary Manning, Jr. "Soldiers in the Gospels" [www.biola.edu](http://www.biola.edu)), so they were probably seen as traitors to the Jewish people (American Bible Society, "Tax Collecting During the Roman Rule" <https://bibleresources.americanbible.org>). Both tax collectors and soldiers were despised (Luke 18:11; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.5.3-4), but John was still preaching to them, and convincing them to turn back to God along with everybody else. Yeshua did much the same thing; he preached to sinners and tax collectors, and even called some of them to be his own disciples (Mark 2:13-15). In defense of this practice, Yeshua said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 1:17). John's reason for preaching to outcast sinners was likely the same. This calling of sinners is also reminiscent of what God said through the prophet Isaiah:

### **Isaiah 42:16**

And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them.

In addition to giving moral teachings, John also warned that God would bring judgment upon the unfruitful (Matthew 3:10, 12), and he prophesied that the Messiah was coming (Luke 3:15-16). He urged people to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2).

One thing that John was particularly famous for was *baptizing*, immersing people in water when they accepted his message. People came to John to be baptized in the Jordan river (Mark 1:5). John did not invent baptism; it was practiced by a number of Jewish groups of the time, including the Pharisees (m. Eduyot 5:2) and the Essenes (Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 2.8.5; 1QS III.9). Baptism was a sign of admission into the group; a baptized person was considered to be a disciple who had repented from his sins and was now learning God's ways (1QS II.26-III.5). John, however, placed special emphasis on the baptismal process, as scholar Craig Keener notes:

Those joining the Essene sect were also baptized during their initiation, and this immersion also offers an analogy. But this baptism did not have the same force as that of John's baptism or that of Jesus' disciples. For the Essenes, it was simply the first of many purification rituals, and only a small component of the process of joining the sect. For John and Jesus' movement, a single, emphatic baptism itself represented a transition to the new life.

- Craig Keener, "Baptism," NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible

The historian Josephus also commented on John's "baptism of repentance." He said:

[John] commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness.

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2

For John, baptism was a symbol of repentance; it symbolized a commitment to turning away from sin, and following God's ways for the rest of one's life. Yeshua himself was baptized by John (Matthew 3:13). As Yeshua approached John at the Jordan river, John declared, "[Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!](#)" (John 1:29).

To learn more about baptism, we recommend our teaching, [What is Baptism?](#)

Although John taught things that were difficult to hear, it seems that his message was well-received by the common people. There were many who came to him, confessed their sins, and were baptized (Matthew 3:6). John had his own disciples, who were loyal to him and his teachings (Mark 2:18; Luke 7:19; Acts 19:1-6). The gospels uphold John as a prophet sent from God (John 1:6; Matthew 3:3), and they regard him as a credible voice in support of Yeshua (Matthew 3:14). During John's life, people wondered if he could be the Messiah (Luke 3:15; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2), and after his death, many wondered if Yeshua was actually John in a resurrected body (Mark 8:27-28; Matthew 14:1-2)! The historian Josephus, who was not even born until after John was dead, still knew who John was. He said that John was a "good man" who "commanded the Jews to exercise virtue." (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2). Clearly, John's ministry had a powerful effect on the people of his day.

However, John's favor with the people was seen as a threat by those in power, especially the ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas. Herod had divorced his wife in order to marry the wife of his brother (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5.1), and John criticized him for this immoral marriage (Mark 6:18). Herod was afraid that John might use his influence with the people to lead a revolt (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2), so he had John arrested and put in prison (Mark 6:17). However, John still had contact with his disciples when he was in prison (Luke 7:19), and likely continued to preach from his cell.

While John was in prison, he heard about how Yeshua's ministry was going, and he sent him a message. As Matthew recorded:

#### **Matthew 11:2-6**

[Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus \[Yeshua\] answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."](#)

Like Peter did when Yeshua was on trial (Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75), John was having doubts about Yeshua being the Messiah. John had prophesied that Yeshua would "[gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire](#)" (Matthew 3:12). Herod Antipas, the wicked ruler who had imprisoned John, would have been considered one of the "chaff." Surely the Messiah would overthrow Herod, establish a righteous kingdom, and release John from prison! But Yeshua was not doing any of that. So, John was wondering whether he had backed the wrong person. Was Yeshua going to fulfill his Messianic destiny, or should John be looking for someone else? Yeshua responded by listing the miracles he had been performing, which were signs that he was the Messiah (e.g., Malachi 4:2; Psalm 147:2-3; Isaiah 29:18; 35:4-6). He encouraged John to stay faithful even in the midst of persecution.

Eventually, Herod's wife—the woman whose marriage to Herod John had criticized—convinced Herod

to have John executed. She sent her daughter, who was also Herod's niece, to entertain the king on his birthday, and after Herod promised that he would give the girl whatever she wanted, she requested to have John's head on a platter. Herod reluctantly honored his word, and had John beheaded (Mark 6:21-28). Even though John was disgracefully executed, John's disciples did manage to recover his body, and the great teacher and prophet did at least receive a proper burial (Mark 6:29).

## John's Influence

What was the significance of John's ministry? As we mentioned, John had great influence among the people, and he convinced many to repent and be baptized. He was often compared to the prophet Elijah (e.g., Matthew 11:13-14; 17:12-13), and indeed, John's life paralleled Elijah's in many ways. Both John and Elijah wore a hairy garment with a leather belt (2 Kings 1:8; Mark 1:6); both went out into the wilderness (1 Kings 19:4; Luke 1:80); both of them urged people to repent and devote themselves to God (1 Kings 18:18, 21; Matthew 3:1-2); both of them rebuked a king for his sin (1 Kings 18:17-18; Mark 6:18); and both of them were persecuted by a wicked queen (1 Kings 19:1-3; Mark 6:19). However, the most significant connection between John and Elijah comes through a prophecy that was given by Malachi:

### Malachi 4:5-6

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD [YHWH] comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.

Elijah and John both paved the way for greater things to come. Elijah was succeeded by his disciple, Elisha, who received a "double portion" of Elijah's spirit (2 Kings 2:9, 15); John was succeeded by the Messiah himself, Yeshua. John said that he wasn't even worthy to carry the Messiah's shoes (Matthew 3:11), but he moved the hearts of the people, preparing them to receive the message that Yeshua gave. In doing this, John also fulfilled another prophecy (Matthew 11:10) from Isaiah, which said:

### Isaiah 40:3-5

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD [YHWH]; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD [YHWH] shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD [YHWH] has spoken."

John prepared the way of YHWH, so that YHWH's glory could be revealed. How did John do this? By teaching the people to turn back to God and to his ways. John "ploughed the field," so-to-speak, so that Yeshua could plant it. When Yeshua arrived on the scene, his ministry picked up right where John's had left off (Mark 1:14-15), even using the same phrasing as John: "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**" (Matthew 4:17). However, Yeshua went on to "fulfill" the laws of God (Matthew 5:17), not only teaching *that* they should be kept, but *how* they should be interpreted (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44; 6:2, 5, 16; 7:12, 28-29), and revealing God's glory in the process (John 17:4; 2 Corinthians 3:9-11, 14, 18). As the apostle Paul said:

### 2 Corinthians 3:9-11

For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far

exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

Of course, Yeshua revealed even more of God's glory when he died and was resurrected (1 Peter 1:21; Romans 6:4; Philippians 2:8-11). John's preaching helped prepare the way for Yeshua to reveal the glory of God.

## **Lessons From John's Life**

What are some lessons we can learn from the life of John the Baptist? Here are three to consider.

First, John provides us with a great example of humility. John was a special person. John's birth was miraculous, his coming was prophesied, and God gave him the holy spirit before he was even born. But John did not allow all of that to go to his head. He acknowledged that God had bigger plans than just what he was doing with John, and he humbly admitted that Yeshua "must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). When Yeshua arrived, John did not exalt himself or try to compete with the Messiah. In the same way, we should yield to God's will, even if it does not bring us personal glory. Instead, like John, we should always prepare the way for *God's* glory to be revealed.

Another thing that we can learn from John's life is similar to a lesson we learn from all of Yeshua's disciples: that is, we will all have times that we struggle to keep our faith. Just like John questioned Yeshua while he was in prison, and Peter denied Yeshua while Yeshua was facing trial, we will all have times that we question our faith in God. None of us are immune to the persecution and pressure of the world. But, when we are struggling, we can take comfort in Yeshua's words:

### **John 16:33**

...In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

Finally, an important lesson we can learn from John is simply the content of his teachings. There is a reason that all four gospels begin with the teachings of John the Baptist. We need to understand John's message, so that we can accept Christ's message. And what is John's message? That God's judgment, and his kingdom, are coming, so we should turn back to God, devote ourselves to him, and walk in his ways. If we have no desire to follow God, then the words of Yeshua aren't going to mean much to us. As it says in Hebrews:

### **Hebrews 11:6**

...whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Once we have this desire to follow God in our hearts, we can begin to accept what Yeshua's teachings really mean for us. We can also more fully appreciate what Yeshua's work on the cross provides. John's call was to the despised, the outcast, and the sinner; that they should repent and draw near to God. Today, let us also heed John's call: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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1) FB banner text (Short sentence or two)

The Biblical Profile of the John the Baptist.

2) Viral graphic text. (Something thought provoking)

3) A short summary of the teaching for the Vimeo description

Join us as we take a look at the entire Biblical and historical profile of John the Baptist. Who was he?

How did he get his name? What role did he play in Scripture?

4) Short Quotes for Twitter or Graphics

Just like John questioned Yeshua while he was in prison, and Peter denied Yeshua while Yeshua was facing trial, we will all have times that we question our faith in God

5) Include keywords, longer description, and some key scripture verses

Biblical and Historical Profile, John the Baptist, miracle birth, prophecy, who was John the Baptist?,

why was John called the Baptist?, Malachi 4:5-6, Isaiah 40:3-5