

Two Questions about John the Baptist

Introduction

One of the key figures in the New Testament is John the Baptist. For one thing, Scripture tells us that John the Baptist fulfilled the Old Testament prophesy, about the one who would “prepare the way of the Lord”:

Matthew 3:1-3 (ESV):

¹ In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”

In addition, John the Baptist is the very *first* person to identify Jesus as the promised Messiah, in the Gospel of John:

John 1:29 (ESV):

²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

However, there are a few rather “confusing” items about John the Baptist - i.e., items that don’t seem to “add up”. Two such items are listed in Luke chapter 7:

Luke 7:18-23, 28-30 (ESV):

¹⁸ The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, ¹⁹calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ²⁰And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” ²¹In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²²And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. ²³And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

²⁸I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” ²⁹(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, ³⁰ but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)

There are two specific *questions* that arise about John the Baptist, from the above passage:

Question 1: Why did John ask: “Are you the one who is to come”?

In verses 18 and 19 of the above passage, John instructs his followers to ask Jesus if he is the “one who is to come” - i.e., if Jesus is the Messiah. On the face of it, that doesn’t make sense to me - because after all,

John, *himself*, explicitly *identified* Jesus as the Messiah! So, what's going on here - *why* does John want his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah, when John *already knows* that Jesus is the Messiah?

I can see three *potential* reasons, for why John would have his disciples ask Jesus if he is the Messiah.

Possible reason #1: At the time that John asked that question, he was being held prisoner by Herod. As it turns out, John never got out of that prison - because Herod murdered him while he was imprisoned. Needless to say, being held prisoner - and never knowing when you will be killed - is a very depressing and stressful situation to be in.

So, one *possible* reason why John asked that question is that he simply wanted to "lift his spirits". In other words, perhaps John wanted Jesus to confirm he was the Messiah, so that John could get a "morale boost". Certainly, receiving confirmation that the Messiah is *currently* on the earth, performing miracles, is extremely comforting news.

Possible reason #2: John was very well aware that once Jesus began his ministry, John's *own* ministry would diminish. In fact, in John 3:30, John explicitly told his followers: "He [Jesus] must *increase*, but I must *decrease*." So, apparently John knew that once Jesus "came on the scene", people should start following Jesus - *rather* than following him.

Of course, we can see in Scripture that John had a dedicated group of followers of his own - and presumably, those followers were very loyal to him. So, it seems likely that John's followers would *not* want to "abandon" him - and start following Jesus - even after John was thrown in prison.

As a result, John *might* have told his followers to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah, because he knew that that question would "prompt" Jesus to perform many miracles, *in the presence* of John's followers. Those miracles would then provide *firsthand* evidence to John's followers, that Jesus is God's chosen Messiah - and that, in turn, would (presumably) cause them to start following Jesus.

In other words, John *may* have asked Jesus that question, in order to try to convince his followers to **start following Jesus** - *rather* than following him.

Possible reason #3: One of the beliefs that some Jews have held - both in ancient times, and currently - is that there will be **two separate Messiahs**, rather than just one Messiah. Basically, this view states that the *first* Messiah would be the "Messiah son of Joseph", who would suffer and die for his people. Then, the *second* Messiah would be the "Messiah son of David", who would conquer the earth, and restore the kingdom to Israel. A concise description of this "two Messiahs" doctrine can be found here: <http://www.chaim.org/2messiah.htm>

This "two Messiahs" belief dates back to at least the second century *before* Christ. As a result, it is *possible* that John the Baptist was familiar with that doctrine.

So, if John *was* familiar with the "two Messiahs" doctrine, then he *might* have been asking Jesus this, when he asked Jesus if he is "the one who is to come":

"Jesus, I know that you are the Messiah son of Joseph. However, are you **also** the Messiah son of David - or do we have to wait for *someone else* to come along, to fulfill that role?"

Question 2: What does “The least in the kingdom is greater than he” mean?

In Luke 7:28, Jesus makes this statement, about John the Baptist: “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

That is a rather cryptic statement to me. What, *exactly*, does Jesus mean, when he says that John is “greater” than those “born of women”? And even more importantly, what does he mean when he says the one who is “least in the kingdom” is “greater” than John?

First, let’s see if we can determine what the adjective “greater” means, in this context. In other words, what qualities make a person “great”, according to Jesus?

Matthew 23:11-12 (ESV):

¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Mark 9:33-35 (ESV):

³³ And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”

Luke 22:24-27 (ESV):

²⁴ A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵ And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶ But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. ²⁷ For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

In the above passages, Jesus states that the quality that makes a person “great” is his willingness to serve others - and to serve God.

In addition, Jesus links serving others to being humble. In other words, it appears that being a servant requires *humility* - i.e., the quality of humility is a “prerequisite” for being a good servant.

John the Baptist certainly served others, and served God - he baptized and preached to the people, in order to “prepare the way of the Lord”. In addition, John reproved Herod for the evil he had done, even though that caused Herod to imprison - and eventually kill - him. In other words, John was such a dedicated servant, that he did the will of God - even though it cost him his life.

John also displayed extraordinary humility. As mentioned above, John did *not* try to exalt his own ministry - on the contrary, in John 3:30 he states that Jesus’ ministry must increase, and his must decrease. In addition, John refers to Jesus as someone who is *much* greater than he is - in fact, in Luke 3:16, John states that he is not even worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals.

So, John the Baptist certainly appears to fulfill Jesus’ requirements for being “great”.

Next, let's see if we can determine what the phrases "born of women" and "in the kingdom" mean.

In the first half of John chapter 3, Jesus has a very interesting conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus. Here is an excerpt of that conversation:

John 3:3-8 (ESV):

³Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Jesus appears to be referring to two *different* "types" of birth here: The birth "of the flesh", and the birth "of the Spirit". In addition, he states that a person who is born "of the flesh" *cannot* enter the kingdom of God.

From the context, it appears that the birth "of the flesh" refers to our "natural" births, to our human mothers. The birth "of the Spirit" is something entirely different, of course.

Paul also refers to the concept that people who are born "of the flesh" *cannot* inherit the kingdom:

1 Corinthians 15:50 (ESV):

⁵⁰I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

In addition, Paul refers to a distinction between "natural" (or fleshly) bodies, and "spiritual" bodies:

1 Corinthians 15:42-44 (ESV):

⁴²So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. ⁴⁴It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

So, the birth "of the Spirit" appears to refer to being given *spiritual bodies*. In other words, a person becomes completely "born of the Spirit", *when* he receives a spiritual body.

Note: so far, there is only *one* person who has been *completely* born of the Spirit - and that one person is, of course, Jesus.

Here is Jesus' statement about John the Baptist in Luke 7:28 again: "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

From all of the above information, I understand the following about that statement:

- When Jesus uses the phrase “among those **born of women**“, he is referring to people who have **natural bodies**.

- When Jesus uses the phrase “the least **in the kingdom**“, he is referring to people who have **spiritual bodies**.

If the above assertions are true, then it seems to me that a paraphrase of Luke 7:28 could be expressed this way:

“Among all of the people who have **natural bodies**, no one has *ever* served God as wholeheartedly as John did. However, *everyone* who obtains a **spiritual body** will serve God even *more* wholeheartedly than John did.”

Note: a document which discusses the differences between “natural” bodies and “spiritual” bodies can be found here: http://ncbf.homestead.com/Natural_Bodies_vs_Spiritual_Bodies.pdf