

Exegetical Notes, John 1:19-28
“The Troubling Appearance of J the B”

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John 1:19-28

Verse 19

Now this was John’s testimony when the Jews in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.

- The "John" mentioned here is known to us as John the Baptist or, more accurately, John the Baptizer. He was so called because he baptized people in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.
- John's appearance caused a stir among the religious leaders (the Sanhedrin, the Council of Elders) in Jerusalem. They heard about him and dispatched an official delegation to find out who John was.
- This official delegation was composed of members of the Levitical order, the tribe set aside to serve Israel as priests.
- They came to ask John who he was because they thought he might lay claim to the title of "Messiah" in Hebrew or "Christ" in Greek.

Verses 20-22

²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.”²¹ They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

- John knew their expectation -- that he would claim to be the Messiah. So he told them openly and emphatically that he was not the Messiah.
- They then asked if he was Elijah? According to 2 Kings 2:11, the prophet Elijah had been taken into the kingdom of Heaven without dying. Since he did not die, the Jews considered that Elijah was still alive and would return to earth to announce "the great and dreadful day of the Lord." See Malachi 4:5. John said that he was not the prophet Elijah. Later, Jesus will say that John "was the Elijah who was to come." See Matthew 11:14, 17:10-13. This seems to be contradictory since John says that he was not Elijah but Jesus says that

he was. However, John is a Greek thinker. For Greek thinkers reason is not always on the surface but sometimes requires deeper probing to be discovered. Literally speaking, John the Baptist is not the Old Testament prophet Elijah. So he responds to the delegation's literal question literally. The delegation does not probe the literal reality for deeper meaning. So they accept the literal answer John the Baptist gives without pressing for anything deeper. Therefore, they miss the deeper reality. While John is not literally Elijah, he is the one come in the "spirit of Elijah." It is this deeper truth to which Jesus speaks.

- In the Gospel of John this literal question/literal answer game will be played over and over. John is showing his readers that truth is found by probing not simply on the surface of things. It is only through the probing that the true spiritual reality can be seen. He is inviting his reader to look deeper.
- The delegation then wants to know if John is "the prophet." In Deuteronomy 18:15, 18, Moses promises to raise up a "prophet like Moses" from among the people to guide them. Again, John emphatically denies that he is this prophet.
- Throughout the dialogue John's answers are emphatic and become increasingly terse. It appears that he becomes frustrated because the delegation is unwilling to look deeper, but only wants to stay on the surface of the issue. They demand to know who John claims to be.

Verses 23

²³ *John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"*

- John responded to their direct question by quoting Isaiah 40:3. He says that he is the voice of one crying in the wilderness that the Lord is coming and that people should prepare the way for him.
- This is another invitation for them to ask him what he means. But the members of the official delegation fail to engage. They will not look deeper to discover the truth. They are content or not content to stay on the surface.

Verses 24

²⁴ *Now the Pharisees who had been sent* ²⁵ *questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"*

- Among those sent with the delegation were some "Pharisees." These men were probably not of the Levitical order. They were conservative religious thinkers who gave themselves to living with the Law of Moses. They see that John is inviting deeper dialogue and so engage him. "If you are not one of these persons," they ask, "why are you baptizing?" They are willing to look deeper than the surface to find truth.

Verses 26-28

²⁶ "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

- John uses the question as an opportunity to do what he has been sent to do. He points everyone's attention to "the greater one," Jesus, who is among them. But they still do not engage. They drop the subject. They do not ask who this "greater one is." They refuse to look below the surface to discover truth and consequently miss the truth. They go home frustrated because they will not go deeper than the surface.
- This first encounter occurred in the "other" Bethany. This town is not the Bethany where Lazarus lived with his sisters, Mary and Martha. That Bethany was just two miles outside of Jerusalem. This is another town with the same name located across the Jordan on the east side.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Troubling Appearance of Jesus the B*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen*. They are used here by permission.)