

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
1:19-28

19. And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who are you? 20. And he confessed, and denied not, but confessed, I am not the Christ. 21. And they asked him, What then? Are you Elijah? And he said, I am not. Are you that prophet? And he answered, No. 22. Then said they unto him, Who are you? that we may give an answer to them who sent us. What do you say about yourself? 23. He said, I *am* the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the LORD, as said the prophet Isaiah. 24. And they who were sent were of the Pharisees. 25. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, neither that prophet? 26. John answered them, saying, I baptize with water, but there stands one among you, whom ye know not. 27. He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to unloose. 28. These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.

19.--[*This is the record.*] The Greek word translated "record," is the same that is rendered "witness" in the 7th verse. The sentence means, "this is the testimony that John bore."

[*When.*] This word raises the question, "At what time was this testimony of John borne?" It appears to have been after our Lord Jesus Christ's baptism, and at the end of His forty days' temptation in the wilderness. The 29th verse tells us that "the next day John seeth Jesus coming to him." It is worthy of notice that nowhere in the Gospels do we find "days" so carefully marked as in that portion of the first chapter of St. John which we have now begun.

[*The Jews.*] This expression is remarkable, as peculiar to St. John's Gospel. He generally speaks of our Lord's enemies and questioners as "the Jews." It seems to indicate that St. John did not write his Gospel in Palestine or at Jerusalem, and that it was written especially for the Gentile Christians scattered over the world, and much later than the other three Gospels.

[*Sent priests and Levites...Jerusalem.*] These words show that those who questioned John the Baptist on this occasion were a formal deputation sent with authority from the Sanhedrim, or ecclesiastical council of the Jews, to inquire about John's proceedings, and to report what he taught and whom he gave himself out to be.

Wordsworth remarks, that "More honour was paid by the Jews to John than to Christ, both in the persons sent and in the place from which they were sent. They esteemed John for his sacerdotal lineage." When Christ

appeared, they called Him the Carpenter's son. Our Lord refers to this great respect at first shown to John when He says, "Ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light." (John v.35.)

[*To ask him, Who are you?*] We can hardly suppose that these priests and Levites were ignorant that John was the son of a priest, Zacharias, and therefore a Levite himself. Their inquiry seems to refer to John's office. "What did he profess to be? Did he assume to be the Messiah? Did he claim to be a prophet? What reason could he assign for his having taken up his remarkable position as a preacher and a baptizer at a distance from Jerusalem? What account could he give of himself and his ministry?"

Two things are plainly taught in this verse. One is the great sensation which John the Baptist's ministry caused throughout Palestine. He attracted so much notice, and such crowds following him, that the Sanhedrim felt it necessary to inquire about him. The other is the state of expectation in which the minds of the Jews were at this particular season. Partly from the seventy weeks of Daniel having expired, partly from the sceptre having practically departed from Judah, there was evidently an expectation that some remarkable person was about to appear. As to the sort of person the Jews expected, it is plain that they only looked for a temporal King, who would make them once more an independent nation. They had no idea of a spiritual Saviour from sin. But as to the fact that this vague expectation existed throughout the East at this particular time, we have the direct testimony of Latin historians. The extraordinary ministry of John the Baptist at once suggested the idea to the Jews at Jerusalem that he might possibly be the expected Redeemer. Therefore they sent to ask, "Who are you? Are you the long expected King?"

20.--[*He confessed...denied not...confessed, etc.*] This is a peculiar form of speech, implying a very positive, unmistakable, emphatic asseveration. It gives the idea of a man shrinking with holy indignation from the very thought of being regarded as the Christ: "Pain me not by suggesting that such a one as I can be the Christ of God. I am one far inferior to Him."

Bengel says on this verse, "Whilst John denied himself, he did not deny Christ." Luther makes some excellent remarks on the strong temptation which was here put in John's way to take honour to himself, and the humility and faith which he showed in overcoming it.

21.--[*Are you Elijah?*] This question was not an absurd and unnatural one, as some commentators have thought fit to say. It was based upon that prophecy of Malachi which speaks of God "sending Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord." (Mal. iv.5.) The manner, dress, and ministry of John the Baptist, as well as his appearing in the wilderness, constituted a great similarity between him and Elijah and suggested the idea that John might possibly be Elijah. "If this man," thought the priests and Levites, "is not the Christ, perhaps he is His forerunner, the prophet Elijah."

[*And he said, I am not.*] This answer of John deserves particular notice

and involves a grave difficulty. How could John say, "I am not Elijah," when Christ says distinctly in another place, "This is Elijah." How shall we reconcile these two statements? To me it seems impossible to explain John's words except on the simple theory that there are two comings of Elijah the prophet. The first was only a coming in spirit and in power, but not a literal coming. The second will be a literal and real appearance on earth of him whom Elisha saw taken up into heaven. The first coming took place at Christ's first advent, and was fulfilled by John the Baptist going before Messiah's face in the spirit and power of Elijah. The second coming of Elijah will take place at the second advent of Jesus Christ, and will be fulfilled by Elijah himself once more coming as a prophet to the tribes of Israel.

It is of this second, future, literal coming of Elijah that John speaks in this place. When he says, "I am not Elijah," he means, "I am not that Elijah you mean, who was taken up to heaven 900 years ago. The coming of that Elijah is yet a future thing. I am the forerunner of the first advent in humiliation, not of the second advent in glory. I am not the herald of Christ coming to reign, as Elijah will be one day, but the herald of Christ coming to suffer on the cross. I am not come to prepare the way for a conquering King, such as you fondly expect, but for a meek and lowly Saviour, whose great work is to bear our sins and to die. I am not the Elijah you expect.

In confirmation of this view, our Lord's remarkable words in another Gospel ought to be carefully studied. He says distinctly, "Elijah truly shall first come and restore all things." (Matt. xvii.11.) And yet He adds in the same breath, "I say unto you that Elijah is come already." That is, "He is come, in a certain sense, by John the Baptist going before my face in the spirit and power of Elijah." In short, our Lord says at the same time, "Elijah shall come," and "Elijah is come!" To me His words seem a plain proof of the theory I am here maintaining, that there are two comings of Elijah. In *spirit* Elijah came when John the Baptist came, a man like to Elijah in mind and habits. But in the *flesh* Elijah has not yet come, and is yet to appear. And it was in the view of this future, literal coming, that John the Baptist said, "I am not Elijah." He knew that the Jews were thinking of the times of Messiah's glory and of the literal coming of Elijah, which would usher in those times. Therefore he says, "I am not the Elijah you mean. I belong to a different dispensation."

The other view, which is undoubtedly maintained by the vast majority of commentators, appears to me surrounded with insuperable difficulties. According to them, there never was to be more than one fulfilment of Malachi's prophecy about Elijah. It was to be fulfilled by John the Baptist; and when he appeared, it had received its full accomplishment. How John the Baptist's answer in this place can be satisfactorily explained, according to this theory, I am quite unable to see. The Jews ask him plainly whether he is Elijah; that is, whether he is the person who is to fulfil Malachi's prophecy. This, at any rate, was evidently the idea in their minds. He answers distinctly that he is not. And yet according to the theory against which I contend, he *was* Elijah, and he ought to have

replied, "I am." In short, he appears to say that which is not true! There never was to be anyone after him who was to fulfil Malachi's prophecy, and yet he declares in effect that he does not fulfil it by saying that he is not Elijah!

About the future literal coming of Elijah the prophet, when the Jews will at last see a living person who will say, "I am Elijah," this is not the place to speak. Whether or not he will minister to any but the Jews, whether or not he will prove one of the two witnesses spoken of in Revelation xi.3, are interesting and disputed questions. I will only remark that the subject deserves far more attention than it ordinarily receives.

The following quotations from the Fathers will show that the opinion I have expressed is not a modern one.

Chrysostom, on Matt. xvii.10, says, "As there are two comings of Christ,--first, to suffer,--secondly, to judge; so there are two comings of Elijah; first of John before Christ's first coming, who is called Elijah because he came in the manner and spirit of Elijah; secondly, of the person of Elijah, the Tishbite, before Christ's second coming." Jerome and Theophylact say just the same.

Gregory, quoted by Mayer, says, "Whereas John denieth himself to be Elijah, and Christ after affirmeth it, there is no contradiction. There is a double coming of Elijah. The one is in spirit, before Christ's coming to redeem; the other in person, before Christ's coming to judgment. According to the first, Christ's saying is true, 'This is Elijah.' According to the second, John's speech is true, 'I am not.' This was the fittest answer to men asking in a carnal sense.

Augustine says, "What John was to the first advent, Elijah will be to the second advent. As there are two advents, so there are two heralds."

[*Are you that prophet?*] There are two views of this question. Some think, as Augustine and Gregory, that the words should be as our marginal reading has them, "Art thou a prophet?" Others think, as Cyril and Chrysostom, that the question referred to "the prophet" of whom Moses foretold that he would come. (Deut. xviii.15.) I decidedly prefer the latter view. It seems very improbable that John the Baptist would entirely deny that he was a prophet. Besides this, it seems not unreasonable that the Jews would ask whether he was "the great prophet foretold by Moses." And to this question, John answers most truly, that he was not. It admits of doubt whether the Jews who questioned him clearly saw that the "prophet like unto Moses" and the "Messiah" were to be one and the same. It rather looks as if they thought "Christ" and "the prophet" were two different persons.

Lightfoot thinks that the question refers to a common expectation among the Jews, that the prophets were to rise again at the coming of Messiah, and that John's questioners meant, "Are you one of the prophets raised from the dead?" This superstitious notion explains the words of the disciples in

Luke: "Others say that one of the old prophets is risen again." (Luke ix.19.) But the Greek article in the words before us seems to me too strong to be rendered "a prophet."

22.--[*An answer to them that sent us.*] This expression confirms the opinion already given about the character of those who questioned John. They were not idle inquirers, but a formal deputation sent down from the Sanhedrim at Jerusalem with a commission to find out who John was, and to make a report of what they discovered.

23.--[*He said, I am the voice, etc.*] John the Baptist's account of himself in this verse consists of a reference to Scripture. He reminds the priests and Levites who wanted to know who he was, of Isaiah's prophecy concerning the times of the Messiah. (Isaiah xl.3.) They would there find Isaiah saying, with the abruptness of an inspired prophet, and speaking as if he saw what he was describing, "The voice of Him that crieth in the wilderness!" That means, "I hear in spirit, as I look forward to Messiah's time, a man crying in a wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord." "That prophecy," says John the Baptist, "is this day fulfilled in me. I am the person whom Isaiah saw and heard in vision. I am come to prepare the way for Messiah, like a man going before a king in a desert country to prepare a road for his master. I am come to make ready the barren hearts of the Jewish nation for Christ's first advent and the kingdom of God. I am only a voice. I do not come to work miracles. I do not want disciples to follow me, but my Master. The object of my mission is to be a herald, a crier, a warning voice to my fellow-countrymen, so that when my Master begins His ministry they may not be found unprepared."

[*The wilderness.*] The common view of this expression is that it refers to John the Baptist's ministry having begun in the wilderness of Judæa. I rather doubt the correctness of this idea. The whole quotation is undeniably figurative. The prophet compares Messiah's forerunner to one preparing a road for a King through a desert or uninhabited country. The "way" or road is unquestionably figurative, and the straightness of the way too. No one supposes that Isaiah meant that John the Baptist was literally to make a road. But if the "way" is figurative, the country through which it is made must surely be figurative too. I therefore think that the wilderness is a prophetic and figurative description of the spiritual barrenness of Israel when the Messiah's forerunner began his ministry. At the same time, I fully admit that John's retired and ascetic habits and his residence in the wilderness form a remarkable coincidence with the text.

The expression "voice," has often been remarked as a beautiful illustration of the general character of John's ministry. He was eminently a humble man. He was one who desired to be *heard*, and to awaken attention by the sound of this testimony, but not to be *seen* or visibly honoured.

24.--[*And they...sent...Pharisees.*] The object of this verse is somewhat doubtful. Some think that it refers to the verse preceding, which contains a quotation from Isaiah. They which were sent being Pharisees, and not Sadducees or Herodians, should have seen and admitted the Scriptural

character of John's mission. Some think, as Bengel, that it refers to the following verse, in which a question was raised about baptism. They which were sent, being Pharisees, were specially strict about ceremonies, ordinances, and forms. Therefore they were not satisfied with a reference to Scripture. They asked John's authority for baptizing. Some think that it refers generally to the notorious enmity and dislike with which the Pharisees regarded John the Baptist all through his ministry. Our Lord says in another place, "They rejected the counsel of God, not being baptized of him." (Luke vii.30.) The text before us would then mean, that they which asked all these questions asked them with a thoroughly unfriendly spirit, and with no real desire to learn God's truth, because they were Pharisees.

25.--[*Why then do you baptize if you be not, etc.*] This verse evidently implies that John's questioners expected the Messiah, or his forerunner, to baptize whenever he appeared. It is not unlikely, as Lightfoot says, that the idea arose from the text in Ezekiel, describing Messiah's time, "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean," etc. (Ezek. xxxvi.24.)

Luther thinks that this verse shows that the questioners who came to John now changed their tone. Hitherto they had flattered. Now they began to threaten.

One thing is very clear from this verse. The Jews were not unacquainted with baptism as a religious ordinance. It was one of the ceremonies, according to Lightfoot, by which proselytes were admitted into the Jewish Church. Moreover it is worthy of notice, that when proselytes were so admitted, their children were baptized together with them. It was not therefore the fact of John baptizing which the Pharisees here called in question, but his authority for administering baptism.

26.--[*I baptize with water, but, etc.*] The answer of John the Baptist here reported is very elliptical, and the full meaning of what he said must be supplied from other places. He seems to say, "I do not baptize by my own authority, but by a commission from One far higher than either you or I. I only baptize with water, and I do not do it to make disciples for myself, but for my master. I form no party. I ask no man to follow me. I tell all whom I baptize to believe on that Mighty One who is coming after me. I am only the servant of One far greater than myself, who is even now standing among you, if you had eyes to see Him. He is one so much above me in nature and dignity, that I am not worthy to be his humblest servant. He can baptize hearts, and will fulfil the promises about Messiah to which you are vaguely referring. In the meantime, I only baptize with water all those who profess repentance and willingness to receive my Master. I baptize for another and not for myself."

[*There stands One among you.*] I doubt whether these words literally mean, "There is standing in the crowd of you, my hearers." I prefer the sense, "There is already *living* and abiding among you, in this land of Judæa, One greater than I." I think this to be the sense, because of the words in the

29th verse, "John seeth Jesus coming to him," which seem to imply that he was not with him the previous day. The thought seems parallel to that contained in the words, "The kingdom of God comes not with observation." "The messenger of God comes suddenly to his temple." (Mal. iii.1; Luke xvii.20.) All serve to point to the same truth: viz., that when Messiah came the first time, He came quietly, without noise, without display, without the nation of the Jews knowing it; so that He "stood among them," and yet they were not aware of His presence.

The Greek word rendered "stands" is in the perfect tense, and would be literally rendered, "there hath stood;" that is, "hath stood for some little time, and is still standing." The Messiah has come and is present. Bengel renders it, "hath taken His stand."

The view I have maintained of the meaning of the word "stands," is held by Parkhurst, who defines it as "being or living," and quotes John vi.22 as a parallel instance. Pearce takes the same view, and quotes Acts xxvi.22. Jansenius renders it, "has conversed among you, as when He sat among the doctors" in the temple. Aretius renders it, "He is present in the flesh, and walking in Judæa."

[*Ye know not.*] This seems to mean not only that the Jews knew not Jesus the Messiah by sight, but that they had no spiritual knowledge of Him, and of the true nature of His office as the Saviour of sinners. "Ye look for a conquering, reigning Messiah. Ye know not the suffering Messiah, who came to be cut off and to be crucified for sinners."

Bengel remarks that John is here specially "addressing inhabitants of Jerusalem who had not been present at the baptism of Jesus. And he whets their desires that they may be anxious to become acquainted with Him."

27.--[*Coming after...preferred before.*] The remarks made on the 15th verse apply fully to this expression. John declares that though his Master, in point of time, began His ministry after him, in point of dignity He was far above him. To exalt Christ and abase himself seem ideas never long out of John's mind.

[*Sandal strap I am not worthy to unloose.*] This is evidently a proverbial expression. "I am so inferior to Him that came after me, that in comparison with Him, I am like the humblest servant compared to his master." To be not fit to carry a person's shoes, in our times, is a well-known proverb, describing inferiority.

28.--[*These things...done...in Bethabara.*] In hot countries like Palestine, it was evidently important for John the Baptist to be near a supply of water suited to the baptism of the multitudes who came to him. If Beth-barah, spoken of in Gideon's history, is the same place, it is worthy of notice that it is specially mentioned as near "waters." (Judges vii.24.)

The name of the place ought always to be dear to the hearts of Christians.

It is the place where the first disciples of Jesus were made, and the foundation of the Christian Church was laid. It was here, "the next day," that Jesus was publicly proclaimed as the "Lamb of God." It was here, "the day after," that Andrew and another disciple followed Jesus. Here then the Church of Christ, properly so called, began.

In leaving this passage, let us remember that John the Baptist's ministry left the Jews entirely without excuse, when afterwards they refused to believe on Christ. They could never plead that our Lord's ministry came on them unawares and took them by surprise. The whole nation dwelling in Palestine, from the great ecclesiastical Council down to the humblest classes, were evidently aroused to a state of attention by John's doings.