

Did John Know Jesus?

John's Gospel does not give a narrative of the baptism of Jesus at all. He is explaining John the Baptist's defense of his ministry to the Sadducees and the Pharisees. John also explains the purpose of the Baptist's ministry: to identify the Son of God "in order that he might be revealed to Israel" (Jn 1:32). The question before us is: Did John know Jesus at all? Did he know what Jesus looked like? Did he know who Jesus was, a member of his own family, but did not know he was Messiah? What about Matthew's Gospel? John does seem to know Jesus and knows Jesus is the Messiah, therefore John does not want to baptize Him. (Matt 3:14)

Our problem begins with the translation found in the KJV: "And I *knew* him not..." (Jn 1:31 and 1:33). To English readers, this suggests that John had no knowledge of Jesus at all. This seems highly unlikely when we consider the events surrounding his birth. John's parents were commanded by Gabriel to commit John to a Nazarite vow at birth, excluding him from his inherited right as a priest. His mission was clearly stated by Gabriel, "He who will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Lu 1:17). There is Elizabeth's statement to Mary that the child in Mary's womb is "my Lord." John leaped for joy while still in the womb when he heard this greeting, being filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. (Lu 1:44)

The NASB, and other translations, say "I did not *recognize* Him..." rather than the KJV "*knew* Him not." When we consider the variation in meaning in the word *recognize*, the problem of whether John knew Jesus before His baptism is easier to figure out. When Matthew describes Jesus coming to John, John obviously did know Jesus, though he may actually have never seen Him. His parents would have told him about the marvelous events surrounding his own birth. They would have explained to him why he was under a Nazarite vow from birth, rather than serving as a priest, as was his birthright. How could Zechariah and Elizabeth neglect to tell him that his cousin in Nazareth is the Messiah King? And that John has the privilege of going into the wilderness to introduce Him?

So Matthew is describing a private exchange between two cousins, when John says "I ought to be baptized by you." (Matt 3:14). So if John seems to *recognize*, or *know* who Jesus is, why doesn't he shout to everyone right then "Here he is! My cousin Jesus, *He's* the Messiah! And *I* am going to baptize *Him!*" How could he prove that Jesus, a poor man from a despised town, a Nazarene carpenter, is the promised Messiah of Israel? Does John want to proclaim Jesus as Messiah to the world with nothing other than his knowledge of family history?

Can you imagine the response?

"Oh sure! Your cousin! We're supposed to believe that *this Nazarene* is the Messiah?" John's claim would have looked like a scheme; two cousins colluding to foment a new rebellion against the established order. There had been too many "self proclaimed Messiahs" in Israel. And the Jews had always suffered for it. There is good reason that the Jewish leaders were skeptical and came out to the Jordan to see what John was doing.

When John baptizes Jesus he is not supposed to *recognize* Jesus publicly, though he does *recognize* Him privately. The Lord had told John how Jesus would be revealed as Messiah. The "burden of proof" is not going to rest on John but on the Lord Himself! And this is what Matthew goes on to describe:

After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." (Matt 3:16-17)

This is a clear testimony from Heaven. *Here* is the One that John the Baptist proclaimed would "baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." A testimony verified by the Holy Spirit and God the Father. The descent of the dove at His baptism identified Jesus as the true Messiah, a sign to the

nation Israel and to John's followers. This public sign freed John from the silence that the Lord had imposed on him. He could now publicly introduce Jesus to the world. His first public *recognition* of Jesus, however, is not as the King but as the Lamb. The cross before the crown!

Now look at the context of John 1:19ff.

John is defending his ministry before the religious leaders of Jerusalem. The Gospel writer is describing the meeting that takes place *after* John the Baptist has baptized Jesus. John says emphatically "I am not the Messiah." He is the prophet who comes to introduce the Messiah. The next day, when Jesus returns from his 40 day trial in the wilderness, John points to him and shouts: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29) Then John goes on to explain who this One is, and why he knows for certain that this is the Messiah. He is publicly *recognizing* Him because of what had taken place 40 days before. It is John saying, "There is no doubt as to what we saw and heard. This is the Messiah of Israel!"

"I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water. I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him." (Jn 1:31-32)

"I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God." (Jn 1:33-34)

Look carefully at what John is saying: The reason he is baptizing with water is so that Jesus can be made known as the Messiah to Israel. It is not just because John baptizes Him, it is because of what happens when He is baptized. And the Lord had told him what He was going to do ahead of time: "The Holy Spirit would descend and remain on Him." This is the basis for John's testimony, the visible descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove. Something everyone could see. John does not mention God's voice saying, "This is My beloved Son." But John heard the Father. He can say, "I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God."

John is publicly recognizing and testifying to the world that Jesus is "the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit." He is the One who is the sacrifice for the sins of the world, "the Lamb of God," so that sins can be once and for all forgiven. I think this is the real meaning of the word *know* in this context. It is referring to a public recognition based on facts, testimony and position. Our Congress uses this expression in exactly the same way: "The chairman *recognizes* the Senator from New York." We do not conclude the chairman did not *know* who the Senator was until that moment. Rather, we know it is the *recognition* of the Senator based on his standing in the Senate. The chairman *knows* who he is, and he is being *recognized* publicly.

John the Gospel writer is telling his readers how John the Baptist defends his claim that this "Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah." The confirmation from Heaven is clear. There is no collusion on the part of John and Jesus to "make Jesus Messiah." John does not make any claims about Jesus until it is revealed from the Father, the same Lord that had sent him as the forerunner in the spirit and the power of Elijah—the "voice crying in the wilderness."

[All references *NASB*, unless otherwise noted.]

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