

Question: Who was John the Baptist?

Answer: John the Baptist was the one foretold by the prophet Isaiah that was to come before Jesus to, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” (Isaiah 40:3; Matt 3:3) John was born to a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Zechariah was a priest of the Abijah division, which was the 8th of 24 divisions of priesthood in ancient Judaism (1 Chronicles 24:7-19). Both Elizabeth and Zechariah were devout Jews and according to Luke were, “observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly. But they had no child” (Luke 1:6-7) By Luke’s account, Elizabeth was advanced in years and was considered barren. By lot, Zechariah was chosen one day to practice the priestly services according to his order at the temple and enter into the sanctuary of the Lord to burn incense (Luke 1:8-9). While Zechariah was doing his priestly duties, the angel of the Lord appeared to him. The angel told Zechariah, “your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John, (and) he will be great in the sight of the Lord.” (Luke 1:13-15) Because Zechariah was doubtful of what the angel Gabriel was telling him, Zechariah’s speech was taken away until the day in which these things that were prophesied were fulfilled.

The first interaction between John and Jesus is miraculous as it happens before either of them are born. Mary, in a vision is told by the angel that she will bear a son and is to name him Jesus. Mary is also told that her relative Elizabeth has conceived in old age. With this information, Mary rushes to meet Elizabeth overjoyed at the news that Elizabeth is with child. Upon arrival, Mary greets Elizabeth and the infant in Elizabeth’s womb, “leaped for joy” at the sound of Mary’s voice (Luke 1:44).

The gospel narratives then skip forward to John’s adult ministry. By Luke’s dating, John probably began his adult ministry of preaching and baptizing sometime in the year 28 A.D. Around this time, John left the desert to proclaim the coming kingdom publicly. He began going throughout the region of the Jordan River proclaiming baptism and the repentance of sins. John was, “A voice of one crying out in the desert.” (Isaiah 40:3-5) Matthew’s description of John leaves us no doubt that he was a rough looking character. He “wore clothes made of camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.” (Matthew 3:4) John was Jewish himself and saw the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He warned them that if they were to be baptized by him, they must truly repent to avoid the coming wrath of God. Much like Jesus, John taught tax collectors and soldiers to not practice extortion, collect more money than what was prescribed, and to not falsely accuse the innocent. (Luke 3:10-14)

With the authority John spoke and the prophetic utterances that he made many people came out to John thinking he was the Messiah himself. He readily admitted that, “I am not the Messiah.” (John 1:20) John also warned those that questioned him that, “I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire.” (Matthew 3:11) It was John himself who baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. When Jesus came to John to be baptized, John looked at Jesus and told him that he was not worthy to baptize the Lamb of God. John told Jesus that, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?” (Matthew 3:14) Instead of agreeing with what John said, Jesus told John that he must be baptized so that he can “fulfill all righteousness.” In his own ministry, Jesus acknowledges the legitimacy and importance of John’s mission. Jesus affirms that John is the fulfillment of the prophecy, “Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you.” (Exodus 23:20) Addressing a group of people, Jesus says that there has been none greater born of woman than John the Baptist. (Matthew 11:11)

After the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by John, the gospel narratives shift their focus from John to Jesus. However, the gospels do reveal the fate of the baptizer. John was captured by Herod Antipas. The reason for the imprisonment has to do with John’s comments directed at Herod’s actions. Herod Antipas had fallen in love and taken for his own the wife of his half brother Phillip (also his niece named Herodias). John was disgusted with Herod’s actions and accused him of adultery. Herod had John captured for his comments but did not put him to death for fear there would be a revolt by the people because John was much loved and regarded by many as a prophet. (Matthew 14:5) At a birthday celebration, Herodias performed a dance that impressed Herod so much that he swore to give her anything that she wanted. Holding him to his oath, Herodias said to Herod, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” (Matthew 14:8) Hesitant of the request, Herod did what was asked and had John beheaded.