

*“Who Is More Important?”*

Today’s Reading has several aspects, which reveal an important contrast between what the Gospel of John and other New Testament gospels say about the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. Additionally, this **Scripture provides greater insight into the mystery of the relative historical accuracy of the Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.** Unfortunately, this Reading is rarely read in most churches. Part of the reason for that is these verses are not included in the Lectionary three year cycle of Scripture Readings, which many congregations frequently follow. In fact, we usually follow one or more of those Lectionary Readings, except during this school year, because we are revisiting the updated school year long sermon series I preached ten years ago after my Intensive Sabbatical Study of the Gospel of John.

**This Text reports what John the Baptist discussed about Jesus with some of his disciples.** It provides helpful insights into Jesus’ and John the Baptist’s relationship. Biblical scholars are divided over how much of this Reading was intended to be understood as the words of John the Baptist. He began speaking in verse 27. However, some scholars believe the Baptist’s words end with verse 30, and so, verses 31-36 begin the comments of the gospel author or editor. The renowned, although now deceased, Gospel of John scholar Raymond Brown believed verses 31-36 were Jesus’ continuing comments to Nicodemus. Brown thought the report of the discussion between John the Baptist and his disciples, which is found in verses 22-30, was inserted in the midst of Jesus’ comments with Nicodemus for some unexplained reason. **My analysis of our Scripture leads me to conclude John the Baptist was speaking in all of verses 27-36.**

Reading begins in verses 22-23 with information about the setting for the discussion between John the Baptist and some of his disciples. The verses say Jesus, along with his disciples, were actively gathering followers in the same general area where the Baptist and his disciples were operating. Then, in verses 27-36, John the Baptist spoke about his relationship with Jesus. The Baptizer’s description fits with John Robinson’s and my view of how Jesus turned away from John the Baptist’s path. **This Text gives an important puzzle piece for why Jesus physically separated himself from the Baptist and, instead, began healing and being God’s Suffering Servant.**

The gospel author clearly indicated he had finished reporting on Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in verse 24 with his description of Jesus being on the move. **In verse 24, the gospel reported, “Jesus and his disciples went to the province of Judea, where he spent some time with them and baptized.”** Jesus and his disciples were carrying out their Ministry in the same vicinity of which John the Baptist and his disciples were active, which evidently led to conflict between the disciples of the Baptizer and Jesus. The unhappy disciples of the Baptist informed John about Jesus’ activities in part of **verse 26, “Well, he is baptizing now”.** Verse 26 went on to reveal John’s disciples’ unhappiness was the result of more people going to Jesus and his disciples to be baptized, than to the Baptizer.

Interestingly enough, immediately following our Scripture in John 4:1-3, it is reported Jesus learned about those rumors. Although, **in verse 2 the author informs us, “(Actually, Jesus himself did not baptize anyone; only his disciples did.)”** Perhaps, the gospel author wants the reader to note how out of their anger and unhappiness, the disciples of the Baptist were misrepresenting the truth. **John 4:3 went on to state, “So when Jesus heard what was being said, he left Judea and went back to Galilee”.** Evidently, Jesus physically moved away from John the Baptist to prevent conflict, to avoid a competitive environment, and to separate himself from John the Baptist.

The Baptizer responded to the anger and envy of his disciples by restating what he had told them of his message from God about the Spirit staying on the Messiah and how Jesus’ baptism fulfilled what the Almighty had communicated as recorded in John 1:15-35. Remember in John 1:33, he declared, **“I still did not know that he was the one, but God, Who sent me to baptize with water, had said to me, ‘You will see the Spirit come down and stay on a man; he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’”**

John the Baptist sought to explain to his disciples in several ways, the basic point Jesus had been given his prominence by God. First, John informed them of the differences in Jesus’ and his tasks in **verses 27-28, “No one can have anything unless God gives it. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’”**

Evidently, sensing his initial comment did not calm down his disciples, the Baptizer used the analogy of the bridegroom and his friend in **verse 29, “The bridegroom is the one to whom the bride belongs; but the**

*bridegroom's friend, who stands by and listens, is glad when he hears the bridegroom's voice.*" John concluded the analogy saying, *"This is how my own happiness is made complete."* John's own happiness comes from hearing Jesus' voice! Then, the Baptizer made his crucial point, **saying in vs. 30, "He must become more important while I become less important."**

Again, if you look at how the Pew Bibles translate today's Scripture, the quotations close and the remainder of the Reading – verses 31-36 have no quotation marks. There is nothing in the Original Greek Text to indicate the Baptizer stopped speaking about Jesus to his disciples. So, why do the interpreters and translators believe John the Baptist did not continue speaking in verses 31-36? Yes, if the Baptizer spoke those verses, then he would have been using a description of Jesus' purpose, much like what Jesus used when he explained it to Nicodemus. That, however, does not mean Brown was correct in saying those verses were a continuation of what Jesus told Nicodemus. Remember, Jesus and his disciples had been nearby for a significant amount of time and John's disciples had noticed more people going to Jesus, instead of the Baptizer. **It would have been natural for John to have heard Jesus declare his Mission or Purpose and, then, to share with his disciples what the Baptizer understood Jesus to have been saying about himself.**

So, I affirm, John the Baptist elaborated about the nature of Jesus in these rarely read **verses of 31-36, "He who comes from above is greater than all. He who is from the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly matters, but he who comes from heaven is above all. He tells what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his message. But whoever accepts his message confirms by this that God is truthful. The one whom God has sent speaks God's words, because God gives him the fullness of His Spirit. The Father loves His Son and has put everything in his power."**

However, the last verse of the Reading – verse 36 sounds very much like the way John the Baptist spoke, instead of what Jesus would have said about himself. The Baptizer said in **verse 36, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not have life, but will remain under God's punishment."** I agree with Raymond Brown's assertion of Jesus' Mission changing from judging – like that of John the Baptist to the Ministry of healing and being God's Suffering Servant in conjunction with Jesus physically moving away from the Baptizer. Indeed, **I would go so far as to say Jesus not only moved away from John and his disciples to prevent conflict but, also, to disassociate himself from the Baptist's focus on God's Judgment and on Punishment.** It is important to recall Jesus told Nicodemus in **3:17, "For God did not send His Son into the world to be its Judge, but to be its Savior."**

If we contrast what our Reading says about the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist with what is reported in Luke 7:18-28 and Matthew 11:2-19, we see two entirely different accounts. **The report of those two Synoptic gospels indicate the Baptizer was unsure – didn't know for sure Jesus was the Messiah!** You may recall Matthew and Luke tell the same basic story of how the imprisoned John the Baptist sent messengers – some of his disciples to Jesus to ask him if he was the Messiah or whether they would have to wait for another person to fulfill God's Promise. Since the Gospel of Mark did not have this same report, many Biblical Scholars would agree Matthew's and Luke's sources for their accounts come from the long lost "Q Document" of stories and sayings of Jesus. **The early Christian churches had some challenges from the followers of John the Baptist, who claimed their Teacher was superior to Jesus.** I suspect the authors of the "Q Document" used their story of the question from the imprisoned Baptizer to discredit him – show he failed to confidently reveal the Messiah, as a way of undermining the challenge from the followers of the Baptist. The Q authors either did not know about the Baptizer's own responses to his disciples' anger and envy or they thought it a better strategy to use their story of John's question from jail to undermine the followers of the Baptist. **I argue the Gospel of John's account is most likely the most historically accurate, especially since Mark, most likely the oldest of the Synoptic Gospels, did not include the story, which is in both Matthew and Luke.** The testimony of John the Baptist in verse 30 of our Reading encourages us to follow his example of saying about Jesus, *"He must become more important while I become less important."* Yes, we are called to recognize and live under the authority of Jesus the Christ! Further, let us be humble and perceive our Salvation and New Life come through God's Love manifested, especially, in the Death and Resurrection of God's Suffering Servant Son! **Yes, we are called to follow Jesus' example of manifesting God's Self-Giving and Sacrificial "Agape" Love.** Are we letting God empower and guide us in this New Life? Amen.