

Chapter 4 – The Case of John's Question

Reasonable Doubt?

John the Baptist is a famous New Testament figure. Scripture reports the miracle of his birth (Lk 1:5-25, 36-44 & 57-80). It also lets us know John was a relative of Jesus because scripture tells us John's mother was a cousin of the mother of Jesus (Lk 1:36). Jesus was baptized by John and "John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him" (Fourth gospel 1:32).

Scripture tells us many things about John, including this fact; he had been put in prison by Herod, "for John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife" (Mk 6:18). Scripture also says while John was in prison he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" (Mt 11:2-3, Lk 7:19). So, what are we to make of John's question?

This is the time to get your Bible and look at John's question. Jot down your thoughts about it, then return to this case study to compare your notes to the evidence that will be presented to see if scripture reveals a better way to gain insight on John's curious question.

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The Case of John's Question

John the Baptist Asked Jesus a Question

"Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" (Mt 11:3, Lk 7:19). Given the other things John the Baptist said about Jesus, many wonder why he would ask this of Jesus. In an effort to make sense of the question, people ascribe various motives to John, and this usually leads them to characterize his inquiry in one of the following ways:

- (A) *'John had a moment of doubt, but since he was in prison at the time he would have been depressed, so his doubt about Jesus is understandable;'*
- (B) *'John was discouraged so he wondered if Jesus was truly the Christ;'*
- (C) *'John was perplexed and/or frustrated because Jesus had not yet overthrown the Romans as John had expected;'* or
- (D) *'John knew who Jesus was and he only asked the question because he wanted his disciples to know it too.'*

Sadly, ideas like those pass for sound reasoning with alarming ease, due to our tendency to lean on our own understanding, and our desire to get a fast answer without having to search the scriptures. However, as will be shown, those views cannot stand up to biblical scrutiny.

Doubting John?

The Bible says, "Every word of God *is* pure: he *is* a shield unto them that put their trust in him" (Prv 30:5), and it surely applies in this case. Notice John's question does not mention "the Christ." Still, people will rush to judgment and assume that is what he was asking about (and this leads them to hold views like the ones listed above). Do they cite scripture to show "the Christ" was the subject of John's question? No. They take it for granted, and because they can find others who agree with them, they assume they are correct. But, agreement among men is no assurance of truth.

In scripture John did not call Jesus "the Christ," but when he baptized Jesus he "saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon" Jesus (Fourth gospel 1:32). John also declared Jesus to be "the Lamb of God" (Fourth gospel 1:29 & 36). When John's disciple Andrew heard this, he left to follow Jesus and *the next day* he told his brother Peter, "We have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ" (Fourth gospel 1:41). So, Andrew knew Jesus was "the Christ" and this suggests Andrew learned this from his mentor John the Baptist.

Because of all that, those who presume John's question was about "the Christ" have to find ways to explain his question. For example, John was in prison when he asked it, so some say, *'he was depressed and he just had a moment of doubt like we all do.'* But would being in prison always lead a man of God to be depressed? No. In Acts 16:23 Paul and Silas were cast "into prison" and they "prayed, and sang praises unto God" (Acts 16:25). While this does not prove John was not depressed when he sent his question to Jesus, it shows it is wrong to *assume* he was depressed just because he was in prison at the time. Moreover, his execution came as a surprise (Mt 14:6-10, Mk 6:20-27), so those who say he depressed because of that are ignoring the facts.

Besides identifying Jesus as "the Lamb of God" and seeing "the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove" and abiding on Jesus, John was "filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb" (Lk 1:15). John's mother would surely have told him about his own miracle birth along with whatever details she learned from her cousin Mary about the birth of Jesus. In order to believe John was asking if Jesus was "the Christ," we must assume John forgot or ignored all this evidence. He also said, "one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose" (Lu 3:16). Did he later do an about-face and think he was worthy to question if Jesus was "the Christ?" If not, then we must reject that idea, realize his question had a different purpose, and allow scripture to teach us how to see it from John's point of view.

The Context of the Question

Instead of considering John's question in isolation and out of context, we need to see what moved John to ask the question. In Matthew 11, John's question is found in this context:

"it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities. Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" (Mt 11:1-3).

Notice it does not say John heard about the works of 'Jesus.' It says he heard "the works of Christ." Is there any biblical reason to believe such a report would either frustrate John, or prompt him to wonder if Jesus was "the Christ?" No.

If John already knew Jesus was "the Christ," then why did this report of "the works of Christ" cause John to ask the question that he did?

Thankfully, scripture has another account of John's question. In this passage, we find additional details about the report that moved John to send a question to Jesus. Furthermore, this additional information also helps us to see why John phrased his question in the way he did.

Luke 7:11-19 presents the following report:

"And it came to pass the day after, that he [Jesus] went into a city called Nain; and many of his disciples went with him, and much people. Now when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not. And he came and touched the bier [platform to carry a body]: and they that bare *him* stood still. And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And he delivered him to his mother. And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people. And this rumor of him went forth throughout all Judea, and throughout all the region round about. And the disciples of John shewed him of all these things. And John calling *unto him* two of his disciples sent *them* to Jesus, saying, Art thou he that should come or look we for another?"

John Gets Some Good News!

"And the disciples of John shewed him of all these things" (Lk 7:18). What did he learn from their report? He learned about Jesus raising a man from the dead and the reaction that followed. Would this cause John to doubt or be impatient? No. (Also, John's disciples brought him the news. So, those who say he asked the question '*for their benefit*' need to realize they knew of "the works of Christ" before John did.)

Of course, one might doubt a report of Jesus raising someone from the dead. However, if a person knew it was true, it would not cause them to doubt Jesus. For example, when the religious leaders heard about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, they did not doubt Jesus; they plotted to kill him (cf. Fourth gospel 11:43-53).

John's disciples told him about the miracle and the crowd's reaction. Because he trusted their report and learned new information, he sent a question to Jesus. We can learn this if we look to scripture to see what led him to ask it. But if his question is considered by itself, then we can easily misunderstand his words because they are cut off from the rest of scripture.

Jesus on John the Baptist

Jesus' words also let us know John's question did not indicate doubt on John's part, for after he heard John's question he said, "Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" (Lk 7:28). Jesus said those words after John's disciples left to bring him Jesus' response. Here is his statement in context:

"And when the messengers of John were departed, he [Jesus] began to speak unto the people concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously appareled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. This is *he*, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. And all the people that heard *him*, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John" (Lk 7:24-29).

Do those words suggest John's question indicated doubt, impatience, depression, wavering, or a weak moment on his part? No they do not. Jesus' criticized his own disciples in their moments "of little faith" (Mt 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8), but he said no such words about John.

On the contrary, after Jesus responded to John's question, he said, "Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist." Those words do not suggest he thought John was doubting or frustrated or perplexed.

Some may still try to defend the '*doubting John*' idea by suggesting it is justified because Jesus also said this to the two disciples of John, "And blessed is *he*, whosoever shall not be offended in me" (Mt 11:6, Lk 7:23). Those words were part of Jesus' response to John's question, and it is fair to ask, what did Jesus mean by those words? Yet, to assume the phrase "offended in me" justifies the '*doubting John*' idea one has to ignore:

- (A) what led John to ask the question, and
- (B) the words of praise about John that were spoken by Jesus right after he sent his response to John.

Cause and Effect

People do not usually ask a question when they think they already know the answer. If someone says, '*John asked Jesus if he was really the Messiah*' and we believe them, then that will define how we see John's question. When we discover there is evidence to the contrary, then we will begin to wonder, what was John asking? As you will see, the key to discovering the intent of John's question is to let scripture teach us why he asked it.

Luke 7:11-14 tells us Jesus visited "a city called Nain" where "a dead man was carried out" who was "the only son of his mother, and she was a widow" and Jesus "had compassion on her" and raised her son from the dead right then and there. Here is what happened after that:

"...he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And he [Jesus] delivered him to his mother. And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people. And this rumor of him went forth throughout all Judea, and throughout all the region round about. And the disciples of John shewed him of all these things. And John calling *unto him* two of his disciples sent *them* to Jesus, saying, Art thou he that should come, or look we for another?" (Lk 7:15-19).

In paying attention to "every word of God" always note the sequence in which scripture presents the facts. John's question came after he heard of "all these things." This means the miracle Jesus did was

not the only thing John heard about. "All these things" would also have included the crowd's response to the miracle.

"And they glorified God"

"There came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people" (Lk 7:16). No doubt a flood of emotions swept over the people who saw Jesus do the miracle. Given how fans today react at a ball game, one may be tempted to think of this as a time when the crowd went wild. Scripture paints a very different picture, however.

It says, "there came a fear on all." This is far different than euphoria. It is more like how the disciples reacted when Jesus stopped a storm (Mt 8:26, Mk 4:39, Lk 8:24). They were afraid of the storm, but when Jesus stopped the storm, they "marveled" (Mt 8:27), and "feared exceedingly" (Mk 4:41), and asked one another "What manner of man is this?" while "they being afraid wondered" (Lk 8:25).

"And there came a fear on all" describes a profound awe. This lets us know the words "and they glorified God" do not suggest the crowd cheered or jumped for joy. Rather, those eyewitnesses recognized the miracle of Jesus raising the widow's son from the dead was far more than just a great gift. They had seen God's hand at work and their response was to glorify God. John heard about both the miracle and the response of the eyewitnesses in the aftermath of the miracle – and this is what led John the Baptist to ask Jesus a question.

Scripture versus Our Assumptions

The idea that John's question had to do with Jesus being "the Christ" does not arise from scripture. That assumption needs to be subjected to biblical scrutiny. Once it is, then the facts in the word of God can open our eyes to true intent of John's question.

When we read the Bible, we tend to view things through the lens of our present beliefs (i.e., we lean on our own understanding). Since we assume our beliefs are correct, we think the men of God whom we read about in scripture would think like us. However, we know things the people of John's day did not know, so we need to avoid imposing our views on the text. The way to do this is to let scripture teach us the views of the people we are reading about.

Churchgoers are taught to see Jesus as prophet, priest, and king, but the people who lived in John's day had a different perspective than post-resurrection believers do. No doubt John had more insight about Jesus than others did in that era. Nevertheless, he had a first century, pre-resurrection perspective. Therefore, to understand his question, we must see it from his point of view.

John Asked the Right Question

Why would the miracle, and the crowd's reaction to it, inspire John to ask Jesus, "Art thou he that should come, or look we for another?" John did not ask, *'Was I wrong?'* or *'Are you really the Lamb of God?'* (Then he would have been doubting.) Instead, he asked if Jesus was "he **that should come.**" When people make a rush to judgment and assume this term referred to the Christ, they are leaning on their own understanding, and they misconstrue his question. As will be shown, John's knowledge of Jesus was actually growing when he asked it.

There was an air of anticipation in that era, as we see in Luke 3:15 – "**The people were in expectation**, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not." Yet, to understand how people in that day viewed Jesus, we need to recognize "the Christ" was not the only person they were expecting!

After the miracle people said, "a great prophet is risen up among us," and hearing of those things caused John to ask if Jesus was "he **that should come.**" Why? Scripture has the answer, for it proves the Jews of John's day were waiting for someone other than "the Christ."

They were also looking for...

The Prophet That Should Come

Moses said, "The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me" (Dt 18:15). Moses spoke of a prophet to come and this was highlighted again when the LORD told Moses, "I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him" (Dt 18:18). It was Moses who communicated this prophecy, and it was stated this prophet would be "like unto" Moses. The Jews who esteemed Moses would have looked forward to the fulfillment of this prophecy, and given his prominence in Israel's history, this promise would have been high on their list of expectations. In John's day, terms such as "that prophet" and the one "that should come" were used to refer to this person, as will be shown.

[The Old Testament prophets had come and gone and none of them were the fulfillment of this prophecy. This is also true of Elijah, though scripture has a separate prophecy related to him: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD" (Mal 4:5).]

In John's time, there was an unfulfilled prophecy delivered by Moses, about one who would be "like unto" Moses. So, it should not surprise anyone to learn the Jews were looking for this prophecy to be fulfilled. However, it may come as a surprise to many churchgoers today when they learn the people of John's day thought the prophecies regarding "that prophet" and "the Christ" spoke of two people, not one person.

Getting to Know Jesus

People cannot make sense of John's question until they see that, at the time of Jesus' ministry, God's faithful did not view Jesus the way we do now. This included John the Baptist who, like those of his day, believed the prophet to come was a separate person from the Christ – or at least he did until he was moved to pose his question to Jesus.

"All men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not" (Lk 3:15). They also had other ideas as to who John might be, as we can see from this passage:

"And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No" (Fourth gospel 1:19-21).

Note the three options: "the Christ," "Elias," or "that prophet." This is where we learn those designations were seen as distinct individuals in that era. The "priests and Levites" who asked John those questions clearly thought "that prophet" and "the Christ" were different people. Others "which were sent were of the Pharisees" (Fourth gospel 1:24), also asked John about the same options: "Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?" (Fourth gospel 1:25). He did not correct those who asked him those questions. At that time, John did not say anything that would suggest he thought "the Christ" and "that prophet" would be one individual. Keep this in mind.

People living in John's day assumed the role of "that prophet" would be fulfilled by one person and someone else would fulfill the role of "the Christ." While John was a prophet and a cousin of Jesus (Lk 1:36), his knowledge of Jesus was not complete, for John himself twice said, "I knew him not" (Fourth gospel 1:31 & 33). Thus, we should not be shocked to find John discovering a new insight about Jesus.

The guesswork regarding John pales by comparison to the debates about Jesus. For the most part, John was well thought of in his day, "all *men* counted John, that he was a prophet indeed" (Mk 11:32), but Jesus polarized the people. Although Jesus was working miracles that nobody else had done, public opinion about him was often split and contentious, as Jesus said it would be.

Division Caused by Jesus

"Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division" (Lk 12:51). Jesus spoke those words and he did as he said. We are told "there was a division among the people because of him" (Fourth gospel 7:43). Similar language was used to describe the opposing reactions to Jesus on two other occasions: "And there was a division among them" (Fourth gospel 9:16) and "There was a division therefore again among the Jews" (Fourth gospel 10:19).

We see a wide range of opinions regarding Jesus. When Jesus asked his disciples, "Whom say the people that I am?" (Lk 9:18) they replied, "John the Baptist; but some say, Elias; and others say, that one of the old prophets is risen again" (Lk 9:19). A parallel account in Matthew 16:14 has "and others, Jeremiah" also thrown into this mix. [Note: the speculation about Jesus being "John the Baptist" occurred after John had been beheaded, and it lets us know some people thought Jesus was John risen from the dead (cf. Lk 9:7-8).] What should arrest our attention is not the various ideas as to who Jesus was, rather, it is what is missing from the list. Notice "the Christ" is not even included in that list!

In the verses above we saw when the "priests and Levites" and "they which were sent were of the Pharisees" quizzed John the Baptist, "the Christ" was at the top of their list of speculations about who John was. This was not the case when it came to Jesus. Still, it is possible Jesus may have wanted it that way, for when he went on to ask his disciples, "But whom say ye that I am?" and Peter said, "the Christ," Jesus then told his disciples to "tell no man" (cf. Mt 16:15-16 & 20, Mk 8:29-30, Lk 9:20-21). So, Jesus was obviously not seeking to publicize his role as Christ at that point in time.

While Jesus did not proclaim he was "the Christ," some still knew it. Andrew was the first disciple in scripture to publicly declare it when "he first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ" (Fourth gospel 1:41). The woman at the well also figured out who Jesus was. Her first assessment of him was, "Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet" (Fourth gospel 4:19). Then after learning more, she left Jesus and told the men of her city, "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" (Fourth gospel 4:29). After the men of the city spent two days with Jesus, then they agreed with her conclusion and said, "we have heard *him* ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ" (Fourth gospel 4:42). "The twelve" came to know it (cf. Fourth gospel 6:69). Martha also called Jesus "the Christ" before he raised her brother Lazarus (Fourth gospel 11:27).

Once when Jesus was in the temple some said, "He speaketh boldly, and they say nothing unto him. Do the rulers know indeed that this is the very Christ? ... And many of the people believed on him, and said, When Christ cometh, will he do more miracles than these which this *man* hath done?" (Fourth gospel 7:26 & 31). Jesus' works plainly testified as to who he was – so much so that when the Jews said, "How long will thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly. Jesus answered them, I told you, and ye believed not" (Fourth gospel 10:24-25).

Despite the miracles he did, the debates over Jesus did not cease. His opponents tried to sow doubts about him among the people, and this fueled the debate, as in this verse: when some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not of God, because he keepeth not the sabbath day. Others said, How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles? And there was a division among them" (Fourth gospel 9:16).

Another time "many of them [the Jews] said, He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye him? Others said, These are not the words of him that hath a devil. Can a devil open the eyes of the blind?" (Fourth gospel 10:20-21).

At a different time we read, "there was much murmuring among the people concerning him: for some said, He is a good man: others said, Nay; but he deceiveth the people" (Fourth gospel 7:12).

"That prophet that should come into the world"

When Jesus came onto the scene, the people were looking for the Christ, Elijah, and the prophet like unto Moses – and two passages record occasions when some people saw Jesus as a possible candidate for the latter of those three.

The first of those passages is this: "Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet **that should come** into the world" (Fourth gospel 6:14). This was said by witnesses who saw Jesus feed five thousand men starting with only "five barley loaves, and two small fishes." Like those who saw Jesus raise a man from the dead and concluded "a great prophet is risen up among us," some of those who saw Jesus feed five thousand men concluded he was "that prophet that should come into the world."

In the second of those two passages, the possibility of Jesus being "the Prophet" was raised in response to his teaching:

"In the last day, that great *day* of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet *given*; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.) Many of the people therefore, when they heard this saying, said, Of a truth this is **the Prophet**. Others said, This is the Christ. But some said, Shall Christ come out of Galilee?" (Fourth gospel 7:37-41).

"The Prophet."

"The Christ."

Some thought one thing, some believed another. However, what is missing is people who think "the Prophet" and "the Christ" could be the same person.

"The Prophet" and "the Christ"?

In Acts 3:19-26 we read the following:

"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began. For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, *that* every soul, which will not hear **that prophet**, shall be destroyed from among the people. Yea, and all the prophets from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken, have likewise foretold of **these days**. Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities."

In John's day they were expecting someone *other than* "the Christ" – not instead of him, but *in addition to* him. [The passage above shows the prophecy about a prophet "like unto" Moses (aka "the Prophet" and "that prophet **that should come** into the world") referred to, and was fulfilled by, the risen Jesus. Acts 3 was written after Jesus rose from the dead. Thus, "foretold of **these days**" refers to the time after Jesus was raised, and the phrase "having raised up his Son Jesus" shows this also.] Before Jesus was raised, you would be hard-pressed to find anyone in scripture expressing the idea that one person would be both "the Prophet" and "the Christ." We know this idea was taught after Jesus rose from the dead, but John died long before that.

John did not have a post-resurrection view of Jesus. Thus, in order to understand his question, it must be considered in light of the thinking which prevailed at the time of his question.

In that era, it was assumed the roles of "the Christ" and "the Prophet" would be fulfilled by different men. Thus those who considered Jesus to be "the Christ" (as John did), would have been disinclined to think the Prophet spoken of by Moses might also refer to Jesus.

However, "among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" (Lk 7:28). Thus, John would have been more likely than most to be open to correction and to pursue the truth.

[Jesus' words also reveal the prophet "like unto" Moses would not be "born of women" (for that prophet was going to be greater than John). Psalm 2:7 says, "Thou *art* my Son, this day have I begotten thee" and Acts 13:33 tells us this was fulfilled when God "raised up Jesus again" (cf. 13:30, "raised him from the dead"). The focus was not on when Jesus was born of Mary, but when he became "the **firstborn from the dead**" (Col 1:18). Similarly, Acts 3:19-24 links the prophecy about the prophet "like unto" Moses to Jesus after he rose from the dead.]

Given the evidence, what would an unbiased jury conclude:

- (A) John's question had to do with Jesus being "the Christ," or
- (B) John wondered if Jesus was the prophet "that should come" (because Jesus was called "a great prophet" when he raised a man from the dead, it led John to ask about this topic)?

If John wanted to know if Jesus was "he that should come" in addition to being "the Christ", then his question makes sense. Now let us see what we can learn from Jesus' response to John's question.

"And in that same hour he cured many"

In Luke 7:19-28 we read about John's question and Jesus' response:

"John calling *unto him* two of his disciples sent *them* to Jesus, saying, Art thou he **that should come**, or look we for another? When the men were come unto him, they said, John Baptist hath sent us unto thee, saying, Art thou he that should come, or look we for another? And in that same hour he cured many of *their* infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many *that were* blind he gave sight. Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. And blessed is *he*, whosoever shall not be offended in me. And when the messengers of John were departed, he began to speak unto the people concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously appareled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. This is *he*, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist."

At first, Jesus did not say anything. Instead, he did some things: "in that same hour he cured many of *their* infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many *that were* blind he gave sight" (Lk 7:21).

Since Jesus had already raised a man from the dead, those things were not done to prove his ability to work miracles. His actions here might even seem to be somewhat anti-climactic, in light of his raising the widow's son from the dead.

Why did Jesus, after hearing John's question, take the time to do what he did before he spoke a word in response to the question? Because his deeds were his answer!

Here again is Luke 7:21-23, the portion of the passage where we see what occurred after Jesus had heard John's question:

"And in that same hour he cured many of *their* infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many *that were* blind he gave sight. Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. And blessed is *he*, whosoever shall not be offended in me."

Rather than simply give a verbal response to John's question, Jesus sent back a record of deeds for John to consider. What do you think Jesus wanted his cousin John to learn from this?

What Did John Know and When Did He Know It?

When John heard Jesus' answer to his question, he probably recalled words like, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped" (Isa 35:5). Many passages of scripture had foretold of miraculous deeds and they spoke of the kind of works Jesus cited as evidence in his response to John.

Acts 10:43 says, "To him [Jesus] give all the prophets witness." Since "all the prophets" spoke of him, Jesus cited his works and John then had to consider that evidence in light of the testimony of God's word.

He would not be *only* "the Christ." Nor was he to be *only* "the Prophet." For example, Jesus would also be priest and king – a "high priest after the order of Melchisedec" (Heb 5:10) and "king of kings" (Rv 17:14, 19:16).

[Moreover, in order to be accurate, Jesus' response could not merely discuss the idea of him fulfilling multiple roles, because a prophecy is not fulfilled until it is fulfilled. Many prophecies (like the one that led the people of John's day to look for the "prophet **that should come**" (Fourth gospel 6:14)) were going to be fulfilled by Jesus only after he rose from the dead. "All the prophets" spoke of Jesus (Acts 10:43). However, their "witness" included things that would only be fulfilled after Jesus' resurrection. This was the case with the prophecy of "that prophet" (cf. Acts 3:22-26), and Jesus' response also had to take this into account.]

To understand the question John posed to Jesus, one must be sure to weigh the evidence that can shed light on John's frame of mind at that time.

The evidence indicates John, like others in his day, initially thought "the prophet" and "the Christ" were different people. Then he heard a report of people saying this about Jesus, "**a great prophet** is risen up among us" (Lk 7:16), and this led John to test his prior assumption by asking Jesus the question that is preserved for us in scripture.

The Conclusion to the Case of John's Question

Note two verses:

- (1) "Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet **that should come** into the world" (Fourth gospel 6:14), and
- (2) "Many of the people therefore, when they heard this [Jesus'] saying, said, Of a truth this is the Prophet" (Fourth gospel 7:40).

While many were not sure what to think about Jesus, those verses show that at least some people thought he might be "the prophet" they were expecting. However, the religious scholars and leaders led the people astray because they refused to believe the word of God, as Jesus himself noted when he said, "For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me" (Fourth gospel 5:46).

Although scripture reveals the people of Jesus' day saw "the Prophet" and "the Christ" as separate people, many people overlook this fact even though this truth was in scripture all along. If you missed it,

then you can improve your Bible study method and, hopefully, you learned how important it is to give heed to "every word of God."

When John was asked about Jesus baptizing men, his reply included these notable comments:

- (A) "I am not the Christ, but that **I am sent before him**" (Fourth gospel 3:28); and
- (B) "he that cometh from above is above all" (Fourth gospel 3:31).

Those statements let us know how John viewed Jesus, and scripture never says he had second thoughts about those words or any of the other things he said about Jesus. Thus, there is no biblical reason to believe his question had anything to do with Jesus being "the Christ."

John's question makes sense if he wanted to know if Jesus was also going to fulfill the role of "that prophet that should come into the world" (in addition to fulfilling the prophecies regarding "the Christ"). Sadly, however, many preachers are led to explain away John's question by using excuses which are not related to the word of God. Why is this? It happens because schools train people to look to the writings of men for their answers to Bible questions. When people rely on that method they end up holding views that are founded on the beliefs of others.

What happens if people rely on commentaries to tell them how to view John's question? If those resources say John was asking if Jesus was "the Christ," then it will seem to be reasonable because '*that is what the experts say.*' If we buy their view, then from that point on our view of John's question will be skewed, and the confidence we put in men will prejudice our view of the passage. This shows the problem with relying on the teachings of men.

When we elect to put confidence in an author, teacher, or group, then we are going against the counsel of scripture and leaning on our own understanding (which is telling us to lean on *their* understanding).

"Rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tm 2:15), on the other hand, allows scripture to lead us to the correct understanding of John's question.

The end of the Case of John's Question