

Jesus and John

Luke 3:16

Dr. Sam O. Morris

Jerusalem Institute for Biblical Exploration

Luke begins this chapter with a simple identification of the political climate which also dates the events with some accuracy. This common practice of dating, suggests the year of 25-26 as Tiberius began ruling the provinces in 11 CE. Phillip and Antipas, Herod the Great's sons, Pontius Pilate and Lysanias do more to describe the political climate than they do to fix the dates. We know that the tetrarchs, Antipas and Phillip began ruling sometime after the death of their father in 4 BCE. Herod the Great's son, Archelaus was appointed tetrarch of Judea, Samaria and Idumea at the same time. After only nine years, he was deposed by Rome. Following Archelaus removal, Roman procurators ruled Judea, Samaria and Idumea. Pontius Pilate was the second of Rome's prefects.

Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests mentioned by Luke are noteworthy especially in relation to the trial of Jesus. The house of Annas held the high priesthood for most of the first century until the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Annas was high priest from 6 CE until 15 CE when Gratus removed him. From that time until the destruction of the Temple, five of Annas sons, a grandson and his son-in-law Caiaphas would serve as high priests. Caiaphas, possibly because of his political acumen, holds the office for the longest period of time. Obviously, John's gospel highlights the influence of the house of Annas by calling Caiaphas the 'high priest that year.' As Sadducees, Annas and Caiaphas influence is felt more strongly in Jerusalem and Judea. However, there are indications in the gospels that the Judean priests occasionally sent a kind of scribal Mafia to evaluate the orthodoxy of the Galilean rabbis. One such group takes a great interest in John the Baptizer and come to the Jordan River where he is baptizing to ask if he is the messiah.

Geographically, John's ministry overlaps the territories of Judea, Samaria, Perea, and possibly Batanaea and Traconitis. In this way, he intersects the political influence of Herod Antipas and to a lesser degree Herod Phillip. Although Judea is under the political rule of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, the Judean priests, especially the high priest, wield great power. And, in reality, the prefects will say that if they control the high priest, they control the people. As we said, the Judean priests send envoys to John to question him.

It may have been something as simple as punctuation which transformed John the Baptizer. When the Essenes read Isaiah 40:3, they heard it literally: A voice crying, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord." Luke records a different understanding in relation to the Baptizer: A voice crying in the wilderness: Prepare the Way of the Lord! What a difference a colon makes. For the Essenes, it led to sectarian communities with salvation only for the children of light (the Essenes) as they retreated to the wilderness to build their communities. Contrast this to Luke and Matthew's reading of the same passage and witness John as God's instrument who prepares the way for God's messiah.

As an aside, most Biblical scholars agree that the Dead Sea Scrolls, which we primarily attribute to the Essene Community at Qumran, are, for biblical scholarship, the most significant discovery of the 20th Century. For the gift of the scrolls, we are all profoundly grateful that the Essenes read Isaiah as they did. As Christians, we are even more profoundly grateful that John read the Isaiah scroll as he did. As we prepare to look carefully at this passage from Luke, this should cause us pause.

John's actions have political overtones. He preaches repentance in the wilderness. People are called to re-enter the promised land by repentance and baptism. John baptizes people in the Jordan and at the Salim Springs. The children of Israel entered the promised land by passing through the Jordan. And, it was near the Salim Springs where Abraham first received the promise of the land at the Oak of Moreh. Joshua brought the people to the area of the Salim Springs and caused them to pass between Mt. Ebal (Mount of Curses) and Mt. Gerazim (Mount of Blessings) as they claim the land of promise. The visible acts of baptism and re-entering the promised land by first century Jews would not have been missed by the political and religious authorities. It was a religious demonstration with political overtones. These actions along with his condemnation of Herod Antipas' marriage to Herodius led to John's imprisonment and death.

One other observation about the passage: John's message and Jesus early preaching are very similar. This fact suggests that the rugged prophet influenced Jesus. This is the normal process for human beings. One person mentors another. It also suggests that Jesus spent some time with John possibly several years. Although we cannot know this for certain, a careful reading of the Gospels appears to leave room for this possibility.