

Introduction

As Jesus began his ministry, he caused a social disturbance that would reverberate through the next twenty centuries, not only within Judaism but throughout the world. This disturbance enveloped everyone he met, as they chose whether to believe in him as the Messiah, a decision that had both temporal social consequences and eternal personal ones. The recorded responses of the people and the religious leaders to Jesus and his message at an early stage of his ministry are one way the gospel writers chose to authenticate Jesus as the Messiah.

The Response of John the Baptist

When Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist had already devoted his life to preparing himself [Luke 1:80]¹ to prepare the way for the Messiah [John 1:31].² His message was that the Messiah was coming and included quotation of and allusion to messianic prophecies such as Isaiah 40:3 [John 1:23].³ He had received revelation from God about the nature [Matt 3:11-12] and identity of the Messiah [John 1:33].⁴ John responded to the Messiah in faith, deferring to him [Matt 3:13], pointing the way to him [Matt 3:1-6, 11-12; John 1:19-28],⁵ identifying him [John 1:29-36], remaining content with a subordinate role to him [Matt 3:11-12; John 3:27-30], even handing off some of his disciples to him [John 1:35-37]. Having already sacrificed much, he also was willing to suffer in the cause of the Messiah and – though he wondered at not being delivered from his suffering [Matt 11:2-3]⁶ – walked in faith even unto death [Matt 14:1-12].⁷

¹ Martin suggests John the Baptist followed the example of Elijah even in living in the desolate areas while growing up. See John A. Martin, “Luke,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2004), 207.

² Morris enlightens by explaining that the Greek construction of this verse emphasizes the point that the whole purpose of John’s “baptism was to make the Messiah manifest to Israel.” See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, Rev. Ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 132.

³ As Carson points out, this verse from Isaiah had a different meaning in its original context, but since the end of the exile in Isaiah can be seen as a literary “type” of a more general return to the Lord and this section of Isaiah is highly messianic in nature, it is not inconsistent for John the Baptist to consider himself in these terms. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 144.

⁴ Morris, 134, points out that John the Baptist is the only person to receive divine revelation about the identity of Christ, all others being dependent on a human witness [or, one would think, Christ’s divine-human witness]. Morris attributed the thought to J. Marsh [full reference not given].

⁵ Toussaint notes that several passages from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel prophesied repentance preceding manifestation of the Kingdom. See Stanley, D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1980), 69.

⁶ Toussaint, 148, suggests John’s question had more to do with wondering why Jesus did not assert his authority and judge the people. Pentecost says John’s question derived from impatience for Jesus to “put down oppression and deliver Israel from the Gentiles”; see J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words & Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 198.

⁷ Toussaint, 188, notes, “It is an important fact that John was beheaded for righteousness’ sake.” Indeed, John most likely could have freed himself by recanting his condemnation of Herod Antipas and Herodias.

The Responses of the Disciples

At least two disciples of John the Baptist accepted his witness and began to follow Jesus [John 1:37]. They invited brothers and friends to meet the Messiah [John 1:41, 45].⁸ They responded to the insight Jesus had about them [John 1:49].⁹ Though just getting to know him, they followed Jesus even when he left the area to go to Cana [John 2:2, 11]. There they saw a miracle and their faith was strengthened [John 2:11].¹⁰ They stood by him when he cleared the Temple [John 2:15-22], witnessed more miracles [John 2:23], went with him to do baptizing work [John 3:22; 4:1-2], and continued traveling with him back through Samaria [John 4:4-5, 27, 31-33]¹¹ and Galilee [John 4:43-45]. When Jesus called them to full-time service, they responded at once, even though this meant leaving their work [Matt 4:18-22; 9:9] and risking the ire of religious leaders [Matt 12:1-2]. At least twelve of them were deputized in the ministry, despite the additional risk that entailed [Luke 6:12-16; Matt 10:1-11:1].¹² They all immersed themselves in his teaching [Matt 5:3-7:27].

The Responses of Judeans, Samaritans, Galileans, and Others

The Judeans saw the miracles Jesus was doing and began to believe [John 2:23], though this was a surface level of faith [John 2:24-25].¹³ Many also came out to the countryside to be baptized, either by John or by Jesus [John 3:22-23]. The Samaritans of Sychar believed in his teachings and came to faith, despite the longstanding animosity between Jews and Samaritans [John 4:41-42]. Jesus said they were ripe for harvest [John 4:35]. In Galilee, they initially welcomed Jesus, having seen his miracles in Jerusalem [John 4:45]¹⁴ and experienced his teachings in their synagogues [Luke 4:14-15].¹⁵ However, in Nazareth, they objected to his teaching and tried to kill him [Luke 4:28-29], though they were enjoying his words [Luke 4:22] until he baited them [Luke 4:23-27].¹⁶ In response to his teachings and miracles in Capernaum, people were inspired to continue coming to him, and his fame spread [Luke 4:31-44; Matt 9:1-8]. This continued in

⁸ Morris, 140, points out that while it is significant that the early disciples referred to Jesus as the Messiah, it is also important to realize that it was quite some time before they came to realize the full accurate meaning of that word.

⁹ Morris, 147, explains that, having just been called a true Israelite, when Nathan in return called Jesus “King of Israel,” he was not only using a name in common usage for the expected Messiah, he was also acknowledging Jesus as his personal king.

¹⁰ At first having only the witness of John the Baptist and some impressive insight from Jesus himself, the disciples now had, as Blum says, a demonstration of Christ’s glory and power. See Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2004), 278-279.

¹¹ Morris, 242-249, and Carson, 227-232, both point out that this was a mind-broadening experience for the disciples, not only from Jesus’ direct teaching but from his example of ministering to an immoral Samaritan woman, all three characteristics of whom might have excluded their involvement.

¹² Toussaint, 137, says this deputation was an impressive show of authority, both relationally and supernaturally.

¹³ Morris, 181-182, comments that the people were ready to make an earthly king of Jesus, but did not possess deep faith; Jesus “looked for genuine conversion, not enthusiasm for the spectacle.”

¹⁴ In explaining the odd parenthetical remark in John 4:44, Carson, 236, interprets the initial enthusiasm from the Galileans to be derived from miracles only, and thus to indicate the same surface level faith the Judeans had.

¹⁵ In contrast to the forgoing note, Constable points out that the response in Galilee to Jesus’ teaching was “the normal initial response that Spirit-directed believers experience.” See Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Luke*, 2005 Ed. (Online: <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/luke.pdf>, accessed 06.07.07), 59.

¹⁶ Constable, 62, stresses the meaning of Jesus’ words, that God wanted to bless his people.

other towns in Galilee [Luke 5:12-16; 7:11-17].¹⁷ Eventually, Jesus was attracting crowds from Galilee, Judea, Idumea, and regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon [Matt 4:25; Mark 3:7-12; Luke 6:17-18].¹⁸ They were amazed by his teaching and followed him around [Matt 7:28-8:1].¹⁹ Even a Gentile centurion came to faith, such strong faith that Jesus was amazed [Matt 8:10].

The Responses of the Religious Leaders

The religious leaders were shocked by John the Baptist's activities and message [John 1:24],²⁰ though it could not have helped to be called a brood of vipers [Matt 3:7].²¹ After Jesus cleared the Temple court, they questioned his right to do it but not the righteousness of his act, demanding a miracle to prove his authority [John 2:18]. He had just given them a sign,²² but they were too hard hearted to see, and when he offered another they did not understand and so mocked him [John 2:19-21]. One religious leader, Nicodemus, saw significance in the miracles, but he still assumed the right to assess Christ²³ and his response to Christ's teachings was frustration and hesitation to believe [John 3:1-21]. It is possible that he later came to faith [John 7:45-52; 19:38-42].²⁴ When Jesus forgave the sins of a paralytic, the religious leaders considered him blasphemous [Matt 9:3], though the subsequent miraculous physical healing might have impressed them [Matt 9:8]. When Jesus ate at Matthew's house, the religious leaders considered this odd and probably a defilement [Matt 9:10-11].²⁵ When Jesus healed a man in Jerusalem on the Sabbath, the religious leaders persecuted him [John 5:16]. Likewise, when the disciples picked some grain on a Sabbath, the religious leaders [apparently tracking Jesus by this time] challenged them [Matt 12:1-2].²⁶ When Jesus again healed someone on the Sabbath and taught about it, the religious leaders began to plot how to kill him [Matt 12:9-14].

Conclusions

What we see throughout these narratives of Jesus' early ministry is a pattern: those who were truly seeking God saw truth in Jesus and followed; those who were interested in God on a more

¹⁷ Constable, 93, says aspects of this fame were the fear and praise of God that the miracles elicited.

¹⁸ Toussaint, 85, notes that there would have been a great number of Gentiles in these crowds.

¹⁹ Toussaint, 118, highlights the fact that the crowds were increasingly awed by Jesus' teachings, not only his miracles.

²⁰ As Carson, 145-146, notes, the religious leaders were perplexed by the call to individual repentance and baptism for Jews.

²¹ Which Toussaint, 68, points out was no doubt an accurate assessment.

²² Carson, 181.

²³ Carson, 187.

²⁴ Morris, 729-730, believes he did, noting not only the open attention paid to Jesus' body, but also the *royally* lavish provision of burial spices he brought with him.

²⁵ Toussaint, 130, comments, "It is interesting to note that the Evangelist in the brief span of five verses presents the twofold response to the King. Matthew, a tax-gatherer, follows the King in simple obedience; the Pharisees, on the other hand, stand aside and criticize."

²⁶ Barbieri comments on the evident lack of compassion, mercy, and spiritual vitality of the religious leaders. See Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2004), 45. Toussaint, 160, says they were blind due to hardened hypocrisy.

surface level came to a surface level of faith in Jesus, one that would not last under the animosity of the religious leaders; and those with hardened hearts resisted and turned away from Jesus [John 3:19-21]. The failure of the crowds to accept fully in faith is evidenced in later teachings such as in Matthew 11:16-24, but even as early as Matthew 8:11, Luke 4:25-27, or John 3:19-21. This is not evidence against the authenticity of Jesus, for as Jesus himself noted [Matt 13:11-16], Isaiah had predicted such a situation [Isa 6:9-10], and there are several other messianic passages in the Old Testament foretelling the ultimate rejection and death of the Messiah prior to his resurrection and exaltation [e.g. Isa 53:1-3].

Putting aside the future falling away of most people amidst the clash between Jesus and the religious leaders, in these early days most people responded favorably to Jesus' actions and teachings. Aside from the difficulty of the Nazarenes to believe in someone they had known pre-ministry, the only people who consistently opposed Jesus in the early days of his ministry were the religious leaders. Jesus understood the inevitability of this, based on his prayer in Matthew 11:25-26, which acknowledged that God the Father had hidden the truth from such people. This apparently was due to their hardened hearts, hearts so hard that Jesus accused them of not believing the words of the scriptures [John 5:46-47]. In summary, the gospel writers showed that people responded to Christ just as prophesied previously and anticipated by Christ: the devout in true faith, the crowds with experiential faith, and the hardened religious leaders with animosity. The consistency of these responses with expectations is one way the gospel writers authenticated Jesus as the Messiah.