

Reading the Old Testament Through John John the Baptist

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light... the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (Jn. 1:6-8, 14-18).



The image of tapestry weaving speaks to me of God's hand in history. You and I get to decide what kind of thread we wish to be, but even with that individual choice, we are active in God's hands as he weaves through time to create the history that

will culminate in the coming of his kingdom at the right time and in the right manner.

The integration of human/divine interaction is at play in the verses of John examined today. The passage introduces John the Baptist, and does so in an interesting way. John the Baptist's ministry signaled the truth that Jesus was (and still is) the long-anticipated Messiah. As Messiah, Jesus was greater than any who had ever been born, and greater than any that ever would be born. Jesus stood in contrast to all the holy ones of Israel, head and shoulders above the holy ones in every way. The John the gospel writer explains that in both blunt and subtle ways.

WARNING: This lesson is heavy in referencing the Greek vocabulary used by John in writing the gospel. The Greek should not be shunned, but embraced. It will give a much greater understanding of the import of what John writes in today's passage, so rather than skimming over the Greek sections, get a stiff cup of coffee and read on!

John the Baptist

The section of John that introduces John the Baptist starts with an interesting Greek phrase, *Egeneto anthrōpos* (Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος). Look carefully at each word, because they give clues to their meanings in the English words that have derived from each.



Egeneto has in its spelling our modern word “gene.” Our genes are our genetic codes (“genetic” being another related word) that we have from birth. *Egeneto* was a Greek expression for something that was born or came into being, something that was created or made.

The second word is *anthrōpos*, a word that has given us the English word, “anthropology.” *Anthrōpos* references a human being, just as anthropology is the study of human beings.

The two words together are translated in both the English Standard Version and the New International Version as, “There was a man...” The way John has written this, in the original Greek, would immediately set up a contrast between the one about whom John is about to write (John the Baptist) and the one of whom John began his gospel (Jesus). In John 1:1, the gospel began with “In the beginning was the Word.” Jesus already was. Jesus was, as God, already present when time began, when the

universe came to be. Jesus was NOT made. He was the Creator. Through him, “all things were made.” Without him, “not anything was made that was made” (Jn. 1:3).

In contrast to Jesus, the unmade, pre-existent, un-created God, we have John the Baptist (and every other person). John was “made.” He was “born” or “came into being.” John did not exist on one day, then he was created. John is a human. A very important human in history, but he was still only a human. *Egeneto Anthrōpos*, “[t]here was a man”; a man was created and came to be.

One last important note on these verses in John’s original Greek writing. The usage of the word root in *egeneto* does not surface first in John 1:6 referencing John the Baptist. The word is already used three times in John 1:3, referenced above. *Egeneto* is there translated by the English word “made.” Inserting the Greek into the English in brackets gives,

All things were made [*egeneto*] through him, and without him was not any thing made [*egeneto*] that was made [*egeneto*¹].

John doesn’t want the reader to miss the stark difference in Jesus and John. John was “made” by and through Jesus the Word. Jesus always was; he wasn’t “made.”

This contrast is bluntly set forth in the Nicene Creed. This creed was authorized by the church at the Council of Nice² (hence the name “Nicene” Creed) in 325AD. (It was completed at the Council of Constantinople in 381.) In determining how to best express the relationship of Jesus to the Father, the Creed adopted language with which many are familiar, using much of John’s vocabulary to express the distinction of Jesus as “begotten” but not “made.”

The Creed begins,

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty;
Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God,
Begotten of the Father before all worlds;
God of God, Light of Light,
Very God of Very God,

¹ The Greek word used this third time is another form of the same word as *egeneto*, but in a different tense. So reading the Greek text shows the different form (*genonen* - γέγονεν), but the same root word and meaning.

² The council met in Νικέα which transliterates into the English letters Nice with the root Nice. Because of the pronunciation of the word, most English write-ups reference the city as “Nicaea.” The creed keeps the original spelling of the city as the “Nicene Creed.”

Begotten, not made,
Being of one substance with the Father;
By whom all things were made;

This distinction between Jesus the begotten and John the Baptist (and all others) who are made was carried further in the creed now termed The Athanasian Creed (likely written around 100 years later), which states,

The Father is made of none: neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone: **not made**, nor created: but **begotten**.

John's contrast of the important John the Baptist as one who was made is an elevation of Jesus, the unmade maker. But John's magnification of Jesus doesn't stop there. It continues in later verses after introducing John the Baptist in greater detail. I will pick it up after John's interlude on how and why John the Baptist was made by God.

Beyond the first two words detailing John being made, John continues with the statement that John the Baptist was "sent from God." Again, the Greek word used is important. The verb translated "sent" is the Greek root *apostellō* (ἀποστέλλω). Careful examination of the Greek word gives insight into its meaning as one recognizes the English idea of "postal" present. In English when one "posts" a letter, or uses the "postal service," one is intentionally sending correspondence forth to a selected designation. This idea is present in the Greek word as well.



When someone would *apostellō* another, it meant that one was sending the other out for some objective or purpose. This happens in a lot of passages that John will write further in the gospel. Certain Jews "sent" (*apostellō*) priests and Levites to ask John the Baptist who he was (Jn. 1:19). God "sent" (*apostellō*) his Son into the world to save the world (Jn. 3:17). The Chief Priests and Pharisees "sent" (*apostellō*) officers to arrest Jesus (Jn. 7:32).

A particular insight into John's usage of *apostellō* is also found in the *Torah*, those first five books of the Old Testament also known as "the Books of Moses," or in English: Genesis³, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In those books,

³ In the original Hebrew, the books of the Bible bear the names of their first word. So the first book is termed, "*Bereshit*" because that is the first word in the Hebrew original of Genesis. It is

God frequently “sends.” The Jewish translators of the *Torah*, who put their translations into circulation centuries before John was writing, used this Greek word *apostellō* to speak of God’s sending for a purpose.

In Genesis 19:13, God “sends” (*apostellō*) angels to Sodom and Gomorrah to demonstrate the city’s depravity. In Genesis 24:7, 40, God “sends” (*apostellō*) an angel to help Abraham’s servant. Over and over Joseph talks of God having “sent” (*apostellō*) him to Egypt to preserve the life of his family.

Perhaps most salient to John’s writing in this passage is the passages in Exodus that speak of God “sending” (*apostellō*) Moses to Egypt to garner the Israelites release from Pharaoh. In the memorable story of Moses encountering the burning bush, God says over and over he will send (*apostellō*) Moses:

“Come, I will send (*apostellō*) you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” ... Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent (*apostellō*) me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent (*apostellō*) me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent (*apostellō*) me to you’ (Ex. 3:10, 13-15).

Moses didn’t stumble into his role as rebel leader. Moses didn’t simply opt to have a terrifying adventure (and headache) in his old age (he was 70 at the time). Moses was sent by God. God had a purpose, and he selected Moses to be his emissary, sent to accomplish certain tasks.

As one reads the Moses account further in the Greek version popular at the time John wrote his gospel, something interesting happens when Moses considers what God is sending him to do. God is “sends” (*apostellō*) Moses, doesn’t want to go! Moses doesn’t want to be “sent.”

In Exodus 4:13, it reads that Moses responded to God,

“Oh, my Lord, please send (*apostellō*) someone else.”

translated, “In the beginning.” In English, the book titles are based on content. Genesis is so named because it is a story of “beginnings,” the root idea behind the English word, “genesis.” Relevant to this lesson is that the word “genesis” also came from *egeneto*, the Greek word explained earlier above encompassing the ideas of coming into being or being born.

That Moses would try to refuse to fulfill the mission God “sent” (*apostellō*) him to do was very serious. The words immediately following Moses’ attempted refusal says that it “kindled God’s anger”! (Ex. 4:14).

Ultimately, Moses went as sent, going first to Aaron to explain and enroll Aaron as his helper. The key to Moses explaining what might seem to the world as a fool’s errand is found in the word (*apostellō*). God had *sent* Moses to do this thing.

Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which he had sent (*apostellō*) him to speak, and all the signs that he had commanded him to do (Ex. 4:28).

Moses would frequently return to the concept of God having sent him. Even when complaining about the unfolding of events. After Pharaoh not only refuses to let the people go, but intensifies their work load, Exodus 5:22 reads,

Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send (*apostellō*) me?”

Moses was challenging the purpose behind God’s sending.

With this brief background of the significance of someone whom God selected and sent for a purpose, one sees that John is not lightly writing that John the Baptist was made by God (*egeneto*) and sent by God (*apostellō*). The question then arises, what was God’s purpose for John the Baptist? Or, *why* did God send John the Baptist? The writer John explains immediately in the next verse.

He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him (Jn. 1:7).

John the Baptist wasn’t simply born to exist, to live day-by-day, to sleep, eat, go to work, have a family, retire, and eventually die. John the Baptist was sent by God to bear witness that Jesus of Nazareth was God’s Messiah for Israel and Savior for the world. Jesus was the Messiah that all should trust to deliver them from sin and sin’s consequences, most notably, death.

In the Greek, what John was sent to be is closely tied to what he was sent to do. He came as “a witness” in order that he might “bear witness.” This wasn’t for his own benefit. God sent him for others. It was so others *might* believe.

Before moving onto the testimony that John and John the Baptist both bear about Jesus in the next verses, it is important that everyone realize that God sending John the Baptist can’t be viewed in isolation. In Ephesians, Paul explained that all

believers have a purpose before God. God saved believers for more than some combination of existing, living day-by-day, sleeping, eating, going to work, having a family, retiring, and eventually dying. Before bringing his children into his family, God prepared a chore list for them! God had purpose picked out ahead of time.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For *we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them* (Eph. 2:8-10).

The idea of John the Baptist being sent, of Moses being sent, should not only instill in the reader an understanding that Jesus was unlike any other, and hence God sent someone special just to bear witness to that truth. But the idea should also resonate in the reader an understanding that each person has purpose – divine purpose – in this life. Everyone should live seeking that purpose, with a willingness to do what God sent them to do.

A model of this attitude is found in the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah chapter six, after encountering God in his throne room, Isaiah hears God proclaim,

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send (*apostellō*), and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send (*apostellō*) me” (Isa. 6:8).

This should be everyone’s response to God’s calling. If God is sending me, I will go! Being sent by God should instill in each a sense of purpose, but also a sense of humility. Life is no longer about what I accomplish for *me*. Life is about what God does through me as the one who purposed my life and sent me to do his good works. God gets the glory, and God gets the credit.

This is modeled in the life and words of John the Baptist, who was quizzed over whether he was jealous that Jesus garnered so much attention,

John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ (Jn. 3:27-28).

The world would be a better place, life would be much more satisfying to the believer, if every encounter, every moment was lived with a conscious recognition that God made *me* for a purpose in this moment, in this encounter. If I can treat people as God wants me to, if I can embrace in love as God made me to, if I can control my selfish desires and urges, and put God’s purposes first, then I will fulfill my calling, and do as I was sent to do. This should be one’s objective in life. As

we do so, we see the hand of the Master Weaver at work, putting our individual threads into his masterpiece.

Jesus the Messiah

John the Baptist, like Moses, bore witness to Jesus as the Messiah. How much greater than is Jesus, the one through whom all (including Moses and John the Baptist) were made and purposed? John begins to unfold the greatness of Jesus in the succeeding verses.

To be continued....