

**The Gospel of John (6);
The Prelude to the Public Ministry of Jesus (1:19-51) (part 1)**

Introduction:

Last Lord's Day we completed our consideration of John's prologue to his Gospel, which is in 1:1-18. We may describe the remainder of John 1 as **The Prelude to the Public Ministry of Jesus** (1:19-51). In this portion of the Gospel we read further of the witness to Jesus by John the Baptist (1:19-34). We then read of the calling of His first disciples, before He and they left for Galilee to commence His public ministry.

Here is an outline of the remainder of chapter one of John's Gospel (The emboldened font is that which we hope to address today):

- I. The Prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-18)
- II. The Prelude to the Public Ministry of Jesus (1:19-51)
 - A. The Witness of John the Baptist (1:19-34)
 - 1. John and "the Jews" (1:19-28)**
 - a. The priests and the Levites inquire of John, "Who are you?" (1:19-23)**
 - b. Those of the Pharisees inquire of John, "Why then do you baptize?" (1:24-28)
 - 2. John and Jesus (1:29-34)
 - B. The First Disciples (1:35-51)
 - 1. Andrew and Peter (1:35-42)
 - 2. Philip and Nathaniel (1:43-51)

Today we will begin to address the witness of John the Baptist, which is contained in verses 19 through 34. Although the witness of the Baptist has already been attested twice in the Prologue (1:6-8, 15), in these verses greater detail of his witness is provided as a prelude to the public ministry of the Savior. Let us begin with reading the witness of John the Baptist to Jesus Christ in **John 1:19-34**.

¹⁹Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

²⁰He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

And he answered, "No."

²²Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

²³He said: "I am

'The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Make straight the way of the LORD,' "

as the prophet Isaiah said."

²⁴Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. ²⁵And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. ²⁷It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose."

²⁸These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ ³¹I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.”

³²And John bore witness, saying, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. ³³I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”

In verses 1 through 18 we had the prologue to the entire Gospel of John. And now with verses 19 through 28 we have a prologue to our Lord’s ministry. John the Baptist is once again called upon by the Gospel writer to bear witness of Jesus Christ. It would seem that John always precedes and prepares for the way of the Lord, both historically and literarily.

The apostle had first identified John the Baptist as having been sent by God to bear witness to the Light (1:6-8). Then the writer again brought the Baptist forward in verse 15, in which it was said, “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.’” And now for the third time, the Gospel writer calls upon the witness of John the Baptist, of the direct witness that he bore to Jesus.

The witness that John bore to Jesus is shown to have been initially due to “the Jews” in Jerusalem inquiring of him who he was (vs. 19-24) and why he was baptizing people (vs. 25-34). First, the Jews sent “priests and Levites” to John (v. 19), and later the Pharisees sent some on their behalf to inquire of him (1:24). And then with verse 29ff John bears direct witness to Jesus, in which after he recounts having seen Jesus, he declared openly that He was the promised Messiah.

I. John’s witness to the Jews (1:19-28)

A. John and “the Jews” (1:19-28)

1. The priests and the Levites inquire of John, “Who are you?” (1:19-23)

We read in **verse 19**, “*Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’*” You might take notice of the word, “sent.” God had “sent” John to bear witness (1:6, 8). The Jews had “sent” “priests and Levites” to John. This renders this visit to John “as official business.”¹

The Gospel only mentions “priests and Levites” here directly, although there are a number of references to the “chief priests.” Priests and Levites belonged to the lower rank of clergy in Jerusalem. “Priests were rarely high in social status. The Levites were even lower: forbidden to take part in the offering of sacrifice, they usually provided service as musicians, doormen, and the police force of the temple.”² All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. John the Baptist was himself the son of a priest, being of the tribe of Levi. There is no word that John himself had trained to serve as a priest.

The Gospel writer wrote of the “Jews” who had sent the priests and the Levites—“when *the Jews* sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem...” This is our first introduction to this group of people in this Gospel. “Jews” is a commonly used term in this Gospel. It is used in this fourth Gospel much more frequently than in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

The expression “the Jews” has a peculiar place in the Fourth Gospel; in Mark it occurs six times, five of which are in the phrase “king of the Jews” (In Matthew five occurrences, four of them in “king of

¹ Edward W. Klink, III, *John*. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 126.

² Ibid.

the Jews”, in Luke five occurrences, three in “king of the Jews”), whereas it occurs seventy times in John.³

“The Jews” is a term that conveys a number of nuances depending on the immediate context in which it is found. At this time in history when the Gospel was written, when Jews referred to themselves, they commonly used the word, “Israelite.” “Jews” was a term commonly used by non-Jews to refer to the Jewish people.⁴ But the Apostle John, the writer of this Gospel, used the term frequently, having rarely used the term “Israelite.”

What is meant by this term, “the Jews”, in this Gospel? The Apostle John did not use the term with an exclusive negative connotation. He is a Jew writing as a Jew. He described Jesus as a “Jew” (4:9). He wrote of Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman that salvation was of the “Jews” (4:22). Later John wrote of many “Jews” who had believed on Jesus (cf. 8:31; 11:45; 12:11). He wrote of the feast of the “Jews” (6:4; 2:13; 5:1).⁵ But the Apostle frequently does refer to the “Jews” in their hostility to Jesus.

Nevertheless—and this is an important nuance in the Fourth Gospel—“the Jews” are frequently seen in dialogue with Jesus, and the term thereby acquires a strong connotation of “Jews who are hostile to Jesus” with special reference in many cases (a sharp line of demarcation is impossible here!) to the Jewish leaders and authorities. For instance, it is said that the feast pilgrims—themselves Jews!—dared not speak about Jesus “for fear of the Jews” (7:13; similarly 9:22; 19:38; 20:19), who in that case are those more specifically called “the Pharisees” elsewhere (12:42; cf. also 5:10 with 9:13).⁶

The Jews “defend the letter of the law (5:16), refuse to accept the authority of Jesus and his messianic status (9:22), and, after denying his kingship, ultimately deny their own status as the people of God (19:14-16).”⁷ The term “Jews”, therefore, although setting forth specifically the hostility of the Jewish leadership toward Jesus, reflects the general opposition and rejection of the Jewish people in mass to Jesus.

Even then one will have to guard against a generalizing tendency toward all Jews and everything that is Jewish. There is in this Gospel a spectrum of nuances, from “the Jews” as the people called and chosen by God to salvation (cf. 4:22) to “the Jews” as the leading aristocracy, those that sought Jesus’ destruction (cf., e.g., 5:18; 7:1; 11:8, etc.).⁸

Even though there is no open hostility attributed directly to “the Jews” in the passage before us, the tone betrays at the outset of the Gospel resistance and rejection of “the Jews” to the forerunner of our Lord, John the Baptist. Here we have portending for us the hostility that our Lord would encounter throughout His ministry from the established Jewish leaders.

But let us also remember that John probably wrote this Gospel many decades after these narrated events had occurred, long after the Jewish authorities had rejected and crucified Jesus, persecuted the early church, and had suffered God’s judgment upon them by the Romans in the war of AD 67 to 70. The Evangelist (John the Apostle) recorded in his Gospel this hostility of the Jews from the earliest days of onset of this kingdom age. Of this Gospel’s presentation of “the Jews”, **Francis Hoskyns** wrote a good and thorough depiction:

³ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 20.

⁴ “Whereas ‘Israel’ was still the people’s self-designation, ‘Jew’ was generally used by non-Jews for Jews, and Jews in the diaspora (i.e. in the Roman world) gradually adopted the designation.” Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John; A Theological Commentary* (William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 62.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 62f.

⁷ Klink, p. 127.

⁸ Ridderbos, p. 63.

The Evangelist is not here speaking of a race marked by the peculiar purity of its physical descent or of a people endowed with peculiar moral and intellectual qualities, especially visible in its accredited leaders. To the Evangelist the Jews were Jews because to them the law of God had been given, because to them the prophets had spoken, and because to them the coming of the Messiah had been promised (Rom. 2:17-21). Salvation is therefore of the Jews (4:22). They were a nation under the authority of God, this authority being exercised through the priests who were responsible for the worship in the Temple and through the Pharisees who were the guardians of the Law. On the knowledge and understanding of priests and Pharisees, and especially on their ability to recognize the Messiah when He came, depended the destiny of the whole Jewish people. But the Jewish authorities, with the approval of the populace in Jerusalem, had put Jesus to death; and the Evangelist knows only too well that since that time the Jews had consistently and with great bitterness everywhere opposed and persecuted His disciples (Matt. 28:15). Throughout his gospel the Evangelist therefore uses the phrase *the Jews* to denote the national rejection of the Christ and especially His rejection by the Jewish authorities (2:18ff, 5:10, 15-18, 7:13, 15, 9:22, 18:12ff), by the Pharisees (4:1, 9:13ff) and by the chief priests and the Pharisees (7:32, 45, 11:47, 57, 18:3). By their failure to recognize the Messiah in whom the law and the prophets are fulfilled, the Jews have shown that they have misunderstood their own worship (2:20), their own practices of purification (2:6), the Sabbath (5:18), the Scriptures (5:39, 40, 47), and the Passover (6:4); and so far from accepting the authority of God, they are actively engaged in the service of their *father the devil* (8:44). (Cf. 2:6, 13, 5:1, 6:4, 7:2, 11:55; 8:17, 10:34, 15:25, 18:31, 19:7,...) In the perspective of the gospel, the Jews are therefore merged into the *World* (15:18), which, though created by the Word of God, does not receive Him when He comes into the world to His own. Indeed, it is in open opposition of the Jews in general, though (rather, “the”?) less self-conscious opposition of the World is most clearly seen. The gulf that separates John from the Jewish deputation, and which causes the Evangelist to speak of the Jews as a distinct and separate people, is not due to the possibility that the prophet had been born and exercised his whole ministry on the periphery of Palestinian Judaism and that the Evangelist was a Greek writing for Greek Christians.⁹ The gulf is the ultimate gulf between unbelief and faith, between blindness and sight, between death and life.¹⁰

And so, here at the outset of the Gospel, the hostility of the Jewish leadership is introduced to us, not overtly, but certainly. They will be the opposition to both the forerunner and Messiah Himself, which they will manifest fully and finally at His cross.

But let us be mindful of this! God often works salvation in those who may initially be quite hostile to the Lord Jesus and/or His people. Although the Jews, especially the Jewish leaders, were resistant and hostile to the Lord and His representatives, nevertheless, many of them later became disciples of Jesus Christ. Yes, the Jewish leadership persisted in their resistance, but there was a Nicodemus and a Joseph of Arimathea from among them (John 19:38ff). And later we read that “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). And later still there was one who was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord”, whom the Lord converted and transformed into a Christ promoter rather than persecutor (Acts 9:1, 6). We should not cease praying for, and bearing witness to even the one who most opposes us, who is most resistant and hostile to the Gospel, for it may be the Lord’s intention to save that soul. On the other hand, do not be too enamored with the one that may seem to have little resistance or oppose you little in your Christian ways and witness, for nothing may come of that one. We may find it more profitable to engage a soul for the Lord who is cold or hot, rather than lukewarm.

1) John first denied that he was the Christ (1:20)

Again, verse 19 reads, “Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’” The Lord was still in Judea at this time, probably not far from

⁹ This was the understanding of many more liberal commentators.

¹⁰ Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), p. 173.

Jerusalem. He would be leaving for Galilee before long. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark tell us the reason Jesus left Judea and traveled to Galilee was due to the hostility of the Jewish leaders and especially due to Herod's arrest and imprisonment of John the Baptist (Matt. 4:12; Mark 1:14).

When the Jewish leaders inquired of John, "Who are you?", they were not concerned about his personal identity, as such. They wanted to know what John claimed regarding his place and role in his announcing the coming Messiah and the promised Kingdom of God. They asked who John was and we read of his response, "he confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ'" (v. 20).¹¹

There was great expectation of the people at this time that the promised Messiah would soon appear.

First century Palestine was rife with messianic expectations. Some expected a Davidic Messiah; others (as at Qumran) expected a priestly Messiah as well, not to mention the coming of 'the prophet' (1QS9:11).¹² But if they think he is a 'Messiah' at all, an 'Anointed One' long prophesied by the Scriptures, they are wrong.¹³

John the Baptist had such a remarkable ministry that many had thought that he was the Christ. We read of this in Luke 3:15, that they "all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not."

The manner in which John the Baptist answered their query is rather unique. It is said of John, "He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'" His response was emphatic: "***I am not*** the Christ."

The forceful way this is presented, *He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely*, is the Evangelist's way of saying that even the Baptist's denials that he was the Christ constituted part of his positive witness to (his confession of) the true Christ.¹⁴

The depiction of John's answer is special. John "confessed and did not deny." The word, "confess", conveys the idea of a formal witness testifying in a court setting. John was undergoing a legal examination in which he declared the truth openly and forthrightly. The Gospel writer is setting forward John the Baptist as "the ideal witness to Christ."¹⁵ who was legally testifying of Jesus Christ.

John would have no one think more highly of him than what they thought of Christ. Even questions posed to John regarding him, he turned about to testify of Jesus. And so, even in his humility, he sought to exalt Christ. **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) wrote,

He was more industrious to *do good* than to *appear great*; and therefore waved saying anything of himself till he was legally interrogated. Those speak best for Christ that say least of themselves, whose *own works* praise them, *not their own lips*.¹⁶

I appreciated the exhortation of **J. C. Ryle** (1816-1900) at this point:

¹¹ It may be that there was a sect that later advocated that John the Baptist was the true Messiah. It has been suggested that John the Gospel writer kept asserting that John the Baptist was not the Christ in order to correct these errant followers of John. This is somewhat speculative.

¹² The designation, 1QS9:11, is a reference to one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. "1Q" means that this scroll was found in cave #1 at Qumran. "S" is the designation of the specific scroll. "S" stands for the Hebrew word, "Serekh" or "rule." It is the title of the scroll which contained the rules for the community, which is commonly known as "The Manual of Discipline." "9:11" refers to the 9th column and the 11th line of this scroll.

¹³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 142.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 143.

¹⁵ W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, quoted by Ridderbos, p. 64.

¹⁶ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 5 (Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d., originally 1721), p. 858. He also gave forth this lesson based on this passage: "God's faithful witnesses stand more upon their guard *against undue respect* than against *unjust contempt*."

If we profess to have any real Christianity, let us strive to be of John the Baptist's spirit. Let us study humility. This is the grace with which all must begin, who would be saved. We have no true religion about us, until we cast away our high thoughts, and feel ourselves sinners.—This is the grace which all saints follow after, and which none have any excuse for neglecting. All God's children have not gifts, or money, or time to work, or a wide sphere of usefulness; but all may be humble.—This is the grace, above all, which will appear most beautiful in our latter end. Never shall we feel the need of humility so deeply, as when we lie on our deathbeds, and stand before the judgment-seat of Christ. Our whole lives will then appear a long catalogue of imperfections, ourselves nothing, and Christ all.¹⁷

2) John secondly denied that he was Elijah the prophet (1:21)

After John denied that he was the Christ, they asked him further:

²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"
He said, "I am not."

John's answer was short and terse. One rightly pointed out,

"The increasing curtness of John's successive utterances should not be missed. It appears to stem from a dislike for answering questions about himself. He had come to bear witness to Another."¹⁸

The Jews anticipated the arrival and ministry of Elijah the prophet before the arrival of the Messiah. This was based on a prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament). We read in **Malachi 4:5, 6**, the last words in our Old Testament:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet
Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.
And he will turn
The hearts of the fathers to the children,
And the hearts of the children to their fathers,
Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

The Lord Jesus later taught His disciples that John the Baptist was the realization and fulfillment of this Elijah prophecy. We read in **Matthew 11:7-15**:

⁷As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰***For this is he of whom it is written:***

***'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,
Who will prepare Your way before You.'***

¹¹"Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. ¹⁴***And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.*** ¹⁵He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

¹⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), p. 45.

¹⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 136.

Now when John the Baptist answered the question negatively, “No I am not Elijah”, either he was not aware that he was the fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi 4, or else he was simply denying that he was literally Elijah the prophet. But our Lord definitively stated that John the Baptist was the Elijah that God had promised to come before the Day of the Lord.

And yet, in spite of the fact that our Lord declared John the Baptist to have been the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi 4:5 and 6, there are many evangelicals today who insist that in the future Elijah will appear on the scene, during a supposed future seven year tribulation, just before the second coming of Jesus Christ. This is a very common belief, but I would argue, a very errant belief. I heard it declared recently on the radio. In fact, this radio preacher argued from our text of John 1:21 that John the Baptist directly denied that he was Elijah, and therefore John the Baptist could not be the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy that Elijah would come. He did not address our Lord’s forthright statement that the Baptist was the promised Elijah to come. **Ralph Woodrow** set the matter plainly:

What is meant by this prophecy about the coming of Elijah? Again, there are two differing views that are held among Christians today. The one view is that this prophecy is yet FUTURE—a prophecy for the very last days of this age. According to this view, Elijah—the literal Elijah—will make another appearance on this earth before the second coming of Jesus Christ in judgment. The other view is the FULFILLED interpretation—that Elijah has already come and that this prophecy met its fulfillment in John the Baptist.¹⁹

There are those who argue,

“After all, Elijah did not experience physical death, but was taken up alive in a chariot into heaven. Since he did not die, he could come back again before the second coming of Christ” (Cf. 2 Kings 2:11).

“Besides”, they say, “Malachi foretold of the coming of Elijah the prophet ‘before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD’ (Mal. 4:5), which was not a reference to the first coming of Jesus but of his second coming; therefore,” they argue, “Elijah must yet come in the future just before the Day of the Lord.”

But if one reads the prophecy of Malachi 4 carefully, it foretells both the deliverance and the overthrow of the people, of both the rise and the fall of many in Israel (Cf. Mal. 4:1-3). This is consistent with the prophecy that Simeon pronounced over the infant Jesus in the temple, when he said to Mary, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34f). The “Day of the Lord” foretold in Malachi 4:5 was a direct prophecy of the overthrow of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The coming of the Messiah would result in both some Jews being saved from their sin and with other Jews being judged and overthrown for their unbelief.

But in addition to those who believe that Elijah himself will literally appear before the (second) Second Coming of Christ, there have been many “preachers” who have claimed to be the Elijah to come prophesied in Scripture. Woodrow thinks that there have been “hundreds” of these claimants that they were the fulfillment of the prophecy that Elijah would return before the second coming of Christ. He wrote,

Failing to accept this as final, over the centuries there have been men who have claimed to be Elijah or have the Elijah ministry. One man who makes this claim sends out his sermons in “scroll” form. Another man, figuring himself to be the leader of God’s true church, has told some of his closer followers that he is Elijah. Many years ago, the Chicago preacher, healer, and founder of Zion, Illinois, John Alexander Dowie, taught that he was Elijah. An interesting and controversial character, with his beard and forceful preaching, he could have well fit the part. But his kingdom fell into discord, after years of preaching against doctors, he was afflicted, divorced by his cousin-wife, and accused of

¹⁹ Ralph Woodrow, *His Truth is Marching On* (Ralph Woodrow Association, 1977), p. 60.

polygamy. Quite a number believed William Branham was Elijah and that his ministry was the forerunner for the return of Christ. He passed on now. All in all, I suppose there have been several hundred cases in which men have claimed to be Elijah. Such has commonly resulted in misunderstanding and ridicule—all of which could have been avoided by recognizing John the Baptist, as Jesus explained, as the fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy.²⁰

No, our Lord Himself said very plainly that Malachi's prophecy was fulfilled in the life and ministry of John the Baptist. This was also declared by an angel to John's father, Zacharias, when he was ministering in the temple. We read in Luke 1 of the angel's announcement regarding John the Baptist:

¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷*He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah*, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

When these ones had come from Jerusalem, they asked John if he was literally Elijah reincarnated. He declared to them, "No, I am not."

3) John thirdly denied that he was "the Prophet" (1:21)

The third possibility that the Jews had heard regarding the identity of John is recorded in verses 21b-23.

"Are you the Prophet?"
And he answered, "No."

They did not ask if John was *a* prophet. They asked if John was *the* Prophet. There is the definite article, "the", in the Greek text that precedes "Prophet." They were asking John if he were a specific prophet.

Common understanding among the Jews was that with the coming of the Messiah, God would send a Prophet who would have the same authority and standing as had Moses, yes, even greater authority than had Moses. Moses himself had declared this word in **Deuteronomy 18:15-22**. I will read the larger passage for context:

¹⁵*"The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear,* ¹⁶according to all you desired of the LORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.'

¹⁷And the LORD said to me: 'What they have spoken is good. ¹⁸*I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.* ¹⁹*And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.* ²⁰But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.'

²¹And if you say in your heart, 'How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?'—
²²when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

²⁰ Ibid, pp. 60f.

The Jews thought, “Would John claim to be the Messiah, or the forerunner of the Messiah?” The queried John to see if he claimed to be this promised Prophet.

Of course the Word of God declares that Jesus Christ is “the Prophet” that Moses had foretold would come. Jesus Christ is our *Prophet*, Priest, and King. He is the Prophet greater than Moses. Peter declared this before the crowd in Jerusalem not long after Pentecost, after the Lord Jesus had been raised, ascended and enthroned in heaven. After Peter had pressed upon the Jewish crowd their guilt for having rejected and crucified their Messiah, he declared these words:

¹⁷“Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. ¹⁹Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, ²⁰and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, ²¹whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. ²²*For Moses truly said to the fathers, ‘The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you.’* ²³*And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’* ²⁴Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days. ²⁵You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ ²⁶To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities.”

The Reformation Study Bible, which I highly regard and recommend, has this footnote on the Deuteronomy passage:

Moses, the preeminent prophet of the Old Testament period, introduces the topic of Israelite prophecy. God would communicate His word to Israel through a succession of prophets. As mediators of God’s word to His people, the other Old Testament prophets would function in similar ways to Moses (v. 16). But none would be the initial mediators of a covenant, and none would equal Moses’ intimacy with God or receive divine revelations as clear as those given to him (Numb. 12:6-8; Deut. 34:10). This passage, then, finds final fulfillment in the Prophet who is equal to, indeed greater than, the prophet Moses—Jesus Christ (Acts 3:22-26; 7:37; cf. John 5:45-47; Heb. 3:2-6). Like Moses, Christ is the Mediator of a covenant between God and His people (Luke 22:20; Heb. 8:7-13).²¹

4) John declared himself to be “the Voice” prophesied by Isaiah (1:22-23)

John told this delegation from the Jews of Jerusalem, “I am not that Prophet.” Having exhausted the opinions of most, they asked him to identify himself.

²²Then they said to him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”

²³He said: “I am

‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
“Make straight the way of the LORD,” ’

as the prophet Isaiah said.”

²¹ R. C. Sproul, gen. ed., *The Reformation Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1995), p. 266.

These representatives of the Jews in Jerusalem had to give a more direct answer to their senders than whom John said he was not.

The members of the deputation felt frustrated. John was clearly an “eschatological” figure, with his preaching of imminent judgment to be administered by the Coming One. Yet he refused to be identified with any of the figures of popular eschatological expectation. What, then, was his own account of himself? What kind of answer were they to take back to the people who had sent them?²²

And so they asked, “John, how do you identify yourself? What do you claim is your role in God’s purposes?” John declared that he was “the voice” foretold by Isaiah, quoting Isaiah 40:3. Let us consider the context of the passage of Isaiah 40 in which this verse is quoted then we will read it in its entirety.

God had brought His judgment upon Israel. We read of His severe, but just punishment of this people who were under His wrath. This people had sinned against all of God’s kindness and blessing that He had so graciously bestowed upon them. Their sin warranted His judgment, which He justly brought to pass in history. They had nothing remaining that God had not smitten or removed from them. Their land had been decimated, their cities destroyed, the people had been enslaved. They had no hope before God. They had no basis of claim to God. *This* God, who had formerly been *their* God, was against them and had greatly afflicted them. And if this was how Israel the once great people of God stood before their holy God, what of the Gentiles who know never knew God? What hope had they? The answer of course is no hope, when they considered their condition and state before the one true God who had passed His judgment upon them. But it was to this hopeless and helpless people that the initial message of comfort and restoration was given. Here is **Isaiah 40:1-11**:

“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!”

Says your God.

²“Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,
That her warfare is ended,
That her iniquity is pardoned;
For she has received from the LORD’s hand
Double for all her sins.”

³The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the LORD;

Make straight in the desert

A highway for our God.

⁴Every valley shall be exalted

And every mountain and hill brought low;

The crooked places shall be made straight

And the rough places smooth;

⁵The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,

And all flesh shall see it together;

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

⁶The voice said, “Cry out!”

And he said, “What shall I cry?”

“All flesh is grass,

And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.

²² F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 48.

⁷The grass withers, the flower fades,
Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.

⁸The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.”

⁹O Zion,
You who bring good tidings,
Get up into the high mountain;
O Jerusalem,
You who bring good tidings,
Lift up your voice with strength,
Lift it up, be not afraid;
Say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

¹⁰Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand,
And His arm shall rule for Him;
Behold, His reward is with Him,
And His work before Him.

¹¹He will feed His flock like a shepherd;
He will gather the lambs with His arm,
And carry them in His bosom,
And gently lead those who are with young.

This prophecy of Isaiah anticipated the restoration of a remnant of Jews from the Babylonian exile in to which God had sent them. Their release and return from Babylon is set forth as an act of salvation that God brings to His people. But it is clear that Isaiah was looking beyond a mere physical return of Jews to their homeland. What Isaiah proclaimed was God’s promise that He would bring salvation from sin under which His people had been condemned. In their “return” to Zion they would see the inauguration of the long-promised Kingdom of God, ruled over by the Promised Messiah. Here, therefore, we have a beautiful prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ and salvation that God wrought through Him. John the Baptist was this voice of Isaiah 40:3 in which he heralded the Kingdom of God was at hand, that the Messiah would soon arrive in order to redeem and restore His people unto God.²³

F. F. Bruce drew out the gospel implications of this passage:

In the original context the prophet hears a voice calling for the levelling of a path through the eastern desert so that the God of Israel may lead his people home from exile. In the NT application of the oracle, the desert becomes the wilderness of Judea in which John preached his message of repentance. The two-fold corpus of prophecy which runs from Isaiah 40 to 66 begins by proclaiming good tidings to Zion of the return of her exiled children, but goes on to tell of a greater redemption, wrought not by the edict of Cyrus but by the passion and triumph of the obedient Servant of the Lord, and concludes with the promise of new heavens and a new earth. The NT writers reinterpret the glad tidings to Zion in terms of the Christian gospel, the message which began to be inaugurated when John prepared the way for a greater than himself. The redemption which he was to accomplish was now on the eve of its appearance, and it was John’s high honour to be the voice announcing its near approach.²⁴

²³ For the attentive and perceptive reader of these notes, it is clear that this understanding of Isaiah 40 and the fulfillment of the “voice” in the person of John the Baptist, who heralded the soon inauguration of the Kingdom of God, is consistent with an amillennial understanding of the present kingdom—this church age—as the promised “millennium” or kingdom age proclaimed by the prophets and taught by the Lord Jesus and His apostles.

²⁴ Bruce, *John*, p. 49.

John declared that he was “the voice.” He rightly applied the Holy Scripture to himself, but he did so not to bolster his dignity or his notoriety, but to emphasize his duty and his dependence on another to give him his message and enable his proclamation.

Conclusion:

Let us be faithful witnesses as John the Baptist was faithful to Him who had sent Him. Let us be quick to deny any credit or status that might be conferred upon us, but rather testify forthrightly of the glory of our Redeemer. “Temptations to pride, and assuming that human honour to ourselves which does not belong to us, ought to be resisted with a great deal of vigour and earnestness” (Matthew Henry). We are helpless and powerless to produce any spiritual good in others. They need Jesus Christ, and we are to clearly and forcefully place Christ before them.

And so it is that we need Jesus Christ as well. May we not only prepare others to hear and respond to the Lord, but may we also prepare ourselves to receive the Lord and His Words as He comes to us. “When God is coming towards us, we must prepare to meet Him, and let the word of the Lord have *free course*” (Matthew Henry).

Next Lord’s Day, Lord willing, we will read of the second delegation sent to inquire of John. Whereas the first delegation inquired of John who he was, the second delegation will question his act of baptizing people.

“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way.
The Lord be with you all.” (2 Thess. 3:16)
