

## John 1:19-28      John's encounter with the delegation from Jerusalem

John 1:6 established John as a *man sent from God*. The Jews of Jerusalem (John 1:19) did not see it that way, so sent a delegation to question John. Three important questions arise from this passage:

### 1. Who were the Jews?

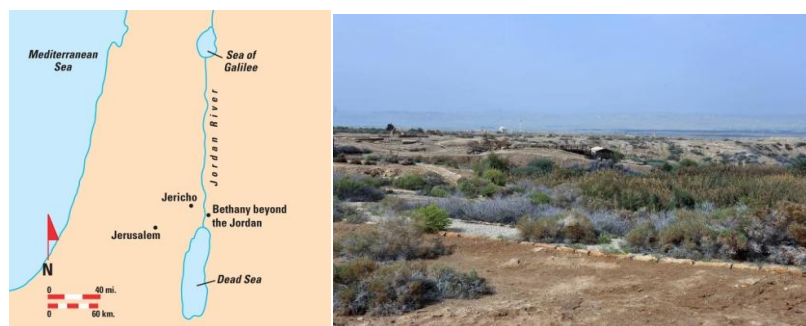
We are told in John 1:19 that the delegation of priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem to quiz John were sent by *the Jews*. Last week I suggested that *his own* (John 1:11) refers to this group who in John's gospel are referred to as *the Jews* or *Judeans*. They are not all Jews as we know them today, but were a subset of 1<sup>st</sup> century Israelite society, and in fact the wider dominant and ruling subgroup, with their power base in Jerusalem. The body governing the Jewish community and life in the first century was called the Sanhedrin. Even though Israel was under the authority of Rome they were allowed a degree of self-rule. It was the Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus to death, though this could only be done with the permission of Pilate. But for sure the Sanhedrin (made up of Sadducees and Pharisees) exercised considerable power over the population. In John 1:24 we read that the delegation was sent specifically from the Pharisaic authorities.

The main problem was that John had become far too successful for the liking of the Jewish authorities. Many were coming to John, listening to his powerful preaching, repenting of their sins, being baptised, and hearing about the Messiah to come. In effect, John was conducting open air revival meetings and the ordinary people loved it!

Matthew fills us in on the details: *People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River* (Matthew 3:5-6). Not all Judeans were opposed to either John or Jesus. Rather it was "*the Jews*" as John describes them, the ruling elite, who opposed God's work and felt threatened. John 10 casts these people as the evil shepherds of Israel, and contrasts them with Jesus the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (see John 10:31). In John 10:40-42 Jesus returns to the region, called 'beyond the Jordan' where John had been baptising. Many of the people who had heard John and no doubt been baptised by him responded very positively to Jesus and believed in him.

### 2. Where did John baptise?

As we know John baptised in the River Jordan. But John 1:28 specifically calls the area *Bethany beyond the Jordan*.



The exact location of Bethany beyond the Jordan has been disputed since the days of the church fathers (Origen), and no archaeological remains have been found. But there are good biblical and extra-biblical reasons for believing it was close to the location marked on the map, about 30 miles from Jerusalem. But Bethany is also mentioned in John 11:18, *two miles from Jerusalem*. Most likely John in his gospel is being careful to distinguish between two villages called Bethany, Bethany beyond the Jordan, and Bethany two miles from Jerusalem (cf. Wells in Somerset and Wells-Next-

The-Sea in Norfolk.) Isaiah prophesied about the region 'Beyond the Jordan' (Isaiah 9:1, Matthew 4:15). Indeed a light had dawned in this region through the ministry of John (John 1:7) and later Jesus (John 10:40-42).

There is a lot of significance of John baptising in the Jordan River. The Jordan was the crossing point into the Promised Land. It signifies entry into the kingdom of God. At the Jordan people were repenting of their sins, getting right with God, and preparing for the Coming One. Spiritually they were crossing the Jordan! (cf. Lyrics of the hymn *Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer.*)

But *the Jews* were not happy with this revival!

### 3. How did the Jews challenge John?

*The Jews* wanted to know what authority John had to carry out this mass water ceremony in the Judean countryside. We can see that John recognised the authority of the Jews but he didn't think he needed their permission to baptise. They thought otherwise and plied him with questions. If John could show he was Messiah, or Elijah or the Prophet, perhaps his ministry was legitimate.

**QUESTION NO. 1:** *Who are you?* (v19) John guessed what they were thinking, and answered them, *I am not the Christ.* The Christ would be Saviour, and John was quick to confess he was not the Saviour. Jesus warned many would come claiming to be a Christ or Saviour, but do not be deceived (Matthew 24:5). John did not have a Messiah-complex!

**QUESTION NO. 2:** *What then? Are you Elijah?* (v21) John says, *I am not.* Did they think John could be Elijah reincarnated? No, because Jews did not believe in reincarnation. But they did believe in the literal coming of Elijah (Malachi 4:5-6), who didn't die, but who was transported into heaven in a chariot of fire (2Kings2). John is saying that he is not Elijah in the literal sense. However, Jesus said John was *the Elijah who was to come* (Matthew 11:13-14). Though not literally Elijah, John came in the spirit and power of Elijah and exercised a ministry similar to Elijah in turning the people back to the Lord.

**QUESTION NO. 3:** *Are you the Prophet?* John answers, *No!* Notice his answers are getting shorter and shorter! The prophecy of a coming Prophet like unto Moses (Deuteronomy 18:11) is a prophecy of the coming Messiah, although it seems that *the Jews* hadn't made the connection, even though later, after the feeding of the 5000, the people thought Jesus to be the Prophet to come (John 6:14).

**QUESTION NO. 4:** *Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?* (John 1:22). John answers by identifying himself as the voice of Isaiah crying out in the wilderness (John 1:23). Note that Isaiah says, *make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* Identifying 'Jesus' with 'God' is in my view a strong hint of Jesus' deity.

**QUESTION NO. 5:** *"Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"* (v25). Clearly therefore in the eyes of the delegation John's ministry was not legitimate. But John's answer bewilders them: *I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know.* Note that they are those who *know him not* (John 1:10). *He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.* Untying the straps of someone's sandals was a slave's job. John did not consider himself even worthy of untying his Master's sandals. John wasn't insecure and he didn't have an inferiority complex. He knew his calling and his ministry. But he also knew that it wasn't all about him, something we can learn from in this narcissistic age we live in. May be this is why Jesus said, *I tell you, among those born of women there is none greater than John.* (Luke 7:28). Like John we need to bring the self life under the authority of King Jesus, who loves His sheep and laid down His life for us!