

John, the Last Prophet

BY D. A. CARSON

I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11).

The more one meditates on this verse the more astonishing it is. The plain meaning is that if you are a Christian, you are greater than King David, greater than Abraham, greater than King Solomon; for this text says that John the Baptist was the greatest one born of women up to that point, and the least in the kingdom is greater than he. So by Jesus’ assessment, John the Baptist in some respect outstrips David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel, and the least in the kingdom outstrips John. That is astonishing!

In verses 10-11 we find what John was. Jesus tells us: “This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way before You.’” That is

to say, he was not only a prophet, he was the subject of prophecy, the one about whom prophecy was written. What prophecy? Malachi’s prophecy revealed that there would be a messenger ahead of the Lord’s

appearing, a messenger who would announce and prepare the way of the Lord, a precursor, a forerunner. John was that person.

“Indeed,” Jesus says in verse 11, “among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.” What does Jesus mean? Clearly, He is saying that John the Baptist is to be viewed as greater than King David — the great King David; greater than Moses, the

one who under God introduced the Sinai code, the Law, the Ten Commandments. He is greater than Abraham, the first patriarch, the originator of the entire Jewish race. He is greater than Isaiah, the one who penned the servant song, “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace

*John the Baptist
is the greatest
simply because
he is the one
who has pointed
out Jesus with
greatest clarity.*

was upon Him and by His stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5 NKJV).

John the Baptist is the greatest simply because he is the one who has

pointed out Jesus with greatest clarity. The law “prophesies”: it depicts Jesus in a variety of ways through the entire sacrificial system. Moses thus anticipates Jesus. Moses is the figure in Deuteronomy 18: 18 who anticipates the prophet who is to come. King David is the archetypal king, and Jesus comes in David’s line; that way, David witnesses to Jesus. Isaiah certainly witnesses to Jesus. Even Jeremiah pointed out who Jesus is. But to

John the Baptist fell the peculiar lot of pointing out who Jesus is directly. “There, that’s the One,” he said. “That is the One: He is the promised Messiah. That is the Lamb of God. That is the One whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose. That is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit promised under the terms of the new covenant. He is the One.” And that is what makes John the Baptist great.

The same sort of thing is said in John’s gospel in John 10:40-42. We read these remarkable words: “Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. Here He stayed and

many people came to Him. They said, ‘Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true.’ And in that place

many believed in Jesus.” John’s greatness, therefore, did not consist in the ability to perform miracles, for he did not perform one; not in the ability to write great books like Isaiah, for he didn’t write one. Not in the ability to rule a great people; he was never a king. He was not a high priest, he never offered a sacrifice. He was a desert preacher, but he pointed out who Jesus was — and that’s what makes him great.

For Jesus to say that John the Baptist’s greatness was above everyone

who had been born of women (which is pretty universal — it might exclude Adam, and that’s about it) makes Him either who He claims to be — one with God — or an international class nutter. There’s no intervening possibility — none. So we find here, in other words, both Jesus’ public identification of the forerunner and the public identification of His own role and place in redemptive history. ■

Dr. D.A. Carson, author of numerous books and commentaries, is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL. This article is adapted from a sermon delivered at Grace Reformed Baptist Church, Amesbury, MA, in November 1990.

Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about Jesus is true.

He was a desert preacher, but he pointed out who Jesus was — and that’s what makes him great.