

No other biblical character defines the season of Advent more than John the Baptist. It is his voice, which gives voice to how the faithful should prepare themselves for the coming of Christ. It is his enigmatic life, which reflects the strangeness of the New Testament life we are called to live. But who was John the Baptist? It is obvious from how much he is mentioned in Holy Scripture that he's important. He appears in all four Gospels, and that's saying something for not every story from the life of Christ finds its way into all four Gospel accounts. And when a story does appear in all four—like Christ's birth or His death, for example—you can bet it's significant. The fact that John the Baptist is described by all four evangelists should make us pause and take notice. And the first thing we notice is how there are two different views of John in the New Testament. The synoptic Gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark and Luke) look upon John as a *Prophet*, who announces the imminent coming of Christ. In the fourth Gospel, that of John's Gospel, the focus is instead on how John the Baptist is a *Witness* to the true identity of Christ. In this way, John straddles two worlds—the old and the new. As a prophet, John predicts the coming Messiah, and resembles all the Old Testaments prophets who came before him preaching repentance and preparing the way. As a Witness, John identifies Christ as more than simply a man. He is the first to proclaim Jesus publicly as, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”. In this way, John resembles all the New Testament evangelists, who would come after him, preaching forgiveness, life and salvation in Christ our Lord. In his preaching, then, John the Baptist closes the Old Testament Prophetic Office and opens the New Testament Preaching Office.

But what can we say about John the person? Well for starters, John was a man of his times. He did not live in a vacuum. And at this time in history, all of Palestine had come under the sway of Hellenistic culture. Hellenism brought the domination of Greek thought to the Holy Land. Greek philosophy, art, language, literature, and religion caused a watering down of the distinct message of Yahweh to His chosen people. Many were swept away by the enticements of Greek thought—many, but not all. There was a group within Judaism that sought to remain faithful to the original covenant. They physically separated themselves from the invasive Greek ideology and lived in isolation. The Law of Moses was for them the expression of God's Will, and fidelity to God meant the utmost fidelity to His Covenant. This sequestered group were known as the Essenes, meaning the modest ones, the silent ones, the pious ones. They escaped into the desert. They resided in the caves of Qumran near the

Dead Sea. In fact, it was their library, which was discovered in 1947, that provides us with some of our oldest manuscripts of Old Testament books and writings. Today, we call this collection the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Essenes lived in seclusion. They were monkish in their habits. They rejected the luxuries of the world and chose instead a life of ascetism—simple diets, rustic clothing, and lives given solely to the study and meditation of God’s holy Law. The Essenes saw themselves as the actual fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah, “The voice of one crying in the desert: Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.” Sound familiar? It should because this is exactly how John the Baptist is described for us by the New Testament writers. Although never officially given the name, his life is framed by the Essene way of life. We are told in Luke the Word of the Lord came to John the Baptist in the desert. It seems the Gospel writers wanted to make this connection between the Essenes and John the Baptist, seeing how the very word “desert” is not some generic description of a barren wasteland, but the very same name the hermits of Qumran gave their dwelling place. The contact of John with the Essenes explains a great deal about John’s character: his diet of locusts and honey, his clothing of course camel hair, his prophecy about being the Voice crying in the wilderness, all are of one piece with the ascetic practices and teaching of the Essenes. It also answers for us how John the Baptist could live in the wilderness from childhood. For a child to live out in the wilderness alone would not make much sense unless the wilderness is none other than the region occupied by the Qumran community. Finally, we know that the location where John the Baptist baptized Jesus was less than two miles from where the community resided.

Who knows how many of the Essenes transferred their Messianic hopes onto Jesus. One thing is for certain, though, John the Baptist did. His life of seclusion ended with the appearance of Christ. From the moment He points at Christ and says “Behold the Lamb of God”, John stepped out of the shadows and into the public spotlight. He began to preach and teach openly in towns and villages. And his newfound notoriety precipitated his untimely death. John the Baptist straddled two worlds—the Old Testament world and the New Testament world. John the Baptist straddled two ways of life—a secluded life and a public life. Christ our Lord did the very same thing. Christ is the culmination of the Old and yet He Himself makes all things new. Christ lived amongst the crowds, but sought out isolated places to pray, even escaping into the desert Himself. In John the Baptist, the

curtain rises, and the great drama of our salvation begins, and I can think of no better character to serve as a prelude to the mystery and the strangeness of Immanuel, God with us. Amen.