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John the Baptist: The Miracle and the Mission

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Jesus testified that “among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” (Luke 7:28; see also Matthew 11:11). In fact, the Savior called John “more than a prophet” (Matthew 11:9). What was the source of John’s greatness? It was not an upbringing and education in the Jerusalem schools. It was not the number of his baptisms or disciples. It was not the performance of miracles. Yet Jesus saw greatness in ways the world could not detect. Miraculous events accompanied John’s premortal, mortal, and post-mortal life, giving credence to the Savior’s supreme tribute.

Miraculous Premortality

Ancient prophets such as Isaiah, Lehi, Nephi, and Malachi foretold John’s mission, revealing that he would be a messenger for the Lord who would cry from the wilderness to prepare the way before the coming of Jesus, and who would baptize Him (see Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1; 1 Nephi 10:7–8; 11:27; 2 Nephi 31:4). John was not the only faithful member of the house of Israel in his day; however, he was the singular individual with the prophesied responsibility to “make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3), a metaphor alluding to “a runner who immediately precedes the horse or chariot of high officials in order to clear the way or make a proclamation.”¹ Although an earthly king might summon fifty men to run before his chariots and horsemen preparing the way for the royal entourage (see 1 Kings

1:5), only one man, John, was called an Elias² and sent to prepare the way for the King of mankind. Our current Bibles lack clarity concerning Elias and do not use the term to mean forerunner. Joseph Smith, however, restored the ancient concept by clarifying that the term Elias has existed “from the first ages of the world.”³ He stated further, “The Spirit of Elias is to prepare the way for a greater revelation of God. . . . When God sends a man into the world to prepare for a greater work, holding the keys of the power of Elias, it was called the doctrine of Elias, even from the early ages of the world.”⁴ This usage of Elias pre-dates the prophet Elijah.

Because John had to come forth at a particular time and to a particular lineage to fulfill his mission, not only his parents but also his whole genealogy were affected by his foreordained responsibility. John’s parents, Zacharias and Elisabeth, were of the tribe of Levi and were also descendants of the family of Aaron (see Luke 1:5). Although Zacharias described himself as “an old man” and Elisabeth as “well stricken in years” (Luke 1:18), they had not ceased praying for a child despite their age and Elisabeth’s apparent barrenness (see Luke 1:7, 13).

Zacharias, while fulfilling his Aaronic Priesthood responsibilities in caring for the altar of incense at the temple, was visited by an angel heralding the glad tidings of a future son (see Luke 1:8–13). God sent Gabriel⁵ to announce the coming of an extraordinary son whose name, holy status, and title were assigned by heaven itself (see Luke 1:13–17; D&C 27:7). Rather than receiving a family name, his name was revealed as John (see Luke 1:13, 59–63), meaning “Jehovah is gracious,”⁶ pointing to his miraculous birth to aged parents and the joy and rejoicing he would bring them and many others (see Luke 1:14). Gabriel instructed Zacharias that John “shall drink neither wine nor strong drink” (Luke 1:15), one aspect of a Nazarite’s vow. A Nazarite was separated from the masses and consecrated for service to the Lord and forbidden to eat grapes of any kind, foods made from vines, or the kernels from husks. Additionally, a Nazarite could not cut his hair or become unclean by associating with dead bodies—even close family members (see Numbers 6:3–7). The instructions of Gabriel implied that John may have been consecrated to God with a Nazarite vow from his birth. Because John would follow those vows faithfully Zacharias was promised that his son “shall be great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:15) and blessed with an outpouring of the Holy Ghost, the “spirit and power of Elias,” enabling him to “turn” many and prepare them for Jesus’s mission (Luke 1:17). This clearly alludes to the prophecy in Malachi 4:5–6. Zacharias and Elisabeth provided the essential

inheritance for their soon-to-be-born son: the correct lineage and a righteous family (see Luke 1:6), while John brought a faithful and willing spirit. The coming of an angel of God; the pregnancy of a barren, older woman; and the promise of a special son all attest to God's hand in the lives of Zacharias, Elisabeth, and John.

Even before birth, John and Jesus must have been kindred spirits. When Mary visited her cousin Elisabeth, John "leaped in her womb" for joy at the sound of Mary's voice (Luke 1:41), fulfilling Gabriel's prophecy—that he would be "filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15). John's Spirit-filled response engendered the promptings of the Holy Ghost in Elisabeth. She blessed Mary, her unborn child, and proclaimed humbly that her young cousin was to be "the mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43). This was a miraculous outpouring of the Spirit between unborn cousins, an aged woman, and a young virgin.

Miraculous Mortality

Soon after John's birth, miraculous events surrounded the newborn. Zacharias's voice was dramatically restored, allowing him to pronounce the Benedictus, a prophetic blessing upon his son. Filled with the Holy Ghost, Zacharias prophesied the intertwining of his son's and Jesus's missions (see Luke 1:67–79). John would be "the prophet of the Highest" (Luke 1:76) called to go before him to prepare the way by teaching salvation through baptism for the remission of sins (see Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 1:76). At this time, John also was "ordained" by an angel, presumably Gabriel, to his mission "to overthrow the kingdom of the Jews, and to make straight the way of the Lord before the face of his people, to prepare them for the coming of the Lord, in whose hand is given all power" (D&C 84:28).⁷ This was not, however, an ordination to the priesthood because the Levitical Priesthood came as a birthright with responsibilities beginning at the age of twenty-five or thirty (see Numbers 4:3; 8:23–26). Elder Bruce R. McConkie noted that John yet needed baptism and other preparations.⁸ President Joseph Fielding Smith declared that the ordination came from an angel because "John received certain keys of authority which his father Zacharias did not possess."⁹ No one else in Judea at that time held these keys or had recorded an outpouring of blessings under such miraculous circumstances.

Few details are recorded of John's upbringing. Herod the Great's death decree possibly could have threatened his life as it had the baby Jesus (see Matthew 2:16). Gabriel's instructions to Zacharias that John

“shall drink neither wine nor strong drink” (Luke 1:15); his description of John’s clothing and food, a “raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey” (Matthew 3:4); and that he “grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel” (Luke 1:80) indicate that John was separated from others his age, perhaps keeping the vows of a Nazarite, and living a simple life in the desert so that his upbringing would be at the hand of God and he could be protected from a designing king (see Luke 1:80).¹⁰

John’s preaching demonstrates that although he was raised in the wilderness away from the teachings of the rabbis, he had been well schooled by his parents and God in fundamental doctrines. For example, John taught repentance from sin, the proximity of the kingdom of God, and the importance of baptism and confession of sin (see Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 3:27–32); Jesus’s premortal existence and creation responsibilities, divine sonship, mission to baptize with fire, mission to give immortality and eternal life to his believers (see Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:1–18),¹¹ and mission to take away sin, bring salvation to heathen nations, gather the house of Israel, prepare for preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, bring to pass the resurrection from the dead, return to his Father and resume his place at God’s right hand, and administer a righteous judgment (see Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 3:5–9).¹² Having been born into the sterile spiritual environment of Judea amidst apostate Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes, John’s grasp of true doctrine and his understanding of his own divinely designated role testifies of a miraculous upbringing by faithful parents and divine tutors.

Although John’s ministry was not characterized by the same type of miraculous demonstrations of priesthood power as Jesus’s ministry, he was nevertheless a participant in and a witness to the great signs and events surrounding Jesus’s baptism. The brief accounts about John in each of the Gospels act as literary forerunners to the ministry of Jesus.¹³ Matthew, Mark, and Luke emphasize John’s role as a preparer *before* baptizing Jesus. The Gospel of John complements the synoptic Gospels, focusing on John the Baptist’s ministry *after* baptizing Jesus.

Similar to Jesus, John probably began his ministry at age thirty (see Luke 3:23), announcing, “I am he who was spoken of by the prophet Esaias [Isaiah] (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 3:3).”¹⁴ Many from Jerusalem and surrounding areas came to hear him preach and to be baptized in the Jordan River at Bethabara (see 1 Nephi 10:9; Matthew 3:5–6; Mark 1:4–5; Luke 3:3). The Prophet Joseph Smith declared that

“the kingdom of God for a season seemed to rest with John alone”¹⁵ with this reasoning: John was “a legal administrator, . . . the laws and oracles of God were there; therefore the kingdom of God was there.”¹⁶ Further, the Prophet Joseph explained, “It is evident the kingdom of God was on the earth, and John prepared subjects for the kingdom by preaching the Gospel to them and baptizing them.”¹⁷ As the last legal administrator and prophet of the old dispensation and the first legal administrator and prophet of the new dispensation,¹⁸ Jesus “submitted to that authority Himself.”¹⁹ Because John was both the last of the prophets under the law of Moses (see D&C 84:27) and the first of the prophets in the new dispensation, he held the priesthood keys of authority to which the mortal Jesus presented himself for baptism.

Despite his protestations that he needed to be baptized of Jesus, John was entrusted with the honor and privilege of baptizing Jesus, hearing the voice of God speaking from the heavens identifying Jesus as his Beloved Son, and seeing the Holy Ghost descending “like a dove” as witnesses to the ordinance (John 1:32; see also Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 3:43–46). Joseph Smith explained that “the sign of the dove was instituted before the creation of the world, a witness for the Holy Ghost . . . and given to John to signify the truth of the deed, as the dove is an emblem or token of truth and innocence.”²⁰ It does not appear that John knew Jesus personally prior to this time, although at age twelve both would likely have been in Jerusalem and at the temple on holy days such as Passover—one grew up in the wilderness, and the other was taken to Egypt for a few years and then raised in Nazareth. God gave John a prearranged sign so that he could identify Jesus as the Messiah (see John 1:31–33; Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:31–32).²¹

Because John was so successful in the wilderness preaching and baptizing, the Pharisees in Jerusalem sent a delegation of priests and Levites to examine him. In response to their question, “Who art thou?” John confessed he was Elias but said, “I am not the Christ,” explaining that he was not “that Elias who was to restore all things” (Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:20–22; see also Acts 13:25). Elder McConkie pointed out that “John’s questioners were familiar with some ancient Messianic prophecy unknown to us, which foretold the coming of Elias to perform a mighty work of restoration.”²²

When they continued to question him, John declared, “There standeth one among you, whom ye know not,” speaking of Jesus (John 1:26). He then explained, “He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me” (John 1:27). When Jesus returned to Bethabara

after his baptism and forty days of communing with God and the Holy Spirit in the wilderness, John testified to those with him, undoubtedly gesturing toward Jesus, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). John knew this was the Messiah because “when he was baptized of me, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him” (Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:31). John, as a priest in the Aaronic order—one who by his qualifications and performance of rituals prefigured and typified the Messiah—pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment of the law of Moses and as one for whom the designated sign had been given. John bore prophetic witness that Jesus is the unblemished Lamb whose blood will atone for mankind.

Although John was six months older than Jesus, he told his disciples that Jesus is “preferred before me: for he was before me,” emphasizing Jesus’s premortal Godhood (John 1:30). John testified that “he that cometh after me is mightier than I,” (Matthew 3:11) recognizing that “He held the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood and kingdom of God, and had before revealed the priesthood of Moses.”²³ John’s confession that he was unworthy to carry or loosen Jesus’s sandals (see Matthew 3:11; John 1:27; Acts 13:25) was the testimony of a humble man kneeling before the Savior and proclaiming the Master. Further accentuating Jesus’s elevated status, John pointed out the preparatory nature of his mission to baptize with water in contrast to Jesus’s mission to baptize not only with water but also fire (see Matthew 3:11; Joseph Smith Translation, Mark 1:6; John 1:33). John understood Jesus’s mission then—what Jesus’s close Apostles would not know until after his death. John humbly and loyally identified himself not as the Christ but as a witness to him, not as the bridegroom but as a friend of the bridegroom. As John’s mission drew to a close, he willingly stepped aside with these words, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Although a lesser man might have been enamored with ancient prophecies, his own miraculous birth, or having the honor of baptizing the Savior of the world, John never transcended the bounds of his priesthood, demonstrating that he was a true Elias.²⁴ John was the legal administrator of the kingdom of heaven until Jesus was baptized. At that point Jesus became “the legal administrator, and ordained his Apostles.”²⁵

John also testified of Jesus Christ to two of his disciples, pointing him out and again calling him the “Lamb of God” (John 1:36). Andrew, one of these, in turn found his brother Peter, who also was seeking the Messiah (see John 1:41–42). After the death of Judas

and the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus, the Apostles gathered to select a twelfth member. The criteria set forth for the new Apostle was that he “companied with us . . . from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he [Jesus] was taken up from us” (Acts 1:21–23). Clearly, John, Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael also fit this criteria and perhaps more if not all the apostles (see John 1:40–48).²⁶

John was taken to a prison called Machaerus on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea for his bold assertion of righteous principles to Herod Antipas and probably also the Pharisees.²⁷ Although Mark and Matthew’s accounts indicate he was “cast into prison” (Matthew 4:12; see also Mark 6:17–19; Luke 3:19–20) because he denounced Herod Antipas’s marriage to Herodias, his niece and formerly his brother Philip’s wife, Josephus wrote that Herod Antipas feared that John’s popularity and influence with the people might foment rebellion.²⁸ The Pharisees were as unhappy with John’s popularity as Herod Antipas was because it diminished their power and authority over the people also. They openly opposed him and denied the legitimacy of his authority to baptize (see Matthew 21:23–27; Luke 7:30, 33). An examination of the Greek word *paradidomi*, translated in the King James Version in this instance as “cast into” (prison) is more often translated elsewhere as “deliver up” or “betray,” providing support for political maneuvering in John’s arrest.²⁹ Taken together, the information suggests a conspiracy between Herod Antipas’s supporters and the Pharisees.³⁰ Jesus knew of John’s imprisonment and sent angels to comfort him, a miraculous attestation of Jesus’s great compassion and love for his forerunner (see Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 4:11).

John bore testimony of the Messiah, that Jesus was the Christ, and that his disciples should leave him and follow Jesus. While John was imprisoned, Jesus began to be well known—having yet more disciples than John (see Joseph Smith Translation, John 4:1). Some even said, “A great prophet is risen up among us,” and his fame extended to all of Judea and the surrounding area (Luke 7:16). Two of John’s disciples came to visit him at Machaerus, and he sent them to Jesus with a two-part question, “Art thou he of whom it is written in the prophets that should come, or do we look for another?”³¹ It appears that John had difficulty persuading at least these disciples to leave him and follow Jesus. John had already borne testimony of Jesus as the Lamb of God and told his disciples that his own mission must decrease while Jesus’s must increase. It was not John’s testimony that was in question but the testimony of these two disciples. After observing Jesus’s preaching

and miraculous healings, they returned to report to John, undoubtedly bearing their own new witness (Matthew 11:4–5).

John's life would soon end, and Jesus honored him by testifying of this faithful disciple and calling him "blessed" to the multitudes now following him.³² Jesus asked his listeners, "What went ye out for to see?" (Matthew 11:8). He contrasted John's wilderness abode, his unwavering prophetic testimony, and his simple apparel with those who wore soft and beautiful clothing, lived in ease, and associated with nobles in the king's court.³³ Jesus announced that John was more than a prophet—he was the first fulfillment of Isaiah's and Malachi's prophecies about an Elias or preparer, and then Jesus declared, "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater [one] than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matthew 11:11; see also Luke 7:28). Jesus declared that John "received not his testimony of man, but of God" (Joseph Smith Translation, John 5:35) and described him as "a burning and a shining light," one who was a brilliant and true witness of him for the duration of his short earthly ministry (John 5:35). Although wicked men—Herod the Great and his son Antipas—attempted to thwart both Jesus and John from their foreordained missions, Jesus prophesied in conjunction with his testimony of John that "the days will come, when the violent shall have no power" (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 11:13).

At the temple just before his own death, Jesus responded to the question of the chief priests, scribes, and elders: "By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority to do these things?" by asking his own question: "The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or of men?" (Mark 11:28, 30). Because these Jewish leaders could not answer without offending the people or admitting their hypocrisy, they refused to answer his question, and therefore Jesus refused to answer theirs. John did not have to wait until he stood in judgment after this life to have the great Advocate claim him as his own. John had authority from heaven, and Jesus proclaimed that he had faithfully fulfilled his mission. Joseph Smith gave three reasons why Jesus called John great:

First. He was entrusted with a divine mission of preparing the way before the face of the Lord. Whoever had such a trust committed to him before or since? No man.

Secondly. He was entrusted with the important mission, and it was required at his hands, to baptize the Son of Man. Whoever had the honor doing that? Whoever had so great a privilege and glory? Whoever

led the Son of God into the waters of baptism, and had the privilege of beholding the Holy Ghost descend in the form of a dove. . . .

Thirdly. John, at that time was the only legal administrator in the affairs of the kingdom there was then on earth. And holding the keys of power, the Jews had to obey his instructions or be damned, by their own law; and Christ himself fulfilled all righteousness in becoming obedient to the law which he had given to Moses on the mount, and thereby magnified it and made it honorable, instead of destroying it. The son of Zacharias wrested the keys, the kingdom, the power, the glory from the Jews, by the holy anointing and decree of heaven, and these three reasons constitute him the greatest prophet born of woman.³⁴

Herod Antipas recognized, at least initially, that John was a just and holy man and gladly listened to his message (see Mark 6:20). The Joseph Smith Translation also includes an addition to this phrase “and when he [Herod Antipas] heard him he did many things *for him*” (Joseph Smith Translation, Mark 6:21), implying that Herod Antipas may have protected him for a time from Herodias’s vengeful designs. She was offended by John’s condemnation of her marriage to Herod Antipas and plotted his death. At an opportune moment, Herod Antipas’s birthday feast, she enlisted the aid of her daughter Salome, who pleased Herod Antipas so much with her dancing that he foolishly promised her whatever she would have up to half of the kingdom. Herodias told Salome to ask for “the head of John the Baptist” (Mark 6:24). Despite his apparent reluctance, “yet for his oath’s sake, and for their sakes which sat with him” (Mark 6:26; see also Matthew 14:9), Herod Antipas sent the executioner to behead John. Because of Herod Antipas’s complicity in John’s murder, Luke records that Jesus, in speaking to certain Pharisees, called him “that fox” (Luke 13:32)³⁵ and would not speak to him at his trial (see Luke 23:9).³⁶ When Herod Antipas heard about Jesus, “for his name was spread abroad,” his clarion call to repentance, and his mighty works, he thought Jesus was “John the Baptist . . . risen from the dead” (Mark 6:14). The spiritual power of John and Jesus were so intertwined that Herod Antipas confused the two, the anointed Aaronic high priest and the anointed Melchizedek high priest and king, and perhaps felt guilty for beheading a man that he himself had once revered.

Miraculous Postmortality

Death did not arrest John’s mission. The Joseph Smith Translation adds that John the Baptist was witness to the miraculous outpouring of “the kingdom of God come with power” (Mark 9:1) on the Mount of Transfiguration (see Matthew 16:19; 17:1–3; Joseph Smith

Translation, Mark 9:3). Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained that other unnamed prophets may also have been present at this great event; however, in regard to John the Baptist, he was not the “Elias [Elijah] who appeared with Moses to confer the keys and authority upon those who then held the Melchizedek Priesthood; . . . rather, for some reason that remains unknown—because of the partial record of the proceedings—John played some other part in the glorious manifestations. . . . Perhaps he was there, as the last legal administrator under the covenant, to symbolize that the law was fulfilled.”³⁷

Approximately six months after the events on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus was slain. The Lord revealed to Joseph Smith that when Jesus, the firstfruits of the Resurrection, came forth from the tomb, he was accompanied by many ancient prophets, including his beloved forerunner, John (see D&C 133:55). The Apostle John testifies that signs are given “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:31). Of all the signs John recorded, the greatest was the miracle of resurrection, and John the Baptist was among the first to receive it.

In the dispensation of the fulness of times, John by right as the last legal administrator of the Aaronic Priesthood was privy to the grand events of the final dispensation. Joseph Smith declared that John personally visited him and Oliver Cowdery (see D&C 27:7; Joseph Smith—History 1:68–72), restoring the lesser priesthood and its keys to them in 1829 (see D&C 13; 27:7–8; Joseph Smith—History 1:68–72), preparing the way for Peter, James, and John to restore the Melchizedek Priesthood (see D&C 27:12), and later in 1836 for Moses, Elijah, and Elias to restore additional priesthood keys (see D&C 110:11–16).

John the Baptist’s full written testimony of Jesus is yet to come forth (see D&C 93:6, 18); nevertheless, part of his testimony was included long after his death with John the Beloved’s testimony. John the Beloved may have used John’s written account when compiling his own Gospel (see Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:1–34). A portion was also revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith and is recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants (see D&C 93:7–17).³⁸ As a mortal, John the Baptist saw Jesus’s premortal glory, that he has always been the Word or Messenger of the covenant of salvation, the Redeemer, the Spirit of Truth, the Creator, and the Only Begotten of the Father who came to earth as a mortal to live among us (see D&C 93:7–17). John testified that in mortality a veil of forgetfulness was drawn over Jesus,

who developed his spiritual capabilities gradually, receiving “grace for grace” until he received all of God’s power (D&C 93:12–17). John’s witness of Jesus included details that could have come only through the miracle of divine revelation.

Conclusion

Greatness in the eyes of God was found in the heart of a humble man who faithfully followed Nazarite vows and dutifully carried out his Aaronic Priesthood responsibilities. He fulfilled his prophetic destiny to be “great in the sight of God” (Luke 1:15) in going before the Savior and preparing many for the baptism by fire (see Matthew 3:11). He was “great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:15) because he went before and prepared many for the Lord (see Luke 1:17). John was the great “herald of the Messianic age, the messenger, forerunner, and Elias”³⁹—the one who stood at the transition from the old to the new covenant. In concert with his premortal foreordination, a sign was prepared so that he would know when he had fulfilled the most important portion of his mission. His birth to aged parents was miraculous as was his protection from the murderous decree of Herod the Great. He was the greatest of all Aaronic Priesthood bearers, given the responsibility to baptize the Son of God. Their ministries were perfectly intertwined; thus, Jesus testified of John’s greatness, while yet recognizing his own greater responsibility. John’s mission as an Elias also means that he was the first to restore priesthood keys to Joseph Smith in opening the dispensation of the fulness of times in preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Summarizing the significance of John the Baptist, Sidney Rigdon declared, “No man ever had a more important mission than John the Baptist: it was he who put a period to the Jewish polity: it was he who changed the services of the priesthood from sacrificing to baptizing: he was Messiah’s harbinger to announce his advent, on which depended the fate of the Jewish nation, and yet, notwithstanding the vast importance of his mission; for so important was it, that those who rejected his baptism rejected the council of God against themselves, still not one miracle was wrought to prove him to be a messenger of the Most High.”⁴⁰ The scriptures record, “John did no miracle” (John 10:41); instead, John was the miracle. **RE**

Notes

1. John D. Davis and Henry Snyder Gehman, *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1944), s.v. “forerunner”; see also 1 Samuel 8:11; 2 Samuel 15:1; 1 Kings 1:5; Isaiah 62:10. Similarly, Jehovah went before the house of Israel in leading them out of Egypt to the promised land (see Exodus 13:21) and before Cyrus to prepare the way for the return of the Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem (see Isaiah 45:1–2).

2. Elias is sometimes the New Testament Greek form for Elijah (Hebrew). In restoration scripture, however, Elias is used as both a name and title. In this paper, Elias is a title and refers primarily to John’s role as a preparer or forerunner. The title is also used in the New Testament referring to a restorer (see Joseph Smith Translation—John 1:22). John prepared the way for Jesus, whereas Jesus was the restorer who brought back the gospel and the Melchizedek Priesthood (Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Elias”). Although Elias is used in restoration scriptures, Elijah is preferred in most scholarly commentaries of the New Testament.

3. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 159.

4. Smith, *Teachings*, 335–36.

5. Joseph Smith identified Gabriel as Noah (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957], 3:386) and also as an Elias (see D&C 27:7).

6. This is a Semitic name meaning “God [Yahweh] is gracious” (*Luke, John*, Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 8, ed. George A. Buttrick [New York: Abingdon Press, 1952], 33).

7. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 1:89.

8. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:89.

9. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 5:2.

10. In *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* on page 261, a statement is attributed to Joseph Smith that likely was not his. The quotation, taken from an unsigned *Times and Seasons* editorial, commented: “When King Herod’s edict went forth to destroy the young children, John was about six months older than Jesus, and came under this hellish edict, and Zachariah caused his mother to take him into the mountains, where he was raised on locusts and wild honey. When his father refused to discover his hiding place, and being the officiating high priest at the Temple that year, [he] was slain by Herod’s order, between the porch of the temple and the altar as Jesus said” (*Times and Seasons*, September 1, 1842, 902). Because Joseph Smith was listed as editor of the newspaper, he has been credited with having written this. In the very first sentence of the editorial, however, Joseph Smith is mentioned in the third person. Additionally, according to February 1842 journal entries by Wilford Woodruff, he and John Taylor were appointed by the Quorum of Twelve “to edit the Times and Seasons and take charge of the whole establishment under the direction of Joseph the Seer. . . . Elder Taylor assists him in writing while it has fallen to my lot to take charge of the business part of the establishment” (*Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1893*, ed. Scott G. Ken-

ney [Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983], 2:153, 155). Thus, most Latter-day Saint scholars do not believe that Joseph Smith was the author of this comment, although he was likely aware of the legend. The Gospel of James, also titled the *Protoevangelium of James* or the *Infancy Gospel of James*, is a New Testament apocryphal account containing the legend that Elisabeth and John received divine protection in the mountains and that Zacharias was slain by King Herod's officers (Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and Related Writings*, rev. [Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991], 436). On January 31, 1844, Joseph Smith donated to the Nauvoo library his copy of the *Apocryphal Testament* (Kenneth W. Godfrey, "A Note on the Nauvoo Library and Library Institute," *BYU Studies* 14, no. 3 [1974]: 1), a book that included "all the Gospels, Epistles, and other Pieces now extant, attributed, in the First Four Centuries, to Jesus Christ, His Apostles, and their Companions, and not included in the New Testament by its Compilers" (*The Christian Examiner* 55, n.s., no. 25, March 1833). Jesus commented, "Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar" (Matthew 23:34–35). The idea that this comment referred to Zacharias, father of John the Baptist, is most likely incorrect. Instead, it could refer to Zechariah, the last martyr of the Hebrew Bible (see 2 Chronicles 24:20–24). Anna Brownell Jameson, in writing about this legend, said, "There is a very old tradition, as old at least as the second century, that King Herod also sought to destroy at the same time the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth—the young St. John, whose greatness had been foretold to him; that Elizabeth escaped with her son from amid the slaughter, and was afterwards miraculously preserved, and that King Herod, in his rage at being thus baffled, sent and slew Zacharias between the altar and the Temple." Jameson also cites a Greek manuscript with Byzantine miniatures from the ninth century which depict King Herod, his counselors, an executioner and a child. In the same picture is Zacharias, pierced by a lance, and Elizabeth and John hidden in a rock" (Anna Brownell Jameson, *The History of Our Lord as Exemplified in Works of Art* [London: Longmans, Green, 1865], 1:260).

11. Not all scholars agree with the Latter-day Saint assessment that John the Apostle is quoting John the Baptist in these verses. For example, R. Bultmann believed that the Johannine community altered John 1:1–18, the Logos hymn, so that it spoke of Jesus rather than John the Baptist (Thomas Wayment, "The Logos Incarnate and the Journey of the Soul: A New Paradigm for Interpreting the Prologue of John" [PhD diss., Claremont University, 2000], 16, 17, 19). The Joseph Smith Translations of Luke 3:5–9 and John 1, however, seem to make clear that the beginning of John's testament is the testimony of John the Baptist.

12. Additional principles and doctrines taught by John the Baptist are listed in Robert J. Matthews, *A Burning Light* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1972), 47–48.

13. Cecilia M. Peek, "The Death of John the Baptist," in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ: From the Transfiguration to the Triumphal Entry*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 2:208.

14. Thomas A. Wayment, ed., *The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 6. Numbers 4:3, 23, 30, 35,

43, 47 appear to indicate that thirty years is the age at which Levites began their priesthood service.

15. Smith, *Teachings*, 272.

16. Smith, *Teachings*, 273.

17. Smith, *Teachings*, 274.

18. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:113.

19. Smith, *Teachings*, 273.

20. Smith, *Teachings*, 275–76. Joseph Smith also clarified that the phrase in Luke 3:22, “in a bodily shape like a dove” is incorrect: “The Holy Ghost is a personage, and is in the form of a personage.”

21. For a discussion of the differences between these two versions, “I knew him not” and “I knew him,” see Matthews, *A Burning Light*, 63–64. Matthews concludes that the difference is not serious. Although John had not known Jesus personally, he did recognize the moral purity of the person who sought baptism and did know of his mission.

22. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:130.

23. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:259. Further elucidating all that John implied by calling Jesus mighty is the term “mighty man,” found frequently in the Old Testament and associated with the valor of a warrior (see, for example, Judges 6:12; 11:1; 1 Samuel 9:1; 16:18; 1 Kings 11:28). The word *valor* means “intrinsic worth or merit; power, import, and significance; courage, bravery” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “valor”).

24. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:251. Regarding priesthood power, Joseph Smith remarked, “We find the apostles endowed with greater power than John: their office was more under the spirit and power of Elijah than Elias.” This statement by Joseph Smith further accentuates that there is a difference between Elias and Elijah.

25. Smith, *Teachings*, 318–19.

26. Matthew’s own account of his call to the apostleship indicates it was later than some of the other Apostles. This fact, however, does not preclude the possibility that he was a disciple of John who witnessed Jesus’s baptism or was an early believer.

27. The four Gospel accounts do not identify where John was imprisoned; however, Josephus does (Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.5.1–2).

28. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.5.1–2. For example, Judeans and Samaritans complained to Rome regarding the tyrannical rule of Antipas’s brother Archelaus. Josephus recorded that one of Archelaus’s major transgressions according to the Jews and Samaritans was that he had “transgressed the law of our fathers, and married Glaphyra,” the wife of his dead half-brother. Augustus, perhaps concerned that a rebellion might occur, deposed Archelaus. Herod Antipas’s marriage to his living brother’s wife would have been even more noxious to the Jews, and thus perhaps Herod Antipas or Herodias might have thought that a popular Nazarete condemning his marriage could provide the impetus for being deposed (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.13.1). See also Peek, “The Death of John the Baptist,” for more on the political difficulties in Herod Antipas’s reign.

29. The Greek word *paradidomi*, translated as “cast” into prison in Matthew 4:12, is translated elsewhere as “deliver” or “deliver up” (see Matthew 10:17, 19, 21; 11:27; 18:34; 20:19; 24:9; 25:14, 20, 22; 26:15; 27:2, 18) and “betray” (see Matthew 17:22; 20:18; 24:10; 26:2, 16, 21, 23–25, 45–46, 48; 27:3–4) (Walter Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian*

Literature, ed. F. W. Danker, 3rd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000], 761–63, s.v. “paradidomi”). See also, Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 210–13. Additional examples of these translations can be found in the other three gospels. Inserting the meaning of “deliver up” or “betray” implies a conspiracy to silence John.

30. A conspiracy between the Herodians, the supporters of the Herodian dynasty, and Pharisees, the rabbis who opposed Herod Antipas, is difficult to imagine. When Jesus learned, however, what had happened to John, he went to Nazareth and Capernaum in Galilee (Matthew 4:12–13), perhaps for safety from the designs of the Pharisees in Judea. Other indications of Jewish involvement are seen in this passage to Peter, James, and John: “Elias is come already, and [the Pharisees] knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist” (Matthew 17:12–13). Again, although Herodians and Pharisees seem unlikely partners, the Gospel writers point to conspiracy between them in their hatred for Jesus (see Matthew 22:15–16; Mark 3:6; 12:13). For additional commentary, see Matthews, *A Burning Light*, 88–90.

31. Wayment, *Joseph Smith Translation*, 32.

32. Wayment, *Joseph Smith Translation*, 32.

33. Jesus is possibly referring to the Herodians, a politically motivated segment of the Jewish population who supported the dynasty of Herod and who sometimes united with their usual opponents, the Pharisees, to oppose Jesus (see, for example, Matthew 22:15–16; Mark 3:6, 12:13).

34. Smith, *Teachings*, 275–76; emphasis added.

35. Although not contested in the Greek manuscripts, the Joseph Smith Translation does not corroborate Jesus calling Herod Antipas “that fox” (see Wayment, *Joseph Smith Translation*, 192). If this pejorative term and the telling of it to certain Pharisees is accurate, it is perhaps additional evidence of the duplicity among the Pharisees and Herod Antipas. For further commentary, see Matthews, *A Burning Light*, 89.

36. How long was John the Baptist’s mission? John’s public ministry presumably began at least six months prior to Jesus’s mission. Matthew 3, Mark 1, and Luke 3 record Jesus’s baptism when it occurred. On the other hand, the wording in John 1 indicates that the baptism had already occurred and that John the Baptist continued to teach and baptize others. John 3 moves John the Baptist from Bethabara to Aenon near Salim and says that he continued with his mission of baptizing, with the note that “John was not yet cast into prison” (John 3:24). Some time after this, John was put into prison, during which time his disciples came and visited him. Quite possibly John was placed in prison sometime near the end of the first year of Jesus’s ministry and probably remained in prison for at least a year, maybe a little longer. Thus, John’s ministry could have lasted from one to two years (J. Reuben Clark, *Our Lord of the Gospels* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1968], 37, 62).

37. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:404.

38. Until 1981, the heading of Doctrine and Covenants 93 identified the John quoted in the text as John the Revelator; however, the Joseph Smith Translations of Luke 3:5–9 and John 1 make clear that this is the testimony of John the Baptist.

39. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:113.

40. Messenger and Advocate, January 1836, 244.