

# **Yochanan Prophet of Fire**

**A Study of the Life and Ministry of John the Baptist**

**PART II**

**THE EARLY LIFE & MINISTRY**

**OF**

**JOHN THE BAPTIZER**



## THE EARLY LIFE OF YOCHANAN

Very little is known of the early years of Yochanan. What we do know is he was born into a priestly family and lived in Yehudah (Judah – the southern area of Israel where Jerusalem is) and from his birth he lived by the Nazarite vow. This vow is taken by individuals who have voluntarily dedicated themselves to the service of YHWH. The Hebrew word *nazir* means “to be separated or consecrated.” The Nazarite vow has the following five features;

- People who wish to consecrate themselves wholly to the Lord take the Nazarite vow voluntarily. There is no divine command involved and it is usually for a specified period. There are, however, three examples of men who lived by the Nazarite vow from birth; Samson (Judges 13.1-5), Samuel (I Sam 2.8-28) and John the Baptist (Luke 1.13-17)
- This vow was open equally to men or women and was often taken as an act of thanksgiving for recovery from an illness, the birth of a child, etc. In the case of women taking the vow, their decision could be rescinded by a husband in the case of a married woman or a father in the case of a single woman.
- The vow had a specific timeframe as indicated in Numbers 6.8 & 13a.
- The individual taking the vow lived within specified restrictions. These were abstinence from wine or other fermented drink, grape juice, grapes or raisins, even their skins or seeds. Additionally, the Nazarite was not to cut their hair nor go near a dead body.
- At the completion of the vow a sacrifice was offered, the hair was cut and placed on the altar and the priest did the rest.

The above is a summary of the full details given here in Numbers 6.1-21;

“And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When either man or woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazarite, to separate themselves unto the LORD: He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine, or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried. All the days of his separation shall he eat nothing that is made of the vine tree, from the kernels even to the husk. All the days of the vow of his separation there shall no razor come upon his head: until the days be fulfilled, in the which he separateth himself unto the LORD, he shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow.

All the days that he separateth himself unto the LORD he shall come at no dead body. He shall not make himself unclean for his father, or for his mother, for his brother, or for his sister, when they die: because the consecration of his God is upon his head. All the days of his separation he is

holy unto the LORD. And if any man die very suddenly by him, and he hath defiled the head of his consecration; then he shall shave his head in the day of his cleansing, on the seventh day shall he shave it.

“And on the eighth day he shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons, to the priest, to the door of the tabernacle of the congregation: And the priest shall offer the one for a sin offering, and the other for a burnt offering, and make an atonement for him, for that he sinned by the dead, and shall hallow his head that same day. And he shall consecrate unto the LORD the days of his separation, and shall bring a lamb of the first year for a trespass offering: but the days that were before shall be lost, because his separation was defiled. And this is the law of the Nazarite, when the days of his separation are fulfilled: he shall be brought unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation:

And he shall offer his offering unto the LORD, one he lamb of the first year without blemish for a burnt offering, and one ewe lamb of the first year without blemish for a sin offering, and one ram without blemish for peace offerings, And a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mingled with oil, and wafers of unleavened bread anointed with oil, and their meat offering, and their drink offerings. And the priest shall bring them before the LORD, and shall offer his sin offering, and his burnt offering: And he shall offer the ram for a sacrifice of peace offerings unto the LORD, with the basket of unleavened bread: the priest shall offer also his meat offering, and his drink offering. And the Nazarite shall shave the head of his separation at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and shall take the hair of the head of his separation, and put it in the fire which is under the sacrifice of the peace offerings.

And the priest shall take the sodden shoulder of the ram, and one unleavened cake out of the basket, and one unleavened wafer, and shall put them upon the hands of the Nazarite, after the hair of his separation is shaven: And the priest shall wave them for a wave offering before the LORD: this is holy for the priest, with the wave breast and heave shoulder: and after that the Nazarite may drink wine. This is the law of the Nazarite who hath vowed, and of his offering unto the LORD for his separation, beside that that his hand shall get: according to the vow which he vowed, so he must do after the law of his separation”

While the exact age at which he did so remains unknown, at some point Yochanan left his home in the Judean hill country and went to live in the wilderness of Judah. He dressed in a camel’s hair tunic and his diet was locusts and wild honey.

### **Was Yochanan’s Diet True to Levitical Law?**

In the law given by God to Moses He had forbidden the consumption of insects, interestingly with the one exception of a particular species of locusts which happened to be plentiful in the Judean high country. Wild honey was, of course, entirely acceptable

## THE CALL OF YOCHANAN

Life was relatively simple for Yochanan, if somewhat rugged and austere. He dwelled in the mountains, he neither cultivated food nor kept livestock. He was completely surrendered to the purpose of God for his life which according to Luke came in AD 26 when he would have reached the age of 30+ years. Here is the record of Gods call to Yochanan to begin his public ministry;

*"Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness" (Luke 3.1-2)*

Note the words in Luke 3.2 **"the word of God came unto John....."** The Greek word most commonly used in a phrase such as this is "*logos*" which refers to the written, spoken and incarnate word. However, this is not the word Luke used at all. He chose the word "*rhema*" which can only mean the spoken word. Therefore God spoke audibly to Yochanan in the wilderness.

This spoken word was the means God used to call Yochanan to his prophetic office. Such a direct revelation from God fulfilled the promise made to his father Zechariah that his son would be a prophet. In rabbinic theology the last prophet was Malachi and the next would be Elijah whose task it would be to announce that the Messiah will come.

### Was Yochanan Elijah?

He was not, of course, the person of the Prophet Elijah, but indeed would come in the power and spirit of Elijah

## THE MESSAGE OF YOCHANAN

Matthew, Mark and Luke are what is known as the synoptic gospels as they present much the same accounts of the life of Christ, covering many of the same incidents and teachings. To get a clear picture of the message of Yochanan, we need only compare the accounts of Matthew and Mark.

*"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he*

*that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matthew 3.1-6)*

*"As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins. And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey;"*

*(Mark 1.2-6)*

The message of Yochanan was threefold. Firstly, it was a call to repent. This word in Greek is "*metanoia*" the Hebrew equivalent of which is "*shuv*" (to turn). In Greek and Hebrew the respective words literally mean to "*reorient one's perspective from sin to God*" Repentance does not simply mean to feel sorry for one's sins, but to do something about it by turning from sin to God. As far as the Baptizer is concerned, the motivation to repent is the arrival of God and the possibility of His wrath (Luke 3.7-9).

Secondly, his message was kingdom oriented. His message was clear; "*Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand*" (Matthew 3.2). Notice that Yochanan made no attempt to explain the nature of the Kingdom he was talking about because it was clearly understood from the Hebrew scriptures.

Thirdly, his message was a call to a "baptism of repentance unto remission of sins" (Luke 3.3). The principal detail to note here is that those who were baptized by Yochanan were making a commitment that they would accept whoever Yochanan identified as the Messiah. By believing the Baptizers message they received remission of sins. Later in the gospels when those who had been baptized by Yochanan encountered Yeshua, they did believe on Him. Unlike traditional Judaism, Yochanan's baptism is an affirmation, a washing that looks with hope for God's coming and lives in the light of one's relationship with Him. It was a baptism of promise that looks to the greater baptism of the Spirit. It points forward to a cleansing that comes to those who respond to Messiah's offer with faith.