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The Word of God Came to John, Son of Zechariah, in the Wilderness
Mark 1:1 and Luke 3:1-2

The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness DIG: How long is the time gap between appearances of John the Baptist here and in Luke 1:80? What do you suppose Yochanan was doing in those intervening years? Why? Why does Luke list all the political and religious figures in these verses?

REFLECT: When was your beginning with Jesus? This is your testimony. You should be able to explain to others how you came to Christ. This should only take a couple of minutes. You always need to be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (1 Peter 3:15a).

The people of Isra'el were well aware that for four hundred years the voice of prophecy had been silent. They were waiting for some authentic word from **God**, and **ADONAI** was ready to break the silence as **He** sent the last of the prophets to the Israelites. And when **John** spoke, they heard **His** voice. In every walk of life the expert is recognizable. We immediately know when a speaker really knows his subject. **John** had come from **the LORD** and to hear **him** was to know it.[217]

There are some great opening lines in literature. The one most often quoted is Charles Dickens' introduction to *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times." Another is the first line of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, "Call me Ishmael." In contemporary literature, many call attention to Ernest Hemingway's genius for piquing his reader's interest and prefiguring the story to come when he begins *The Old Man and the Sea* with the simple sentence, "He was an old man who fished alone." But, nothing can match the inspired author of Scripture. In one short and profound sentence, **Mark** announces **his** theme and gives a general outline of the whole Gospel story: **The beginning of the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God (Mk 1:1).**[218] **John's** ministry lasted about one year. All four gospels and several summaries in **Acts (Acts**

1:21-22, 10:37, 13:27, 19:4), identify the appearance of **John** with **the beginning of the Good News.**

The beginning (Mk 1:1a): This is not **the beginning** of either **John** or **Jesus**. It is the beginning of **the Good News** when **Yeshua the Messiah** came to this earth and died upon a cross for the sins of the world and rose again after three days. That, my friend, is **the Good News**. There are three **beginnings** recorded in the Bible:

1. **In the beginning was the Word (John 1:1).** This goes back to eternity past, a **beginning** before all time. Here the human mind can only fumble around in the dark. We must put our peg somewhere in the past in order to take off. If I see an airplane in the air, I assume there is an airport somewhere. I may not know where it is, but, I know the plane took off from somewhere. So, when we look around the universe, we know that it took off from somewhere, and that somewhere is **God**. However, we don't know anything about that beginning. **God** comes out of eternity past to meet us. We just have to put down our peg at the point where **He** met us, back as far as we can think, and realize **He** was there before that.

2. **In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth (Genesis 1:1).** This is where we move out of eternity into time. Although many people have attempted to date this universe, no one knows exactly how old it is. It is probably around six thousand years old, but, some secular authors try to find a way to accommodate dinosaur years and account for billions of years in the creation story. We know so little, but, when we come into **His** presence and begin to **know fully even as we are known, then we** will realize how **we** see **only a reflection as in a mirror (First Corinthians 13:12). I** am sure we **shall** be amazed at how little we really knew in this life. **God** is great and always right on time.[219]

3. **The beginning of the Good News . . . (Mark 1:1)**, is the same as **that which was from the beginning . . . (First John 1:1).** This is dated. It goes back to the exact moment when **He**, **Jesus Christ**, took upon **Himself** human flesh. The good news in Greek is *euaggelion,* or *a message of good news.* This word was originally used for *good news* of any kind. For example, the proclamation of the accession of a new Roman emperor was entitled *good news*. But, the evangelists changed the word from its secular usage, and spoke of the message of salvation as **the Good News**.[220] Therefore, **Yeshua Messiah** is **the Good News.**

In the far northeast part of the Land, occupying at least in part the ancient

possession of Manasseh, were the provinces belonging to **Philip the tetrarch. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, His brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert (Luke 3:1-2).**

Luke, the historian, was careful to identify the time that **John the Baptist** began **his** prophetic ministry by tying the dates to secular history. The times were ripe. Rome, which held absolute control over the whole known world, had reached her highest pinnacle of development under Augustus and was on the decline. Two philosophies, Epicureanism and Stoicism, contended for the supremacy; but, the former led to sensuality, the latter to pride, and both to despair. In the end atheism prevailed largely among the philosophers. All religions of all the conquered peoples were tolerated in Rome, but none satisfied the spiritual void in their lives. Slavery was widespread, and indescribable cruelty was practiced against them. The sacredness of marriage had disappeared and only scandals remained. Worship of the emperors led to promiscuous deification accompanied with despicable lusts. Might was substituted in the place of right, and justice could not be found. The degenerated tastes of the people ran to unlawful public amusements, in which the emperor would butcher thousands in the arena to make the citizens of Rome content. Charity disappeared and honest manual labor was looked on with contempt. The philosophies of Rome offered no hope, but, led only to deeper immorality.

Not only was the Roman world in desperate need of **ADONAI's** message, but, the nation of Isra'el also needed **His Good News**. The conditions in the provinces were somewhat more favorable, but, it was the policy of Rome to absorb all subject nationalities. The Jews continued to worship one **God** and retain their ethnic identity as after the Babylonian Captivity, they were no longer tempted to worship foreign gods, but, Rome still controlled them. The procurators in **Judea** had changed **the high priest** four times, although it was supposed to be an office of life tenure; until they found and appointed **Caiaphas**, who was willing to be a puppet to Roman tyranny. Violence, robbery, insults, venality, murders without trial, and cruelty characterized Roman rule.

The religious conditions in Palestine had deteriorated to an alarming degree. There was a lot of phony worship, but, little faith. The Pharisees emphasized separateness, but, not true holiness. Believing that they were guaranteed a place in paradise

because they were the children of Abraham, they lost sight of the fact that **the one who sins is the one who will die** spiritually **(Ezeki'el 18:20)**. The scribes professed great devotion to the Scriptures, but, emphasized traditionalism and sought to promote themselves. They multiplied regulations for every detail of life, until they became a burden too heavy to be borne. By the time of **Christ** they had about fifteen hundred oral laws for every one of the six hundred and thirteen commandments in the Torah of Moshe. The Oral Law (**to see link click Ei – The Oral Law**) was elevated to the point of being superior to the Torah of **ADONAI**, with the result that the Torah was eventually marginalized.

The Sadducees ridiculed Pharisaic separateness and their air of superiority, but, were themselves indifferent and did not believe in life after death. Consequently, they grabbed everything they could in this life. They praised morality while preferring lives of comfort and self-indulgence. They were favored by the Roman authorities and in turn submitted to their tyranny without much protest (see **Ja – Whose Wife Will She Be at the Resurrection?**).[221]

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar takes place in AD 26 **(Luke 3:1a).** It had been twenty or thirty years since **John** had gone into **the** desert**, or the wilderness.** Harshness characterized **the reign of Tiberius** in Palestine, and in Rome the Jews suffered severe persecution. It seems likely that **Luke** calculated these years from the death of Augustus **Caesar**, **the fifteenth year** probably would be AD 28, plus or minus a year. The reference of the other rulers is not especially helpful in obtaining a specific date when **John** began his ministry because there were several years where their rules overlapped. But, **Luke** didn't mention their names to get an exact date; he did so to relate a decisive event in salvation history against the context of world history.

As **John** preached on the banks of the Jordan River and **Jesus** was about to reveal **His** true identity, **Pontius Pilate** stepped ashore in the seaside fortress town of Caesarea to be **governor of Judea** from AD 26 to AD 36 **(Luke 3:1b).** It was a miserable appointment, for **Judea** was known to be a difficult place to govern. And **he** was no friend of the Jews. One of **his** first official acts was to order Roman troops in Jerusalem to decorate standards (a statue of an eagle situated atop a metal post), with an emblem bearing a likeness of **Tiberius Caesar** attached just below the eagle. To the Jews this was an idol forbidden by the Torah. When they rose up in protest **Pilate** threatened execution thinking they would back down. But, the Jews bent down and stuck out their necks, making it clear that they were prepared to die for their beliefs. For the first time **Pilate** witnessed with **his** own eyes the

determination of the Jewish faith. **He** ordered **his** soldiers to stand down and the standards were removed.

Pontius Pilate merely formulated a new strategy for dealing with the Jews. **He** formed an uneasy bond with **Caiaphas**, a Sadducee, the acting **high priest** for **his** father-in-law **Annas**. **He** had complete power over religious life in Jerusalem, including the enforcement of Jewish law. Of course, while **Caiaphas** could pass sentence, it was **Pilate** who decided if it should be carried out. **Pilate** was a Roman. **Caiaphas** was a Jew. **They** worshiped different gods, ate different foods, had different hopes for **their** people's future, and spoke different languages. **Pilate** supposedly served a divine emperor, while **Caiaphas** supposedly served **God**. But, **they** shared a command of the Greek language and a belief that **they** were entitled to do anything in order to stay in power.[222]

Herod Antipas was **tetrarch of Galilee** (see **Fl – John the Baptist is Beheaded**) and Perea, who ruled from 4 BC to AD 39 **(Luke 3:1c,** also see **3:19, 8:3, 9:7** and **9, 13:31, 23:7-12; Acts 4:27, 12:1-23, 13:1, 23:25): He** was the son of **Herod** the Great, or as many called **him**– **Herod** the Paranoid (see **Av – The Visit of the Magi**).

Herod's step-brother **Philip** was **tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis (Luke 3:1d): He** ruled east of the Jordan from 4 BC to AD 34. **Philip** was also a son of **Herod** the Great.

And Lysanias, by the testimony of **Luke** and confirmed by modern excavation, was **tetrarch of Abilene (Luke 3:1e):** It is uncertain why **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** inspired **Luke** to mention **Lysanias** because little is known about **him**. Some have speculated that it may have been because **Luke** supposedly came from Syria, and **Abilene** bordered Syria.

John's ministry also began **during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas (Luke 3:2a): Annas** was deposed by the Romans in AD 14 and replaced by **his** son-in-law **Caiaphas**, but the Jews continued to regard **Annas** as the rightful **high priest** because they viewed **the high-priesthood** as an office for life **(John 18:13)**. The plural "high priests" is found throughout the gospels, and **Annas** is called **the high priest** in **Acts 4:6** and **John 18:19**.

The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah (Luke 3:2b): The word of God here is the *rhema, or spoken* **word**, not *logos,* or the written Word. Therefore,

John heard *an audible* voice from heaven. It was then, that **he** began his ministry for which **he** was born. A similar statement is found at the introduction to **Haggai's** prophecy **(Haggai 1:1)**, **Zechariah's** prophecy **(Zechariah 1:1)**, and **Malachi's** prophecy **(Malachi 1:1)**. This phrase was the formula for a prophetic message from **the LORD** to be delivered to the nation of Isra'el. As a result, **John** stood in the same relationship to Isra'el that the three great prophets after the Babylonian captivity occupied. **He** was **ADONAI's** messenger with **ADONAI's** message to **ADONAI's** people.

In the wilderness (Luke 3:2c): Instead of serving in the Temple as **his** father **Zechariah** had done (see **Ak – The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold**), or appearing in the city Jerusalem as had the post-exilic prophets, **John** went into **the wilderness** and renounced **his** priesthood. **His** very life-style suggested that **he** was outside the established religious order of **his** day. **He** did not want to serve in a corrupt system, and so, **he** became a prophet.

John the Baptist is one of the most striking characters that appear in the Bible. **He** reminded the people of Elijah because both were **in the wilderness** during their years of preparation. **He** also reminded the people of **the** coming **Messiah**. **John** was a paradoxical person and truly an unusual man. **Luke** has told us of **his** miraculous birth (see **Ao – The Birth of John the Baptist**). **His** entire childhood is passed over, and the next major development in **his** life was the beginning of his ministry. **He** was a priest, a prophet and a preacher. **He** was a priest by birth because **he** was **the son of Zechariah**, but **he** was called by **ADONAI** to be a prophet and a preacher. Thus, the scene is set, and **John** lived a life of seclusion in **the wilderness** until **his** ministry began **(Luke 1:80)**.