

The Twelfth Day of Christmas: The Forerunner in the Wilderness

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[0 : 00] Welcome back to this, the twelfth and final of my series of echoes and symmetries within the infancy and the nativity narratives of the Gospels. Today I'm going to be doing something slightly different and looking at a character that you may not have given much attention to within the context of the nativity.

And that's John the Baptist. John the Baptist, we read the stories about John the Baptist, the announcement of his birth, these sorts of things. And it's something that we pay attention to, but we don't necessarily think how that connects with the story of the nativity of Christ.

And that's what I want to look at today. Some of the biblical theological background that will help us to understand who John the Baptist is, how he fits in with the ministry of Christ. And you might be surprised at some of the typology that is being used within this text.

Now John the Baptist, his birth is given considerable attention within the Gospel of Luke, almost as much as the nativity of Christ. We see a lot of attention given to the appearance of the angel to Zechariah in the temple.

We also see attention to the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary. And there are things going on there that are quite significant. We see John the Baptist being like David, dancing before the ark as he leaps in the womb, as Mary comes with Christ in her womb.

[1 : 21] Now, there are other themes taking place there that help us to fill out that picture of Mary and the ark. But I'm not going to get into that here. That would be before Christmas. Primarily, I'd want to explore that.

What I want to look at here is something later on, after John the Baptist is born. And something that would have been around the same time as Christ was growing up. And that's the description of how John the Baptist is growing.

And so the child grew and became strong in spirit and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel. Now, that seems a fairly innocuous text.

There's nothing particularly interesting about that, perhaps. It's something that doesn't maybe stand out. It's one of the growing and becoming strong texts that we see in the reference to Christ. And those texts refer back to the story of Samuel.

And we've already connected the story of Samuel with John the Baptist and David. But there's more going on here, I think. And the greater connection, I think, is found as we go back to the story of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis chapter 21.

[2 : 30] And at the end, it says, So God was with the lad, and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness and became an archer.

He dwelt in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. Now, it's interesting that we have that reference to the growth of Ishmael in the wilderness.

He's a desert child. And that connection of Ishmael with the desert is something that's quite significant. There's a connection of a number of figures in Scripture with the desert.

Eremitic figures. Ishmael. Moses. Elijah. And John the Baptist. And each of these figures is part connected with another figure.

They're paired figures. In all cases, we have one who's associated with the wilderness and a successor who's associated with the land.

[3 : 37] I think there's significant things going on here. If you look through the rest of the Gospels, you'll notice a strong connection between John the Baptist and Elijah.

In both cases, there is an oppressive king and wife, and he escapes and flees from them. And there's this struggle between these figures.

There's other things taking place. Some of the things we see is the way that John the Baptist dresses camel hair. And he's someone who lives in the wilderness dressed in camel hair.

That's the way that we have Elijah the Tishbite described at the beginning of 2 Kings 1. These are significant parallels. And we're told quite explicitly that John the Baptist was the Elijah that was to come.

And that suggests that Christ is the one that follows after, the one who completes the ministry of Elijah. Just as Elisha completed the ministry of Elijah, and Elisha's ministry, if you look carefully, you'll see all sorts of parallels to the ministry of Christ.

[4 : 45] The healing, raising of people from the dead. The going to people in other countries. The multiplication of food. These sorts of things. These are significant parallels.

And they help us to understand who Christ is. Again, there's a transition on the banks of the Jordan. We see that transition in the case of Moses and Joshua. Moses goes first. And then there's a transition on the banks of the Jordan.

And Joshua takes over. In the same way, in 2 Kings 2, we see that with Elijah and Elisha. And then later on with Jesus and John the Baptist. Now, what else can we glean from this?

What should we make of the Hagar and the Ishmael connection? Well, we can see part of this being channeled through the story of Elijah. So Elijah has a certain passage in 1 Kings chapter 19 that's very interesting.

He's pursued by Jezebel. And Jezebel seeks his life. And so he tries to escape. And when he saw that, And then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, If I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.

[6 : 00] And when he saw that, he rose and ran for his life. And he went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, And left his servant there. And he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, And came and sat down under a broom tree.

And he prayed that he might die, and said, It is enough. Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my father's. Then as he lay down and slept under the broom tree, Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, Arise and eat.

Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, And a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. If we look back at the story of Genesis chapter 19, Or Genesis chapter 21, Pay attention to the parallels.

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, Whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing.

Therefore she said to Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son, For the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my wife, Namely with Isaac.

The matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight, Because of his son. And then sends Hagar out. Then she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

[7 : 13] And the water in the skin was used up, And she placed the boy under one of the shrubs. Then she went and sat down across from him, At a distance about a bow shot. For she said to herself, Let me not see the death of the boy.

So she sat opposite him and lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called out to Hagar out of heaven and said to her, What ails you, Hagar?

Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, For I will make him a great nation. And God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.

Then she went and filled her skin with water and gave the lad a drink. And so we see a tree, a shrub in that text. And we see the significance of the lad, the lad who's left behind.

We have that same thing in the story of 1 Kings. In 1 Kings 19, Elijah leaves his lad behind, his servant. And he leaves him in Beersheba as he goes into Beersheba.

[8 : 15] And again, wilderness of Beersheba. It's the same place. And then we have the tree that's mentioned, a broom tree, is associated with Kedar. And Kedar is associated with the sons of Ishmael.

He's one of the sons of Ishmael. And as we see these connections, it helps us to see there's a broader congealing of different figures. They're coming together and helping us to see that there are parallels here.

It helps us to understand John the Baptist. John the Baptist is in some sense connected with Elijah. In some sense connected with Moses. And he's in some sense connected with Ishmael.

And Ishmael, what are we to make of that? Why would Ishmael be a character that's significant? We see Ishmael and Hagar appear later on in scripture.

If we read the story of Revelation 12, the woman gives birth to the son. And the son is caught up into heaven. And then in verse 6 of Revelation 12.

[9 : 14] Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she has a place prepared by God. That they should feed her there 1260 days. And she's pursued by the dragon.

And so we can see some of these significant parallels. What about this character in the wilderness? What is the significance of that? The forerunner goes to the wilderness.

The forerunner is the one who provides the starting point. The ground for the successor to work with. And so we see Ishmael and figures associated with Ishmael providing a place for Isaac to dwell for a period of time.

After he leaves his father, he dwells with Ishmael. It's interesting. It's significant. In the same way, Midian provides a home for Moses.

And we see this connection between Ishmael as the forerunner. Now we often think about Ishmael purely in terms of Abraham's mistake. And that's to miss a lot of what's taking place here.

[10 : 20] And the way that the typology is used in subtle and brilliant ways. In ways that reverse and subvert and invert these figures. And so for instance, Sarah plays a role that's similar to Jezebel.

She's the one who persecutes this woman. Who drives her out. Now in some respects that act is justified. She's not a straightforward figure associated with Jezebel. She's not the wicked queen in quite the same way.

But she's a complicated figure. And these typologies help us to see that these figures aren't just flat figures. There's a lot of things going on beneath the surface. Like Ishmael, Moses and Elijah and John are wild figures associated with the wilderness.

They dwell with their brethren but they're rejected by most of them. They're outsiders. They're associated also with desert beasts. We see the story of Ishmael.

Ishmael is associated with a wild ass in the wilderness. And John and Elijah are associated with camels. And all of these figures in different ways have to give way to the true heir.

[11 : 28] The true son of Abraham. The Joshua who's going to enter into the land and receive the inheritance. Elijah who's going to lead the mission into the land.

Whereas Elijah was the one of the wilderness. And then John the Baptist who has to decrease so that Christ must increase. And in each one of these figures we see something of the vocation coming to the forefront.

And it helps us to understand what's taking place. I think that this will be very helpful in reading through these passages. That we can see something that is not just a bare story of certain historical events.

But there is a deeper event coming out. And I hope this will help you in your reading of the text. And that this series more generally will be useful to you. Thank you very much for listening. And Lord willing I'll be back again soon with answers to questions.

God bless. God bless.