

# Who is John the Baptist? (John 1:19-1:28, Part B)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

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## I. Background for This Lesson

- a. In our previous lesson we read through **John 1:19-28**. We discussed the three questions John the Baptist was asked:
  - i. “Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’” (**John 1:19–21**, NKJV)
- b. The three questions:
  - i. Are you the Christ? (covered in the previous message)
  - ii. Are you Elijah? (covered today’s lesson)
  - iii. Are you the Prophet? (also covered in this lesson)

## II. John the Baptist, Are You Elijah?

- a. People openly wondered whether John the Baptist or Jesus was ‘Elijah’.
  - i. **Question:** Of all the prophets from long ago, *why Elijah?* Why not Isaiah, Jeremiah or Daniel, for example?
  - ii. **Question:** Who was Elijah?
    1. Elijah’s life and ministry are discussed at the end of **1 Kings** and the beginning of **2 Kings** (those books are referred to as **3 and 4 Kingdoms** in the Septuagint).
    2. He was a prophet around 860 BC during the time of Ahab and Jezebel, a notoriously wicked king and queen in the northern kingdom of Israel. This was during the time of the Divided Kingdom, after Solomon.
    3. Elijah had a rather distinctive appearance or manner of dress. In **2 Kings 1**, King Ahaziah (son of Ahab) has an accident and sends out messengers to inquire of Baal if he will recover. Elijah intercepts the messengers and tells them the king will die from this injury. The king asks his messengers who gave
      - a. “Then he said to them, ‘What kind of man was it who came up to meet you and told you these words?’ them this bad news.

So they answered him, ‘A hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist.’ And he said, ‘It is Elijah the Tishbite.’” (**2 Kings 1:7-8**, NKJV)

- b. In at least five other translations I checked, instead of “a hairy man” this expression is rendered, “wearing a *garment of hair*” (see for example: ESV, RSV, NIV, NAB, JB). Apparently, it was not clear to the translators whether this unusual covering of hair was Elijah’s own or not. Regardless, his appearance was striking!
4. Elijah didn’t die; he was mysteriously taken up into heaven in a whirlwind, after a chariot and horses of fire appeared, as described in **2 Kings 2:11-12**.
  5. He was a man renowned for great spiritual power, who was protected by God during a time of great wickedness. His prayers brought about miracles from God such as raising the dead, and even changing the weather! In the New Testament, he is held up to us as a great example of effective prayer.
    - a. “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.” (**James 5:16-18**, NKJV)
    - b. Clearly God considered him a righteous man. He is the example of what is possible *for the righteous* who fervently cry out to God.
    - c. Recently we posted a lesson entitled, *Does God Play Favorites?* God indeed does have favorites: those who love him and strive to live righteous lives. Unfortunately, God’s favorites often must endure extraordinary hardship (just like Jesus)! This was the case with Elijah, who was hunted down by Ahab and Jezebel. However, God provides for and protects His favorites. We see a great example of that in the life of Elijah. God protected Elijah and fed him miraculously with bread and meat brought to him by ravens (**1 Kings 17:6**), and then by a widow whose bin of flour and jar of oil miraculously did not run out during the drought instigated by Elijah’s prayer (**1 Kings 17:13-16**).

- iii. Clearly Elijah was a powerful prophet of old! **Question:** Why were people expecting Elijah to return, and what was the significance of that?
1. “Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts. ‘But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like launderers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasant to the LORD, as in the days of old, as in former years.” **(Malachi 3:1–4, NKJV)**
  2. And from the last verses of **Malachi**, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.” **(Malachi 4:5–6, NKJV; in the LXX see Malachi 3:22-23)**
  3. From these two passages in **Malachi**, we learn:
    - a. God will send a messenger to prepare the way
    - b. That messenger is referred to as “Elijah the prophet” (who had been taken up to the heavens in a whirlwind several hundred years earlier).
      - i. Perhaps people were expecting him to return by the same fiery chariot or in some similarly dramatic way?
    - c. The Lord will appear suddenly in His temple, after this messenger appears.
    - d. This messenger, Elijah, will come before the “great and dreadful day of the Lord”.
  4. **Question:** Since there are two “comings of the Lord” (the Second Coming being associated with Jesus’ return on the Day of Judgment), which “coming of the Lord” do these passages in Malachi refer to? To the first one, the second one, or to both?
- b. Things in John the Baptist that remind me of Elijah.
- i. Solitary prophetic figure in the Wilderness, boldly calling people to repent. Even called out the personal sins of the king.

1. Elijah called out the sins of Ahab, an extremely wicked king.
  2. John the Baptist called out the sin of Herod, the king.
- ii. Hated by a notorious wicked king; an *even more evil* queen wanted him killed.
1. Elijah was hated by Ahab; Jezebel swore to have him killed. (**1 Kings 18-19**)
  2. John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod; his wife Herodias conspired to have John beheaded. (**Luke 3:19-20; Matthew 14:1-12**)
- iii. Even their unusual clothing and appearance.
1. “Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” (**Mark 1:6**, NKJV)
  2. Very similar to the description of Elijah’s appearance mentioned earlier.
- c. **Question:** Was John the Baptist the Elijah who was to come?
- i. After Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples approach Jesus and ask Him about Elijah.
    1. “And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist.” (**Matthew 17:10–13**, NKJV)
  - ii. Jesus spoke to the crowds about John the Baptist:
    1. “As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.’ (*here Jesus is quoting Malachi 3:1*) Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until

now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (**Matthew 11:7-15**, NKJV)

2. Jesus applies the **Malachi 3:1** prophecy to John the Baptist.
  3. Jesus states, "he is Elijah who is to come", alluding to the **Malachi 4:5-6**.
  4. This explains why John is mentioned so prominently at the start of all four gospels. His coming was the clear sign to the Jews that the time had come: the Messiah, the Christ was imminent.
- iii. When John was asked "Are you Elijah?" in **John 1:21**, why did he answer directly, "*I am not.*"? Jesus later said *he was!*
1. John applied the **Isaiah 40:3** prophecy to himself, saying he was the one who came to prepare the way for the Lord; however, *he said he was NOT* Elijah.
  2. Is it possible that John the Baptist was mistaken, or deliberately giving an incorrect answer here?
    - a. Muslims claim this as an example of how the New Testament text "contains contradictions" and was "changed / corrupted later by the Christians".
  3. Or is there another possibility? Let's consider the words of the angel Gabriel, who appeared to Zecharias the father of John of Baptist:
    - a. "But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' (*here quoting **Malachi 4:5-6***) and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'" (**Luke 1:13-17**, NKJV)
  4. **Conclusion:** John was not (literally) Elijah returned from heaven. However, he was the one who would come *in the spirit*

*and power of Elijah*. Therefore, in this sense we understand that John was indeed “the Elijah who was to come”.

- d. **Question:** At some time in the future will Elijah come again, *literally*?
- i. Read **Revelation 11:1-11**
    1. Here, the references to “two olive trees” and “lampstand” point back to **Zechariah 4:1-14**.
    2. The description of the two witnesses remind me of Elijah (power to shut up heavens from rain) and Moses (turn water to blood, strike the earth with plagues). However, some early Christian writers saw *Enoch* and Elijah here.
  - ii. Several early Christian writers believed that just as Elijah came figuratively (in John the Baptist) before the First Coming of Jesus, Elijah himself will indeed come again to the earth (literally) before the Second Coming.
    1. That may explain why Elijah did not die in **2 Kings**; the great prophet may be reserved for one final mission.
    2. That may also explain why John said he was not Elijah; since Elijah himself was yet to come.
    3. For more related to the second coming of Elijah before the Last Day, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, D. Bercot et., article on Elijah; and Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in ANF vol. 1, p.219-220.

### III. John the Baptist, Are You ‘The Prophet’?

- a. John denies that he is “the Prophet”. **Question:** Who is “the Prophet” the Jews were referring to? This is an extremely important subject today.
  - i. There are about 1.8 billion Muslims in the world; about ¼ of the world’s population.
  - ii. The top four Muslim countries by population (all with over 100 million each) are in Asia. They are:
    1. Indonesia
    2. Pakistan
    3. India
    4. Bangladesh
  - iii. Muslims accept that John the Baptist was a true prophet of God. Regarding the three questions John the Baptist was asked in **John 1**, they believe:
    1. “The Christ” (the Messiah) is Jesus

- a. They believe Jesus was a great prophet sent by God. However, they reject the idea that he was the Son of God, contending, "God cannot have a son". Also, they do not believe in the divinity of Christ.
  - b. They accept that Jesus will come again on the Last Day.
  - c. They do not believe that Jesus died on the cross, nor that He was raised from the dead. They claim Christians added that part to the gospel story later on; that the New Testament we have has been corrupted.
2. Elijah = ??? (I am not sure what the Muslims believe about that prophecy.)
  3. Muslims believe that "The Prophet" referred to in **John 1** is Mohammad
    - a. They claim Mohammad was the last and ultimate Prophet.
- b. The difference between "a prophet" and "The Prophet" is huge.
    - i. John Chrysostom (347 – 407 AD), bishop of the church in Constantinople, wrote, "For they expected that some special prophet should come, because Moses said, 'The Lord thy God will raise up a Prophet from among your brethren like unto me; Him shall you heed.' (from **Deuteronomy 18:15**) Now this was Christ. Wherefore they did not say, 'Art you a prophet?' meaning thereby one of the ordinary prophets; but the expression, 'Are you the prophet?' with the addition of the article [*the word 'the' – CP*], means, 'Are you that Prophet who was foretold by Moses?' and therefore he denied not that he was a prophet, but that he was 'that Prophet.'" (Source: John Chrysostom, *Homily XVI on the Gospel of John*; in NPNF vol. 14, p. 56)
    - ii. The difference between "a prophet" and "the prophet" comes down to a single one-letter word in Greek. It makes all the difference.
  - c. **Deuteronomy 18** holds the key prophecy that the questioners of John the Baptist had in mind (taken from what Moses said over 1200 years before Jesus). *This is one of the most important prophecies for Christians to know, especially when reaching out to Muslims:*
    - i. "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear, according to all you asked from the Lord your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let us not hear again the voice of the Lord our God, nor let us see this great fire anymore, lest we die.' Then the LORD said to me, 'What they have spoken is good. I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and I will put My word in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all I command Him. Therefore, whatever man will not

listen to whatever the Prophet speaks in My name, I will require it of him.” (**Deuteronomy 18:15–19**, LXX, OSB)

- ii. Every phrase of this prophecy is significant!
  - iii. The apostle Peter confirmed that this prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus, in his speech at Solomon’s Portico in **Acts 3:22-26**.
  - iv. Stephen also connects this prophecy to Jesus, in **Acts 7:37** and **7:51-53**.
- d. Context of this prophecy: Moses is recalling what God had revealed to him almost 40 years earlier, at Mount Horeb (Mt. Sinai), the same day that the Ten Commandments were given (**Exodus 19-20; Deuteronomy 5**).
- i. I personally consider this to be “The Eleventh Commandment”. It was given the last day, after the first Ten at Mt. Sinai, but not mentioned in **Exodus 19-20**, or **Deuteronomy 5**, but later in **Deuteronomy 18**.
  - ii. The Eleventh Commandment: We must do whatever the Prophet who will come in future says. (“I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and I will put My word in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all I command Him. Therefore, whatever man will not listen to whatever the Prophet speaks in My name, I will require it of him.”)
  - iii. Recall that Jesus said at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount:
    1. “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.” (**Matthew 5:17**, NKJV)
    2. I believe Jesus “fulfilled the Law” by fulfilling the last commandment, the Eleventh Commandment, given to Moses that day on Sinai. Jesus was the Prophet! We must do whatever He says.
    3. That is why Jesus had the authority to go further than Moses had gone in the Ten Commandments. God had indicated back then at Sinai that there was more to come; a future Prophet would bring more instruction, and anyone who did not heed what that Prophet said would be called to account! (Consider Jesus changing the Law through His teachings regarding non-resistance, divorce and remarriage, dietary restrictions, etc.)
- e. **Question:** Do the 1.8 billion Muslims of the world have a legitimate claim that Mohammad, not Jesus, was the Prophet referred to in **Deuteronomy 18**? Let’s take a close look at the key elements of this prophecy. Every detail has great significance!
- i. Moses was told by God that one specific prophet, “*the Prophet*”, who would be sent to the people in the future.

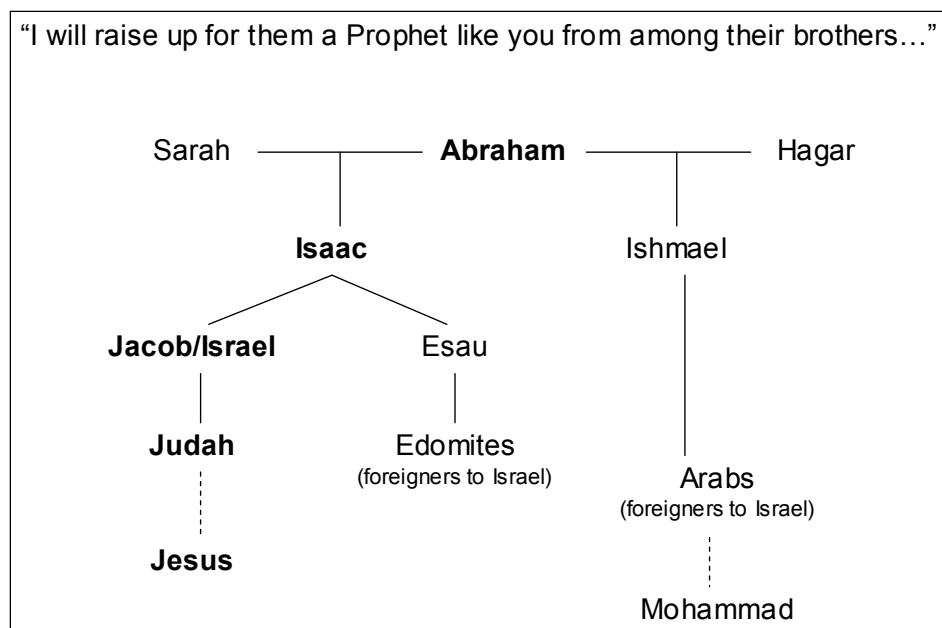


- ii. The Prophet would come from “among their brethren”. (Bear in mind that Moses is speaking to the Jewish nation here).
  - iii. The Prophet to come would be “like Moses”.
  - iv. God said He would “raise up” this Prophet.
  - v. God said that anyone who did not heed what that Prophet said would be called to account; he would have to answer to God for it.
- f. “From among your brethren”
- i. The word used here (common word from the LXX that means ‘brothers’ or ‘brethren’)
  - ii. As in English, this is an extremely common word. Its meaning is usually obvious based the context in which it is used. Examples:
    1. “Now Cain talked with Abel his brother...” (here ‘brother’ refers to physical offspring from the same parents) (**Genesis 4:8**, LXX, OSB).
    2. “Then Laban said to Jacob, ‘because you are my brother, should you therefore serve me for nothing?’” (here ‘brother’ refers to a relative) (**Genesis 29:15**, LXX, OSB)
    3. “I took your brethren the Levites from the midst of the children of Israel, as a gift given to the Lord, to minister liturgically in the tabernacle of testimony.” (here ‘brother’ refers to a member of the same tribe; in this case a fellow Levite) (**Numbers 18:6**, LXX, OSB)
    4. “If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, then in the seventh year you shall let them go free from you.” (here ‘brother’ means a fellow Hebrew) (**Deuteronomy 15:12**, LXX, OSB)
    5. “You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother.” (here ‘brother’ means a person who is in some way related, in this case distantly, through Isaac) (**Deuteronomy 23:8**, LXX, OSB)
    6. “I have become a brother of jackals and a companion of ostriches.” (here ‘brother’ means a close associate of) (**Job 30:29**, LXX, LES)
    7. Throughout the New Testament fellow Christians are referred to as ‘brothers’.
  - iii. Bottom line: only by looking at the context (who is being addressed, and what is being said) can we understand in what sense the word ‘brother’ or ‘brethren’ is intended. Then, however, its meaning usually is apparent.

- iv. When Muslims make the claim that the **Deuteronomy 18:15-18** passage applies to Mohammad, I often ask, “Really? Do you mean to tell me that Mohammad actually was *a Jew*?” They respond that he was an Arab, descended from Abraham via Ishmael, and therefore “among their brethren.” Is that explanation plausible?
- v. The context of what Moses said in **Deuteronomy 18:15-18**.
1. Read **Deuteronomy 1:1-3**, which provides the context for the **Book of Deuteronomy**. Moses is addressing the Jewish nation, the sons of Israel, in the 40<sup>th</sup> year of wandering in the Wilderness after departing Egypt. Moses is about to die, after which Joshua will lead them into the Promised Land.
  2. Moses reminds them in **Deuteronomy chapter 4** that they were the only nation to hear God’s voice, speaking to them from Mount Sinai. They were the nation that the Lord had brought out of Egypt, with great signs and wonders.
  3. Moses also reminds the Israelites,
    - a. “For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God chose you to be a people for Himself, special above all the nations on the face of the earth.” (**Deuteronomy 7:6**, LXX, OSB)
  4. Since they are a separate people, a holy nation, set apart for God (Peter later applies this to us, the church today, in **1 Peter 2:9-12**), Moses tells them:
    - a. Do not intermarry with the other nations (**Deuteronomy 7:3-4**)
    - b. In the future, when they set a ruler over themselves, it must be “one from among your brethren...you cannot set a foreigner over yourselves because he is not your brother.” (**Deuteronomy 17:15**, LXX, OSB)
    - c. As mentioned previously, Moses said he would raise up a prophet in the future “from your brethren”. (**Deuteronomy 18:15-18**, LXX, OSB)
  5. In context, what do you think God meant when he said, “from your brothers (as opposed to foreigners)” in these passages?
    - a. “But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites—from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, ‘You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.’ Solomon clung to these in love. And he had

seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart.” (1 Kings 11:1-3, NKJV)

- i. Note that ‘Edomites’ = ‘Idumeans’ (same term, different translations).
  - ii. Note that Herod the Great, on the throne at the time of Jesus’ birth, was an Idumean (an Edomite descended from Esau; not a Jew). Early church historian Eusebius pointed to this as the first time a foreigner ascending to the throne of Israel, a sign that the Christ would appear, based on the prophecy of **Genesis 49:10**.
- b. There are passages in the Old Testament where it says things like, “don’t hate the Edomites, they are your brothers”, they were still clearly considered to be foreigners.
- c. If this is true of the Edomites (Esau’s children being ‘cousins’ of Israel’s sons), what does that say about Ishmael’s descendants (much more distant, being ‘second, half-cousins’)?
- d. Bottom line: in the context of who is being addressed in **Deuteronomy**, Moses was clearly stating that this Prophet to come must be an Israelite, a fellow Jew. This *could not* refer to an Ishmaelite. On this ground alone, Mohammad (and most of the rest of us) is disqualified from being a candidate to be ‘the Prophet’!



- g. The Prophet would be “like Moses”
  - i. Parallels between Moses and Jesus; a few obvious ones.
    1. Sent by God to save his people, to deliver them from bondage.
    2. Brought in a new covenant.
    3. At his birth, a wicked king issued an edict to kill all the infant boys in his area. However, he managed to escape that fate.
    4. First public miracle: changing water to blood (Moses) vs. changing water to wine at wedding in Cana (Jesus)
    5. Fed thousands with bread from heaven (Moses – manna)
    6. Power over the sea (Moses parted the Red Sea; Jesus calmed the storm and walked on water)
    7. Met God on the mountain.
    8. Radiant face after being in the presence of God
    9. After his death, his followers could not find the dead body.
    10. Expressed concern that God’s people not be “like sheep without a shepherd” (**Numbers 27:17, Matthew 9:36**)
  - ii. In a lesson at Society for the Two Tasks taught at Harvard last year, I broke up the room into groups and assigned them passages from **Exodus, Numbers** and **Deuteronomy** to see the parallels between Moses and Jesus. The students were stunned when we assembled it all: over 30 unusual points of similarity!
  - iii. Clearly if we look at the life of Jesus and that of Mohammad and map them against the life of Moses, we see which one was truly “a prophet like Moses”.
- h. God would “raise him up”.
  - i. For years I took this part of the prophecy figuratively (for example, a church will ‘raise up’ leaders). Perhaps almost everyone throughout history saw it that way.
  - ii. The word used there in the LXX for ‘raise up’ is just like the English term; it can be used either literally or figuratively.
  - iii. Recently I re-read what Peter said in **Acts 3** when he quoted this passage from **Deuteronomy**. The point Peter was making is that Moses said God would “raise up” a prophet, and in fact HE DID just “raise up” Jesus, literally, from the dead! (Obviously, Mohammad was not *raised up*!)
- i. Conclusion regarding “the Prophet”
  - i. John the Baptist was not “the Prophet”. Jesus was!

- ii. John the Baptist came “in the Spirit and Power of Elijah” so in that sense he was the Elijah to come. However, Jesus was both the Christ promised by David and others, as well as the Prophet promised by Moses.
- iii. This was a fulfillment of a promise Moses had provided before his death, recalling what God said to him on Mount Sinai the day the 10 Commandments were given.
- iv. We can demonstrate that Jesus, not Mohammad, is “the Prophet” because:
  - 1. Mohammad was not of Jewish descent, and the promise was that the Prophet would come “from among your brothers” (addressed to the Jews).
  - 2. Comparing the lives of Jesus and Mohammad, Jesus is the one whose life is clearly the most similar to that of Moses. His life was more “like Moses” than that of any prophet who ever lived.
  - 3. The final proof: God said he would “raise up” this prophet. That was the ultimate sign, fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus on the third day.
- j. Jesus: the greatest prophet of them all
  - i. Several ways we can view Jesus, including:
    - 1. Christ, the king over God’s kingdom, as discussed in the gospels
    - 2. The ultimate high priest who offered the great sacrifice once for all, as discussed in **Hebrews 5-9**.
    - 3. The good shepherd over God’s flock, as discussed in **Ezekiel 34**.
    - 4. However, let us never forget that Jesus also was the greatest prophet of all time!
      - a. No one spoke the word of God as completely as He did.
      - b. No one preached a message of repentance as boldly as He did.
      - c. No one warned us about the impending judgment as He did.
      - d. He truly is “*The Prophet*”.