When studying the New Testament, one can see many allusions made to the Old Testament. Without the characters, stories, and traditions expressed in the Old Testament the New Testament would be severely deficient as a book of faith. Without Judaism, Christianity would never have come into existence, and Judaism cannot exist without the Torah. Therefore, the New Testament cannot stand on its own, but rather it must be read and studied with part of the mind looking back to the stories and histories of ancient Israel. If we do not know these stories, we will not understand what Jesus and his followers were teaching, preaching, and practicing. The Old Testament is so imbedded within the last twenty-seven books of the Bible that some of the New Testament characters are direct representations of Old Testament people. Jesus is seen as both a teacher akin to Moses and a king akin to David, and Mary, in her exultation on the conception of Jesus expressed in the gospel of Luke, represents Hannah and the exultation she felt after conceiving Samuel. However, neither of these parallels is developed as well as the parallel between the first great prophet Elijah, and his New Testament counterpart, John the Baptist. These two men have more in common with one another than perhaps any other characters in the Bible. Both prophets faced adversaries, and they met these enemies with boldness and stamina of character. Both of them were also very well acquainted with the wilderness, and were seen as rough and unsophisticated. While there are many unequivocal differences between the two great prophets, Elijah the Tishbite and John the Baptist share many similarities in both character and circumstances.

The word prophet, which means “one who announces or pours forth the declaration of God,” automatically evokes images from the Old Testament and people such as Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah (Smith, 534). However, one of the greatest prophets of all time appears in the New Testament (Ritenbaugh, 3). Jesus, in Matthew 11: 7-15, declares John the Baptist to be “more than a prophet.” Jesus goes on to say: “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; … For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.” These verses make known that John the Baptist is not only the greatest prophet, but he is also the return of Elijah, which was prophesied in Malachi 4:5-6. Despite any other similarities between the two men, they are inescapably linked because Jesus announces John as the Elijah on whom Israel has been waiting.

However, their similarities go much deeper than a declaration of kinship. Both Elijah and John the Baptist arise on the scene at pivotal points in Israel’s history. Elijah was Israel’s prophet at a time when all seemed hopeless for the nation. Israel was in a poor state prior to Elijah’s appearance, and was under the rule of the most evil King it had ever seen (Ellsworth, ix; I Kings 16). In the verses proceeding Elijah’s first meeting with Ahab, it says, “Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him” (I Kings 16:33). While Elijah faced a gruesome and sinful king, John the Baptist also had many powerful men against him. John was sent as the messenger to “prepare the way” for the coming ministry of Jesus and the idea of both baptism and repentance (Mark 1: 2-8). While confronting a king was not the point of John’s ministry, he, like Elijah, was vital to a particular time in history and was central in what would be a turning point in history.

Elijah was “a man of strong passions, more hot and eager than most men, and therefore the more fit to deal with the daring sinners of the age he lived in” (Henry, 517). He did not mind calling out Ahab in his wrongdoing. In I Kings 18:18, Elijah very plainly states to Ahab that he has “troubled Israel” because he followed Baal rather than Yahweh. He does not shrink away from speaking to Ahab, and he boldly denounces the king to his face (Baxter, 12). This boldness of character is what suited him to defy Ahab and stand up for the God of Israel.

John the Baptist was also an extremely bold prophet. In Matthew 3: 7-10, John speaks directly to the Pharisees and Sadducees, saying, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” He attacks both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees had public power, and the Sadducees practically controlled the Temple, therefore, the two groups combined virtually controlled, or at least heavily influenced most people’s lives (Ritenbaugh, 6). “John courageously confronts the establishment’s leader-ship” (Ritenbaugh, 6). He, like Elijah, was not afraid to stand up to those who had power over him and demand that they make themselves right before God. John the Baptist not only stood up to the religious and secular leaders of his time, but he too confronted the king. Much like Elijah’s confrontation with Ahab, John speaks plainly to Herod, despite the fact that he was king (Henry, 394). John told Herod, whom had married his brother's wife, Herodias, that, “it is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” (Mark 6: 18). John did not seem to mind that he was speaking to the king, whom could, and eventually did, have him killed. John seems to have possessed boldness, as did the Old Testament prophet, Elijah.

Another similarity between the two men was the wrath their boldness incurred. Both Ahab and Herod’s wives were furious at the prophets. Jezebel, whose name means, “Baal is prince,” was devout in her worship of Baal, and wanted no religious rival (Ellsworth, 5-6). Due to her devoutness, she did not want Elijah discrediting her religion. I Kings 19, recounts Elijah’s slaying of Baal’s prophets. When Jezebel learns of what he has done, she swears to see him dead within the next day. However, it is not known whether or not Jezebel truly meant to kill him, or if she just wanted to make him fear for his life (Henry, 529). Despite her intentions, Elijah was deeply afraid. “The man who had boldly faced four hundred and fifty hostile prophets now trembles at the threat of one woman” (Ellsworth, 84). After learning of the threat, Elijah flees to Beer-Sheba,
which was in the far south of ancient Israelite Palestine and was as far away from Jezebel as he could possibly get (Kelly, 62).

Similar to Elijah, John also faced severe opposition from a king’s wife. Herodias was outraged that John was calling her marriage adulterous, and she, like Jezebel, wanted the prophet killed. However, Herod feared John and did not consent for his death at first (Henry, 524). It was not until his daughter asked for John’s head on a platter during a banquet in celebration of his birthday that Herod reluctantly sent for John to be killed (Mark 6: 24-26). Despite the similar situation the prophets found themselves in, there are some differences in the accounts. Jezebel wanted Elijah killed out of religious disagreement. She did not want anyone to be worshiped or placed above Baal, and when Elijah challenged that, she took action. Herodias, on the other hand, “had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him” for personal reasons (Mark 6: 19). She had a personal vendetta against him because he called her out on her sin, and she wanted him silenced. The most important difference between the two accounts though, is the fact that Jezebel does not kill Elijah whereas Herodias does receive John’s head on a platter.

Perhaps the most commonly known similarity between the great Old and New Testament prophets is their outward appearance. II Kings 1:8 states: “A hairy man with a leather belt around his waist…is Elijah the Tishbite.” This passage is very similar to the physical description of John the Baptist found in Mark 1: 6. It reads: “Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” In the context of the New Testament, its readers would have automatically been reminded of Elijah when they read the description of John the Baptist, thus solidifying Jesus’ earlier point that John is the Elijah to come. However, they would not just think of Elijah. Readers, who were acquainted with the times, would most likely also think of poverty.

In his dress and diet, he was distinctive from what was normal for the times. His dress was durable and serviceable—what would normally be associated with the clothing of the poorest of the land. The same is true of his diet. His diet would be unusual for us but common for the poor folk of his time. (Ellsworth, 4)

John and Elijah looked very similar to one another, and their outward appearance marked them both as being different than their contemporaries.

Both John the Baptist and Elijah were well acquainted with the wilderness. In Mark chapter one, John is proclaimed as “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” He is, in essence, a wilderness man, one not associated with normal society. John must be from the wilderness “to symbolize the sharp break with the institution and culture of the city, to dramatize the renunciation required of those who would accept his authority, [and] to intimate that [he] came in the spirit and power of Elijah…” (Kelly, 48). Not only does the wilderness link him to Elijah, but it shows to all who saw him that he was something new, and that all things following him would also be new. Elijah was also familiar with the wilderness, but whereas John felt at home in the wilderness, or so it seems, Elijah went into the wilderness in order to escape Jezebel (II Kings 19:4). The wilderness, while it offered the protection Elijah desired, was not the same place for him as it was for John the Baptist. The wilderness seems to have made John into the bold, unconventional character, which God needed him to be, whereas the wilderness was a sort of city of refuge for Elijah while he hid from Jezebel. Regardless of why the prophets entered the wilderness, it played a large role in both of their ministries and defined them as prophets.

The study of John the Baptist throughout the gospels of the New Testament will most likely have one looking through the books of First and Second Kings. To aptly understand John the Baptist, and his influence on those who would later believe in Jesus as the Messiah, one must have a deeper understanding of the Old Testament prophet Elijah the Tishbite. Both men were unequaled in boldness and tenacity and they both proved themselves loyal to God. Elijah and John the Baptist, although very different men, have so many similarities that they alone establish just how important it is to be well versed in both Old and New Testament writings.

Works Cited
