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Matthew 11:11—The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived?

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke record Jesus as indicating that John the Baptist may have been the greatest man who had ever lived—with one caveat.

Matthew 11:11	Luke 7:28
“Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”	“I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

Cyril of Jerusalem (313–386), a theologian of the early church, emphasizes the point:

Even though Elijah the Tishbite was taken up to heaven, he was not greater than John. [See 2 Kings 2:11.]

Enoch too was translated but was not greater than John. [See Gen. 5:24.]

Moses was the greatest of lawgivers and all the prophets were admirable, but none greater than John.

It is not I who would dare to compare prophet with prophet, but their Master and ours who himself declared, “Among those born of women, there is none greater than John.”

But then Cyril adds this note: “Observe! Not ‘born of *virgins*,’ but ‘born of *women*!’”¹

So for Cyril of Jerusalem, John the Baptist can be regarded only as the “second greatest man who ever lived.” Jesus was not born of a woman (but see Gal. 4:4) but of a virgin, and that makes all the difference. (To follow the logic, we must assume that, for Cyril, a “virgin” was not yet a “woman.”)

Other New Testament interpreters would note that John’s preeminence endures only up to the advent of the kingdom of heaven.

The *least* in the kingdom are greater than him and so, obviously, the *greatest* in the kingdom—children and the childlike (Matt. 18:4), servants and slaves (Matt. 20:26–27)—must be greater still.

1. J. Ballie et al., eds., *Library of Christian Classics*, 26 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953–66), 4:93–94.