

Matthew 3:1-12

¹ In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea ² (and) saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” ³ It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said:

“A voice of one crying out in the desert,
‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.’”

⁴ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him ⁶ and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. ⁷ When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. ¹⁰ Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Context

A new section of Matthew begins at Mt 3:1. Without warning or preparation, John the Baptist appears in the wilderness preaching not (as in Mark 1:4) a “*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*,” but rather repentance, “*for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Matt 3:2). This is also different than Luke’s gospel in which we follow the story of Zechariah, Elizabeth and their son John (Lk 1); we are not told of the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth – hence there is no announced family relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus.

Yet the structure of Matthew’s gospel point to a more key relationship between John and Jesus. The section (3:1 to 11:19) brackets a chiasmic pattern that describes the parameters of the relationship that are central to Matthew’s understanding of the gospel good news.

- The content of John’s preaching is clear from the beginning: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*” Later when John is in prison, those words are repeated verbatim by Jesus (Mt 4:17).
- John’s announcement of the “*one who is coming*” (3:11) corresponds to his question in 11:3 - “*Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?*”
- In Chapter 3 John is the one “on stage” whereon the reader hears the Baptist’s view of Jesus. In Chapter 11, John is offstage, Jesus is the primary voice, and the reader receives Jesus’ view of the Baptist and himself.
- This chiasmic bracketing informs our reading of lays between: Jesus’ words and actions are signs that the kingdom, long promised, is indeed at hand and Jesus is that long promised Messiah.

John the Baptist

Who is this wilderness preacher? John was prophet and an ascetic who conducted a ministry in the Judean wilderness that involved preaching and baptism. He was a prophet – not in the mold of Moses or Joshua – but rather in the model of the prophets of the 7th and 8th century BCE (Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, Amos, etc.) whose words proclaimed redemption or judgment upon the people and their leaders. John’s popularity and the revolutionary possibilities of his message of social justice led to his arrest, imprisonment, and execution by Herod Antipas, probably in A.D. 28 or 29. The Jewish historian, Josephus, mentions John in his work *Antiquities*. The paragraph about John the Baptist is immediately preceded by an account of

Herod's divorce from the daughter of Aretas, king of Petra, and of the latter's retaliation by making war on Herod. Josephus writes:

But to some of the Jews the destruction of Herod's army seemed to be divine vengeance, and certainly a just vengeance, for his treatment of John, surnamed the Baptist. For Herod had put him to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice toward their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behavior. When others too joined the crowds about him, because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did. Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation and see his mistake. Though John, because of Herod's suspicions, was brought in chains to Machaerus [Herod's castle fortress], the stronghold that we have previously mentioned, and there put to death, yet the verdict of the Jews was that the destruction visited upon Herod's army was a vindication of John, since God saw fit to inflict such a blow on Herod. (Josephus Ant 18.5.2 §116–19 – from AYBD pp.887-88)

This passage is included to show that in an era when “historical accounts” were written at the pleasure of the sponsor and patron of the work, Josephus takes time to mention an event in the life of the wilderness preacher. In the telling of this small account, Josephus also gives an indication about the meaning of John's baptism

John's Baptism

“to lead righteous lives, to practice justice toward their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing join in baptism” John's baptism was a symbolic act that people who had already done these things – or were committed to living as such – were forming a “faithful remnant” of the covenant. In the gospel accounts all of John's words (except the word against Antipas) are spoken to persons seeking this baptism. His words show that John was unreceptive to those whom he judged to have bad faith, while he was friendly to those who were truly repentant. To the former he repeated threats and warnings and perhaps added new ones, while to the latter he gave hope for further dramatic renewal of their lives as well as ethical guidance relevant to their particular vocations. The former group seems to have been made up of people whose commonality was lording power over the common people: the religious leadership, the wealthy, the tax collectors and soldiers.

It is natural for Christians to begin to interpret John's baptism within the framework of Christian symbols, but it is perhaps better to consider John's actions as prophetic and within the context of the OT prophets mentioned above. A significant possibility for the meaning of John's water baptism is purification. Purification is linked with an anticipated messenger in Mal 3:1–3: “*the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming... For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver ...*” This imagery is reflected in the words of the Judean desert Qumran community whose purification rites were connected with conversion of heart: “Like waters of purification He will sprinkle upon him the spirit of truth, to cleanse him of all the abominations of falsehood and of all pollution through the spirit of filth” (1QS 4:20, 21). Both these actions and John's Baptism echo Ezek 36:25–26: “*I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses ... A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you ...*”

That John was particularly interested in purification coheres with his own priestly background (son of Zechariah the priest) and also with his interest in religious-ascetic practices, such as fasting and prayer (Luke 5:33; 11:1; Acts 14:23). It seems reasonable to suggest that John told those he was baptizing that his baptism of repentance would be followed soon by a second, radical cleansing of them from all evil. In

this regard John is in full accord with the OT prophetic emphasis on the need for radical renewal, a perspective seen, for example, in the call for a new covenant by Hosea (1–3) and Jeremiah (31).

But John also seems to see a maelstrom of coming judgment using fire as traditional symbol of judgmental destruction. The prophet Malachi (3:18–19—Eng 3:18–4:1) envisions the day when God acts as “burning like an oven” and destroying the arrogant and evildoers. This is preceded by a separation of the righteous from the wicked in a metaphor of winnowing; grain is separated from chaff, which is burned with “unquenchable fire.” The analogy with purification is strong: purification involves the removal of impurity from a valued substance; so winnowing removes the impurity, the chaff, from the valued grain. This is a later eschatological purification of his repentant baptized ones.

John the Baptist’s message can be summarized thus: Now is the time of repentance in view of the imminent execution of God’s wrath on unrepentant powerful sinners. Those that do not repent will be destroyed by God’s wrath, while those who do will receive an additional second baptism greater than John’s that will bestow on them a final and perfect purification. In the meantime, they are to do ritual and moral acts that befit their repentance and that anticipate the final purification.

John’s Understanding of Himself

Did John seem to understand that the end-time were at hand? Or were his actions done in anticipation of the arrival of the Messiah and the inauguration of new era? Or was he fulfilling the role of the prophet to call people to the covenant *now* in anticipation of the unknown coming of the promised Messiah? These are questions about how John saw himself and his role in God’s plans. If there is some scholarly consensus about the meaning of John’s baptism, there is far less concerning John’s own self-understanding, e.g., did John see himself as one like Elijah, the herald of the Messiah. And as a corollary question, did John understand his cousin Jesus to be that Messiah?

In the three Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) John’s motivation for his preaching and action are clearly prophetic, but there is nothing that seems to indicate John understood his role narrowly as herald of the Messiah (*cf.* Mt 3:11-12; Mk 1:7-8; Luke 3:15-18). In Mark’s account Jesus then simply appears and is baptized – what transpires immediately seems to be a private intended for Jesus only. The Lukan account is similarly private. In Matthew’s gospel (3:13-17) there is an exchange in which John asks Jesus if it is proper for Jesus to be baptized by John – at least indicating that John had some sense of Jesus’ role; but then the following events are again a seemingly private moment intended for Jesus alone.

It is in John’s Gospel that the Baptist calls out “*Behold, the Lamb of God*” (John 1:31) and where John testifies that he saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus and recounts that “*the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit’*” (John 1:33).

We must be mindful as we study Matthew’s gospel we should resist reaching into another gospel to exegete Matthew’s intention and understanding. John’s gospel carries an account that is the same and yet differs from the Synoptic accounts. All are the same Gospel, but each is according to a different inspired author.

So – what was John’s understanding of himself? After reading the corpus of scholarly works – again, concerning only Matthew’s gospel – it seems to me that the question is interesting, but in the end, obscures the more key question: Did Matthew, the inspired writer, see John in the role of Elijah and Jesus as the promised Messiah? From the whole of this gospel it is clear that Matthew indeed understood John and Jesus in those respective roles. (11:14; 17:12). So, why didn’t Matthew include that information earlier in his account. Possible answers range from its being part of the craft of the narrative, to the fullness of the revelation was only revealed by Jesus later in the ministry.

Commentary

Luke introduces the ministry of John the Baptist with a careful historical introduction listing the year, the emperor, the rulers of the surrounding territories, and the high priest who was in office. Matthew introduces John's ministry with a very general, "*in those days*." The point is not that Matthew was unaware of the interval of about thirty years that he is passing over. Rather, his purpose was to show that the birth of Christ and the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry are part of the same flow of God's activity in salvation history. There are two major sections within this passage. Verses 1-6 introduce the ministry of John the Baptist while verses 7-12 summarize the message of John.

On the 2nd Sunday of Advent each year, the Gospel reading presents the preaching of John the Baptist. This passage is the traditional text for Year A and reflects the advents themes of preparation and expectation. Matthew 3:1-12 describes John's preparation for Jesus (also see Mark 1:2-8; Luke 3:1-18; John 1:19-28). Although we normally call him "the Baptist," Matt 3:1-12 does not focus on his baptizing activity as much as on other aspects of his ministry: John as Preacher/Prophet, and John as the Forerunner to Jesus.

[A note: if you would like to focus on the reading standing alone outside the Advent Season, a review of the detailed "Notes" which follow the Commentary section should provide adequate detail and information.]

Contrary to today's popular misconceptions, biblical prophets do not merely or even primarily "predict" the future. Rather they "speak on behalf of God" (Greek *pro-phemi*), and they do this through both their words and their actions. Thus, John not only talks like a prophet (preaching a message of repentance), but he also acts like one (as Matthew describes his clothing and diet in the desert). John not only calls all people in general to repent, but he has particularly harsh words for some of the more "religious" people, challenging them to show their repentance in their actions, to "*produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance*" (3:8), as all other biblical prophets also did.

Near the end of this reading, Matthew portrays John in a related, but slightly different role: that of a forerunner to Jesus. John is quoted as speaking about "*the one who is coming after me,*" who "*is mightier than I*" (3:11), which makes this selection especially appropriate for Advent. The strong focus on judgment, however ("*the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*"; 3:12), might not seem very "Christmassy" to us, yet it can remind us that during Advent (and all year long) Christians are not only preparing to celebrate the birth Jesus from 2000 years ago, but are also preparing for the future coming of the Son of Man and our final judgment *and* the daily coming of Jesus into our lives – something that all the Advent readings call to our attention.

Matthew's Summary

Matthew's summary comes at the very beginning (v. 2), where John's preaching is summarized in exactly the same words as Jesus' preaching is summarized in 4:17: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" Both preachers demand a radical conversion of the whole person to God, and both urge it as preparation for the new age when the God of Israel will be acknowledged as the Lord by all creation. The phrase "*is at hand*" does not do justice to the perfect tense of *engizō*, which means literally "has come near". The perfect is used also in 26:45 and 46 (cf. Luke 21:8, 20) and introduces a state of affairs which is already beginning and which demands immediate action. John's summons is urgent: the time for decision has already come.

Repenting

The Greek for "repent" (*metanoëo*) means, "to change one's mind." However, given Matthew's emphasis on "bearing fruit," his idea of "repentance" probably goes back to the Hebrew *shuv* -- "to change one's ways." It involves more than just thinking in a different way. The word "Repent" is really a command, and is in the present tense, which denotes continual or repeated actions, i.e., "Keep on repenting!"

Repentance is not a door we pass through once that gets us into the kingdom; repentance is the ongoing life of the kingdom people here and now. Warren Carter enhances this understanding by noting that when people repent when *prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight*. Both “way” and “path” are metaphors for God’s will and purposes (Deut 5:33; Jer 7:23; Matt 7:13-14). God’s purposes, manifested in Jesus, will be experienced either as salvation or as condemnation depending on one’s response to the call – here seen in John’s call to repent. To repent signifies, then, not only specific changes in structures and ways of living, but a basic receptivity to God’s purposes.

Repentance is also a daily renewal of our baptismal vows. St Paul wrote: “*Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life*” (Roman 6:3–4). It is living the newness of life that is the focus of repentance best understood. But there is a potential pitfall. If we understand living the newness of life as a sequence of “I can” – “I am sorry for my sins. I *can* do better. I *can* please you, God.” Then we over accent our “doing” to our openness to God’s will. It is the subtle difference between our turning to God without recognizing that in Jesus God has turned to us.

In repenting we ask the God, who has turned towards us, buried us in baptism and raised us to new life, to continue his work of putting us to death. In other words, to repent is to volunteer and ask that the “death of self” which God began to work in us in baptism continue to this day. The repentant person comes before God saying, “I can’t do it myself, God. Let me die to self so that you can give me new life. You buried me in baptism. Bury me again today. Raise me to a new life.” That is the language of repentance. Repentance is a daily experience that renews our baptism.

The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand

What should be our response to the coming of heaven? Should it be worship, praise and giving thanks? Ironically, those are good responses, but in Matthew’s gospel, not the ideal ones. Jesus never reprimands people for failing to worship or give thanks in this gospel (compare Luke 17:17-18), but he does rebuke those who have witnessed his mighty works and not repented (11:20-24). For Matthew, the ideal response seems to be repentance. We know from Jesus’ teaching in Matthew that people can worship God with their lips even when their deeds demonstrate that their hearts are far from God (15:3-9). Thus, the responsive worship of the crowds in 9:8 and 15:31 is commendable but will be in vain if performed with unrepentant hearts. It is Matthew’s warning to the overtly religious of his day, the Pharisees and Sadducees – and perhaps to us in this season of Advent – it is good to want to celebrate and praise, but make your priority repentance. Let the coming one change our lives.

Notes

Matthew 3:1 in those days: This is an OT expression that marks the beginning of the new period, not necessarily a precise indication of time (see Mt 13:1; 24:22, 29, 36; 26:29). Here it marks the time-shift from the infancy narrative to the adult Jesus’ appearance. **the desert of Judea:** wilderness would perhaps be the better word for modern English. The area is the barren region west of the Dead Sea extending up the Jordan valley.

Matthew 3:2 Repent: the biblical idea of repentance involves a willingness to turn one’s life around in the sense of a complete re-orientation. **the kingdom of heaven is at hand:** “heaven” (literally, “the heavens”) is a substitute for the name “God” that was avoided by devout Jews of the time out of reverence. The expression “the kingdom of heaven” occurs only in the gospel of Matthew. It means the effective rule of God over his people. In its fullness it includes not only human obedience to God’s word, but the triumph of God over physical evils, supremely over death. In the expectation found in Jewish apocalyptic, the kingdom was to be ushered in by a judgment in which sinners would be condemned and

perish, an expectation shared by the Baptist. This was modified in Christian understanding where the kingdom was seen as being established in stages, culminating with the parousia of Jesus.

Matthew 3:3 *the prophet Isaiah had spoken*: The quotation that follows is from Isa 40:3 as found in the Septuagint (LXX). This is a repunctuation and reinterpretation (as in the synoptic gospels and Septuagint) of the Hebrew text of Isaiah 40:3 which reads, “A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord.” Isaiah 40:3 comes at the very beginning of the second part of Isaiah (40–56), in which the prophecy shifts abruptly from present judgment to future restoration after the Babylonian captivities. Chapter 40 begins this part of the book with the proclamation of comfort and tender speech to Jerusalem, whose sins, God assures, have been forgiven (vv. 1–2). Isaiah 40:3 harks back to the imagery of 26:7 with its teaching about God making the ways or paths of the righteous smooth. But even the land and its topography are metaphorically changing, as 40:4 describes the leveling of the mountains, the elevation of the valleys, and the smoothing out of rugged places. Then the Lord’s glory will be revealed and all humanity will see it (40:5). Nothing in the immediate context of Isa. 40 suggests that Isaiah is referring to anyone other than Yahweh himself returning to Israel as king but the references to special sons in Isa. 7–9 and to the messianic branch in Isa. 11, along with the Servant Songs yet to come (beginning in Isa. 42), do indicate God revealing himself through a specially anointed agent. The “shepherding” imagery of a text as close to ours as 40:11 also dovetails with other prophecies in which a messianic figure is likened to a shepherd (esp. Ezek. 34).

Matthew 3:4 *clothing made of camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist*: The clothing of John recalls the austere dress of the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). The expectation of the return of Elijah from heaven to prepare Israel for the final manifestation of God’s kingdom was widespread, and according to Matthew this expectation was fulfilled in the Baptist’s ministry (Matthew 11:14; 17:11-13).

Matthew 3:5 *Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him*: the tense of the Gr. verb (imperfect) implies that there was a steady stream of people regularly going out to John. The three place names and the words “all” and “all over” add to the impression that the response to John was astounding – enough to raise concern among the religious leadership of Israel.

Matthew 3:6 *being baptized*: Ritual washing was practiced by various groups in Palestine between 150 B.C. and A.D. 250. John’s baptism may have been related to the purificatory washings of the Essenes at Qumran. ***acknowledge their sins*:** many other translations well use the word “confess.” The basic meaning of *exomologeomai* is “to acknowledge an inward fact publicly.” Interestingly *exomologeomai* also means “promise.”

Matthew 3:7 *many of the Pharisees and Sadducees*: the former were marked by devotion to the law, written and oral, and the scribes, experts in the law, belonged predominantly to this group. The Sadducees were the priestly aristocratic party, centered in Jerusalem. They accepted as scripture only the first five books of the Old Testament, followed only the letter of the law, rejected the oral legal traditions, and were opposed to teachings not found in the Pentateuch, such as the resurrection of the dead. Matthew links both of these groups together as enemies of Jesus (Matthew 16:1, 6, 11, 12; cf Mark 8:11-13, 15). The threatening words that follow are addressed to them rather than to “the crowds” as in Luke 3:7. ***coming to his baptism*:** the phrase is ambiguous. It can also be translated as “coming against baptism.” Some older translations read “coming to watch his baptism;” however, there is no verb indicating a “watching” activity. ***vipers*:** a genus of snakes prevalent in wilderness areas. The term is used metaphorically for evil or evil people (cf. Mt 12:34; 23:3). The accusatory description of the Pharisees and Sadducees as an evil “brood of vipers” is twice echoed by Jesus (12:34; 23:33, cf. Gen 3:1; Ps 58:4). ***the coming wrath*:** the judgment that will bring about the destruction of unrepentant sinners.

Matthew 3:8 *produce fruit*: The Pharisees and Sadducees are warned that mere ritual is inadequate and will not preserve them from God’s wrath. Rather they must do good deeds that are appropriate to genuine

repentance in view of the coming kingdom. Producing fruit as a metaphor for a repentant lifestyle occurs elsewhere in Matthew (3:10; 7:16–20; 12:33; 13:8, 23, 26; 21:19) and is common in the OT (Ps 1:3; Isa 3:10; 5:1–7; Hos 10:1). The image of Israel as the tree from which fruit is expected echoes Hosea 9:16; Isaiah 27:6; Jeremiah 12:2, 17:8; and Ezekiel 17:8–9, 23.

Matthew 3:9 *we have Abraham as our father*: There may be a reference to the rabbinic idea of the “merits of the fathers” according to which the righteousness of the patriarchs is charged to the account of Israel. ***children to Abraham from these stones*:** In Aramaic and Hebrew there is a clear play on the words ‘*abnayya* (stones) and *bēnayya* (children). The message is that God’s power far surpasses the laws of natural heritage. In Galatians 3 and Romans 4, St Paul develops arguments about the true children of Abraham and concludes that the true children are those who follow his example of fidelity.

Matthew 3:10 *cut down and thrown into the fire*. A vivid picture of judgment. A similar picture of false prophets as unfruitful trees is found in 7:19 (cf. Isa 10:15–19; Jer 11:16), and 13:24–30 pictures the weeds among the wheat being thrown into the fire at the harvest (cf. the chaff in 3:12). Jesus’ cursing the unfruitful fig tree in 21:19 is another similar image. The burning of unfruitful trees is also related to the punishment of evildoers (5:22; 13:42, 50; 18:8–9; 25:41). The vividness of the picture is heightened by the words “*already*,” which depict the chopping down of unfruitful trees as a process that is presently occurring.

Matthew 3:11 *for repentance*: Where Matthew had avoided using the word “repentance” in 3:2, here he takes up the word as a necessary action prior to the coming events/end. ***coming after me*** does not refer to one coming ‘later’ (*opisō*, ‘behind’, is not used of time elsewhere in the New Testament), but is a regular description of a follower or disciple. (*Opisō* is so used, e.g. in 4:19; 10:38; 16:24; Luke 21:8; John 12:19) Jesus first appeared as a follower of John when he came to his baptism. ***to carry his sandals*:** A Rabbi’s disciple was expected to act virtually as his master’s slave, but to remove his shoes was too low a task even for a disciple (*Ketuboth* 96a). ***baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire*:** the water baptism of John will be followed by an “immersion” of the repentant in the cleansing power of the Spirit of God, and of the unrepentant in the destroying power of God’s judgment. In contrast to John’s baptism with water, Jesus is said to baptize with the holy Spirit and with fire. From the point of view of the early Christian community, the Spirit and fire must have been understood in the light of the fire symbolism of the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4); but as part of John’s preaching, the Spirit and fire should be related to their purifying and refining characteristics (Ezekiel 36:25–27; Malachi 3:2–3).

Matthew 3:12 *winnowing fan... threshing floor...gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn*: The discrimination between the good and the bad is compared to the procedure by which a farmer separates wheat and chaff. The winnowing fan was a forklike shovel with which the threshed wheat was thrown into the air. The kernels fell to the ground; the light chaff, blown off by the wind, was gathered and burned up. The scene echoes OT passages such as Ps 1:4; Prov 20:26; Isa 41:14–16; Jer 15:7; 51:33; Dan 2:35; Hos 6:11; 13:3; Joel 3:13; and Mic 4:12–13.

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