

“FROM MATTHEW’S POINT OF VIEW”

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

SESSION FOUR – BAPTISM

The beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry - Matthew 3:1-6; Mark 1:2-8; Luke 3:1-18

Luke describes John’s ministry beginning in “*the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,*” or 29-30 AD. “*...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” Mark adds (1:5): “*The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.*” Matthew (3:4) and Mark (1:6) agree that John was distinctly clothed in camel’s hair and a leather belt (identifying him with Elijah – 2 Kings 1:8), and subsisting on a basic diet of locusts (insects or beans?) and wild (or date?) honey. All the Gospels identify John as fulfilling the words of Isaiah (40:3): “*A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’*”

John’s Message - Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:7-18; John 1:19-28

John’s basic message is fourfold:

- Repent and be baptized – no matter who you are
- Live a life of honesty and generous charity consistent with repentance (Luke 3:10-14)
- The day of judgement and fire is at hand
- There is one coming, much greater than John, who will baptize not with water but with “the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

The Baptism of Jesus - Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:22; John 1:29-34

Matthew’s telling is the most complete: *Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”*

It is difficult to determine who sees the vision of the dove in the Gospels; Matthew, Mark and Luke seem to indicate only Jesus sees this; in John, John the Baptist claims to have witnessed it. The voice from heaven is perhaps heard by all, but is not included in John. John's Gospel does add the proclamation of John the Baptist, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

John's Gospel also adds the Baptist's line (twice: in 1:31 and 1:33), "I myself did not know him." Did this mean that despite their distant family relation (mothers were cousins), John and Jesus did not know one another well? Or is it simply an indication that until that moment, despite knowing Jesus as a cousin, John did not know of him as the Messiah?

John's Ministry Activities After the Baptism of Jesus - John 3:22-36

The Synoptic Gospels are silent on John's activities, but the Gospel of John provides an informative section: *Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized.* John's Gospel clarifies a few verses later (4:1-2) that, *"although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples."*

By this time, John the Baptist had moved his ministry to "*Aenon near Salim,*" in Samaria, where there was, *"plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized."* Nevertheless, John's disciples come to him and report: *"Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."*

Note that by this time Jesus has disciples of his own. Apparently, Jesus had spent sufficient time with the Baptist in the Judean countryside that some of John's disciples transferred their allegiance to Jesus. In John 1:35, the Baptist is *"standing with two of his disciples,"* who, we later learn, are Andrew and Simon Peter. After hearing John call Jesus the Lamb of God, they decide to *"follow Jesus"* (John 1:37).

Despite the concerns of John's disciples, he replies, *"I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him... He must become greater; I must become less."* John then affirms Jesus as the Christ, the "Bridegroom" and God's Son.

John in Prison - Matthew 11:1-17; Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 3:19-20

Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, plays a large part in the life – and death – of John the Baptist. We first hear of his connection with the Baptist in Luke, who writes (Luke 3:19-20), *"But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this*

to them all: He locked John up in prison.” This must have been after John’s time of ministry in Selim, Samaria.

While Luke indicates John had been preaching against Herod’s marriage already in Judea, Herod had no authority or jurisdiction there, and could not effect an arrest. Nor had he jurisdiction in Samaria. We know that jurisdictional issues are important; connected with the arrest and trial of Jesus, we read in Luke (23:7): *“When [Pilate] learned that Jesus [as a Galilean] was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.”*

John must therefore have wrapped up his ministry in Samaria (or handed it over to Jesus, who, according to the Gospel of John, travels to Samaria immediately after we hear of John’s ministry there) and then John relocates to Galilee, at which point Herod, waiting for his chance, arrests and imprisons him. Continuing his pattern of following John, Jesus then begins to minister in Galilee: *“When [Jesus] heard that John had been arrested, he returned to Galilee”* (Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:14)

Jesus’ ministry in Galilee was reported back to John, who was apparently unsettled by the form Jesus’ ministry and teaching had taken. Anticipating a Messiah who would *“put the axe to the root of the trees,”* and *“burn the chaff with fire,”* John’s disciples reported to him a very different realization of “Messiah” (Matthew 11:2-3): *“When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’”*

Now, to John, comes the message: Jesus replied, *“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”* (Matthew 11:4-6) John had “stumbled” in envisioning the Messiah as the instrument of God’s Day of Wrath; Jesus instead proclaims “the year of the Lord’s favour.”

The Death of John - Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29

All the Gospel’s discussions of John’s death are linked with Herod’s fear that Jesus is John come back to life. Herod was not alone in wondering whether Jesus was John the Baptist returned to life. The disciples themselves report the popular theory held by many of the people – maybe even themselves – that Jesus and John are one and the same (Mark 8:27-30; Matthew 16:13-16; Luke 9:18-20): *Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”*

For Herod, this possible identification held greater fears. Matthew 14:1-13:

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him." Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her." Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet.

On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus. When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.

After John's death, Jesus provides an affirmation of John's ministry (now superseded by his own). Reminding the crowd of John's role as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy, "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you" (Malachi 3:1), Jesus continues (Matthew 11:11-14): *Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist... For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.* John, says Jesus, was the last Prophet of the Old Covenant. Now, in Galilee, Jesus is inaugurating a New Covenant. The Kingdom, which was near, is now declared by Jesus to be "among you" (Luke 17:12).

Summary of John the Baptist and Jesus

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." That was John's message. But now it is Jesus' message as well – word for word. The ministry and message of John is transferred in its entirety to Jesus – first the ministry in Judea, then Samaria, and now Galilee. It is only after John's imprisonment, writes Matthew, that Jesus completes the calling of his disciples. Soon, the same crowds who followed John are following Jesus. The transfer is complete. John truly prepared the way.

Baptism in the New Testament

To understand Baptism, we have to look at how Ritual Bathing was understood in the time of Jesus. Various kinds of "washings" were commonly known and practiced throughout much of Israel's history, always as a symbol of some deeper meaning.

- The Old Testament prescribed various forms of water rituals for different types of symbolic purification. These cleansings were understood to be ongoing symbols of God’s inner cleansing (e.g., Ps. 51:2, 7) and were practiced into the NT era.
- Widespread voluntary forms of water rituals were primarily symbolic of purification, such as the table fellowship of the Pharisees or commitment to the community at Qumran. Ceremonial mikveh (“immersion pool”) baths have been uncovered by archaeologists throughout Israel, indicating regular washings by immersion and by pouring flowing water over oneself. Ritual water purifications were repeated, sometimes more than once a day. Ritual immersion was so common a practice that the wealthier inhabitants of Jerusalem had their own immersion pools built in their houses. Nearly 150 of them have been found.
- By the time of John it was possible that Gentile proselytes were required to undergo baptism as an act of initiation into Judaism. This was a one-time baptism signifying the conversion of adults from a Gentile background to Judaism. This is still practiced today when conversions to Judaism are undertaken.
- John’s baptism was also symbolic of purification, but it was a one-time baptism, whereas groups such as those at Qumran and the Pharisees had highly structured regulations for regular, repeated washings. John’s baptism had some similarity to proselyte one-time baptism, but it was far different since John was baptizing Jews, not Gentiles. Those responding were heeding the call to the presence of the kingdom and the “Coming One” whom John announced.
- John’s baptism differs significantly from normal Jewish immersions for ceremonial purification because it is done only once and does not need repeating. It is not simply a rite of cleansing but an initiatory rite in which the one baptized repents and accepts God’s offer of forgiveness to be saved from the coming fiery judgment.
- Throughout the Book of Acts, Baptism was seen as the sign of entrance – the welcome, or initiation – into the community of the church. On the Day of Pentecost, a remarkable 3000 people are said to be baptised! Family groups and households, including children, were baptised. Interestingly, the only individual baptisms mentioned are Paul and the Ethiopian Eunuch, who were both without family.
- Peter describes Baptism as “for you and your children” (Acts 2:39). Children of newly believing parents were baptised together with them; it is possible that in New Testament times, offspring of believing parents would be baptised shortly after birth. This is also evidenced by The Apostle Paul, who equates the Christian rite of Baptism as having replaced the Jewish rite of circumcision (*Colossians 2:11-12 - In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead*). Circumcision was practiced upon Jewish males on the eighth day of life, as a sign of entrance into the covenant community.

The Baptism Ministry at Qasr al Yahud

Qasr al Yahud (The Jews' Castle or Palace) is a site on the banks of the Jordan River not far from Jericho. Christian tradition associates Qasr al Yahud with the site of Jesus' baptism by Matthew (Matthew 3) and it has been revered as such from at least the fourth century. There are many monasteries and churches in the area testifying to the long religious tradition at Qasr al Yahud. In Jewish tradition the crossing of the Jordan by the Children of Israel under Joshua (Joshua 3) must also have taken place in this general area. It is also associated with the site where Elijah handed over the prophecy to Elisha and rose to heaven on a fiery chariot (2 Kings 11).

Due to its location Qasr al Yahud has not been an easy place to visit, and the Yardenit Baptismal Site has been the preferred choice of pilgrims. However, Qasr al Yahud has been recently refurbished with access to the river, showers, facilities for prayer, wheelchair access and improved car parking. The site now seems to be under the administration of the Israel Parks Authority and for the first time in many years is now open daily. The general area is amazingly beautiful and is a good place to understand desert landscape and see the impact of water - the trail of the Jordan is very clear with an oasis like quality.

There are many churches in use, abandoned and being constructed in the area. The Jordan River is very narrow and it is possible to carry out a normal conversation with pilgrims in Jordan! Although this is a place of outstanding natural beauty and religious significance it is an international border in every respect.

Forms of Baptismal Practise

There is evidence around the shore of the Sea of Galilee of a widespread differentiation of Baptismal models. In Sussita, a remains of a church reveal a full-immersion Mikveh baptism. In Kursi, a short distance away, there is a shallow Baptism trough, in which the candidate stands while water is poured over the head; in Tabgha, there is a Baptismal font most obviously suited to children. It is unknown if Baptisms were conducted in the Sea of Galilee itself. It appears as though there was a variance in practice, even within a short distance – much like among our Prince Street Churches today.