THE BAPTIST

For many, the New Testament often seems quite different from the Old Testament. The Old seems to focus on a corporate religion centered on membership in a nation. The New is an individual religion centered on each person's standing before God. The Old is a *physical religion* tied to food laws, sacrifices and blood and water. The New is a *spiritual religion* tied up largely with intangibles.

The inauguration of the Messiah's ministry, however, shows that such is not the case.

> *In every one of the gospels, the beginning of Jesus' ministry is John's ministry. John is the forerunner, the first witness in God's final prosecution of His lawsuit against Israel. John and Jesus both preach repentance and coming judgment; both offer a way of life for Israel; both oppose the Pharisees and Sadducees; both are prophets. Wraith is coming on Israel, and the Lord sends a <u>double witness</u> to warn Israel.*
>
> *Peter Leithart – Jesus as Israel volume 1, page 80*

Matthew has presented the overture of Jesus in chapters one and two, and now he sets out to capture the anointing of the Messiah at the Jordan and his subsequent temptation.

The scene at the Jordan is significant. Jesus is anointed by the Holy Spirit which tells us that the presence of his ministry is conducted within the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is nothing about the scene at the Jordan that is triumphant. Indeed, given John's words of reluctance in baptizing Jesus, the scene is quite humble, divorced from the fanfare of vainglory.

This is the first time we have seen the child of the first two chapters now grown and our initial meeting of him reveals much. Jesus will not act in a manner of a triumphant messiah in order to meet popular expectations, but in his own unique way, in obedience to the will of his Father.

> *In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,*
> *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*
> *Matthew 3:1-2*

Matthew gives us no hint of the number of years that have passed between chapters two and three. What he does give us here is the beginning of the ministry of an adult Jesus.

The tone of Matthew's narrative at the Jordan with John gives us more that historic facts. Matthew's desire is to report more than mere information. Matthew is relating theological history.

Matthew is intentional to portray John and Jesus in parallel terms.

Both are announced:

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,
Matthew 3:1

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.
Matthew 3:13

John's preaching anticipates the preaching of Jesus:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
Matthew 3:1-2

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."
Matthew 4:17

But when John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You offspring of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"
Matthew 3:10

(Jesus said) "You serpents, you offspring of vipers, how are you to escape from being sentenced to hell?"
Matthew 23:33

John then, as well as Jesus, has a message for Matthew's church.

**The phrase Matthew's church comes from scholar Don Hagner, and I believe it's worth mentioning as Matthew sets up the inauguration of the Kingdom of God at the Jordan.*

Jesus is the Promised Messiah, and the background of Matthew's Jordan river scene is found in the expectation of Jewish apocalyptic.

"And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and interpretation sure."
Daniel 2:44

And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.
Daniel 7:14

In Matthew's theology, John is the appointed forerunner, announcing that the expected kingdom is dawning in the person who follows him.

The source of John's practice of baptism remains uncertain. There are similarities in proselyte baptisms and ceremonial illustrations, but these are not sufficient to explain John's baptism.

Given the location of John's baptism, being on the east side of the Jordan about 5.5 miles north of the Dead Sea, we could see a connection between his baptism and that of the Qumran Community. They also emphasized repentance and saw their living in the wilderness as preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

> *the wicked acts of the children of Israel, all of their guilty transgressions and sins committed during dominion of Belial. All the initiates into the Covenant are to respond by confessing, "We have been wicked."*
> *Dead Sea Scroll 1QS 1:23-24*

> *None of perverse men is to enter purifying waters used by Men of Holiness and so contact their purity. (Indeed, it is impossible to be purified without first repenting of evil, inasmuch as impurity adheres to all who transgress his word).*
> *Dead Sea Scroll 1QS 5:13-14*

Within the Qumran Community however, their baptism was an often-repeated process and self-administered, whereas John's baptism was definitively eschatological. This is due to the arrival of the One who would succeed John and the mission he was bringing with him.

Understand the scene Matthew is laying out before his readers. John's baptism is a call to righteousness and therefore has a prophetic action to it. The symbolism of washing related to the removal of spiritual uncleanness is a natural one and is found frequently in the Old Testament.

> *Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean, wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*
> *Psalm 51:7*

> *when the LORD shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgement and by a spirit of burning.*
> *Isaiah 4:4*

> *O Jerusalem, wash your hearts from evil, that you may be saved. How long shall your wicked thoughts lodge within you?*
> *Jeremiah 4:14*

> *On that day there shall be a fountain opened of the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.*
> *Zechariah 13:1*

And yet, given this, John's baptism carries a greater weight and covers a wider canvass, since his successor is the final revelation and the rightful judge, the only savior and eternal life.

"In those days" does not specify a reference to time but emphasizes the importance of *this* time.

It is emblematic of prophets when they speak of eschatological matters.

A day of wrath <u>is that day</u>, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.
Zephaniah 1:15

"Behold, <u>the days are coming</u>," declares the LORD God, when "I will send a famine on the land – not a famine of bread, nor a thirst of water, <u>but of hearing the word of the LORD</u>.
Amos 9:11

<u>In that day</u> the remnant of the house of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth.
Isaiah 10:20

<u>For that day</u> is great, and there is not such another: and it is a time of straightness to Jacob, but he shall be saved out of it.
Jeremiah 37:7 LXX

Understand this phrase *in those days* functions as a pointer to a special time of revelation.

Matthew's use of the location *"The wilderness of Judea"* is important due to the Isaiah quote that is forthcoming.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
Matthew 3:1-2

At hand carries the implication of *drawing near.* Combine this with John's message of repentance and we have a message that is like those of past prophets. This signifies the call of John's message – redemption is at hand but with it comes judgement. Thus, there can only be one decision to the message: return to the God of Israel.

This is a central theme from the time of the Old Testament prophets and moving forward and is used by Jesus in Matthew's gospel.

From that time Jesus began to preach saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
Matthew 4:17

John and Jesus, therefore, stand in continuity and the message of both is equally a message to Matthew's church.

Understand that repentance here, though not stated, includes the forgiveness of sins.

You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people <u>from their sins</u>.
Matthew 1:21

Matthew's use of the phrase *"kingdom of heaven"* is done, so it is thought, to avoid the word God. He does on occasion use *"Kingdom of God"* (see Matthew 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43).

The phrase means *"God reigns."*

> *For <u>this is he</u> who was spoken of by the prophet Isaih when he said, The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."*
> *Matthew 3:3*

The quote comes from Isaiah 40:3 and is quoted in all four gospels.

Matthew's phrase *"For this is he"* denotes fulfillment of prior prophecy.

> *But <u>this is what</u> was uttered through the prophet Joel.*
> *Acts 2:16*

The context of Isaiah 40 is that of comfort and deliverance from exile while alluding to Messianic fulfillment. The fulfillment, according to Matthew's account, is coming shortly.

> *The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight the paths of our God.*
> *O thou that bringest glad tidings to Zion, go up on the mountain; lift up thy voice with strength, thou that bringest glad tidings to Jerusalem; lift it up, fear not; say unto the cities of Juda, Behold your God.*
> *Isaiah 40:3, 9 LXX*

John fulfills this Isaiah prophecy in the wilderness, proclaiming the good of the restoration of the people. Matthew is clearly recapitulating the fulfillment of the Exodus story with Joshu leading the people through the wilderness over the Jordan and into the Promised Land.

There is no shift in John's preaching from corporate concerns to individual concerns. He preaches about and against Israel. Jesus will do the same. Matthew places the focus on the nation and the dangerous condition it faces in its present condition.

> *John's ministry is not a break in the history of Israel at all. It is a continuation of that history, the completion of that history. The exile will end with the Lords' forgiveness of His people, with the glory of the Lord being revealed, with the coming of the Lord. Yahweh will come, and in preparation for His coming all the mountains will be cast down and the high places raised up. A way will be prepared for Yahweh's arrival, which is the end of the exile – Yahweh's return to His land, to His people, to His city and temple. Israel has been back in the land for several centuries, but at the same time they have not seen the complete fulfillment of the promise of return. Now they are going to see that.*
> *Peter Leithart – Jesus as Israel volume 1, page 80-81*

Now John himself had his garment of camel hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.
Matthew 3:4

I used the Greek New Testament translation here because of its use of the phrase *John himself.* This is significant in that the pronoun *himself* indicates that John's manner of living was in accord with the prophets before him. They were his forerunner.

With that in mind, Matthew deliberately presents John as resembling Elijah.

On that day every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies. He will not put on a hairy cloak in order to deceive the people.
Zechariah 13:4

They answered him, "He wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather about his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite."
2 Kings 1:8

Matthew surely identifies John the Baptist as Elijah, but it won't be until Jesus does so that the connection is certain.

"and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come."
Matthew 11:14

Given this direct association with the Old Testament, John is given the aura of a *nazir,* a holy man that would not have been missed by the people of his day. And if John is the prophet spoken of by Isaiah and by Mark's gospel in Malachi, then the time of the Messiah was at hand, and with him was coming the Kingdon of God.

John is putting Isreal on alert. They must prepare for the coming of Yahweh and for the end of exile.

John baptizes in the wilderness and at the Jordan because his baptism ritually enacts the return of the people. Those baptized by him in repentance cross the Jordan from exile back into the land.

Thus, the Isaiah quote and John's garments and lifestyle, mark him out as a continuation of the history of Israel. He is playing a role and that role communicates to Israel what is about to happen.

John is the Elijah prophesied by Malachi who comes before the great and terrible day of the Lord to restore the fathers to children and children to fathers. He is the forerunner of the blazing fire that will burn Israel and consume all the chaff.

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; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

For behold the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.
And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.
Malachi 3:1, 4:1, 4:6

John is Elijah and just as Elijah came to Israel in the darkest period of her history during the time of Ahab and the 400 Israelite prophets of Baal, John comes at another dark time.

Those who desire to survive the and flourish with new life must divorce themselves from idolatrous religion. They must heed Elijah and turn in repentance from their religious ways to Elijah's successor, the coming Elisha.

Just as Israel crossed over the Jordan to enter the land, John is now the forerunner calling them to cross over that Jordan again, not into land that was merely the foreshadow of the promise, but into the eternal life with Yahweh and the promise of a New Heaven and a New Earth as the fulfillment of the Promised Land.

As John's diet typifies, *this is the land flowing with milk and honey.*

John signifies the breaking of the prophetic silence which was recognized by the Jews themselves.

And they laid up the stones in the mountain of the temple in a convenient place, till there should come a prophet, and give answer concerning them.
1 Maccabees 4:46

And there was a great tribulation in Israel such as was not since the day that there was no prophet seen in Israel.
1 Maccabees 9:27

Here then is a new thing: a voice from God out of the silence, self-authenticating by its power and message, as well as by its unusual mediator. Prophecy appears again in the midst of Israel, the people of God.
Hagner – Matthew, page 49

Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him.
Matthew 3:5

And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.
Mark 1:5

Unlike Mark, Matthew does not say *all Jerusalem.* Given Matthew's habit of holding Judaism accountable, he may have recorded his account this way because he recognizes Jerusalem as the center of opposition to Jesus, and because by the time of the writing of this gospel, his own church may have been experiencing opposition from the Jews.

In corroboration with Mark, he does say *all of Judea* which would indicate a great response by the people toward his message. The imperfect tense of the words *going out* describe a repeated process over a period of time.

Indeed, John, as forerunner, appears to enjoy a more successful ministry than his successor.

and they were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.
Matthew 3:6

Again, Matthew uses the imperfect tense here which matches the preceding verse: *they were being baptized – (they) were going out.* Again, this underlines the success of John's ministry.

The confession of sins is the point of John's baptism, being fundamental to repentance and the accompanying new orientation.

The confessing of sins is not necessarily done in *conjunction* with the baptism, but it was clearly done in *connection* with the baptism.

Remarkably, Jews came to submit themselves to a rite that for them had the association of the initiation of a gentile proselyte into Judaism. But the announcement of the imminent end of the age no doubt seemed to justify confession of sins and the cleansing symbolism of the baptism.
Hagner – Matthew, page 49

To close, Peter Leithart writes this regarding John's appearance and his actions at the Jordan.

John's diet links him with the wilderness. Locusts are food of the wilderness. So long as Israel dwells in the land, she cannot be renewed. They have to be taken from the land, turned into Gentiles, and then reincorporated into the land by returning to the land through the Jordan. This is the process of renewal. Locusts are instruments of judgment in the Old Testament. While locusts are clean, it is more common in the Old Testament to read of locusts eating than of them being eaten. Israel has been eaten up by locusts of various Gentiles for centuries, but John consumes locusts. He eats the eater, and those who repent and receive His baptism will also consume the consumer. The locusts will be eaten up into the body of the prophet. In a sense, John eats Gentiles. The honey is wild honey, and locusts often represent invading Gentile armies. Eating is an act of incorporation, and by eating this "Gentilic" food, John anticipates inclusion of the Gentiles. The message is: "Forsake the old Jewry. Become incorporated with John as gentiles, and become a New Israel at the Jordan.
Peter Leithart – Jesus as Israel volume 1, page 82