WARNING

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD'S hand double for all her sins. A voice cries; In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Isaiah 40:1-3

The idea of John the Baptist being the fulfillment of this passage is not novel to Matthew. The Essenes at Qumran viewed their monastic community the fulfillment as well.

the men of the Yahad (unity), each will walk blamelessly with his fellow, guided by what has been revealed to them. That will be the time of "preparing the way in the desert" (Isaiah 40:3). He shall instruct them in every legal finding that is to regulate their works in that time, and teach them to separate from every man who fails to keep himself from perversity.
Dead Sea Scroll - 1QS 9 19-20

The reason I call attention to this is that from it we can see the expectations of John's times.

But when he saw the multitudes of 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 3:7

Here Matthew identifies the opponents of the coming kingdom. As the author, he already knows the antagonistic part they will play throughout his narrative.

With this group, the old saying of *"The enemy of my enemy is my friend,"* becomes reality. These priestly and scholarly authorities were separated by some major differences but come together as Matthew's narrative unfolds in their opposition to Jesus.

"How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."
Matthew 16:11

Most likely the motive of these groups coming to John's activities are mixed. Some may have been sincere, others curious. The majority, however, seem to be hostile to the ministry.

(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)
Luke 7:29-30

The Pharisees, as opponents of a legal righteousness through the observance of oral tradition, are the main competitors of Jesus throughout Matthew's narrative. By the end, Jesus will display an attack against them in Matthew 23 that reveals the irreconcilable divide between them.

As a matter of clarity, the community at Qumran also attacked the Pharisees.

The Sadducees are of less importance until the end of the Gospel, when through their cultic hierarchy and the high priesthood, they play a major role in condemning Jesus to death.

Matthew reveals to us that the initial response to John's ministry is largely a positive response that reveals contrasts to the final rejection of Jesus.

"Offspring of vipers" is used three times by Matthew (see 12:34 and 23:33) and always in reference to the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were members of one of the most important and influential religious and political parties of Judaism in the time of Jesus. There were more than 6,000 Pharisees about this time.

The Sadducees, though smaller, controlled the official political structures of Judaism at this time, being the majority members of the Sanhedrin.

"You offspring of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

If the Pharisees and Sadducees are offsprings of vipers, then is the system of religion they and their 2nd temple forefathers structured and established – the oral law tradition of Judaism with its many prohibitions to attain right standing before God – the idolatry of the day?

Enter John proclaiming the inauguration of the coming kingdom which brings eschatological wrath and mercy conjointly.

This eschatological wrath, associated with fulfillment, is again alluded to in vv. 10-12.

> *Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*
> *Matthew 3:10-12*

What was truly frightening about John's message to his listeners was that he spoke about the nearness of the judgment – that it was hand. This is why his message has eschatological implications. If the Messiah is following on John's heels, then the expected end-time kingdom is at hand.

John's allusion to the Pharisees and Sadducees as vipers fleeing from the coming burning judgment is appropriate, given its New Testament context within the Body of Christ.

and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from <u>the wrath to come</u>.
1 Thessalonians 1:10

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things <u>the wrath of God</u> comes upon the sons of disobedience.
Ephesians 5:6

Therefore produce fruit that proves your repentance.
Matthew 3:8

Here John asks for concrete evidence of repentance.

but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, <u>performing deeds in keeping with their repentance</u>.
Acts 26:20

John is not seeking mere outward participation in his baptism

And don't think you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father. For I tell you that God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones!
Matthew 3:9

John is already dispelling any argument they would give in defense of their right standing before God based upon their heritage. Being Jews, such a defense against John's baptism would have been typical.

In their appeal, "we have Abraham as our father," they made the mistake of thinking that physical descent from Abraham granted them an automatic immunity from God's eschatological wrath. John, however, by no means allowed them to entertain such a presumption.
Hagner – Matthew, page 50

By stating that God can raise up children to Abraham from stones, John underlined the fundamental insufficiency of Abrahamic descent in itself.

Being a descendant of Abraham is not enough, if they don't have the faith of Abraham or bring forth the fruit of Abraham which was his faith in the Person and Promises of Yahweh.

The Kingdom is at hand and John is the forerunning Elijah making this warning known in the region. God's work is moving forward and cannot be thwarted or limited by the disobedience of his people. Matthew reveals to us the importance of this concept concerning a new people in the following verses.

"I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.
Matthew 8:11

"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits."
Matthew 21:43

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit."
Matthew 28:19

"Already the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."
Matthew 3:10

John stresses the imminence of judgment not only by his use of the word *"already"* but by the present tense of the sentence.

The metaphor employed here is that of an unfruitful tree being cut down and thrown into the fire. This was common imagery in Jewish literature and is repeated verbatim by Jesus.

"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."
Matthew 7:19

The *good fruit* being spoken of here is analogous to the *fruit worthy of repentance* in v.8 above. Judgment based on good works is also an important theme in the teaching of Jesus as can be seen in Matthew 7:21-23; 25:45-46.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."
Matthew 3:11

John describes his own baptism as that of repentance. Not that the baptism itself brings about that repentance. Repentance should already be a reality before John's or any one's baptism. The contrast John is revealing to us is that his baptism is *"in agreement"* or *"associated with"* the baptism of Jesus.

Matthew's stress of repentance reminds the readers of the preparational function of John: his message of warning and baptism is one of fulfillment, paving the way for the kingdom's inauguration.

but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

He who is coming after me reminds us of the One that John is truly directing the listener's attention to from the Old Testament.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.
Psalm 118:26

At this point no further identification is required: the forerunner precedes the one who brings the kingdom.

The Baptists expects a triumphant Messiah, yet it is unlikely that he expects Yahweh to actually be the One. His following words of *"winnowing fork in his hand"* and *"gathering chaff and wheat"* seem to suggest John foresaw a human agent.

he who is coming after me is mightier than I

This suggest that the One who brings the kingdom is the One with the more powerful impact.

And he will not weaken during his reign, relying upon his God, because God will make him powerful by a holy spirit.
Psalm of Solomon 17:37

whose sandals I am not worthy to untie

John here uses servant language with the idea being that in contrast to the One coming, John is not worthy to perform the servile task of even untying and/or carrying his sandals.

Matthew is keen to use John, despite the success of his ministry, as being the lesser in the *slave / master* relationship.

John's message points to One greater than himself.

John's baptism is only the preparation for the One who brings the Kingdom's baptism. John is merely the disembodied voice whereas the One coming is the embodied Messiah.

And yet, John draws the contrast between the two by describing the work of the One to come also as a baptism, though metaphorical rather than literal. Thus, there is continuity and discontinuity between John and Jesus.

Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Suggested in this by the context of John's language of judgment, the Holy Spirit here could be thought of as the *"Holy Wind"* or the *pneuma*, the destroying wind that works together with fire.

This also works well with the *threshing floor* concept where *the wind* blows away the chaff. John's message, therefore, is pessimistic and fits well with the urgency of his call to repentance.

For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.
Isaiah 44:3

And I will not hide my face anymore from them when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the LORD God.
Ezekiel 39:29

If John did indeed understand these Old Testament passages and was able to reconcile them with his message, then it would be more than possible for him to see the positive work of the Spirit in his language as well as the judgment. Those who respond to his message of repentance and baptism were surely to experience the baptism of Jesus finally as a blessing. And this blessing mediated by the Spirit he was to bestow.

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.
Matthew 3:12

The winnowing fork is another metaphor of judgment being a common scene in Palestine. In this case, the One coming after John holds the fork, throwing the mixed wheat and chaff into the wind. The lighter chaff is thus separated from the heavier wheat. The threshing floor is cleansed (purged), the wheat is put into storage, and the chaff becomes fuel in the fire.

The language is imagery. The chaff is judged, finding itself thrown into *unquenchable fire.*

Night and day it shall <u>not be</u> <u>quenched</u>; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it forever and ever.
Isaiah 34:10

And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall <u>not be quenched</u>, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.
Isaiah 66:24

Matthew's central figure is Jesus of Nazareth. This Son of David must begin with the divinely sent forerunner, John the Baptist.

John's voice is in accordance with Old Testament prophecy, echoing its warning through the wilderness. John understood the role that he had to perform.

John warned and Jesus fulfilled the promise – the Kingdom of God – was at hand.

The One to bring this fulfillment – the successor to John – was the Agent who was bringing that Kingdom with him.

John was called to make urgent preparation for the judgment that was surely coming. Only a radical repentance would suffice, and those who thought they could find shelter in their Abrahamic pedigree needed to be told that God's purposes could not be restricted to them.

> *But this straightforward account does not do justice to the full significance that Matthew and his readers saw in all of this. For them the judgment of which John spoke – and Jesus, too, in the following narrative – lay in the future (though perhaps already anticipated in the destruction of Jerusalem). Still, the positive aspects of the kingdom had begun to be experienced in the ministry of Jesus and now, through the resurrected Christ, in the Church. They themselves had been taught to baptize disciples in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (28:19). But this was no longer a baptism of preparation, as was John's but rather an extension of that baptism "in the Holy Spirit," which John had prophesied. In short, the church of Matthew now knowns the reality of what John announced in its beginning. It sees itself as bringing forth the proper response of "fruit in agreement with repentance", and it sees its present adversaries as already typified in the Jewish leaders who came to John but were inclined to rest in their Abrahamic lineage. For them was reserved the unhappy prospect of the judgment to come.*
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> *Hagner – Matthew, page 53*