

John 3:22-36: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] John chapter 3 verses 22 to 36. After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.

John also was baptizing at Enon near Salem, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized, for John had not yet been put in prison. Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.

And they came to John and said to him, Rabbi, he who is with you across the Jordan to whom you bore witness, look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him. John answered, A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.

You yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.

The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice.

Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease. He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks in an earthly way.

[1 : 08] He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard. Yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.

For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. At the conclusion of John chapter 3, we return to the witness of John the Baptist.

There is perhaps a contrast to be drawn between John's clear and powerful witness, and Nicodemus, the teacher of the Jews, who nonetheless failed to perceive who Jesus was and what Israel needed.

John here also reveals amazing divinely revealed insight into who Jesus is and his significance.

There are several points here where we can see the threads of chapter 1 being picked up again, providing a broader introduction to the ministry of Jesus, tying things together between chapters 1 and 3, bookending the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

[2 : 16] At this point, Jesus and his disciples are operating in the Judean countryside, whereas the Synoptic Gospels focus more upon Jesus' ministry in the north in Galilee. In John's Gospel, the centre of gravity of the narrative throughout is situated in Jerusalem.

Similarly, in the Synoptics, we don't read of Jesus and his disciples performing any baptisms prior to Pentecost. Jesus' disciples are here baptising, in association with his kingdom movement.

As we discover at the beginning of chapter 4, Jesus is having considerable success at this point, with many followers joining him and being baptised. However, as the evangelist mentions there, Jesus himself does not baptise, but rather his disciples do.

Jesus, then, has a baptismal movement like John, yet he is not personally baptising. He is the minister of a greater baptism that is yet to come, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and it is important that nothing be confused with that.

We might wonder what the meaning of the baptism that Jesus' disciples are administering at this point is. Earlier, John the witness declared that he was sent to baptise to reveal the coming one to Israel.

[3 : 22] However, his baptism seems to have broader meaning than this, as we see in this passage, where he and his disciples discuss rituals of purification with the Jew. Beyond the central task of manifesting Christ himself, John is preparing a people for Christ's appearance.

The baptism performed by Jesus' disciples at this juncture likely has a similar purpose. It is not yet the sort of baptism that would follow Pentecost, but it cleanses people and connects them with the Jesus movement.

Given the large number of baptisms that he is performing with his disciples, John needed a place with plenty of water. However, we don't know exactly where Enon was.

The Gospel writer makes a parenthetical remark at this point that John the Baptist had not yet been thrown into prison, a detail about which he never says anything further in the Gospel, as it would distract him from the story that he is telling.

However, this might be one of several details in the Gospel that suggests that John was writing for people he presumed were familiar with another Gospel, or perhaps some other non-canonical accounts of Jesus, whether written accounts or oral testimony.

[4 : 27] John was not writing in a vacuum. While his claims had been criticised in some quarters, Richard Borkham, for instance, has argued that John presumed a familiarity with the synoptic tradition of Mark of his readers.

It is important to bear in mind that early Christians would generally have been exposed to more than one Gospel tradition. Luke, for instance, can refer to many having attempted to write accounts of the ministry of Christ, and exposure to a plurality of eyewitness accounts.

If John was able to presume such an audience for his Gospel, his Gospel would not need to be a solitary and self-standing work. Rather, it could leave out many episodes of Jesus' story, and downplay various aspects of his ministry and teaching, without fear of leaving his audience uninformed concerning them.

More than any of the other Gospels, John reveals the overlap between the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. In chapter 1, John's witness to Jesus is front and centre of his ministry, in a manner far more pronounced than in the synoptics.

Jesus' first followers are former disciples of John, who were pointed in his direction by John. In this chapter, we see further overlap between John and Jesus' ministry, as both of their groups are carrying out similar baptism ministries simultaneously, and establishing followings.

[5 : 42] However, Jesus' following has started to eclipse John's. John's disciples have discussions about purification with the Jew. It's important to remember that baptism was a form of purification rite, arising in a context where many such rites were practised.

The rite of baptism was not introduced whole cloth by John, in a situation where no similar practice existed before. We find lots of washings in the Old Testament, perhaps most notably the washing received by the priests, as part of the ritual of their initiation into their service.

Various other ritual washings were practised by Jewish communities during this period, and the meaning of John's practice would not have been utterly bizarre to his contemporaries. Rather, it would have been seen as a more radical form of practices that were familiar in other contexts, making it possible for John and his disciples to have debates about purification with other people of their time.

It should further be noted here that the language of Jew, or the Jews, is used at many points within John's Gospel, often with a very negative connotation. This language is not referring to people who are just Jews in the more generic sense that we might typically use it.

It usually seems to refer more specifically to leaders of the people, the leading groups associated with Judea and Jerusalem. It's not used of people in Galilee in quite the same way.

[7 : 01] We might think about the way people in the US might talk about the folk in DC. When talking about the folk in DC, it's usually obvious that people are not speaking in a manner inclusive of people in a poor neighbourhood in Washington.

They're talking about the people in power. Likewise, much of the language that's used in reference to the Jews in John's Gospel is used in that sort of narrow sense. In this period of overlap between the two ministries, John speaks more directly to the question of succession, of how his ministry would decrease and Jesus' increase.

He uses the illustration of the bridegroom and the friend of the bridegroom. This should draw our minds back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the sign at the wedding of Cana. Also, as the friend of the bridegroom, one of John's tasks would have been to serve as a witness to the marriage and to speak on behalf of the bridegroom at certain points.

John especially emphasises the joy that he feels, joy of course being the appropriate response and emotion for a wedding. John's Gospel will later foreground that theme of joy in the context of the

