

Matthew 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 3 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But 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 wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father.

For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 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 baptise you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

[1 : 1 6] 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. Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptised by him.

John would have prevented him, saying, I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me? But Jesus answered him, Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.

Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptised, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and coming to rest on him.

And behold, a voice from heaven said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. In Matthew chapter 3, we are introduced to the character of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is very important in each one of the Gospels, and in the book of Acts we see that to be an apostle, you had to be a witness of Christ's ministry, beginning from John the Baptist, to the resurrection.

[2 : 1 8] John the Baptist is not just mentioned in the New Testament, we also see him in the works of Josephus. His practice of baptism also seems to be related to Jewish ritual washings for purity.

It's not something conjured up out of nothing. The community associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls also seems to have practised similar sorts of baptisms. In the book of John, there are people who come to John and ask him about his practice of baptism, and seem to be discussing it according to the lines of ritual purity more generally.

So it's not an unprecedented movement. It draws upon earlier covenant and natural symbolism. Water has a natural symbolism. Washing, cleansing, union, blessing, all these sorts of things.

And John is drawing upon that and his practice. But he's also drawing upon existing practices of washing. He's drawing upon the symbolism of a particular place.

The crossing of the Jordan was where they entered into the land. By baptising people in the wilderness on the far side of the Jordan, he's preparing people symbolically to enter into the land again.

[3 : 23] And he's calling people to join in this new Exodus movement. It's distinct from later Christian baptism. And it's not self-baptism either. So there are important things to notice about that that distinguish it both from some of the baptisms that we find in places like the book of Leviticus, but also the baptisms that we encounter later on in the New Testament.

John declares the kingdom of heaven. And the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are largely interchangeable expressions. This is central to John the Baptist's ministry and announcement.

It's also central to what Christ declares as he comes on the scene. The words of John the Baptist draw our minds back to Isaiah chapter 40, where there is this prophecy of a new Exodus that's going to happen.

Israel is being forgiven of its sins. Its warfare has ended. And God is going to come to reign among them. That promise of the reign of God or the kingdom of heaven is, in its original context, a prophecy of the return from Babylon.

God is coming to rule. And John the Baptist characterizes himself as the one bearing this message. This frames our understanding of Christ's ministry when it comes.

[4 : 33] Note how little the Bible gives attention to appearance of characters, to scenic features and details of diet. But yet it describes John the Baptist. He's dressed in a garment of camel's hair.

He has a leather belt around his waist. And his food is locusts and wild honey. Now, why on earth does it matter what he eats for his breakfast? Why does it matter how he dresses when he goes out on the day?

Well, it matters because it connects us with various other things that help us to understand what type of character he is. Most particularly, it brings our mind back to 2 Kings 1, verse 8, where the character of Elijah is described.

He wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather around his waist. He said, it is Elijah the Tishbite. The very last prophecy of the Old Testament promises that, Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. The final verse of chapter 4 of the book of Malachi, the final verse of the Old Testament in our typical ordering.

[5 : 46] And now we see this character on the scene who dresses in the same way as Elijah. He is the Elijah to come. And later on in Matthew chapter 17, verse 10 following, he is described as the Elijah that was to come.

In Luke chapter 1, verses 14 following, he is described as one who will come in the spirit and the power of Elijah. And so this reminds us of Old Testament prophecy.

It characterizes John the Baptist, helps us to see who he is and what prophecies he's fulfilling. He eats locusts and wild honey. He's detached from the society. These aren't cultivated foods.

They're wild foods. He's connected with the poor. The locusts may be connected with enemies of Israel. Honey with the sustenance of the land. Wild and uncultivated.

It's a return to the state of Exodus, like eating quail and manna. And his location is important. He's in the wilderness. This brings up themes of exile, fulfillment of prophecy.

[6 : 44] He goes outside of society, a place where there are the fugitives and the outcasts. And John's baptism is connected with a certain exclusion from society. You're stepping away from society to be baptized.

And you're going outside of the main area of the land. And you have to re-enter again through this washing. Pagans who wanted to join Israel would have repented and been baptized.

Israel is being treated in the same way, subject to proselyte baptism. This is in keeping with John's message that Jewish ancestry was no guarantee of safety as God came near to his people.

It also sets the terms for much of the rest of the New Testament message. about Jews and Gentiles and keeps with the themes of Matthew at this point. Many might assume that the merit of Abraham will protect them.

But John attacks that notion. He speaks of them as brood of vipers. It's the seed of the serpent. And this may also be an allusion to the idea that vipers kill their mothers.

[7 : 43] They were set against their ancestors and not walking in their ways. What really matters is that they need to bear the fruits of repentance. So this theme of trees and fruits, it's the characteristic of the righteous man, a tree that bears its fruits in season.

And they need to bear the fruit of repentance. There's also this play on children and stones. You can see that in both Aramaic and Hebrew. And it reminds us of the idea of Israel being taken, hewn from the stone of Abraham.

That if they're going to be the true sons of Abraham, they have to be hewn from this. The axe is laid to the root of the tree. This is the language of Isaiah. Isaiah often uses this language of trees being cut down or of things growing up from a stump or a root out of dry ground.

The axe is laid to the root of the trees. The leaders of Israel are about to be cut down. The heads of the people. And this great forest is about to be felled.

God is going to come near. He's going to judge. And they need to be prepared. See a similar thing in Daniel where it describes the story of Nebuchadnezzar. This great tree in which people took refuge and beneath its shade and its branches.

[8 : 58] It's going to be chopped down. He is humiliated. And then it will be built up again. Now, this is a need for a general repentance. It's not just a subset of the wicked.

This is an event of national, not merely private import. John is calling the whole nation to enter into this repentance. It's a collective return to God. And he uses the language of God coming to the threshing floor.

This is, again, it's language from Malachi. He uses the language of the threshing floor. But Malachi speaks of the temple. 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. But who can endure the day of his coming?

And who can stand when he appears? It is important to remember here that the temple was built on the site of the threshing floor and drew upon its symbolism.

[10 : 10] The threshing floor is the place where the wheat is prepared, where things are tested, where God judges his people. It's the place where the oxen of the priesthood tread out the grain, preparing Israel for God's bread, as it were.

John describes his baptism as anticipatory of a greater baptism, the baptism of the Spirit. Jesus is anointed with the Spirit himself, but he will go on to anoint others.

We might ask why Jesus needed to be baptised. John the Baptist makes the objection to it. But Jesus says this should be done to fulfil all righteousness. Maybe it's referring to God's establishment of his saving righteousness, this fulfilment of prophecy.

Jesus is identifying with his people. He's also symbolically identifying with Israel. He crosses the water and later he'll be tested in the wilderness. And so he's leading the people on this new Exodus movement.

There's a handing on of the baton here as well. Jesus continues from the last great prophet. And this is the baton that has been passed to John himself. John is the Elijah that was to come, the great prophet that was promised.

[11 : 16] And now he passes on the baton to Christ. First, note in the Old Testament the number of transitions that we see at the Jordan. We have Moses transitioning to Joshua.

We have Elijah transitioning to Elisha. And in those cases what we see is a movement from a desert prophet to a land prophet. And in both the case of Joshua and Elisha, there are similarities with Jesus' name.

Joshua and Jesus are the same name. And Elisha and Jesus are also closely associated. God saves or Yahweh saves. These are very similar names.

Now Christ is taking over from the desert prophet and bringing things into the land. John is also a witness. Throughout the book of Matthew and particularly John's gospel, John's witness is set forth as something that is very important.

John the Baptist bears witness to Christ. He is the Baptist, but he recognizes Jesus as the great baptizer, the one who was baptized with the Spirit. And his identification of Jesus is an important part of the witness to Christ.

[12 : 25] Along with the resurrection, this is why it was important for apostles to be aware of John the Baptist's ministry. He comes up out of the water and he's anointed by the Spirit, the Spirit descending in the form of a dove upon him.

He sees this happening. It's not necessarily something that would have been seen by everyone in the situation. In the same way as Elijah ascending into heaven was not necessarily a sight that anyone would have seen.

Rather, your eyes need to be opened to see this. John the Baptist saw this. Jesus saw this. And this is an anointing of Jesus by the Spirit for his mission. The heavens are open.

The dove descends. And the voice declares his status. This is a multifaceted witness to Christ. He is marked out as the Son at this point. This is also a deeply Trinitarian event.

The Father speaking from heaven. The Spirit descending upon him. And Christ in the waters. We might also reflect upon the different voices represented here. The voice of Scripture as a witness to Christ.

[13 : 28] The prophetic voice of John the Baptist as a witness to Christ. And then also the heavenly voice as a witness to Christ. All of these join together in a unified witness to who Christ is.

The Spirit descends in the form of a dove. You can think back to the story of Noah. Where the dove is what descends upon the earth as it first comes out of the water. This is like the Spirit on the original waters as well.

It's associated with themes of love. Doves come out from eyes to express the love between persons in the poetry of something like Song of Songs. And so this is expressing the belovedness of the Son.

It's marking out the Son as it were as the new creation that's just emerged from the waters. And heaven and earth are united at this point. This is a descent of the Spirit upon the Son who's standing in the waters.

And all the different aspects of creation are joined together at this point. The heavens, the waters beneath, the earth. And there's, as it were, communication between heaven and earth.

[14 : 33] This is a Jacob's ladder type theme. And that voice coming from heaven declares that he is the beloved Son. This is the language of Isaiah chapter 42 verse 1 for instance.

Where we read, Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my spirit delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations. Or of Psalm 2 verse 7.

I will tell of the decree. The Lord said to me, You are my son. Today I have begotten you. A question to consider. Later on in the Gospel of Matthew, as in the other synoptic Gospels, we read of the Transfiguration, which has a number of similar themes to the baptism of Christ.

What similarities do you see? And why might these two events be similar?