

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

Matthew 3:1-6; Mark 1:2-6; Luke 3:3-6

DIG: If you could summarize John's message in one word, what would it be? What does the term the Kingdom of heaven mean? How did John the Baptist fulfill the prophetic ministry of the latter-day Elijah? How did he prepare the way for Yeshua? How was Yochanan dressed, what did he eat, and what does that tell us about him? What was John's **two-fold ministry of preparation**?

REFLECT: Who has been the "John the Baptist" in your life? How did that prepare you to meet Jesus? How does the Bible define sin? What does it take for you to repent? When you sin, do you readily ask for forgiveness? Or do the natural consequences of your sin have to pile up to the heavens before you break down and repent? Exactly how do we repent of our sins?

For the first time we have a message from the viewpoint of the three *Synoptic Gospels*. The word *synoptic* comes from two Greek words that mean *to see together*. These three Gospels are called the *Synoptic Gospels* because they can be set down in parallel columns, and their common content can be looked at together. The Gospel writers tell the same story from their own unique perspective, or theme. **Matthew, Mark and Luke** were more interested in what **Yeshua** did; while **John** was far more interested in what **Jesus** said.

Yochanan appears suddenly as he walks onto the pages of the Bible just as suddenly and mysteriously as **Elijah** (**First Kings 17:1**), on whom **Matthew's** account of **John's** prophetic ministry will be modeled. **In those days Yochanan came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea (Mattityahu 3:1)**. The word **wilderness** does not necessarily refer to dry, arid land, but means essentially uninhabited territory - open, wild territory - in contrast to the cultivated, inhabited areas of the country.²²³ Israel's prophets had predicted a new exodus in **the wilderness (Hosea 2:14-15; Isaiah 40:3)**. There, **he** could have safely drawn large crowds (see **Matthew 3:5; Mark 1:5a** below) and it provided **him** the best places for public baptisms that challenged the authority of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Thus, **John's** location symbolized the coming of a new exodus, the final time of salvation, and the price that a true prophet of **God** must be willing to pay for his or her call: total exclusion from all that society values - its comforts, status, even the basic necessities (**First Kings 13:8-9, 20:27; Isaiah 20:2; Jeremiah 15:15-18, 16:1-9; 1 Corinthians 4:8-13**).²²⁴

In those days serves as a transition between **Chapters 2** and **3**. It was a common literary phrase, indicating the general time in which the events being described occurred. Neatly thirty years had elapsed between Joseph taking the infant **Jesus** and **His** mother to Nazareth and the beginning of **John's** public ministry. We cannot understand in these days of instant communication, why **Yochanan** should not have had an opportunity to know **Yeshua** personally. It is probable that both Zacharias and Joseph died when **John** and **Jesus** were quite young, and if so that might account in part for their separation during a large part of the thirty years. Then, too, ninety miles was not a short journey in those days and the responsibility of a large family such as Mary raised, would make it difficult to visit the aged Elizabeth, which in her youthful days Miryam had considered easy enough. Neither do we know if Elisheva lived for many years, since her name disappears from the Scriptures after the birth of **John**.²²⁵

Yochanan was the cousin of **Yeshua**, born just six months before **Him** (**Luke 1:56-57**). His name means *God is gracious*, which is an apt description of the one who will prepare the way of **King Messiah**. **John's** movement was a back to **God** movement. The part of his message that was a spark that ignited Palestine was the announcement that **the Kingdom of heaven has come near**. And **Yochanan's baptism** was to identify themselves with that **Kingdom** centered movement.

John's message was so simple it could be easily summarized in one word: **repent**. The Greek word *metanoeo* behind **repent** means more than regret or sorrow (**Hebrews 12:17**); it means *to turn around, to change direction, to change the mind and will*. It doesn't refer to just any random change, but always a change from wrong to right, away from sin and to righteousness. Yes, repentance involves sorrow for sin, but it is a sorrow that leads a change of thinking, desire and conduct (**Second Corinthians 7:10**). In fact, **John's** command to **repent** could be translated *be converted*.²²⁶

Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven has come near (**Matthew 3:2**). People needed to **repent** and be converted because **the King and His Kingdom** was **already** present. The Greek word for **come**, *engiken*, is in the perfect tense and points to the fact that **the Kingdom** is **already** present, not merely still on the way. In **Mark 1:15** the same phrase is used when **Jesus** announces **the Good News**, also in the perfect tense: **The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the Good News**. The present reality of **the Kingdom** is further supported when **Mattityahu** tells us that **the ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire** (**Matthew 3:10**).

Some modern commentators have questioned **Mattityahu's** use of the term **the Kingdom of heaven**. Some even wonder if **Matthew's** speaking of a different, spiritual **kingdom** verses the earthly **kingdom (Kingdom of God)** alluded to by the other gospel writers. From **Matthew's** perspective, the answer is rather simple. As a traditional Jew writing to a Jewish audience, it would be common to avoid pronouncing or writing the holy name of **God (YHVH)**. **As the Talmud clarifies, "In the Sanctuary the Name was pronounced as written, but beyond its confines a substituted Name was employed" (Tractate Sotah VII.6)**. A solution still common today in the Jewish community is to use substitute terms for **YHVH** such as **ADONAI (LORD)** or **HaShem (the Name)**. **In the Talmudic writings we often find the word *shamayim* or heavens as a substitute for the name of God since it refers to the entire universe that He has created.** When **Matthew** uses the term **Kingdom of Heaven**, then, he is not speaking of a different **Kingdom** but simply using a very Jewish way of referring to **the Creator**.

For the Jewish mind of the first century the expression the Kingdom of heaven was the equivalent for a personal acknowledgement of God. That meant, first, taking upon oneself "the yoke of the Kingdom," and then, as a result, the commandments. Accordingly, the prayer: Sh'ma, Yisra'el adonai elohenu, adonai echad, or Hear Isra'el the Lord [is] our God, the Lord alone (Deuteronomy 6:4a)²²⁷ comes before the admonition of Deuteronomy 11:13: So . . . listen carefully to my mitzvot [commandments] which I am giving you today, [and] love ADONAI your God and serve Him with all your heart and all your being. And in this sense, the repetition of the **Sh'ma** today is itself often seen by Orthodox Jews as taking upon oneself "**the yoke of the Kingdom.**" Similarly, the putting on of phylacteries, and the washing of hands (see **Ei - The Oral Law**), are also seen as taking upon oneself "**the yoke of the Kingdom of heaven.**"²²⁸

Yochanan was a man who lived his message, but his desire was not have everyone live as he did. He didn't call anyone, including the apostles, to do so. But his manner of living was a vivid reminder of the many loves and pleasures that kept people from exchanging their own ways for **ADONAI's**.

The secondary title given to him is **the Baptist**, not because he was a member of the Baptist denomination, but because he was the one who performed ritual baptisms or immersions within the context of Judaism. In Hebrew he is called **the Immerser** or *ha-matbil*, which the Greeks called *baptidzo*, meaning to *totally immerse or dip*. In secular usage, the term is often used to describe the process of dipping a piece of cloth in a dye in order to change its appearance. Perhaps the best word is *identification*, as the cloth would then be identified with the color of the dye. This gives us the meaning of immersion. Baptism is a complete immersion to identify with a particular event of message. Certainly **the Jordan**

River would serve as a kosher place to baptize **Yeshua**, as it would have more than the minimal requirements of fresh water.

There need not be a debate about what kind of **baptism Yochanan** used. Gentile converts were immersed in a *mikveh*, literally meaning *any gathering of waters*. It was used in Jewish law for ritual immersion. **The rabbis taught that immersion was required of both men and women when converting to Judaism. The Jewish baptism candidates were often immersed three times because the word mikveh occurs three times in the Torah.** The idea of total immersion comes from **Leviticus 15:16 (CJB)** where it says: **If a man has a seminal emission, he is to bathe his entire body in water; he will be unclean until evening. The concept of immersion in rabbinic literature referred to a new birth (Yeb. 22a; 48b; 97b; Mass. Ger. c.ii).**²²⁹

As if to prove the point that **John** was not speaking of a different **Kingdom** or a new religion, the Gospel writers quote a prophecy well known by the Jews that there would come one who would prepare the way for the **Mesiah**. **It is written (Mark 1:2a)**, or *gegraptai*, is in the perfect tense, speaking of an act completed in the past, but having continuing results. It is used here to emphasize the fact that the TaNaKh was not merely handed down from generation to generation to the first century, but that it was a permanent record of what **God** said. It is, in the language of the Psalmist, **forever settled in heaven (Psalm 119:89 ASV).**²³⁰

Isaiah the prophet said: **I will send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way (Mark 1:2b).** This is why the New Covenant affirms elsewhere that **John** fulfilled the prophetic ministry of the latter-day **Elijah**, who would usher in the last days (see my commentary on **Revelation Bw - See, I Will Send You the Prophet Elijah Before That Great and Dreadful day of the LORD Comes**). His message was effective because **he** told **people** what in **their** hearts **they** knew, and **he** brought **them** what in the depths of **their** souls they were waiting for. **The rabbis taught that if Isra'el would keep the Torah perfectly for one day the kingdom of God would come.** When **John** summoned **people** to repentance **he** was confronting **them** with a choice and a decision that **they** knew in **their** heart of hearts **they** needed to make.²³¹

A voice; there is no definite article in the Greek text. **John** claimed to be **a voice**, not *the voice*. The One for whom **he** made ready was the Son of **God**, the unique Son, Himself, very **God**. **Of one calling, boao**, meaning *to cry out loud to shout, to speak with a high, strong voice in the wilderness*. *Kaleo* in classic Greek meant *to cry out for a purpose*. But *boao* means *to shout out as an expression of feeling*. It came from the heart, and was addressed to the heart. **I am a voice shouting out in the wilderness in Judea. Make straight the**

way of the Lord (Yochanan 1:23). The One shouting out was ADONAI. John was His mouthpiece. Behind John's preaching to Isra'el was the infinite longing of the God of Isra'el for His chosen people (Isaiah 65:9).

Prepare the way for ADONAI, make straight paths for Him (Mattityahu 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). To make straight is a poetic way of saying, *make easier*. When a king traveled in the desert, workmen preceded him to clear debris and smooth out the roads to make his trip easier. Here, the leveling of the land and making straight paths for Yeshua is a figurative expression meaning the way of the Messiah would be made easier because of the large number of people who were ready to receive Jesus' message (Luke 1:17). The verb make is present imperative, issuing a command to be obeyed continuously. It should be a habit with Isra'el, a constant attitude, not a formal, abrupt welcome and that left at that! But a welcome that would extend on and on, a habitual welcome that would be the natural expression of the heart.

It was common to combine quotations from the prophets, this is a quote from Malachi 3:1 messenger introduced in Isaiah 40:3 and then in Isaiah 40:5 the messenger is identified with Elijah (see Ak - [The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold](#)) and Isaiah 40:3 the context is that the Jews are in Babylon and there is one who will prepare the way for ADONAI Himself to lead the people out of captivity. The quotation from Isaiah being the more important of the two. The preaching of Yochanan was very important to the early messianic community and it is pointed out on the onset that John came first (Acts 1:21-22; 10:37; 19:4).

Luke continues the quotation beyond the other two Gospel writers, saying: Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low, literally humbled. This refers to the humbling of the proud mentioned earlier in Luke 1:52 and later in Luke 14:11 and 18:14. The pictures in these verses should be seen a metaphors or images of repentance. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth (Luke 3:5). This may be an illusion to the corrupt generation, literally crooked, of Acts 2:40. Luke, like John, understood that repentance is part of the central core of the Good News. And all people will see God's salvation (Luke 3:6). This concept of the Gospel going to the farthest parts of the world because it is a universal message.²³²

John probably knew of the prophecies in Malachi and Isaiah because he dressed similar to Elijah the prophet (Second Kings 1:8). John wore clothing made of camel's hair (Matthew 3:4a; Mark 1:6a), which was the equivalent of the sackcloth worn by the prophets when they appeared in mourning with a message of judgment. John's very dress, food, and life-style were in themselves an indictment against the self-satisfied and self-

indulgent religious leaders in Jerusalem. This rough **clothing** seems to have been characteristic of a prophet (**Zechariah 13:4**). **John** did not come with the splendid waistband of the high priest (**Exodus 28:8**), but rather with a simple **leather belt around his waist**, which also reminds us of **Elijah (Second Kings 1:8)**. The actual identification of **John** with **Elijah** is not made by **Matthew** until **11:14**, but it is certainly also implied here.

But more important than that, **John** symbolizes the breaking of the centuries of prophetic silence recognized by the Jews themselves (First Maccabees 4:46, 9:27, 14:41). Here then is a new thing: a **voice** from **ADONAI** out of the silence, confirmed by its power and message, as well as by its unusual messenger. Prophecy appeared again in the midst of **Isra'el, the people of God**.²³³

John's lifestyle matched the ruggedness of his message. **Yochanan's** food was not that of a priest. The priests ate the flesh of the sacrifices. But **John** lived on what the wilderness provided, his food was locusts and wild honey (**Mattityahu 3:4b; Mark 1:6b**). Locusts could be eaten according to the *kashrut*, or dietary laws, as seen in **Leviticus 11:22**, and there is dialogue in the Talmud that is very specific about the characteristics of kosher and unkosher locusts (**CD 12:14-15; 11QTemple 48:3-5; Tractate Chullin 65a-66a**). Locusts were food for the poor in **Yeshua's** day. Bedouins cook and eat them to this day, as did the Jews of Yemen before Operation Flying Carpet removed that community to **Isra'el** in 1950. The wild honey mentioned here was probably date honey, because oases near Jericho are known for the production of dates both then and now, and bees do not live in the wilderness.²³⁴ His diet was compatible with that of a Nazirite. He lived simply - with only the barest essentials for life.

You don't have to be like the world to have an impact on the world. You don't have to be like the crowd to change the crowd. You don't have to lower yourself down to their level to lift them up to your level. Holiness doesn't seek to be odd. Holiness seeks to be like God. Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God (James 4:4).

This tells us that **Yochanan** lived outside the normal economic framework of the country so that he could be wholly devoted to his ministry. As a result, the multitudes were coming to **John**, repenting and being baptized by him in the **Jordan River**. By doing this, they were identifying with what the **Immerser** preached and preparing themselves for the imminent return of the **Messiah**.²³⁵

It is possible that **John the Baptist** was a Essene but we cannot be certain. It is likely that **Yochanan** came in contact with them. He certainly must have known of them. What influences they had on him are not known.²³⁶ The Essenes and the Qumran community

probably had their origin in the Hasidim of the Maccabean times. At the time of **Christ** they were zealous for the Torah and resisted the advance Hellenism. There were an extreme ascetic, communal society living as monks, pulling away from society and believing they were the true, holy Israel. They withdrew into their own communities, either within cities or in isolated sites, such as Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. There they awaited a coming apocalyptic war when they, as "the sons of light," would triumph over "the sons of darkness."²³⁷ Theologically they were even more legalistic than the Pharisees, and clearly **John** broke from legalism. So even if **he** had lived in the Qumran community at some point, when **he** was called to be a forerunner to **the Meshiach**, **he** withdrew to **the wilderness**.

The heart of **his** message was to **turn from your sins to God**. It is important to understand that **Yochanan** was not calling **Isra'el** to convert to a new religion but to **return (shuwb) to the source of their faith, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**. The problem in first century Judaism was not a faulty Torah or Temple service, but that so many Israelites had drifted away from a true spiritual relationship with **ADONAI** and replaced with a faulty man-made substitute (see **Ei - The Oral Law**).

He had a tremendous response to **his** ministry. **And so John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness**. The word **appeared** is a second aorist verb or *ginomai*, literally *to become*. It is used here of **John's** appearance on the stage of history, and used to show it was not some small current event, but an epoch, ushering in a new dispensation of **God's** dealing with mankind. **He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3)**.

In a sense, **John** had a **two-fold ministry of preparation**. First of all, **he** was preparing **the way**. That is clear from **Isaiah 40:3, prepare the way for ADONAI; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God**. The imagery is one of a royal procession and preparing a path for the king. But **Yochanan** not only **prepared a way for ADONAI**, **he** also **prepared a people for ADONAI**. Many of the people of **Isra'el** will **he** bring back to the Lord their God. **And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:16-17)**.

People went out to him. The verb, *ekporeuomai*, is in the imperfect tense that speaks to continuous action and shows the widespread character of the movement. What a picture it paints here. They kept on constantly going out to **John** a steady stream of **people from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan River (Matthew 3:5; Mark 1:5a)**. **Yerushalayim** is at least twenty miles from **the Yarden River** and about four thousand feet above it. It was hard going down the rugged Judean hills to **the Jordan** and

even harder coming back up. Normally, no exclusively ethical preacher, as the Jewish historian Josephus would have us believe Yochanan was (*Antiquities XVIII, 117.2*), could have attracted that kind of interest. But John was no ordinary preacher, and his back to **God** movement raised popular excitement to a fever pitch.²³⁸

His reputation spread through the southern part of Palestine, including the region of Perea across **the Jordan River**. **John 1:35-51** also speaks of Galileans among John's followers. The prepositional phrase **to him** indicates that those who came to Yochanan, came because of who **he** was and what **he** proclaimed. It was not a blind, indiscriminate movement of a mass of **people**, but the deliberate act of each one individually **confessing their sins**. Josephus mentioned that the number of people flocking to John were so numerous that Antipas, the ruler of Perea, worried that there might be a popular uprising.²³⁹

Confessing their sins (Matthew 3:6a). The Greek word for confess, *exomologeō*, means *agree with, admit, acknowledge, declare publically, literally, say the same thing*. In the case of **confessing one's sins**, one is *saying the same thing* about them that **God** says, acknowledging the deeds to be wrong, willing to declare publically one's sorrow, guilt and resolution to change. On Yom-Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, and other fast days, penitential prayers are recited that can help people who say them with sincere devotion to become more willing to admit their **sins** and *agree with God's* opinion of them.

The baptism was accompanied by confession. In any act of returning to **ADONAI**, confession must be made to three **people**. First, we must make a confession to ourselves. It is part of human nature that we shut our eyes to what we do not want to wish to see. For that very reason we tend to shut our eyes to our sins. There is no one harder to face than ourselves; and therefore, the first step to repentance and to a right relationship with **God** is to admit our own sin to ourselves. Secondly, we must make confession to those whom we have wronged. It will not be much use saying we are sorry to **the LORD** until we say we are sorry to those we have hurt, injured or grieved. The human barriers have to be taken away before the divine barriers can be removed. It is often true that confession to **HaShem** is easier than confession to other people. But there can be no forgiveness without humiliation. Thirdly, we must make confession to **ADONAI**. The end of pride is the beginning of forgiveness. When we say, "I have sinned," that gives **God** a chance to say, "I forgive." It is not the one who wants to meet **the LORD** on equal terms who discovers forgiveness, but the one who whispers through their tears: **God have mercy on me, a sinner (Luke 18:13b)**.²⁴⁰

Sins. We live in an age when many people do not know what **sin** is. The Bible tells us that **everyone who keeps sinning is violating Torah - indeed, sin is violation of Torah (First John 3:4)**. The Torah was given by **ADONAI** to **His people** to help them live a life that was both be in their own best interests as well as holy and pleasing to **Him**. In the so-called Age of Enlightenment, two or three centuries ago, the notion of moral relativism began to take a strangle hold in Western society. This led to a belief that the concept of sin didn't matter. They said there is no **sin**, only sicknesses, bad luck, mistakes or the working out of one's environmental, hereditary and biological input (western terminology) or of one's fate or karma (eastern terminology). This cultural relativism negates the biblical concept of **sin**.

The Scriptures devote many verses in explaining what **sin** is, what the penalty for sinning is, how we can avoid that penalty, how can have our **sins** forgiven, and live a holy life free from the power of **sin**, pleasing to **the LORD** and ourselves (**Romans 5:12-21**).²⁴¹ The Bible also explains how to **repent** of our sins: **If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word is not in our lives (First John 1:9)**.

They were continually baptized by him in the Jordan River, literally *placed in the river* (**Matthew 3:6b; Mark 1:5b**). But because **John** pointed his followers to **Yeshua** it wasn't long before **Yochanan** lost most of his following, just as **Jesus** would eventually lose most of **His**. **He** would receive the same reception that many of **God's** prophets received - **he** would be put to death. **Remember, what happens to the herald will happen to the King**. The world does not want to hear the voice of **ADONAI**, especially when that voice speaks of judgment. And **John's** message was very strong.²⁴²