

The Gospel According to Mark, 1:4-8

John's Preparation for the Coming of Jesus

“John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes one who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:4-8, ESV)

1. The Geography of John's Activity

The Gospel According to John narrates that some priests and Levites from Jerusalem were sent to interrogate John the Baptist (John 1:19). We are told, “These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing”¹ (John 1:28). “Across the Jordan” is a traditional phrase from the Old Testament that means “East Jordan, esp. the southern part”.² In the days of John the area was called “Perea” and administered by Herod Antipas.

When the Jerusalem delegation asked who he was, John³ replied, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said” (John 1:23). John was out in the wilderness to fulfill Isa. 40:3, to be the voice crying out (bellowing, not sobbing) to prepare for the coming of the LORD in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. “Across the Jordan” was also associated with the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel in Exodus-Numbers. There the people rebelled against their Redeemer and were confined to remain in the wilderness south and east of the Jordan for 40 years, until that generation returned to dust. It was also to the east of the Jordan, in Assyria and Babylonia, that the people of Israel and Judah were exiled for their continual wickedness. The location identified the people of Judea with their rebellious forefathers, which ties in with John's call to repentance. But it also evoked the grace of God, protecting and guiding His people through the wilderness by means of the “Angel” in whom was the name of the LORD (Ex 23:20), that they might dwell with Him in the land of promise. This ties in with John's preparation for the return of the Angel of the Covenant (cf. Mal 3:2, angel and messenger are the same word in Heb.) in the person of Jesus.

2. The Description of John

John is described as being “clothed with camel's hair” and wearing about his waist “a leather belt”. This is the description given in 2 Kings 1:8 of the prophet Elijah. Elijah was sent to the people of Israel at a time when the nation was spiritually at a low ebb. The nation had been swept up into the cult of Baal, the Phoenician storm and fertility god promoted by Ahaz's Tyrian wife Jezebel. Things seemed so bad that Elijah complained to God, “the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only am left, and they seek my life, to take it away” (1 Kings 19:14). Similarly, John began his ministry as a lone “voice” in the wilderness calling the nation to repentance.

At the birth of John, his father was told by the angel Gabriel that the child would one day “go before [the Lord God] in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17. For Malachi had written, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD” (Mal 4:5)). John was to fulfill this prophecy. As Jesus testified of John, “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and

if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come” (Matt 11:13-14). John was determined to look the part.

This new Elijah was commissioned to “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” (Mal 4:5; cf. Luke 1:17). In the context of Malachi this probably referred to specific sins of the people of God addressed by the prophet, interfaith marriages and rampant divorce (Mal 2:10-16). The basic idea was that a united community of faith and repentance must be prepared, dedicated to faithfully awaiting the coming of the Lord. The same holds true in the fulfillment in the gospels.

3. The Preparation

a. Preaching

According to Malachi 3 and 4, the coming of the Lord will result in a purifying judgment, and a separation of the wicked and righteous. Accordingly, John preached that repentance was needed. The kingdom of God was approaching, and those who would enter must be subjects of the King.

What was the spiritual state of the people of Judea at that time? In the Gospel According to Luke, the Baptist called the people a “brood of vipers” (3:7),⁴ people of the seed of the serpent of Genesis 3:14, 15. Many were complacent in the belief that the outward trappings of Jewish identity were enough to secure favor with God. But John told them the truth: “And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’” (Luke 3:8). The people needed the new heart promised through Ezekiel: “And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put in them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Eze. 11:19-20). Only through the grace of God could the people fulfill the call of the Baptist and escape the coming wrath: “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance ... Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3: 8, 9).

Calvin writes: “Though John, when he introduces the mention of the grace of God, exhorts men to repentance, yet it must not be forgotten, that repentance, not less than the inheritance of the heavenly kingdom, is the gift of God. As he freely pardons our sins, and delivers us, by his mercy, from the condemnation of eternal death, so also does he form us anew to his image, that we may live unto righteousness.”⁵

b. Baptism

Joined to the preaching of John was a baptism “of,” or signifying, “repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. This baptism, as John himself makes clear, anticipated the coming of the “mightier one” who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. The baptism of John was transitional and provisional.⁶ This is seen in the disciples Paul encountered in Ephesus in Acts 19:2 who had been baptized by John, but had not heard “whether the Holy Spirit was *given*.”⁷ Paul preached Christ to them, and “they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying” (19:5, 6).⁸

The Holy Spirit was active in John’s preaching and baptism; otherwise no one would have been able to believe or repent. But the Holy Spirit would not be given in full measure until the resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of the Lord Jesus. This was the difference in the Ephesian disciples of John between his baptism and the baptism of Jesus.

4. The Coming of the Lord

Putting together the prophecies from the Old Testament, we understand the humility of John before the Glory of Jesus. John was to prepare for the coming of the LORD (Isa 40:3), the Lord, the Angel of the Covenant (Mal. 3:1). This one was to baptize with, or “pour out” the Spirit of God (Joel 2:28), which work the prophet attributed to Yahweh. Again, the LORD says in His own voice through the prophet Ezekiel, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you ... And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Eze 36:25, 27). In the Coming of Jesus is the coming of Yahweh, the LORD Himself. He is our God Incarnate, who came to live for us, to die for us, to be raised for us, and to be enthroned for us. By baptizing His people in the Spirit, He united us to Himself and all that He has done for us.

Paul declares, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). We who have believed have already begun to live the life of the age to come. Like John the Baptist, we are to live to bear witness to the True Light, who “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:6-14), our Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer.

Notes

1. “Bethany” is adopted by all but a handful of modern translations because it is “the earliest and most widely attested reading” (Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, p.171). Other ancient Greek manuscripts have the name “Bethabara,” the reading which was adopted in the *Textus Receptus* (KJV, NKJV). The reading goes back to Origen of Alexandria. This prodigious 3rd century scholar stated that “almost all the copies” in his day read “Bethany,” and that “this appears to have been the reading from an earlier time” (From Origen’s Commentary on John in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IX*, p. 370-371). But the only Bethany he could locate was the one near Jerusalem in which Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha lived (John 11:1, 18). He could not locate any place with that name east of the Jordan in his travels through the Holy Land. He heard that there was a town named Bethabara in the right region, and that some claimed it was there that John baptized. And, as the name means “House of Preparation,” he thought Bethbara must be the right place. This is admitted even by the doughty defender of the *Textus Receptus*, John William Burgon: “...the influence of Origen may be traced...in the substitution of Bethabara (St. John i. 28) for Bethany...” (The Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels vindicated and Established, p. 166).
2. Kittel & Friedrich, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. VI*, p. 615.
3. The name “John” in Hebrew and Greek means “the LORD is gracious”.
4. In Matt. 3:7 the Pharisees and Sadducees are singled out for this criticism, but in Luke John addresses the whole people as a snake-brood.
5. Calvin, John. *Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. XVI: A Harmony of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, p. 180.
6. Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to St. Mark [Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, v. 2]*, p. 57.
7. So reads the American Standard Version (ASV) of 1901. There is no word in the original corresponding to the word “given” (thus the italics in the original). This should be understood as something of a paraphrase, trying to convey the sense of it. Cf. Paul Johnson’s commentary: “If they had been exposed to John’s teaching at all, they must have been aware of the existence of the Spirit of God (*Luke* 3:16). Probably their confession of ignorance means, ‘We have not heard that the Holy Spirit has come into people’s experience, as God promised he would in the last days.’ Similar wording in John 7:39 carries this significance: ‘The Spirit had not been given [literally, *was not yet*], because Jesus was not yet glorified’” (Paul Johnson, *Let’s Study Acts*, p.235). Also, I. Howard Marshall: “...the group’s comment simply means that they did not know that the Spirit had yet been given (cf. John 7:39)” (*Acts [Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, v. 5]*, p.365).
8. Why was it necessary to rebaptize the disciples of John? The apostle Andrew had been a disciple of John, and the apostle John has been traditionally thought to be the unnamed disciple in John 1:35-40, as he sometimes inserts himself anonymously into his narrative. And yet there is no mention of either of them being rebaptized. But the Baptist had pointed his disciples to Jesus when He began His public ministry, and these future apostles became His followers. Their faith had a precise object. Additionally, they were both present for the outpouring of the Spirit from the ascended Christ. The disciples Paul encountered, however, had never been disciples specifically of Jesus and were not part of the gathering at Pentecost, so they required further instruction as well as rebaptism in the Name. Certainly, the context infers a lack of specific knowledge on the part of the disciples as part of the deficiency.