

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Appearance of John the Immerser – The Kingdom Has Come Near

by Dan Trygg

“Now in those days John the Immerser came-alongside, proclaiming in the wilderness of Judea, saying, ‘Change-your-perception; for the Kingdom of the Heavens has-come-near!’” Matthew 3:1,2

Matthew gives us no **background about John** at all, nothing with which to explain who he was, or why he was so significant. This is because the Jewish-convert readers of his gospel would either already be very familiar with who John was, or could readily find out more. John was a national sensation for a brief period of time in the first century. From Luke 1 and 2, written to gentile (non-Jewish) readers, we find out more about his background. An angel had visited his elderly father to announce his coming birth, and to give him the name, John (“Yōannēs” meaning, “Yahweh is gracious”). From the time of this announcement, and the miraculous circumstances surrounding his birth, it was known that God had a special purpose for John. He was filled with the Holy Spirit while yet within his mother’s womb, and it was said that he would come in the spirit and power of Elijah the prophet to make ready the way for the Lord. After his birth, we are told nothing except that he “continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the wilderness places until the day of his appearance to Israel” (Lk. 1:80). Luke also gives us enough information to determine that John started his preaching ministry in 25 A.D., when he would have been about 30 years old. He just “showed up” one day, preaching his call to repentance.

How would someone start a preaching ministry in the wilderness? Who would be there to hear him, and why would they listen? To understand this, we need a little more background.

First, more than 400 years earlier, through the prophet Malachi, God had said He would send His messenger before He Himself would come, and this messenger would “clear the way before Me” (Mal. 3:1). Then, in the next chapter, **He indicated that He would send “Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord”**. His ministry would be to “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers”, so that the people would be able to avoid the curse of their sin (Mal. 4:5,6). This is how the OT ended, and from that time until John the Baptist there had been no confirmed prophet. However, **the Jews were looking for Elijah to return, to bring restoration to Israel and judgment to their enemies**. Even up to the present time, faithful Jews will leave an empty chair at their table at Passover time, and even open the door “for Elijah”, in a dramatic enactment of this hope. What is interesting is that the angel had spoken some very similar things about John. Although he was *not* Elijah, he was to come “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Lk. 1:17) and would be the one who would do the kinds of things spoken by Malachi. While the people who first heard John speak in the wilderness would not have known that, John himself undoubtedly did, and took steps to fulfill this calling.

This brings up the second reason why people paid attention when John made his appearance. He dressed and acted like Elijah the prophet. Elijah, who lived over 850 years earlier, was described as a “hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins” (2 Kg. 1:7,8). He, too, lived in the wilderness. So, when John began his ministry, he “appeared” in the wilderness dressed in a camel hair shirt (very hairy in appearance) and wearing a big, leather belt. The connection was obvious to everyone. Furthermore, he was an extremely dedicated man of God. His entire lifestyle screamed “holiness” to anyone who bothered to ask any questions about him. He lived in the wilderness, and had devoted his entire life to God. He had no other worldly aspirations, ...no business, no wife or family, ...even his diet testified to his extreme commitment. Having been instructed by the angel that he was never to drink wine or strong drink, John had gone even farther to live on the simplest of diets, living off locusts and tree sap (“wild honey” probably refers to tree sap, since this was abundantly available, and considered a less desirable food, while bee’s honey was expensive, and considered a delicacy.) He was an extreme ascetic, forgoing common pleasures and comforts in order to express his devotion to God. There was nothing about John to criticize, except the severity of his lifestyle (Matt. 11:18,19). There was no questioning his sincerity or credibility.

Third, he did not simply start preaching just anywhere, John stationed himself at the Jordan river, probably at one of the crossing points, or fords, where travelers would have to pass. As they came by, and had to slowly cross the river, John would be there to proclaim his message. These travelers, then, spread the report of his ministry to others. His popularity grew, until at its height, “Jerusalem, ...Judea, and all the district around the Jordan were going out to hear him” (Matt. 3:5).

Finally, the message itself was electrifying. John was declaring, “Repent! For the Kingdom of the heavens has come!” The draw was *not* the repentance portion. Street preachers calling sinners to repent were not any

more positively received in the first century than they are today. In fact, generally we misunderstand what John was preaching, because we read into it our perceptions of religious preachers of our day. We don't understand what "repentance" means from a Biblical perspective, nor do we grasp what the message that the "Kingdom of the heavens has come" would have meant to first century Jews. **The draw of John's message was: "the Kingdom has come near."**

John (and later Jesus) taught that repentance was in order *because* of the advent of the "Kingdom of the Heavens". In other words, the rationale for a change of mind and heart is the reality that something different has happened, or was about to happen. The Greek for "has come" or "has drawn near" is in the perfect tense, meaning that the action has happened and the result continues. Obviously, there is a huge difference in how you hear the term. Has it already come, or is it on the verge of coming? In either case, once here, it is here to stay. In light of the rest of John's message, he was clearly teaching that it "has come near", while Jesus later would clearly testify that in Him it "has come", as demonstrated by the miracles, or works of the Kingdom, He performed.

What about this "Kingdom of the Heavens"? This particular terminology is used only by Matthew, and was a concession to the Jewish aversion of speaking of God directly. The phrase occurs some 32 times in this gospel, while the term commonly employed by the other gospel writers, the "Kingdom of God" is only used 4 times by Matthew (12:28; 19:24; 21:31,41), where it is employed for special emphasis or contrast. **The concept of the Kingdom is the central teaching of Jesus in the synoptic gospels, yet somehow we have lost that emphasis in our perception of what Jesus and His followers are all about.**

The background of this concept goes back to Daniel 2:44, where the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream declared that four great kingdoms would arise (Nebuchadnezzar's being the first), and **in the days of that fourth kingdom, "...the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever."** Historically, the kingdom of Babylon had fallen, and three more had risen, the Medio-Persian empire, the Greek empire under Alexander the Great and his followers, and now the Roman empire. **If this prophecy was to be fulfilled, the time was ripe.** (Incidentally, if Jesus was *not* the Son of God, the Messianic King, then the time for this fulfillment has passed by, since the Roman empire is no more. Instead, while these political kingdoms have passed away, those who have acknowledged Jesus as their King have spread throughout the world and continue to grow and influence humankind in every sphere.)

You can imagine the impact of this teaching upon a people oppressed by political tyrants, such as the Herods and the Romans! People of faith would have gained new hope. The hearts of people would be turned once again to God, as they looked to Him for deliverance. The political zealots would have heard in the Immerser's words a justification for their insurgent attitudes. The politically powerful, ...those with wealth, and position, ...especially those whose fortunes were tied to the Roman or Herodian power-base..., would have been alarmed at John's words, and certainly would have come to investigate what was really being taught (3:7).

Most everyone was hearing that God was going to kick the Romans out. Yet, *John never says that*, or anything that sounds remotely like that. **What John was teaching was that God's Kingdom is drawing near, and He is coming to clean house!** John said *nothing* about the Romans, ...but he had *plenty* to say about the need for people to align with the Coming King. (This is exactly what the magi of the previous chapter had done nearly thirty years before.) While some of the Jews were looking for national freedom, John was preaching the "great and terrible day of the Lord" (Mal. 3:5). **He sought to get his hearers to face their own need for change.** He warned of the "wrath to come" (Matt. 3:7), and how the One who would be coming after Him would have a winnowing fork in His hand to sort out the good wheat from the chaff. **There was no "wobble room" with John. He told it like it was, pulling no punches. God is ready to judge His people.** The axe is laid at the root of the tree, ready to cut it down for its fruitlessness (vs. 10). (This idea of producing good fruit, first introduced by John, is a favorite theme of Matthew's, one he emphasizes again and again throughout the book.)

This brings us to repentance. **What is the Biblical meaning of repentance?** The Greek word is a compound word, meaning to "change one's perception". Repentance, then, means to **readjust your outlook on life**. It refers to a paradigm shift, where the reality of God as King takes center stage in your life, and everything else finds realignment with Him. **The Eastern mind was holistic. Therefore, they saw that a change in perception would also mean a change in behavior.** Northern Europeans, affected by the Greek culture and way of thinking, tend to compartmentalize things. Thus, we tend to say we believe something is true, yet live in contradiction of that truth in our lives. That is self-deceptive, ...a false imitation for true, Biblical repentance and faith. **Repentance is acknowledging that God is King, and determining to adjust your entire life to honor Him. Anything less is not real.**

The first word of the gospel message is "Repent." You can't come to saving faith without passing through the paradigm shift known as repentance. Note that it is *not* primarily an emotional event. **It is a perspective change that affects the entire person.** It can be emotional, but **God is looking for a commitment of will, not a purge of passion.**