

“Truth In Love Impacts Troubled Souls”

Matthew 3:5-6

May 5, 2024

- INTRO:** When you were growing up were there any words you had an exceptionally difficult time saying?
- For me... “aluminum” & “breakfast” gave me fits...
 - I’ll always remember: “laster-day” & “lell-low”
 - When learning new languages... even worse...

PRAYER

CONTEXT:

- The Gospel of Matthew series: mMm
- Matthew chapters 1 & 2
- **John the Baptist** in ch.3
- One of the early & obvious themes: *“Troubling”*
- Today: *“Truth In Love Attracts Troubled Souls”*

BIG IDEA: Truth in love
impacts troubled souls!

(Truth in love either attracts or attacks troubled souls.)

PREVIEW:

1). First; 2). Then; 3). ALL; 4). And; 5). Us

T/S:

Isaiah 55:10-11

As the rain & snow come down from heaven, & do not return to it without watering the earth & making it bud & flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower & bread for the eater, so will My Word be which goes out of My mouth; It will not return to Me empty/void, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

TEXT:

I. FIRST

- *First things first... start at the beginning.*
- *Let's go back to John's introduction...*
- *Remember... vv.5-6 build on vv.1-4...*

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

¹In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ²"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

³For 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 paths straight.'"*

⁴Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

- We just jumped ~30 years from the end of ch.2
- See... *Who? What? Where? When? Why? & How?*
- **Truth is a troubling contrast to expectations.**
- John the Baptist & Jesus The Christ are shocking!

Zechariah 13:4 = false prophets
dressed like prophets to deceive people.

II. **THEN**

⁵**Then** Jerusalem & all Judea & all the region about the Jordan were going out to him

- Pay attention: "*then*" = **chronological transition**
- Do not miss the ORDER... *this, THEN, that...*
 - What came first? **A:** Preaching repentance!
 - What was result? **A:** *Diverse people came!*
 - **Who came?**
 - **What did they come to?**
 - **Where did they come from?**
 - **When (after what) did they come?**
 - **Why did they come?**
 - **How did they come?**

III. **ALL**

⁵Then (all) Jerusalem & all Judea & all the region about the Jordan were going out to him

i. “(ALL) Jerusalem”

VIDEO: Jerusalem per Matthew 3

ii. “and ALL Judea”

iii. “and ALL the REGION about/beyond the Jordan”

Winding down the difficult but well-traveled eastern descent from Jerusalem to Jericho, the ancient road follows a continuous ridgeline that traces south of the Wadi Qelt as it cuts deep canyons into the soft limestone. This route descends nearly four thousand feet (1219 m) in elevation over fifteen miles (twenty-four km) as it plunges into the depths of the Rift Valley. The surrounding countryside, known as the Judean Wilderness, is exceedingly inhospitable due to its rugged terrain, poor soil, and arid conditions. Lying under a rain shadow, only the sparsest of desert vegetation is possible, springs are exceedingly rare, and apart from a few hardy shepherds and their flocks, the region is incapable of sustaining life. As a result, this is an empty land, “formless and void,” and few but the travelers making the necessary trek between Jerusalem and Jericho would venture out into this rugged wasteland of pale chalky hills and deep ravines.

- Geographic Commentary On The Gospels

iv. “(ALL) going out”

1. Out of Jerusalem
2. Out of the synagogues
3. Out of the empty religious rituals
4. Out of the “civilized”
5. Only “*going out*” because *John did first!*

v. ***“to him/John the Baptist”***

1. Last O.T. prophet & first N.T. evangelist!
2. The unlikely and unorthodox
3. The contrast... The Christ-like...

Don't miss the obvious AND the missional...

See the parallels between **3:3** & 28:18-20

Don't miss the designated ALL's...

1. Here, there, & everywhere...
2. *ALL authority, ALL nations, ALL commands*
3. *“I will be with you ALL-WAYS...”*

VIDEO: *Judean Wilderness per Matthew 3*

IV. *AND*

6 *and*

- Conjunction... “wait, there’s more...”
- John wasn’t “just” preaching repentance...
- The people didn’t just come to hear...

By definition, “and” is a conjunction which always indicates that there is more...

In this case, the “and” helps us to better understand:

- ~ The motive of those who were “going out to see John the Baptist,”
- ~ The message of John the Baptist
- ~ The ministry of John the Baptist
 - Glorifying God
 - Leading others to repent
 - Practicing what he preaches
 - Contrasting dead ritualism
 - Declaring God’s true Word
 - Exposing venomous hypocrisy
 - Baptizing professing followers

they

- There are a number of things worth noting here:

➤ **“they”** =

- Broad & sweeping implications...
- Parallels **“whosoever”** in **John 3:16**
- **Luke 3:7** = *tax collectors; soldiers; unlikely’s*
- **“they”** connects to “all” & each location(s)
- Holy hyperbole... missional magnification...

were baptized

Don't miss God's repeated use of water **with sin**

- *The Flood*
- *The Red Sea parting/passing*
- *The Jordan River crossing*
- *2nd Kings 5:10-12 (Naaman's cleansing)*
- *John's baptism of repentance*

IMPORTANT: That those Jews submitted to **being baptized** was more than a little significant, because that was not a traditional Jewish ceremony.

That act symbolized before the world that they realized their national and racial descent, or even their calling as God's chosen and covenant people, could not save them. They had to repent, forsake sin, and trust in the Lord for salvation...

They had to come into the kingdom just like the Gentiles, through repentance and faith—which included a public admission of sins (cf. **the same Greek term [exomologeō] in Phil. 2:11, where it refers to a verbal confession**).

We know from subsequent accounts in the gospels that many of those acts of repentance must have been superficial and hypocritical, because John soon lost much of his following, just as Jesus would eventually lose most of His popularity. But the impact of John's ministry on the Jewish people was profound and unforgettable. The way of the King had been announced to them, and they had no excuse for not being ready for His coming.
(Geographic Commentary On The Gospels)

- NOT... Mikveh “ceremonial cleansing”
- NOT... Proselyte “conversion baptism”
- BUT... John the Baptist’s “bridging baptism”
- SEE... Christ’s upcoming baptism...
- SEE... Biblical “Christian baptism”
 - **IS...**
 - **Is NOT...**

by him... significance of “**by him**” is “**NOT them**”

in the river Jordan,

- **Moving water is mirrored in the mikvah**
- See the aggregate symbolism here...
- **Think about taking in the 5th Gospel...**
 - Water has been a cleansing symbol...
 - Flood
 - Red Sea
 - Exodus crossing of the Jordan
 - Here we are again...
 - Soon we will meet the Living Water

Confessing

Confession of sin was commanded in the law, not only as part of a priest's duties (Lev 16:21), but as an individual responsibility for wrongs done (Leviticus 5:5; 26:40; Num 5:6-7...)

Proverbs 28:13

Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses & forsakes them will obtain mercy.

**In Israel's better days this was carried out
(Neh 9:2-3; Ps 32:5).**

- Confession is the fruit of grace & realization.-JDP
- NO confession, NO realization.
- NO confession, NO repentance.
- NO repentance, NO restoration/redemption.
- *Superficial confession, superficial repentance.*
- *Superficial repentance, superficial restoration.*
- **Fake confession, Fake repentance.**
- *Fake repentance, Fake restoration/redemption.*

their = Individual... National... Inspirational!

sins.

Sin is any action or attitude... anything & everything... that goes against God's Word, will, and ways.

Faith is not faith until it is obedient.

- JDP

And obedience is not obedience until it is faithful obedience.

- JDP

V. *US*

“Before God can deliver us,
we must undeceive ourselves.”

– *Augustine*

i. Clarity

A school girl was asked who she was before she got saved... she said: “a sinner.”

She is then asked... who are you now?
She answered: “a sinner.”

She is then asked... what’s the difference?
She replied:
“I used to be a sinner running TO sin.”
“Today, I’m a sinner running FROM sin.”

ii. Comprehensiveness

People think they can have Christ as Savior,
without embracing His Lordship.

They are convinced that He can be their King but they do not need to serve Him...

They think that if they simply call Him Lord, they need not surrender to His Lordship.

They are King-less, cross-less, Christ-less christians... which means they are oxymorons.

Too many in church think they can be Christians without actually surrendering to Christ.

Many, most, the vast majority who claim to love Christ never change and live like Christ...

Micky Cowen – famous gangster, heard a Beverly Hills revival message from Billy Graham... Micky “expressed interest” and “Billy Graham (and others) spoke with him, further explained, and started discipling Micky.

Only when Micky heard the Messiah’s koinonia-offering promise in Revelation 3:20 did he commit to changing... BUT... after it was clear that his priorities & patterns were, for the most part, continuing on unchanged. His life showed not signs or fruit of repentance

Micky was lovingly rebuked by those who were trying to pour into him.

Sadly... tragically... Micky revealed that he personally aligned with what many, most... in fact the vast majority of church-goers believe... that he didn't need to stop being a gangster in order to in God's family.

"You didn't say I'd have to give up my work!"

"You didn't say I'd have to give up my friends!"

He had heard that so-and-so what a "Christian cowboy" and so-and-so was a "Christian actress" and so-and-so was a "Christian Senator" - - - and Micky, therefore, actually believed he could be a "Christian gangster."

Friends, there is NO Christianity without biblical repentance! (Mark 1:15)

Biblical repentance is a Head, Heart, & Hands transformation. Anything less is less than biblical repentance! - JDP

iii. Completeness

There is an eternal difference between supernatural repentance & superficial remorse.

Simply saying "sorry" does not save.

REVIEW:

- *First*
- *Then*
- *All*
- *And*
- *Us*

CLOSE:

John's message has an apocalyptic flavor...

John's call to repentance is framed as a necessary preparation in light of a coming judgment, stating that "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 3:2). Also known as the Day of the Lord

Though most people were focused on Rome as the enemy, when John preached the imminent advent of YHWH, he indicated that many in Israel would also stand condemned.

It is through here (the Judean Wilderness) that Joshua first brought the Israelites into the land of promise, that Elijah ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot and Elisha received a double portion of his prophetic spirit...

John's message was not merely one of apocalyptic doom, but ultimately one of hope and rebirth, imagery again drawn out of the wilderness in which he dwelt.

the wilderness is not just a region of death, but holds hope for new life.

Additionally, on the anticipated Day of the Lord, life is imagined breaking forth in the wilderness in the form of springs and vegetation as the spirit of God returns from the east to restore his people (Isa 32:15–16; 41:18–19; 43:19–20; Jer 31:2; Zech 14:4; Isa 41:2; Bar 5:5–7; Ezek 43:2–4).

In it, one can imagine the Rift Valley lifted and the hills of the Judean wilderness smoothed as the well-known road from Jericho becomes a wide, level avenue leading YHWH to Jerusalem.

John was preparing a holy people for YHWH's return.

A new, obedient Israel was being born.
Such a message was bound to create enemies...

VIDEO: *John the Baptist per Matthew 3*

For some...

this was thrillingly momentous, so John drew a wide following, eager to participate. However, for others, an overthrow of the current system would be less desirable, so John also made enemies who feared his prophetic acts might shift the balance—and not in their favor.

According to John, those who repent and bear fruit in accordance with that repentance are the true children of Abraham.

They are the Israel whom God will redeem.

And what better place to call out and give birth to a renewed Israel than at the place where Israel took its first steps toward nationhood, at the border of the promised land, east of Jericho.

ILLUSTRATION:

A child struggling with the pronunciation of the letter “R” is given an assignment to help them develop better diction... (better accuracy and clarity of speech/sound)... The teacher said: Practice saying the following sentence:

*“Robert gave Richard a rap in the ribs
for roasting the rabbit too rare.”*

At the next session the child offered the following:

*“Bob gave Dick a poke in the side for not
cooking the bunny enough.”*

DON'T RUN AWAY FROM GOD'S BIBLICAL R's!

1. **Realize** (Creator, creation, corruption)
2. **Remember**, we're **Rotten**
3. **Righteous** standards (Word, will, ways – 2 Timothy 3:16-17)
4. We all need a new **Relationship**
5. We all need **Restoration**
6. That's why we **Repent**
7. **Redemption!** (Redeemer & His redeemed – a.k.a. family/Church)

PRAYER

WORSHIP:

*Dash;
(Ponder)*

*Even In Exile;
(Promise)*

*God Turn This Thing Around
(Prayer)*

Research Study Notes:

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

¹In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³For 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 paths straight.’”

⁴Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But 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? ⁸Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹And 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. ¹⁰Even 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.

Geographic Commentary On The Gospels:

MINISTRY IN THE WILDERNESS

Matt 3:1–12; Luke 3:1–20

Aubrey L. Taylor

KEY POINTS

- The ministry of John the Baptist was located in the wilderness near Bethany beyond the Jordan.
- This land was rugged and empty, but it was filled with symbolism.
- The wilderness paradoxically symbolizes chaos and distance from God, as well as a place for God to create new life and order.

- In the wilderness God created a people and bound them to himself, laying a foundation for the future nation.
- John likely believed he was initiating God's return by enacting prophetic passages in a literal way within the wilderness.

SETTING THE SCENE FOR JOHN'S MINISTRY

Winding down the difficult but well-traveled eastern descent from Jerusalem to Jericho, the ancient road follows a continuous ridgeline that traces south of the Wadi Qelt as it cuts deep canyons into the soft limestone. This route descends nearly four thousand feet (1219 m) in elevation over fifteen miles (twenty-four km) as it plunges into the depths of the Rift Valley. The surrounding countryside, known as the Judean Wilderness, is exceedingly inhospitable due to its rugged terrain, poor soil, and arid conditions. Lying under a rain shadow, only the sparsest of desert vegetation is possible, springs are exceedingly rare, and apart from a few hardy shepherds and their flocks, the region is incapable of sustaining life. As a result, this is an empty land, "formless and void," and few but the travelers making the necessary trek between Jerusalem and Jericho would venture out into this rugged wasteland of pale chalky hills and deep ravines.

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Judean Wilderness

Jerusalem itself stands at the crest of the Judean Hill Country, overlooking this local desert, but also

shielded from it by the Mount of Olives range. Isolated in the hills, the unlikely capital city has few connections to the outside world, and those that do exist are critical. Though unappealing, the Jericho road represents Jerusalem's only direct route eastward. And Jericho itself holds many important connections to the larger world that a capital city like Jerusalem must control for both prosperity and security.

Other routes from Jericho westward connect to the Benjamin Plateau and the coastal highway beyond—the main route for international trade and traffic through the land of Israel, connecting to Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Phoenician ports. To the east, Jericho aligns with one of four primary Jordan River fording points and provides access up onto the Madaba Plateau and thus the King's Highway, another critical international artery, which traces north-south along the watershed of the Transjordan, connecting Arabia with Damascus.

It is through here that Joshua first brought the Israelites into the land of promise, that Elijah ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot and Elisha received a double portion of his prophetic spirit, and it is here that we begin our search for not only the location of John's ministry, but also the complex meanings associated with a prophet in these unusual and desolate surroundings.

THE LOCATION OF JOHN'S MINISTRY

Geographical markers for the ministry of John the Baptist are both plentiful and vague. Matthew 3:1–6 places John in the “wilderness (*erēmos*, ἔρημος) of Judea” and along the Jordan River, with people coming to him from “Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.” Mark 1:4 simply locates him in the “wilderness,” but with a similar contingent of followers from “the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” coming out to him at the Jordan River.

Luke 3:2–3 indicates that John may be found both in the “wilderness” and in “all the country around the Jordan.”

Only the Gospel of John offers precise toponyms, placing John at Bethany beyond the Jordan (Bēthania ... peran tou Iordanou; John 1:28) and at Aenon near Salim (Ainōn engys tou Saleim; John 3:23). These locations are not without difficulty, however, as their exact locations are unknown, and there are several possible candidates for both.

Aenon, meaning “spring,” is likely near either the Salim by ancient Shechem (associated today with the Arab village *Salim*, within the political district of Samaria, or at *Umm el-'Umdan*, eight miles south of Scythopolis [ancient Beth Shean]). The latter lies within the Decapolis and along the Jordan Valley, in association with another significant Jordan River ford. It is this northern option that is most often preferred, fitting as it does within John's Jordan Valley scope, and perhaps also serving to position him outside of Herod Antipas' territory at a time when John's criticism of this ruler had begun to place him in danger.

The location of Bethany beyond the Jordan has also been widely debated. However, based upon the geographical details provided by the Gospel writers related to John's association with the wilderness and about the places his audience came from, it is perhaps most convincingly sought along the eastern banks of the Jordan River, just north of the Dead Sea. Near the Judean Wilderness and accessible to those coming from Jerusalem and Judea, long standing church tradition places John's ministry in proximity to the ford opposite Jericho, and both banks claim association. The “beyond Jordan” suffix strongly indicates that the eastern bank was intended, placing John in the political district of Perea.⁵ The current consensus is that—though any archeological evidence has long since been erased by shifting water courses, and the precise location may never be found—Bethany beyond the Jordan is most likely located within proximity to the Hajlah ford and the mouth of Wadi el-Kharrar. **It is in this region that we place, if not the entirety of John's ministry, at least those most significant moments recorded in our Gospel accounts.**

REASONS FOR MINISTERING FROM THIS LOCATION

Thus, we may begin to ask ourselves why? **Why would John have chosen to locate his ministry here?**

First, there may be some very practical reasons for John's location. **The Jordan River itself offers the running water necessary for ritual immersion as defined by rabbinic law.** Additionally, both the location near Salim and that of our proposed Bethany lie along important east-west crossroads that would have carried significant traffic in John's day. The ford across from Jericho connected Livias, the capital of Perea, to Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. **Such a location afforded any would-be prophet a ready audience, and the larger network of trade and travel would soon spread the word, attracting people from the surrounding regions.**

Luke 3:7 indicates that crowds had gathered to be baptized by John, including tax collectors and soldiers, and Matt 3:7 mentions religious authorities in his list—just the sort of people likely to travel an important road such as this.

However, likely much more significant to John's choice of location is the potent symbolism evoked by associating himself with the wilderness and, in particular, with this southernmost fording point along the Jordan River. These associations then reflexively bolster the identification of this site as the mostly likely location for his ministry.

1. Provided the right type of water for baptism
2. Provided heavy foot traffic and high exposure
3. Imbued with powerful symbolism

The wilderness has ambivalent symbolism, both in the Hebrew Bible and in the larger ancient world. Cosmological constructs often depicted the created order as a central disk of land, emerging from primordial waters, with the temple of the supreme deity at its center. This land disk was surrounded by the forces of chaos, "un-created" and unlivable regions, often represented by water and desert, far from God's presence and sometimes linked with the underworld. From this, associations develop in which bodies of water and unsettled, inhospitable wilderness regions in the literal landscape become symbols for their cosmic counterparts and accrue similar connotations. They are liminal zones, unclean places, apart from the land of the living, and perhaps apart from the Creator God (see infographic "Ancient Hebrew Conception of the Universe" on pg. 529).

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Interactive: Ancient Hebrew Conception of the Universe

“

*A priest and a prophet, he
has forsaken his role in the
temple, the very center of
the created order, to take
up residence in the God-
forsaken wilderness.*

Drawing on this imagery, ***John's position in the wilderness is then a striking statement.*** Likely raised to take his place among the priesthood (see Luke 1:5–13),

1. John has left behind the accepted dwelling place of God and positioned himself instead along the periphery.
2. A priest and a prophet, he has forsaken his role in the temple, the very center of the created order, to take up residence in the God-forsaken wilderness.
3. This is the world upside-down, and it delivers a subversive critique of the Jerusalem elite and the temple establishment, suggesting that YHWH can no longer be found in the center. If this is an accurate interpretation of John's position vis-à-vis the temple, he was not alone. Many of his contemporaries believed the temple establishment was corrupt beyond redemption and it was time for a radical step toward renewal.
4. John's actions suggest he may have agreed with this perspective, as he drew attention away from the routine of the temple and refocused his audience on the spirit of God's law or Torah.

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Bethany beyond the Jordan (north and south)

In line with this,

5. John's message has an apocalyptic flavor that resonated both with the frustrated expectations of his day and with the larger prophetic canon. **John's call to repentance is framed as a necessary preparation in light of a coming judgment, stating that "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 3:2). Also known as the Day of the Lord within the Hebrew Bible, it is an eschatological concept with a range of meanings.** Generally...

- a. **It anticipated YHWH's judgment upon his enemies and...**
- b. **The reestablishment of Israel.**
- c. **He would then return and fill his temple, ruling over a restored creation.**
- d. **There are also passages that suggest Israel, too, will face judgment and those who have lived in disobedience to God will not be part of the renewed Israel.**

In the first century AD, these ideas held particular potency in light of what seemed to many to be the ongoing state of exile in which they lived. The exile itself was seen as a just punishment for national sin—**God's people had failed to follow Torah and had thus broken their covenant with God. Passages such as Isa 41, Mic 4:1–4, Hag 2:4–9, and Zech 8:1–15 had encouraged the returning exiles with hopeful visions of God's future forgiveness and the ascendancy of Israel.**

However, the expected restoration had not come; instead, Roman occupation and priestly corruption were constant indicators that Israel was still at odds with God. Speculation abounded regarding when and how God might finally act to redeem his people and fulfill his promises. ***Though most people were focused on Rome as the enemy, when John preached the imminent advent of***

YHWH, he indicated that many in Israel would also stand condemned.

However....

John's message was not merely one of apocalyptic doom, but ultimately one of hope and rebirth, imagery again drawn out of the wilderness in which he dwelt.

“*In the wilderness, YHWH*”
created a people and bound them to himself, laying a foundation for the future nation.

Just as the wilderness can, through its affinity with the concept of the uncreated or chaotic periphery, acquire negative associations, so too can it attain positive associations.

The “formless and void” quality on the outskirts of the created order represents, not just chaos, but also the potency of pre-creation, the potential available within the, as yet, unordered.

As such...

the wilderness is not just a region of death, but holds hope for new life.

Coupled with Israel's memory of the exodus, it is this imagery that makes John's actions comprehensible within the

larger traditions of Israel. Passages such as Jer 2:1–8, Hos 2:14–23, and Deut 32:8–14 recall Israel’s formative wilderness experience following the exodus from Egypt as an ideal time in which Israel dwelt in an utterly reliant state with their God and he faithfully met their needs and dwelt in their midst.

In the wilderness, YHWH created a people and bound them to himself, laying a foundation for the future nation. Though, in actuality, not a perfect time in Israel’s history, it was recalled with fondness in the years leading up to the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, as spiritual compromises had begun to take their toll on the hearts and souls of Israel’s leaders.

There was a sense that Israel needed to return to this simple and dependent state in an act of recreation and thus reinvigorate their faith and live their calling.

The wilderness became a symbol for spiritual renewal, and in John’s day, his position within the wilderness would have been a comprehensible reference to this tradition within prophetic literature.

Additionally, on the anticipated Day of the Lord, life is imagined breaking forth in the wilderness in the form of springs and vegetation as the spirit of God returns from the east to restore his people (Isa 32:15–16; 41:18–19; 43:19–20; Jer 31:2; Zech 14:4; Isa 41:2; Bar 5:5–7; Ezek 43:2–4).

Isaiah 40:3–5, uniformly associated with John’s ministry by the Gospel writers, states: A voice cries out: *“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

In it, one can imagine the Rift Valley lifted and the hills of the Judean wilderness smoothed as the well-known road from Jericho becomes a wide, level avenue leading YHWH to Jerusalem.

Employing this passage, the Gospel writers indicate they believed that John's ministry was preparing the way for YHWH's return, and John's own message indicates that he saw himself in this role.

His choice to, in many ways, literally enact these passages in the landscape refers to current expectations as well as biblical tradition. **The associations drawn between John and Elijah have similar intent. Malachi 4:5–6 states that the prophet Elijah will be sent prior to the Day of the Lord, in order to prepare Israel before God's return and thus divert his wrath.**

The few examples we have of **John's specific teachings** indicate that he, like many prophets before him, understood this preparation required a return to God through obedience to Torah, which would manifest itself in righteous living.

Choosing to stage his ministry in the very wilderness from which these hopeful images emerge would have communicated the immediacy and intent of his message in ways that words could not have.

JOHN'S METHOD AND MESSAGE

Uniquely, John's call appears to have been meant for everyone, even those in professions often thought

irredeemable. This is one way in which John critically differs from the Essenes, who maintained an exclusive community and claimed God's future redemption for themselves alone. Though in many ways similar to the Essenes—both left Jerusalem for the wilderness, both are critical of the current temple establishment, and both perform unique ritual immersions—it is perhaps better to see the similarities as evidence that they shared a common spiritual heritage. Rather, given what John considered the crucial historical moment in which they dwelt, **he called all Israel to consider their relationship with God and their fellow man, and to make whatever corrections were necessary in order to be found righteous in the coming day of judgment and therefore included in the redeemed Israel.**

“ *By enacting these prophetic passages in a literal way within the literal landscape, John likely believed he was actively initiating YHWH's return.* ”

Indeed, it has been suggested that in the first century AD a renewed obedience to Torah might have been expected to initiate the return of YHWH and bring an end to exile. **John's call to repentance, though certainly individual in many ways, should likely still be understood in light of the larger concerns over the corporate sins that had led to the exile and the hopes for national restoration that were prevalent in his day.**

Those who responded to his call were participating in a national revival intended to bring about the restoration of Israel and the advent of God. Through confession and repentance, those who underwent John's baptism stood not just for themselves, but symbolically for the whole.

They hoped to both precipitate the redemption of Israel and to insure their place within it as true children of Abraham when the kingdom of heaven finally appeared.

“ *Water, associated with the chaos from which all matter was extracted and ordered, evokes images of* ”

*both death and birth,
destruction and creation.*

Baptism, then, was a fitting symbol that John drew upon to communicate his message. Ritual immersions had a role in most ancient religions. Within Judaism there already existed a tradition of immersion associated with ritual purity, and proselyte baptism was adopted sometime in the

first century as well. **John's baptism seems unique in that, according to his message, immersion for purity would not be efficacious apart from evidence of true repentance.**

However, the act of baptism itself still likely drew upon the symbolism common to all other traditions which made use of the practice. Water, associated with the chaos from which all matter was extracted and ordered, evokes images of both death and birth, destruction and creation. Rites which utilize water are often ones marking change or transition, as the participant moves from one status to another, whether it be from impure to pure, or from initiate to community member, or, in John's case, from sinner to obedient child of God. And not only this, but the symbol of creation might be further applied to the group of penitents as a whole.

**John was preparing a holy people
for YHWH's return.**

A new, obedient Israel was being born.

It is perhaps also significant to **note that prophetic action, such as preaching in a specific location or baptizing people, held complex meaning.** It not only symbolically communicated an intended message, but like a visual teaching device, it was considered capable of bringing about the reality to which it referred.

Thus, by enacting these prophetic passages in a literal way within the literal landscape, John, and others of his day, likely believed that they were actively initiating YHWH's return.

For some...

this was thrillingly momentous, so John drew a wide following, eager to participate. However, for others, an overthrow of the current system would be less desirable, so John also made enemies who feared his prophetic acts might shift the balance—and not in their favor.

There were those in Israel who would be a part of this new movement of God and those who would not.

According to John, those who repent and bear fruit in accordance with that repentance are the true children of Abraham.

They are the Israel whom God will redeem.

And what better place to call out and give birth to a renewed Israel than at the place where Israel took its first steps

*toward nationhood, at the border of the
promised land, east of Jericho.*

Performing his baptism here, at the Jordan River, John reenacts the original exodus “baptism” of Israel under Joshua in a prophetic act of creating a new people, a new Israel (compare Josh 3–5).

Standing in the wilderness, John declares that the time has come for a new exodus and a new people of God, bringing them through the waters of chaos to emerge as a new creation. **This new people of God—repentant, righteous, and purified—are now prepared for God to act and bring to completion his promised salvation.**

His message rings out boldly: “the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt 3:1).

Such a message was bound to create enemies, and John made a powerful one—Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. The Gospels indicate that Antipas imprisoned John because he criticized the lawfulness of Antipas’ marriage to Herodias, who was both his niece and his sister-in-law. However, both in the Gospels and in Josephus’ account of John’s death, there is a hint that something more than moral law was at stake. **Remember that, in John’s eschatological scheme, inclusion in the coming kingdom of God is achieved via demonstrated righteousness.** John’s message of the imminent advent of YHWH in conjunction with his censure of Antipas essentially communicated a vote of no-confidence in the ruler and anticipated his downfall in the emerging new order. So too, the righteous behavior he prescribed for soldiers, tax-collectors, and the like was an implicit condemnation of existing power structures and threatened to undermine the economy. Attracting large crowds, if John were to choose to take practical action to initiate the social revolution and divine judgment he preached, Antipas would

be a likely target. Indeed, **Josephus recounts that Antipas saw John as a political enemy who could not be ignored, powerful enough to raise a rebellion.**

Better safe than sorry, Antipas had John arrested and imprisoned in Machaerus, a Herodian fortress in southern Perea, overlooking his border with Nabatea. Not far from the proposed location of Bethany beyond Jordan and the only one of the several such Herodian fortresses within Antipas' territories, this site boasted of a [lavish palace](#) and quarters for political prisoners. So too, having broken faith with King Aretas of Nabatea, his former father-in-law, through insult and border dispute, Antipas had reason to expect conflict on his vulnerable southeastern frontier and may have moved to this site in preparation. Therefore, it is likely here, in the fortress of Machaerus, that the infamous birthday feast took place in which Herodias claimed the head of John the Baptist, perhaps as much for political expediency as spite. His disciples removed his body. Although there is no textual reference to the place of John's burial, a tradition emerged in the fourth century AD placing his burial near Sebaste, another Herodian palace in Samaria, but the site has little to recommend it besides its distance from Antipas' territory.

Ironically, in their attempt to evade John's prophetic predictions, Antipas and Herodias seem to have secured their place on the losing side.

Josephus tells us that Antipas' army was soon destroyed in battle by King Aretas and that the defeat was popularly attributed to God's judgment of Antipas for his treatment of John. Popular support for John and criticism of Antipas did not subside with John's death. Antipas' ignominy appeared cemented while John's reputation as a prophet and his message of hope persisted unabated, regardless of his personal fate, or even his doubts.²⁸ Later, as Jesus' own ministry began to attract attention, it did so initially in light of John's. Contemplating what must have been an unusual answer to the questions regarding Jesus' identity, Antipas and others wondered whether Jesus might actually be John back from the dead. Jesus seems only to have emerged from John's shadow following John's death, likely indicating a strong correspondence between their two ministries. Perhaps thanks to John's own words, "he must become greater; I must become less,"

the stage was set for Jesus to bring to fullness the restoration of Israel for which John had so earnestly labored.³⁰¹

The Expositor's Bible Commentary:

4–5 Clothes of camel's hair and a leather belt (v. 4, the latter to bind up the loose outer garment) were not only the clothes of poor people but **establish links with Elijah (2 Kings 1:8; cf. Mal 4:5)**. "Locusts" (*akrides*) are large grasshoppers, still eaten in the East, not the fruit of the "locust tree" (BAGD, s.v.). Wild honey is what it purports to be, not gum from a tree (cf. Judg 14:8–9; 1 Sam 14:25–29; Ps 81:16). **Both suggest a poor man used to wilderness living, and this suggests a connection with the prophets (cf. Mt 3:1; 11:8–9)**

—So much so that...

in Zechariah's day (13:4) some false prophets dressed like prophets to deceive people.

[4 "On that day every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies. He will not put on a hairy cloak in order to deceive,]

Both Elijah and John had stern ministries in which austere garb and diet confirmed

¹ Aubrey L. Taylor, "[Ministry in the Wilderness](#)," in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*, ed. Barry J. Beitzel and Kristopher A. Lyle, Lexham Geographic Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 42–51.

their message and condemned the idolatry of physical and spiritual softness. “Even the food and dress of John preached” (Beng.).

John’s impact was enormous (v. 5), and his crowds came from a wide area. In Greek, the places are personified (as in 2:3).

v.6

Confession of sin was commanded in the law, not only as part of a priest’s duties (Lev 16:21), but as an individual responsibility for wrongs done (Lev 5:5; 26:40; Num 5:6–7; Prov 28:13).

In Israel’s better days this was carried out (Neh 9:2–3; Ps 32:5).

In the NT (cf. Acts 19:18; 1 John 1:9) confession is scarcely less important. Because Matthew does not include “for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4), some have deduced that he wants to avoid suggesting any possibility of forgiveness until Jesus’ death (Matt 26:28). This is too subtle.

A first-century reader would hardly hold that sins were not forgiven after being honestly confessed. And since Matthew regularly abbreviates Mark where he uses him, we must be cautious in drawing theological conclusions from such omissions.

The Greek does not make clear whether the confession was individual or corporate, simultaneous with baptism or antecedent to it.

Josephus (Antiq. XVIII, 116–17 [v.2]) says that John, “surnamed the Baptist,” required righteous conduct as a “necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God.”

Since John was urging people to prepare for Messiah’s coming by repenting and being baptized, we may surmise that open renunciation of sin was a precondition of his baptism, which was therefore both a confirmation of confession and an eschatological sign.

Since the discovery of the DSS, many have tried to link John’s baptism with that of the Qumran covenanters. But their washings, though related to confession, were probably regarded as purifying and were repeated (cf. 1QS 1:24ff.; 5:13–25) to remove ritual uncleanness.

John’s baptism, probably a once-only rite (contra Albright and Mann), was unrelated to ceremonial impurity. The rabbis used baptism to induct proselytes but never Jews (SBK, 1:102–12).

As far as we know, though baptism itself was not uncommon, the pointed but limited associations placed on John’s baptism stem from the Baptist

himself—not unlike circumcision, which predates Abraham but lacked covenantal significance before his time.

The Jordan River is fast flowing. No doubt John stationed himself at one of the fords, and prepared the way for the Lord.²

R.C. Sproul Bible Commentary:

Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey (v. 4). The camel hair that John wore was not the sort we find today in expensive outer garments. It was one of the roughest, most crude, and cheapest forms of outer garment of the ancient world. John was not adorned with suede but with the roughhewn skin of the camel. The honey he ate to survive was not the sort cultivated by beekeepers. It was the wild honey obtained only at the risk of a thousand bee stings.

***Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins* (vv. 5–6).**

The Jews referred to common people as *'am hā'āretz*. The Greeks used the expression *hoi polloi*. These were the people of the land in contrast to those titled with nobility. The *'am hā'āretz*, the common folk, heard John gladly and were obedient to his word, whereas the clergy, the professional religious people, were absolutely outraged that this strange man would come out of the wilderness and tell them they were unclean and unready for the coming kingdom.

How would we have responded if we had heard John? Would we have gone to the Jordan River for cleansing, or would we have refused to participate in the humbling ritual?³

² D. A. Carson, "[Matthew](#)," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 102–103.

³ Robert Charles Sproul, [Matthew](#), St. Andrew's Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 41–42.

MacArthur Commentary:

THE MINISTRY

Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. (3:5–6)

The immediate effect of John's preaching was dramatic.

People were coming from the great city of *Jerusalem*, which was a considerable distance away. They came, in fact, from *all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan*. In other words, they were coming from all over southern Palestine, including both sides of the **Jordan River**. As Matthew reports later in his gospel, the people recognized John as a prophet (21:26).

That those Jews submitted to being baptized was more than a little significant, because that was not a traditional Jewish ceremony.

It was completely different from the Levitical washings, which consisted of washing the hands, feet, and head. The Essenes, a group of Jewish ascetics who lived on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, practiced a type of ceremonial washing that more nearly resembled baptism.

But both the Levitical and the Essene washings were repeated, those of the Essenes as much as several times a day or even hourly. They represented repeated purification for repeated sinning.

John's washing, however, was one-time. The only one-time washing the Jews performed was for Gentiles, signifying their coming as outsiders into the true faith of Judaism. A Jew who submitted to such a rite demonstrated, in effect, that he was an outsider who sought entrance into the people of God—an amazing admission for a Jew. Members of God's chosen race, descendants of Abraham, heirs of the covenant of Moses, came to John to be baptized like a Gentile!

That act symbolized before the world that they realized their national and racial descent, or even their calling as God's chosen and covenant people, could not save them. They had to repent, forsake sin, and trust in the Lord for salvation.

It is that of which the baptism was a public witness, as they confessed their sins.

They had to come into the kingdom just like the Gentiles, through repentance and faith—which included a public admission of sins (cf. the same Greek term [exomologeō] in Phil. 2:11, where it refers to a verbal confession).

We know from subsequent accounts in the gospels that many of those acts of repentance must have been superficial and hypocritical, because John soon lost much of his following, just as Jesus would eventually lose most of His popularity. But the impact of John's ministry on the Jewish people was profound and unforgettable. The way of the King had been announced to them, and they had no excuse for not being ready for His coming.

Six things demonstrate the true greatness of John.

(1) He was filled with and controlled by the Spirit, even from “his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15b).

(2) He was obedient to God’s Word. From childhood he followed God’s will, and from it he never wavered.

(3) He was self-controlled, drinking neither “wine or liquor” (Luke 1:15a). In his food, dress, and life-style he was temperate and austere.

(4) He was humble. His purpose was to announce the king, not to act kingly or take for himself any of the king’s prerogatives. Speaking of Jesus, John said, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals” (Mark 1:7), and on a later occasion, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

(5) He courageously & faithfully proclaimed God’s Word, thundering it across the wilderness as long as he was free to preach, to whomever would listen.

(6) Finally, he was faithful in winning people to Christ, in turning “back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:16).

He stands as a pattern for all who seek genuine greatness.⁴

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Matthew*, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 57–58.

American Commentary on The Gospel of Matthew: (Broadus & Albert)

5. After a general account (v. 1–4) of John’s public appearance and preaching, with the fact that in him a prophecy was fulfilled, and after a description of his peculiar dress and manner of life, we have now (v. 5 f.) a general statement that the people went forth to him in large numbers and were baptized, and this is followed (v. 7–12) by a specimen of his preaching, given more in detail.

Then, Matthew’s favorite term of transition, resumes the time of v. 1. 2.

Not only Jerusalem, but the entire district of Judea, and **all the region round about**,—or, *the circuit of the—Jordan*, only part of which was included in Judea, came forth. The Hebrew phrase, ‘round of the Jordan’ or, ‘circuit of the Jordan,’ *i. e.*, the country about the river, is inadequately rendered in Com. Ver. by ‘plain’ (Gen. 13:10, 11; margin Rev. Ver. ‘circle’; 1 Kings 7:46; 2 Chron. 4:17). The cases of its occurrence in Old Testament refer particularly, as here, to the lower part of the river, towards the Dead Sea. **All**, is of course, to be understood as an hyperbole, strongly expressing the fact that very many of the people came forth. (Comp. 8:34.) Similar hyperbolic expressions abound in all languages and periods. We learn from John (1:35–45; 21:2), that some came from Galilee also, but this was perhaps at a later period, when John was baptizing higher up the river. The year to which John’s early ministry probably belongs, A. D. 26, was a Sabbatical year (Wieseler), when the people who strictly observed the law would have more than ordinary leisure.

It was centuries since a prophet had appeared, and the Jews had often longed for prophetic guidance. Thus, Judas Maccabeus and his followers laid away the stones of the desecrated altar “until a prophet should appear to answer concerning them” (1 Macc. 4:46); and the woman of Samaria, as soon as she perceived that here was a prophet, asked him to settle the long-disputed question concerning the proper place to worship. (John 4:19 f.) **In the time of Christ, some were expecting the personal re-appearance of Jeremiah (below, 16:14), and many that of Elijah (John 1:21; Luke 9:8; Matt. 16:14; 17:10; 27:49); while others were looking for the prophet like unto Moses. (John 1:21 Deut. 18:15, 18.)**

And now the report spread far and wide, that at last a prophet had come, who in dress and place of abode resembled the great Elijah, who might be Messiah, or at least a forerunner of Messiah, for he declared that the Messianic reign was near, who performed a very striking rite, and spoke severe rebukes and earnest exhortations to turn from evil ways, such as had been spoken by all the prophets, such as will always arrest the attention of mankind.

No wonder the Jews, from all the country adjacent to the scene of his ministry, and for many months, continually poured forth to see and hear him, and, more or less, impressed by his announcement of the Messianic reign and his call to repentance, confessed their sins and submitted to his baptism.

v.6. Baptized. The Greek word *baptizo*, which we borrow, was of very common use, as is seen in every period of Greek literature, and was applied to a great variety of matters, including the most familiar acts of every-day life. It was thus a word which every Greek-speaking hearer and reader in apostolic times would at once and clearly understand. It meant what we express by 'immerse' and kindred terms, and no one could then have thought of attributing to it a wholly different sense, such as 'sprinkle,' or 'pour,' without distinct explanation to that effect.

The people who speak Greek at the present day wholly reject and ridicule the idea of using this Greek word in any other than its own definite and well-known sense; and the Greek Church still holds nothing to be baptism but immersion. But the newly discovered treatise called the *Didache*, or "Teaching," written some time in the second century, probably in the latter half of the century, shows that in some region of the Christian world there was a disposition to allow a substitute when water was scarce. Thus ch. 7, "Baptize ... in living water (*i. e.* of a stream, fountain, or pool, as opposed to standing or dead water). And if thou have no living water, baptize in other water; and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm. And if thou have neither, pour water upon the head thrice." Here it is evident that baptize means only immerse, but if water be scarce, pouring may be substituted for baptizing. In like manner we find in the West,

towards the middle of the third century, that in case of severe sickness some allowed pouring, and after a while some thought sprinkling sufficient, and these more convenient substitutes grew increasingly common, though often condemned by the ecclesiastical authorities, until in the thirteenth century their general use was sanctioned by the Pope. Luther and Calvin (16th cent.) both explicitly declared that the primitive baptism was immersion, and the former said it ought to be restored; but they allowed the existing practice to remain undisturbed. In the course of time many Protestants came to perceive that it was very awkward to rest their practice in this respect on the authority of the Church of Rome, and being accustomed and attached to the practice they very naturally sought countenance for it in Scripture.

Such are the unavoidable defects of language, that strongly biased and ingenious minds can always cast some apparent doubt over the meaning of the plainest words; as has been done, for example, with respect to words teaching the divinity of Christ, the atonement, and eternal punishment. It is therefore not surprising that a good many able and conscientious men in Great Britain and America (very few in Germany) have succeeded in persuading themselves that perhaps, or even quite probably, *baptizo* might be understood as meaning pour or sprinkle, or purify in general, or *something* that would sanction the practice handed down from revered fathers; and that a few very bold spirits should even venture to cut the knot and assert, that not only sprinkling may be baptism, but nothing else can be. These considerations should promote charity, and may serve to explain the rise, in modern times, of so much controversy about a very plain word.

This controversy has led to a wide examination of Greek literature with reference to this term, and in all the instances of its use that have been found, whether literal or figurative, its fundamental meaning (whatever may be the particular rendering most suitable to the connection and to English idiom) is always 'immerse.' that being in the great mass of cases the only possible sense, and in all cases appropriate and natural. (See a full list of classified examples in Conant "On Baptizein," Philadelphia.) So it is defined and explained in most Greek Lexicons that are of any authority (*e. g.*, in Liddell and Scott, Grimm, Sophocles' Greek Lex. of the Roman and Byzantine periods, Boston), without a hint of any other meaning; and so it is interpreted by almost all commentators in Germany, the land of scholars, and by very many in the Church of England. But some good Lexicons of classical Greek (as Rost and Palm) add such meanings as 'moisten,' 'drench,' 'overwhelm,' justifying them only by certain *figurative* uses of the word, in which drunkards are called 'the baptized,' or men are said to be baptized in (or with) debts, misfortunes, etc; some Lexicons of New Testament Greek (as Robinson) urge that in certain passages of New Testament and Septuagint (*e. g.*, Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38; Acts 2:41; 10:48; 16:33; Judith 12:7), the circumstances make it, in the lexicographer's judgment, unlikely that an immersion was performed; and some others (as Cremer, comp. Stephen's "Thesaurus"), suppose that the Jews came to use the Hebrew *tabal* 'dip,' and therefore used *baptizo*, as a general term for religious washing, which might then be sometimes performed in other ways. Yet all the lexicographers who thus present an additional meaning give 'immerse' as the primary and general meaning of the word.

Now it is a most important principle in the interpretation of language, without the observance of which all interpretation becomes uncertain and unreliable, that whatever is the common and regular meaning of a word, as shown by its origin and general use, must be held to be its meaning everywhere, until there shall be found some passage in which it *cannot* have that sense.

Upon this principle, whether formally recognized or not, scholars are constantly working. But no passage has been pointed out in which this word *must* have some other than its ordinary meaning; indeed, none in which that meaning is not both possible and appropriate. Thus the classical expressions solely relied on by Rost and Palm for another meaning, are given by Liddell and Scott (6th and 7th ed.) as examples of the primary sense 'to dip in or under water,' and compared with the English phrases 'soaked in wine,' 'over head and ears in debt,' such expressions being obviously figurative in both languages. In the passages cited by Robinson, nothing more can be claimed than that in those cases immersion would have been inconvenient or difficult, and is therefore thought unlikely; while a due consideration of Jewish scrupulosity and known customs makes immersion not only possible in such cases, but natural enough—and these passages are so explained by a multitude of German and English writers who are certainly not prejudiced in favor of immersion, for they practice sprinkling, on the authority of the church, or on the ground that it is a matter of little consequence. To the argument of Cremer that the Talmud sometimes uses '*tabal*,' 'dip,' with reference to purifications in which Old Testament directed them to 'sprinkle,' (*rachatz*), and that so *tabal* and *baptizo* seem to have been employed as general terms for religious washing, however performed, it is enough to reply that the Jews had become so extremely scrupulous as frequently to employ the most complete form of purification (*tabal*) in cases in which only the less complete (*raehatz*) was required, wishing thus to make perfectly sure that no touch of impurity had failed to be removed. So already in Sirach 31 (34): 30 (Eng. Ver. Eccles. 34:25), 'One who immerses himself from a dead body and again touches it, what profit did he gain by his bath' (comp. Lev. 22:4–6), in Judith 12:7, and Mark 7:4 (see Meyer); and so in the proselyte-immersion of a later period (see below.) This explanation is at least as probable in itself as the theory of Cremer, and accords with the well-known scrupulosity of the Jews.—It thus appears that in none of the ways mentioned is warrant found for giving *baptizo* any such meaning as pour, sprinkle, or wash religiously, or any other than its own proper and well-known sense. The argument that because baptism suggested (John 3:25) a dispute about purification, therefore any form of purification is baptism (Ed. Beecher on "Baptism," New York), is as if from the fact that a case of yellow fever led to a dispute about malarial diseases, it should be argued that any form of malarial disease is yellow fever. Dale ("Classic Baptism," "Judaic Baptism," "Johannic Baptism," "Christic and Patristic Baptism," four separate volumes, Philadelphia), defines *baptizo* as meaning 'intuspose,' (*i. e.*, 'put within,' comp. Liddell and Scott), 'merse,' 'immerse,' and then by a novel and ingenious, but purely fanciful and

unreasonable process explains it all away, and reaches the conclusion that immersion is not baptism at all. Some attempt has been made to construct an argument as to *baptizo* from the word used in the Syriac New Testament, in reply to which see a tract by C. H. Toy on A mad (Louisville.) These several theories add no force to the efforts of the lexicographers above mentioned, to justify some departure from the plain and recognized meaning of this Greek word.

It was once quite generally held (see especially Lightfoot), and is still maintained by some, that John's baptism was an imitation of what is called Jewish proselyte-baptism. The resemblance between the two is but partial; for Maimonides (twelfth cent.) describes the ceremony as consisting in the person's standing in the water and dipping himself, thus making it a self-purification. Recent investigation shows that there is no ground for believing this Jewish practice of a later time to have existed, as a distinct initiatory rite, in the time of our Lord. Not only is there no allusion to such a rite in the Old or New Testament, or in the Apocryphal books, but none in Philo or Josephus, although each of these writers has various passages in which it seems almost impossible that he should have failed to mention the rite had it then existed, nor any in the early Christian Fathers, some of whom search every page of Old Testament for rites or expressions bearing any, the most fanciful resemblance to baptism. It is not mentioned in the Mishna (about A. D. 200), nor clearly referred to in any of the other Jewish writings belonging to the early centuries after Christ, the first distinct account of it being in the Babylonian Talmud (Gemara), written in the fifth century. The origin of the rite among the Jews is readily explained. When a proselyte (see on 23:15) was received (before the destruction of the temple), he was circumcised, and then before performing his first act as a Jew, viz., offering sacrifice, he must be purified; but this purification was not distinctively initiatory (peculiar to a proselyte), for the Jewish child also must be purified after circumcision, which itself made one unclean. There were thus three acts performed in admitting a proselyte—the circumcision (which really made him a Jew), the consequent purification (which as described by Maimonides, was an immersion), and then sacrifice, in which he publicly acted as a Jew. After the temple was destroyed, the sacrifice became impossible, and then the purification became the closing, and in the case of women, the only act performed; and so it naturally attracted greater attention, and by the fifth century had come to be regarded as distinct from all other purifications, and as possessing a very high importance, equal, if not superior, to that of circumcision. This view takes away all force from the otherwise plausible argument that the so-called proselyte-baptism must have been ancient, on the ground that the Jews would never have adopted it from the hated Christians; for we see that it was not so adopted at all, but was simply one of their own purifications, which from the force of circumstances came, in the course of some centuries after the destruction of the temple, to be regarded as a peculiar initiatory rite. And if later Jewish writers assert that it was ancient, even that it originated at Mount Sinai, they make the same claim for every usage existing among them, however unquestionably late in its origin; and besides, we have seen that the essence of this practice was ancient, though it afterwards assumed its peculiar character and consequence.

There is thus no reason for supposing that John's baptism was a mere modification of some existing rite. Our Lord distinctly intimated

(21:25) that the baptism of John was “from heaven.” The forerunner himself testified that God “sent” him “to baptize in water.” (John 1:33.) Köhler: “So the baptism of John is a highly significant and expressive rite, which in its grand simplicity bears the distinct stamp of a divine ordering.”

In Jordan. The expression thus translated affords a strong, though in itself not an absolute proof, that the action of baptizing was performed within the limits of the stream. This is the natural and regular meaning of the phrase, and must be everywhere adhered to unless there is something in the connection to forbid it. But the Greek preposition *en* is used in some connection not found in English; as, for example, we cannot say, “a city was situated in the Euxine Sea,” “an ambush was laid in a river,” but the Greek has these expressions, meaning that the sea or river was in a certain general sense the locality in which the city or ambush was situated, though not in the strict sense which our ‘in’ would indicate, seeing that such a sense is in those instances not possible from the nature of the case. So in English we say ‘the man is in the mountain,’ meaning not the earth composing it, but the mountain in a more general sense. Now if the action of baptizing were one which *could not* be performed *in* the river in the strict sense, we might understand ‘in the Jordan’ as meaning only in that general locality (comp. Mark 4:1, ‘in the sea’). But until it is shown that the signification of the term baptize is incompatible with the idea of its being performed strictly in the river, *i. e.*, in the water, we are bound to take the preposition in its proper and ordinary sense. Now even those who maintain that ‘baptizo’ is at times used with a certain latitude, generally agree that its regular and usual sense is one which does not forbid, but entirely accords with, the idea of its being performed in the water. We have therefore the natural and almost uniform use of ‘in’ *concurring* with the established meaning of the verb, and reinforcing the argument by which that meaning is established. (Comp. ‘in water’ v. 11, Rev. Ver., margin). The Rev. Ver. reads, *the river Jordan*. The word Jordan, always with the article in the Hebrew and the Greek, signifies ‘the descender,’ and was so named from its rapid descent in a long and deep valley or fissure. The highest of its three principal fountains on the slopes of Hermon is seventeen hundred feet above the level of the Mediterranean; the first lake it forms, Hûleh, has its surface only one hundred and twenty feet above the Mediterranean, while the second, the Lake of Galilee, is six hundred and eighty-two feet (Conder) *below* the level, and the third Lake, the Dead Sea, is twelve hundred and ninety-two feet below the level of the Mediterranean, besides being itself some thirteen hundred feet deep. The fissure or valley varies in width, south of the Lake of Galilee, from two to six miles, and nearer the Dead Sea it becomes fourteen miles wide (Conder). Winding about in this long, narrow valley is another depressed

valley (forty to one hundred and fifty feet deeper), of several hundred yards in width; and within this the actual bed of the river sinks deeper still. The distance *in a straight line* from its highest source to the southern end of the Dead Sea is about one hundred and sixty miles, or excluding the Dead Sea, about one hundred and fifteen miles. But so extremely crooked is the winding river that Lynch estimates it to be near two hundred miles between the Lake of Galilee and its mouth (which is sixty-five miles in a straight line), and though less crooked higher up, its whole length must be at least two hundred and seventy-five miles, not including the Dead Sea. The width and depth of course vary at different seasons, as it is swollen in February and March by the rains, and in May, the "time of harvest" (Josh. 3:15), by the melting snows of Hermon. Above Lake Hûleh it is some forty feet wide, and is deep and rapid, but fordable almost everywhere. Towards the Lake of Galilee it is about sixty feet, and easily forded at several places. For some miles below the lake Lynch found it about seventy-five feet wide, and at points ten feet deep (middle of April), but on one of the numerous rapids only eight inches deep. About five miles below the lake an important tributary enters from the east, and below this the usual depth varies from two and one half to six feet (Ritter). About half way from the Lake of Galilee to the Salt (Dead) Sea, the River Jabbok enters from the east, and smaller streams come in at various neighboring points on both sides. It here becomes from eighty to one hundred and fifty feet wide, and from five to twelve feet deep (McClintock and Crooks, "Cyc."). Near the mouth it widens to some five hundred and fifty feet, and the depth diminishes to two or three feet (Lynch). The principal *fords* are not many (though Conder collected the names of about forty in all). (1) About two miles above the mouth (Fish). Several miles higher up is the traditional place of our Lord's baptism, nearly opposite Jericho, and somewhat above this is (2) a ford used at some seasons. At the traditional place the river is, in spring (when most travelers visit it), both too deep and too swift for fording. Yet just before Easter several thousand Greek and Oriental pilgrims (in the Middle Ages there were sometimes 100,000) go to this place—men, women, and children—and immerse themselves as a sacred bath, many of them changing their garments amid the dense thickets of shrubbery which extend for some distance from the stream; and almost every year, in the vast fanatical throng, crowding in together, some are drowned. Several miles above this place is now a ferry-boat (comp. 2 Sam. 19:18), which is handled with difficulty, the current being in March excessively strong. (3) Ten miles below the mouth of the Jabbok is a ford now much used in going from Nabulus to Es-Salt (Van de Velde). (4) Above the Jabbok is the ford of Succoth, where Jacob crossed with his family and flocks (Gen. 32:10, 22.) (5) Near Beisan is a ford, which Robinson (III., 325) crossed with difficulty, but which, on March 24, 1871, the Modî of Beisan said would only reach the horses' bellies. In this neighborhood Conder, in April, found twenty-one possible fords within seven miles. About ten miles above Beisan is a Saracenic bridge (the only one now crossing the river), upon the road from Nabulus to Damascus, and above it are said to be several difficult and little-used fords. (6) Not far below the Lake of Galilee is an important ford, which the Jews of our Lord's time must have constantly used in going from Galilee through Perea to Jerusalem. At this, on March 25, 1871, the water came nearly to the root of a horse's tail.—But in summer the river falls much lower, and must be easily fordable at many points.—The outer and principal part of the Jordan valley is nearly all entirely unproductive without irrigation, justifying the statement of Josephus that the Jordan flows through a desert ("War," 3, 10, 7). But the banks of the river are everywhere fringed with trees (willow, balsam, etc.), amid which the birds sing, and in whose

pleasant shade the multitudes could gather to hear the voice of the new prophet. As to the scene of the baptism of Jesus, see on v. 13.

The people received this solemn rite **confessing their sins**. The Scriptures promise forgiveness on condition of confession (Prov. 28:13; John 1:9), though of course this is not the meritorious ground of forgiveness.

It was required by the Mosaic Law (Lev. 5:5; 16:21; 26:40; Num. 5:7), and is often recorded as practiced by the penitent (*e.g.*, 2 Chron. 30:22; Psa. 32:5; Neh. 9:2, 3; Dan. 9:20; Acts 19:18). The term here used appears to denote an actually spoken confession, and the present participle shows that it was made in immediate connection with the act of baptism.

Most probably the confession was not made to the multitude, but simply to John, and was not uniform, but varied according to every man's calling, character, etc., (comp. John's specific exhortations to different classes, Luke 3:10–14). The act of submitting to baptism was itself also (Köhler) a confession of faith, namely, of faith in the good news of the kingdom. (Mark 1:15; Acts 19:4.)

We have now (v. 7–12) a specimen of John's teachings given more in detail.⁵

The Baptism of Proselytes

[The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah — Alfred Edersheim](#)

(See vol. i. Book II. ch. xi. p.273.)

⁵ John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, American Commentary on the New Testament (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 38–44.

ONLY those who have made study of it can have any idea how large, and sometimes bewildering, is the literature on the subject of Jewish Proselytes and their Baptism. Our present remarks will be confined to the Baptism of Proselytes.

1. Generally, as regards proselytes (Gerim) we have to distinguish between the Ger ha-Shaar (proselyte of the gate) and Ger Toshabh (sojourner, 'settled among Israel), and again the Ger hatstsedeq (proselyte of righteousness) and Ger habberith (proselyte of the covenant). The former are referred to by Josephus (Ant. xiv.7.2), and frequently in the New Testament, in the Authorised Version under the designation of those who fear God,' Acts xiii.16, 26; are religious,' Acts xiii.43; devout,' Acts xiii.50; xvii.4, 17; worship God,' Acts xvi.14; xviii.7. Whether the expression devout' and feared God' in Acts x.2, 7 refers to proselytes of the gates is doubtful. As the proselytes of the gate' only professed their faith in the God of Israel, and merely bound themselves to the observance of the so-called seven Noachic commandments (on which in another place), the question of baptism' need not be discussed in connection with them, since they did not even undergo circumcision.

2. It was otherwise with the proselytes of righteousness,' who became children of the covenant,' perfect Israelites,' Israelites in every respect, both as regarded duties and privileges. All writers are agreed that three things were required for the admission of such proselytes: Circumcision (Milah), Baptism (Tebhilah), and a Sacrifice (Qorban, in the case of women: baptism and sacrifice) - the latter consisting of a burnt-offering of a heifer, or of a pair of turtle doves or of young doves (Maimonides, Hilkh. Iss. Biah xiii.5). **After the destruction of the Temple promise had to be made of such a sacrifice when the services of the Sanctuary were restored.**

On this and the ordinances about circumcision it is not necessary to enter further. *That baptism was absolutely necessary to make a proselyte is so frequently stated as not to be disputed* (See Maimonides, u. s.; the tractate Masseketh Gerim in Kirchheim's Septem Libri Talm. Parvi, pp.38-44 [which, however,

adds little to our knowledge]; Targum on Ex. xii.44; Ber.47 b; Kerith.9 a; Jer. Yebam. p.8 d; Yebam.45 b, 46 a and b, 48 b, 76 a; Ab. Sar.57 a, 59 a, and other passages).

There was, indeed a difference between Rabbis Joshua and Eliezer, the former maintaining that baptism alone without circumcision, the latter that circumcision alone without baptism, sufficed to make a proselyte, but the sages decided in favour of the necessity of both rites (Yebam.46 a and

b). **The baptism was to be performed in the presence of three witnesses**, ordinarily Sanhedrists (Yebam.47 b), but in case of necessity others might act. **The person to be baptized, having cut his hair and nails, undressed completely, made fresh profession of his faith before what were the fathers of the baptism' (our Godfathers, Kethub.11 a; Erub.15 a), and then immersed completely, so that every part of the body was touched by the water. The rite would, of course, be accompanied by exhortations and benedictions** (Maimonides, Hilkh. Milah iii.4; Hilkh. Iss. Biah xiv.6).

Baptism was not to be administered at night, nor on a Sabbath or feast-day (Yebam.46 b).

Women were attended by those of their own sex, the Rabbis standing at the door outside.

Yet unborn children of proselytes did not require to be baptized, because they were born in holiness' (Yebam.78 a).

In regard to the little children of preselytes opinions differed.

A person under age was indeed received, but not regarded as properly an Isaelite till he had attained majority.

Secret baptism, or where only the mother brought a child, was not acknowledged.

In general, the statements of a proselyte about his baptism required attestation by witnesses.

But the children of a Jewess or of a proselyte were regarded as Jews, even if the baptism of the father was doubtful.

It was indeed a great thing when, in the words of Maimonides, **a stranger sought shelter under the wings of the Shekhinah, and the change of**

condition which he underwent was regarded as complete.

The waters of baptism were to him in very truth, though in a far different from the Christian sense, the bath of regeneration' (Titus iii.5).

As he stepped out of these waters he was considered as born anew' - in the language of the Rabbis, as if he were a little child just born' (Yeb.22 a; 48 b; 97 b), as a child of one day' (Mass. Ger. c. ii.).

But...

this new birth was not a birth from above' in the sense of moral or spiritual renovation, but only as implying a new relationship to God, to Israel, and to his own past, present, and future.

It was expressly enjoined that all the difficulties of his new citizenship should first be set before him, and if, after that, he took upon himself the yoke of the law, he should be told how all those sorrows and persecutions were intended to convey a greater blessing, and all those commandments to redound to greater merit.

More especially was he to regard himself as a new man in reference to his past.

Country, home, habits, friends, and relation were all changed.

The past, with all that had belonged to it, was past, and he was a new man - the old, with its defilements, was buried in the waters of baptism.

This was carried out with such pitiless logic as not only to determine such questions as those of inheritance, but that it was declared that, except, for the sake of not bringing proselytism into contempt, a proselyte might have wedded his own mother or sister (comp. Yeb.22 a; Sanh.58 b). It is a curious circumstance that marriage with a female proselyte was apparently very popular (Horay.13 a, line 5 from bottom; see also Shem. R.27), and the Talmud names at least three celebrated doctors who were the offspring of such unions (comp. Derenbourg, Hist. de la Palest., p.223, note 2). The praises of proselytism are also sung in Vayy. R.1.

If anything could have further enhanced the value of such proselytism, it would have been its supposed anitquity. Tradition traced it up to Abraham and Sarah, and the expression (Gen. xii.5) 'the souls that they had gotten' was explained as referring to their proselytes, since every one that makes a proselyte is as if he made (created) him' (Ber. R.39, comp also the Targums Pseudo-Jon. and Jerus. and Midr. on Cant. i.3). The Talmud, differing in this from the Targumim, finds in Exod. ii.5 a reference to the baptism of Pharoah's daughter (Sotah 12 b, line 3; Megill.13 a, line 11). In Shem. R.27 Jethro is proved to have been a convert, from the circumstances that his original name had been Jether (Exod. iv.18), an additional letter (Jethro). as in the case of Abraham, having been

added to his name when became a proselyte (comp. also Zebhach.116 a and Targum Ps.-Jon. on Exod. xviii.6, 27, Numb. xxiv.21. To pass over other instances, we are pointed to Ruth (Targum on Ruth i.10, 15). and to Nebuzaradan, who is also described as a proselyte (Sanh.96 b, line 19 from the bottom). But it is said that in the days of David and Solomon proselytes were not admitted by the Sanhedrin because their motives were suspected (Yeb.76 a), or that at least they were closely, watched.

But although the baptism of proselytes seems thus far beyond doubt, Christian theologians have discussed the question, whether the rite was practised at the time of Christ, or only introduced after the destruction of the Temple and its Services, to take the place of the Sacrifice previously offered. The conversy, which owed its origin chiefly to dogmatic prejudices on the part of Lutherans, Calvinists, and Baptists, has since been continued on historical or quasi-historical grounds. The silence of Josephus and Philo can scarcely be quoted in favour of the later origin of the rite. On the other hand, it may be urged that, as Baptism did not take the place of sacrifices in any other instance, it would be difficult account for the origin of such a rite in connection with the admission of proselytes.

Again, if a Jew who had become Levitically defiled, required imersion, it is difficult to suppose that a heathen would have been admittd to all the services of the Sanctuary without a similar purification.

But we have also positive testimony (which the objections of Winer, Keil, and Leyrer, in my opinion do not invalidate), that the baptism of proselytes existed in the time of Hillel and Shammai. For, whereas the school of Shammai is said to have allowed a proselyte who was circumcised on the eve of the Passover, to partake after baptism of the Passover, [6439] the school of Hillel forbade it. This controversy must be regarded as providing that at that time (previous to Christ) the baptism of proselytes was customary [6440] (Pes. viii.8, Eduy. v.2).

What does it mean that the Word of God will not return void?

[Isaiah 55:10–11](#) says, “As the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, . . . So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void” (KJV). The word *void* means “empty.” The remainder of verse 11 explains what it means to “not return void,” saying that God’s Word “will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

Rain and snow are part of a cyclical water process. Precipitation comes upon the earth, drains into the land, and produces great benefit in the growth of crops, the refreshment of souls, and the sustaining of life. Rain and snow come from above and do not return back above without accomplishing their purpose. God compares His Word to the rain and snow because, like the precipitation, God’s Word always fulfills His good purposes.

When God says that His Word will not return to Him void, we can know that He has an intention for His Word. God’s Word is from above. He “[breathed out](#)” His words to us, and they were recorded in the Bible ([2 Timothy 3:16](#)). Every word He gave humanity is purposeful and was given for a reason. Like the rain and snow, God’s words bring forth life ([John 6:63](#)) and produce good fruit in our lives. Through His Word, we know that God loves us and that Jesus died to free us from sin and death; we also learn how to live in light of those truths.

When God says that His Word will not return to Him void, we are encouraged to abide in His Word, allowing it to absorb into our lives, soaking it up as the ground soaks up the rain and snow. The truth will not return void as our hearts are changed. God’s Word rebukes us and corrects us when we are wrong, and it trains us in godly living ([2 Timothy 3:16–17](#)). His Word is a light guiding us in this dark world ([Psalm 119:105](#)). It is relevant to every pressing and practical problem. God’s Word will always accomplish what He desires, whether it is teaching, correcting, training, leading us to Him, revealing our sin, or some other good and profitable end.

When God says that His Word will not return to Him void, we understand that [God is sovereign](#). The promise is that God’s Word will accomplish what He wants it to, not necessarily what we want it to. We may share the Word with the purpose of changing someone’s mind—and the person’s mind doesn’t change. Was God’s Word void? No, but our personal goals may have been different from God’s. Like the wind that “blows wherever it pleases,” the Holy Spirit moves in mysterious ways ([John 3:8](#)). And God may use His Word in surprising ways, at surprising times, and in surprising people. We can’t predict exactly how God will use His Word any more than meteorologists can predict with

certitude the rainfall and snowfall.

God's Word will not return void. It is too powerful. When God said, "Let there be light," the immediate result was that "there was light" ([Genesis 1:3](#)). When Jesus said, "Peace! Be still!" the wind ceased and the sea calmed ([Mark 4:39](#)). God's Word will always prosper; God will succeed, and those who receive His Word will be overcomers as well ([1 John 5:4](#)).

Neil Brunner QUOTE on v.6:

"The important thing to see in verse 6 is that the remedy for sin is NOT denying sin's presence or explaining it away or exculpating (laying fault outside of one's self)... By contrast, this is what you do with sin, you admit it! (We are free from sin ONLY when we face it, when we disown it, by owning up to it. The first way to repent is to admit our sins openly. Repentance is NOT first of all a good work. No. Repentance is freely admitting our bad work. God forgives only sinners. And... "He who conceals his transgression/sins will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy" (Proverbs 28:13).

ILLUSTRATION:

There is an eternal difference between supernatural & superficial repentance...

Saying "sorry" does not save.

ILLUSTRATION:

People think they can have Christ as Savior, without embracing His Lordship. They are convinced that He can be their King but they do not need to serve Him... They are cross-less, Christ-less Christians... which means they are really oxymorons. Too many in church think they can be Christians without actually surrendering to Christ. Many, most, the vast majority who claim to love Christ never change & live like Christ...

Micky Cowen – famous gangster, heard a Beverly Hills revival message from Billy Graham... Micky "expressed interest" and "Billy Graham (and others) spoke with him, further explained, and started discipling Micky. Only when Micky heard the Messiah's koinonia-offering promise in Revelation 3:20 did he commit to changing... BUT... after it was clear that his priorities & patterns were, for the most part, continuing on unchanged. His life showed not signs or fruit of repentance Micky was lovingly rebuked by those who were trying to pour into him. Sadly... tragically... Micky revealed that he personally aligned

with what many, most... in fact the vast majority of church-goers believe... that he didn't need to stop being a gangster in order to be in God's family.

"You didn't tell me that I'd have to give up my work!"

"You didn't tell me that I'd have to give up my friends!"

He had heard that so-and-so what a "Christian cowboy" and so-and-so was a "Christian actress" and so-and-so was a "Christian Senator" - - - and Micky, therefore, actually believed he could be a "Christian gangster."

Friends, there is NO Christianity without biblical repentance! (Mark 1:15)

Biblical repentance is a Head, Heart, AND Hands transformation.

Anything less is less than biblical repentance! - JDP

ILLUSTRATION:

A child struggling with the pronunciation of the letter "R" is given an assignment to help them develop better diction... (better accuracy and clarity of speech/sound)... The instructor/teacher says: "Practice saying the following sentence:

"Robert gave Richard a rap in the rib for roasting the rabbit too rare."

At the next session the child offered the following rendition:

"Bob gave Dick a poke in the side for not cooking the bunny enough."

DON'T BE LIKE THAT BOY & RUN AWAY FROM GOD'S BIBLICAL R's!

8. Realize (Creator, creation, corruption)
9. We're Rotten
10. Remember
11. Righteous standards (Word, will, ways – 2 Timothy 3:16-17)
12. We all need a new Relationship
13. That's why we Repent
14. Redemption! (Redeemer & His redeemed – a.k.a. family/Church)

ILLUSTRATION:

"Before God can deliver us, we must undeceive ourselves." – Augustine

School girl is asked who she was before she got saved... she says: "a sinner."

She is then asked... who are you now? She answered: "a sinner."

She is then asked... what's the difference? She replied:
"I used to be a sinner running TO sin."
"Today, I'm a sinner running FROM sin."