

## THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

### Lesson 7, Chapter 3 Continued

If we were to do a deep comparison between the 4 Gospel accounts that open the New Testament, it would become evident that each Gospel writer approaches the matter of the advent, life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah with his own unique mindset and perspective, and that he has a specific purpose and audience for his Gospel in mind. For instance Mark expresses zero interest in Yeshua's background as a youth, and only speaks about Him starting with the day Christ's ministry begins. He also outlines Christ's life and actions in an orderly but rather abrupt way that in my opinion reads like a biography. Luke is trying to please his customer and patron, Theophilus. We don't know who Theophilus was, but his was a Roman gentile name. Luke doesn't seem to expect Theophilus to know much about Jewish Tradition or history and so takes the time to explain certain things Matthew wouldn't have because Matthew was a Jew writing to other Jews and so most Jewish concepts needed no clarification. John also expected his readers to be mostly Jewish and thus familiar with Jewish Tradition and the Holy Scriptures. Therefore the opening sentence of his Gospel speaks of the uniquely Hebrew concept of "The Word" without further explanation. Most Jews would know what the term "The Word" was pointing to, but the vast majority of gentile Believers would not. "The Word" was familiar among Jews; it was the Hebrew notion of the **Memra**. The **Memra** represented a mysterious manifestation of God that had to do with the power of speech (as in: God "spoke" the Universe into existence). The term itself comes from the Hebrew root word '**amar**, which means "to say". The Hebrew **Memra** was translated to the Greek **Logos**, which has to do with speech and speaking. But while **Memra** had a spiritual connotation within the Jewish community, **logos** did not have such a connotation with the Roman gentile community.

Matthew, like John, wrote in a way that had certain expectations of his readers that included knowledge of Hebrew history and custom; but Matthew seems to have expected even more of his readers than did John. Therefore, as we discussed in the prior lesson, Matthew wrote with the ever present backdrop of Yeshua being the second Moses; something Jews would have related with. More specifically Yeshua was the "Prophet like me" that Moses said in the Torah would eventually come. Matthew at times also made somewhat obscure connections between words of the ancient Prophets and certain events within the life of Jesus. Even a well educated gentile would have a rough time trying to understand how Matthew could legitimately make some of these associations such that Jesus (or an event associated with Jesus) became the prophetic fulfillment of the Prophets' words. However a Jew of that era (probably a more studied one) would understand that Matthew was using one of the four different methods of Bible interpretation that the Scribes and Sages employed in order to make his point. Again, such knowledge would have been outside the scope of what gentiles (including Believers) could typically have understood.

Since we are 20 centuries distant from the writing of Matthew's Gospel and the cultures that existed at that time, we are going to step through Matthew's Gospel at a careful pace, and I'm going to do my best to help you climb into the mindset of a 1st century Jew in order to understand where Matthew is coming from and what he meant by what he said. We're going to discuss a number of terms, some of which are rather standard in Christianity (such as Baptism and The Kingdom of Heaven), because often we'll see that what that meant to 1st century Jews is not exactly how the Church has come to define it.

As we began Matthew chapter 3 last week John the Baptist was introduced to us. We'll re-read the entire chapter to have a good foundation for today's teaching. Open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 3.

### **RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 3 all**

The first verse proclaims that John the Baptist began his ministry in the desert of Judea. Since there are a few Johns in the New Testament, recognize that this is not John the Apostle, an original disciple of Yeshua, who is also the writer of his own Gospel and of 3 more letters..... 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John. This is a very unique John whose story begins in other Gospels, but not in Matthew's, when he was still in his mother's womb. The desert of Judea is speaking of the southern end of the Jordan River valley and extending all the way past the Dead Sea and

down to that finger of the Red Sea known today as the Gulf of Aqaba, over which Moses miraculously led the Israelites through parted waters as they fled Pharaoh and his army.

There were several religious communities that lived in that desolate region in the 1st century, seeking peace and separation from both the Romans and the corrupt Temple authorities. None was larger nor more famous than the sect of the Essenes who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, the discovery of which in the mid-20th century opened an entire new vista of understanding and study of the Old Testament and of Jewish history. It is nearly impossible to imagine John not living among one or more of those communities during his years of preparation in that barren desert. So today there is much speculation about his possible involvement with the Essenes of Qumran. Perhaps the greatest evidence of his involvement in Qumran is that he uses very similar terms and phrases that are found among the Dead Sea Scrolls in the section known as the Community Documents. My opinion is that John the Baptist indeed spent significant time with the Essenes, although he didn't become one of them. Still we're not going to spend any of our time with this matter because it really doesn't advance our study of Matthew nor is there any firm evidence either way to hang our hats on.

John's twofold message that he brought to the Jewish community was that people needed to turn away from their sins and return to God, and this was in preparation for the imminent coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. In verse 3 Matthew once again connects an ancient prophetic oracle with the events surrounding the advent of Yeshua; this time it is about John the Baptist. He quotes Isaiah 40:3.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Isaiah 40:3** *A voice cries out: "Clear a road through the desert for ADONAI! Level a highway in the 'Aravah for our God!"*

Different Bible versions will quote this passage differently, but they all amount to the same thing: someone coming from the desert of Judea is going to announce the arrival of God or someone God is sending. The differences among Bible versions come mainly from taking Isaiah's quote either from the Hebrew Tanakh or from the Greek Septuagint. Although it is agreed by Judaism and Christianity that this passage is prophetic of the coming of a Messiah, in reality at the time it was written the context was of the return of the Jews from their captivity in Babylon. I've taught you before that it is the Jewish way (a way we find often in the New Testament) to quote only a few words (or perhaps a couple of

sentences) from an Old Testament book, expecting the reader to know the remainder. In other words, Jews knew the context of the brief quote..... but gentile Christians usually didn't and still don't! It is worth our time to see the context for ourselves so open your Bibles to Isaiah 39; we'll start at verse 5 and continue through Isaiah 40 verse 11.

### **READ ISAIAH 39:5 - 40:11**

We see that this passage, in context, is related to the Jews' return from Babylon. Yet clearly from the way those verses are written, the fullest fulfillment of this prophecy is much wider and more grand than only the Jews coming home from Babylon. From a Jewish viewpoint Matthew would say that the **remez** of the passage speaks of the Messiah, even though the **p'shat** is about returning from Babylon (go review the previous lesson if you are not clear about the terms **remez** and **p'shat**). It was also understood among Jews that the person who is crying out, the one who is preparing the way for the Lord, is Elijah. Speaking of John the Baptist, Matthew says in chapter 11:14:

**<sup>CJB</sup> Matthew 11:14 *Indeed, if you are willing to accept it, he (John the Baptist) is Eliyahu, whose coming was predicted.***

Elijah's return was a prediction found in Malachi.

**<sup>CJB</sup> Malachi 3:23 *Look, I will send to you Eliyahu the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible Day of ADONAI.***

Let me point out that depending on your Bible version, this verse could also appear as Malachi 4:5 or 4:6.

It is here that we need to pause and take a couple of brief detours to explain some terms. Because John is called the Baptist, or in terms more familiar to the minds of Jews, "the immerser", I'd like to discuss the concept of baptism.

For Jews to be immersed (or **baptizein** in the language of the Greeks) was meant in the same sense as one might dye a piece of cloth. That is, one dips a cloth into a vat of colored dye and when removed that cloth has taken on the characteristics (the color) of that dye. However for Jews, this dipping and absorbing of characteristics was also meant in a religious context that revolved around ritual purity. Before a Jew could present his offering at the Temple he first

had to be immersed in one of the several **Mikvehs** that were located either in or near the Temple grounds. This immersion was in obedience to several passages in Leviticus, which prescribed this immersion and washing to remedy any of a number of causes for the worshipper to have become ritually impure.

I think the most important thing to notice is less the exact method of immersion, and more what the immersion is about. Historically for Jews, immersion was about ritual cleansing from spiritual impurity. But John said (and would amplify on this later) that this new immersion that he brought was NOT for cleansing from ritual purity but rather it was a cleansing from sin. Let me impress upon you that impurity and sin are two entirely different things and cause two entirely different human conditions and outcomes. Impurity is not sin. Impurity could almost always be set right with what I call a wash and a wait. That is, most of the reasons for becoming ritually impure could be solved by the worshiper immersing him or her self in living water and then waiting until a new day began (which was at sunset). So the remedy for impurity was usually quick and painless, and theoretically cost nothing (a few of the more serious reasons for impurity required more extensive procedures and a longer wait time). But the remedy for sin always involved an animal sacrifice upon the Temple altar, which ranged from inexpensive animals like birds, all the way up to the hefty price tag of a mature bull. Impurity was cured with water; sin was cured with the blood of an innocent animal. Jews were acutely aware of this difference.

Let me be clear: it is NOT that (according to John) an immersion in water now itself atoned for sin. Rather it is that when one trusted in the One that John was preparing the way for, immersing in the water now was symbolic of taking on the characteristics of the One who atoned for sins. We'll soon see that it was symbolic of identifying with the Christ. This also did not mean that immersion in water to remedy ritual impurity would end. Rather, it was that one would have to declare what the immersion was for.

While many Pharisees and Scribes would argue from the position of Jewish Tradition that there was indeed a kind of supernatural nature in the living water of a river or lake or in a **Mikveh** that had an actual physical effect upon the human body sufficient to remove the toxic impurity, others of the more learned and enlightened Jews understood that the effect of immersion was symbolic on the one hand, but also it was in obedience to the command of God on the other. So whatever physical effect that ritual impurity there might be on the body or soul was erased by God in response to righteous obedience to the Law of Moses; it

was not because water literally washed it away like dirt coming off the body when taking a bath.

It is interesting that although the term *baptizein* (baptize) means "to immerse", hundreds of years ago within the Church the practice of sprinkling began. How sprinkling can be seen as the same as immersing I don't know except that my suspicion is that as with nearly everything else in early gentile Christianity, goal number one of the Bishops was to separate gentile Christians from Jewish practices, including those that were biblically ordained. David Sterns notes that in the 16th and 17th centuries some in the Church revolted against this rather dubious substitution of sprinkling for immersion, and the first groups to break away appropriately called themselves "Baptists".

As to the actual immersion process, so far as the ancient documents tell us, a Jew was not "dunked" by another person. Rather it was a self-immersion. Even today there is often a supervisor at a *mikveh* to make sure that a person is 100% unclothed, or has no open wound on them, or that every last hair became submerged, and they watch for a few other violations as well. We do read that John is said to have baptized people, and this is usually taken to mean that he physically immersed worshippers. But his role was probably that of a supervisor, and to have the immersion candidate publicly declare what their immersion was meant to accomplish.

While I advocate for self immersion with supervision (it is, after all, the way it was done among the Jews who invented the process), I also don't take the position that if a person is "dunked" by another that such baptism is inferior or invalid. But as for sprinkling? I have a stronger position against that except in the case where a person lives in a primitive place where water is so scarce that immersion is simply not an option. Having a few drops of water flicked on you is not immersion, and therefore it is not baptizing. Neither is the practice of baptizing infants or small children efficacious because they have no choice of the will in the matter. If you are one who was sprinkled or perhaps baptized as a child before the age of accountability, my advice is to be properly baptized as soon as possible.

As a somewhat shorter detour, I now want to briefly talk about the term "The Kingdom of Heaven". This term has essentially the same meaning as, and is fully interchangeable with, "The Kingdom of God". So I will alternate those two terms throughout our study of Matthew. The reason that some Jews preferred the term

"Kingdom of Heaven" is because they didn't want to use the word "God" due to a taboo of saying His name that began around 300 B.C. I think it is fair to say that the more strict Jews..... no doubt many of the Holy Land Jews as opposed to the Diaspora Jews.... more carefully avoided using the term "God" in any context. It is noteworthy that Matthew is the one Gospel writer who almost exclusively uses the term "The Kingdom of Heaven" instead of "Kingdom of God" because as for the other 3 Gospel writers, it is the reverse. It is all the more reason that I view Matthew as not only the most "Jewish" of all the Gospels, but also that Matthew himself was a learned and pious Holy Land Jew.

The term "Kingdom of Heaven" or "Kingdom of God" is directly connected to the concept of ultimate restoration of God's Creation. Christ is quoted as saying:

**CJB Luke 17:20-21 <sup>20</sup> *The P'rushim asked Yeshua when the Kingdom of God would come. "The Kingdom of God," he answered, "does not come with visible signs; <sup>21</sup> nor will people be able to say, 'Look! Here it is!' or, 'Over there!' Because, you see, the Kingdom of God is among you.*"**

The CJB along with the majority of Bible translations say that the Kingdom of God is "among you". It implies that Christ Himself is the Kingdom of God, which is not biblical. The word being translated is **entos**, which the various Greek Lexicons says means "within" or "inside". It does not mean "in the midst" and certainly not "among". In other words, The Kingdom of Heaven is not a place or a time. Rather it is a state of being. It is a state of being whereby all has been restored to the original perfection. All is new and the Universe is forever free from sin and death. In the biblical context it also means that all living beings quite naturally glorify God as the ruler over all things.

But what does John the Baptist mean by the Kingdom of Heaven **is near**? First, it doesn't indicate proximity since the Kingdom of Heaven isn't a time or a place or a creature. Rather it is that the arrival of the state of being called the Kingdom of Heaven is a process that involves many stages. John the Baptist's presence and ministry is its beginning because he is the one who will prepare the way and announce the arrival of God's agent, Yeshua, who will eventually bring it about. The Kingdom of Heaven will only be in a partial state of being until The Devil and his minions are no more, and the new heavens and new earth arrive. Even the Millennial Kingdom (the 1000 years reign of Messiah) will not be the fullest fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven because we know that sin and death and even rebellion against God will occur during that span of time and especially at its

end.

For now, in our day, by trusting in Our Savior Yeshua, we can have the Kingdom of Heaven, such as it currently is, within us. That is, its ideals and goals, its hopes and helps, will be present within us. We can choose to live holy lives that reflect the perfection of the Kingdom of Heaven, in determined obedience to God, as we wait for the Kingdom in all of its completeness to arrive universally. Let me say this another way; for now only in Believers..... hopefully you..... does the Kingdom of Heaven exist on earth.

Verse 4 says that John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. In 2Kings 1:8, we read this about the Prophet Elijah.

<sup>CJB</sup> **2 Kings 1:8** *"He was a hairy man," they answered him, "with a leather belt around his waist." He said, "It was Eliyahu from Tishbe."*

Interestingly other Bible versions say:

<sup>NAB</sup> **2 Kings 1:8** *They replied, "He wore a hairy garment with a leather belt around his waist." "It is Elijah the Tishbite!" he exclaimed.*

I cannot prove which is the correct translation. However since Matthew seeks to connect Elijah and John together, with John as essentially the new Elijah, it can be no coincidence that John's appearance was described as hairy and with a leather belt, just as was Elijah's.

Eating locusts and wild honey is not the Jews' regular diet, yet it was survival food. But as the ascetic monk that John was, that this is what he was said to have eaten fits his persona.

Certain kinds of locusts were considered kosher food for Jews (Leviticus 11 spells this out). It may not sound particularly appetizing to us, but the Hebrews weren't, and aren't, the only culture that finds eating certain insects to be an acceptable addition to their diet. What is the "wild honey" that John also lived off of? Probably it is bee honey taken from colonies of bees that made hives in trees, in carcasses of dead animals, etc.; in other words bee hives that were not cultivated by humans. I say this because until the last couple of years it was believed that man-made bee hives and bee husbandry was a relatively late development. However about 3 years ago, in an archaeological dig in Rahov in



northern Israel, a large cache of man-made beehives was discovered and dated to about 900 B.C. (just after the time of King Solomon). These are by far the oldest beehives ever discovered anywhere in the world. So it seems that the current scholarly take that the biblical term "honey" meant a sweet extract taken from dates is going to have to be revamped. And therefore there truly was cultivated honey and there was also wild honey, both a product of honeybees, just as we might find it today.

The point is this: John the Baptist lived a life not connected to regular Jewish society, and he did it by choice and by divine inspiration. He wore the outfit of an ancient prophet no doubt to identify himself with that profession, if not the actual person of Elijah. In fact I think it is reasonable to ask ourselves what the attraction was to John such that in verse 5 we read that people from Jerusalem and all Judea went to him to be immersed. Their purpose, we're told, was to confess their sins. This was in no way symbolic (at that moment) of a conscious identity with Christ because Christ hadn't yet begun His ministry. It seems probable to me that many people in the Holy Land region in and around Jerusalem thought that John indeed was the prophesied return of Elijah. He looked like it, dressed like it, and acted like it. What is it they say? If it walks like a duck, quakes like a duck, and looks like a duck..... it's probably a duck.

It has long been known (and can be easily gleaned from the New Testament) that common everyday Jews in that era felt so oppressed by Rome that they were certain they had to be living in the prophesied End Times. And since the Prophet Malachi said that Elijah would come before the Day of the Lord..... meaning that Elijah would re-appear in the End Times..... then it makes sense that John would be seen as Elijah, whether he confessed to it or not. In fact when directly confronted about it as recorded in John 1:21 The Baptist famously said that he was NOT Elijah. I suspect that in the same way Yeshua would be so elusive at first about admitting whether or not He was the Messiah, so it was that John was elusive enough about whether or not he was Elijah that even when he answered "no", it didn't matter to many of the people. They were convinced that he was the 2nd coming of Elijah. That of course is only my opinion.

It is difficult to understand exactly why the people came to be immersed if it wasn't to see Elijah. It doesn't help much to read the other Gospels on this matter because they each give the meaning for folks wanting John's baptism as something a little different. One says it was for forgiveness of sins, another says it was for repenting, and Matthew says in one verse it was for confession and in

another for repenting. John the Baptist is also quoted as saying it was for avoiding God's wrath. This is probably (at least partly) why the next verse has the religious authorities from Jerusalem suddenly coming to investigate. If this was indeed Elijah, or just another holy man who wanted to gain a following, they needed to know.

In verse 7 we find representatives of the Pharisees and the Sadducees coming to John to question him. John obviously did not welcome them, calling them vipers to their faces. But he also sarcastically asked who had warned them about the soon coming of God's wrath, implying that they didn't know about it or weren't ready for it. There's so much to untangle here. First let's grasp that we have representatives of both halves of the Jews' dual religious system of that era showing up. The Pharisees represented the Synagogue system and the Sadducees the Temple system. The Pharisees and Sadducees were uneasy rivals, but they weren't enemies. They were certainly unified in the motive of wanting to guard their religious territory and authority; so the growing flocks of people seeking out John sent up a red flag. That John characterized the two representatives' visit as trying to avoid God's coming wrath once again plays right into the Elijah and End Times scenario because Elijah was believed throughout Judaism to appear shortly before the Day of the Lord when God would indeed pour out His wrath.

So apparently the common folks coming to John believed they were living in the End Times. Without doubt the Apostles Paul and Peter believed they were living in the Last Days and taught it to anyone who'd listen. The people were fearful of it and so possibly came to participate in a ritual immersion from this very strange man (who many thought was Elijah) in order to perhaps avoid God's wrath in some way that just isn't clear. Would any of us or our neighbors be much different?

I have no doubt that when all Hell breaks loose and the arrival of the End of Days becomes apparent to those who at least harbor some measure of religious interest, people will want a speedy way to purchase some kind of personal protection against God's wrath. You can bet they will be accommodated by throngs of unscrupulous Pastors, Priests, and Rabbis all too happy to take their money in return for a ritual, an amulet, a special prayer, a large donation, anything that gives those frightened folks false comfort.

In no way am I suggesting that this is what John was doing; but I suspect that a

good portion of the crowd was coming in belief that they were going to get to see Elijah and they didn't want to miss an opportunity to be made right with God in those perilous times. There were plenty of charlatans seeking profit in John's day, playing upon the fears and vulnerability of the Jewish people, even though he wasn't one of them. But there is sufficient historical proof that these folks of the 1st century were not unlike Westerners of the 21st century that will go and seek out any number of religious sounding people who claim they have the antidote to fix their finances, to cure illnesses, to predict the future, and to protect from eternal damnation.

Verse 8 is one that needs to connect deeply within our souls especially in these turbulent times we live in. It has John saying to the Pharisee and Sadducee representatives that if they are sincerely coming to confess or repent then they need to bear fruit to prove it. This concept of fruit, meaning works and deeds, as the necessary proof of one's faith in the God of Israel is stated several times in various of the New Testament books. But the one statement that is perhaps the most well known is found in James.

**CJB James 2:15-18 <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, <sup>16</sup> and someone says to him, "Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!" without giving him what he needs, what good does it do? <sup>17</sup> Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead. <sup>18</sup> But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. Show me this faith of yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions!**

Felling sorry for people in need is not the same thing as taking action to help people in need. Good fruit is not our nice thoughts and well wishes; it is physical, tangible deeds that we do to alleviate people's sufferings. While James uses this good fruit as proof of our faith, John uses it as proof of our sincerity. John then takes it one step farther by telling these religious authorities that simply being a Hebrew descended from Abraham (the Father of all Hebrews) is not good enough to be in good stead with God. That is, being a Jew doesn't negate the need for personal forgiveness of sins, restoration and redemption..... or for performing good deeds. The take away is that sincere trust in God can only be proven by one's outward deeds and actions, which obviously begins with obedience to God. One's affiliation to a group or one's family heritage does not include or exclude anyone from having peace with God. However, if there is no obedience, and there are no good deeds and works to go along with a professed faith..... actions and fruit as prescribed by the Holy Scriptures.... then one's faith

is to be legitimately doubted. This doesn't just concern a doubt of your true faith by the people in your social circle. The lack of good fruit ought to first and foremost be an alarm signal to one's self that perhaps we've been deceiving ourselves all along.

As our Messiah so soberly warned us:

**CJB Matthew 7:19-23** <sup>19</sup> *Any tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire!* <sup>20</sup> *So you will recognize them by their fruit.* <sup>21</sup> *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, only those who do what my Father in heaven wants.* <sup>22</sup> *On that Day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we expel demons in your name? Didn't we perform many miracles in your name?'* <sup>23</sup> *Then I will tell them to their faces, 'I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!'*

We'll continue in Matthew chapter 3 next time.