

## THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

### Lesson 39, Chapter 11

From the panoramic view perhaps one of the main take-aways from all 4 Gospel accounts is that Yeshua was misunderstood by His own Jewish countrymen; and surprisingly by those one might think would have understood Him best. Since it is various individuals and groups of people that misunderstand who He is and what He has come to do, He employs several different methods to inform them. Yet at times His responses to questions asked of Him seem awfully cryptic not only to those He is speaking, but even to His followers that would come later; followers from all eras.... including our own.

Chapter 11 of the Gospel of Matthew opens with just such an issue and oddly enough the person of interest who seems to be confused by who Jesus is: John the Baptist. Let's begin by re-reading the opening section of Matthew 11.

#### **RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 11:1 - 19**

The setting is this: Christ has finished instructing His 12 Disciples for the time being, and sent them on their way to the Jewish people of the Galilee. He too is now traveling primarily around the Galilee to various towns and villages teaching and preaching, but doing it alone. Nonetheless, the crowds are ever present. Some miles away, John the Baptist languishes in prison, very likely at Machaerus, Herod Antipas's fortress city that lies about 15 miles to the east of the mouth of the Jordan River. Knowing that his end would happen there, soon, John uses two of his own disciples to take an urgent message to Yeshua. The message is: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for someone else?" Even when we take into account the Jewish cultural aspect of this question, a plain reading is that John has doubts about Yeshua's purpose and

mission, and about His place in redemption history. Yet Christianity so elevates the Baptist's person and status, placing him on a lofty pedestal of near spiritual perfection, that Christian Bible scholars more often than not have tried to find some other meaning to John's inquiry of Christ that side-steps the obvious.

A most popular option among theologians is that Matthew is mistaken, or perhaps his words have been corrupted in the oldest Greek manuscripts we have of Matthew's Gospel. In other words, to easily solve the problem, it is dismissed; John's inquiry about Yeshua's identity never actually happened. Their rationale for this is because John is recorded as saying some things concerning Yeshua that seem to mean he is quite settled as to who Yeshua is.

**CJB Matthew 3:11** *It's true that I am immersing you in water so that you might turn from sin to God; but the one coming after me is more powerful than I- I'm not worthy even to carry his sandals- and he will immerse you in the Ruach HaKodesh and in fire.*

That is followed up by:

**CJB Matthew 3:17** *and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; I am well pleased with him."*

In the Gospel of John we read:

**CJB John 1:29** *The next day, Yochanan saw Yeshua coming toward him and said, "Look! God's lamb! The one who is taking away the sin of the world!"*

All of these statements, assume so many Bible scholars, amount to John saying "here is the Messiah". So, reasons most Bible commentators that I have reviewed, there is no way John can say these things and then turn around later and ask if Yeshua is the one to come, or if there is another. Bottom line: he never said it.

Another popular option is that John is sending a coded message to Yeshua, and even Yeshua's response to John is coded. The premise is that Rome was always on the look out for the next "Messiah" of the Jews. Not because Rome in any way saw this Messiah from a spiritual or religious perspective, but rather because they well knew that the Jewish people believed that their Messiah would be a great warrior leader that would lead them in a successful rebellion against Rome.

Many would-be Messiah's had come and gone by Yeshua's day; and more would come after His death. Therefore the reasoning is that John and Yeshua were using coded words to communicate so that only Jews would understand but the Romans would be none the wiser.

Several of the Early Church Fathers decided that John's question to Yeshua was but a veiled teaching lesson for the sake of his followers. That is, while John never actually doubted, the construction of his question was intended to instruct his followers in faithfulness. There are a handful of other options and solutions for what the Church has typically seen as this "problem" question of John the Baptist, but these should suffice to make my point.

I want to briefly address the two most popular solutions and begin by clarifying that the rather common claim that John had made statements proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah is no more true than saying that Jesus has publicly called Himself the Messiah. Such statements are assumed and often read back into the Gospel accounts, but they are not actually there. Christians, in hindsight and using our unique brand of religious jargon, take the statements that God said from Heaven that this is His Son in whom He is pleased, and that John calls Jesus the Lamb of God, as equivalent titles to the title of Messiah. This is not necessarily true from a 1st century Jewish cultural viewpoint. In earlier lessons I have explained that all the Kings of Israel were called God's Son or the Son of God. In no way was "Son of God" considered an exclusive, or alternate, title for the Messiah. For John, who after immersing Yeshua heard God's booming voice from Heaven making the pronouncement that Yeshua was God's Son, this could just as easily have meant to him that Yeshua was to be Israel's next earthly king.... which, by the way, was the nearly universal hope and expectation of the Jewish people, which kept Rome on edge.

As for the matter of Yeshua being God's Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. The first thing we must look at is the fuller context of where the Baptist's statement to that effect is made in John's Gospel.

**CJB John 1:28-34 <sup>28</sup> All this took place in Beit-Anyah, east of the Yarden, where Yochanan was immersing. <sup>29</sup> The next day, Yochanan saw Yeshua coming toward him and said, "Look! God's lamb! The one who is taking away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup> This is the man I was talking about when I said, 'After me is coming someone who has come to rank above me, because he existed before me.' <sup>31</sup> I myself did not know who he was, but the reason I**

*came immersing with water was so that he might be made known to Isra'el."* <sup>32</sup> *Then Yochanan gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and remaining on him."* <sup>33</sup> *I myself did not know who he was, but the one who sent me to immerse in water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining, this is the one who immerses in the Ruach HaKodesh.'* <sup>34</sup> *And I have seen and borne witness that this is the Son of God."*

Notice a couple of points in this passage. First, it is twice maintained that John the Baptist didn't know who Yeshua of Nazareth was. Second, after immersing Yeshua and hearing God's pronouncement, John's conclusion is NOT that Jesus is the Messiah (in the sense of being the divine Redeemer of Israel). Rather it is that "This is the Son of God". Again; to Jews of that day that phrase "Son of God" meant an anointed Israelite king. The Spirit descending upon Jesus that was illustrated and compared to a dove coming to rest, WAS Yeshua's anointing. Customarily, for centuries, a new king of Israel was literally anointed with olive oil (usually by a Prophet or the High Priest). The purpose of this anointing with oil was to symbolize the **Ruach HaKodesh**... the Holy Spirit... descending upon that king (the same thing that happened to Christ). In fact the English term "Messiah", which is often mistakenly said to mean Savior, is in fact a transliteration of the Hebrew Word **mashiach**; and **mashiach** literally means "anointed one". So biblical Israelite kings (and prophets) were regularly referred to as anointed ones, "**mashiach**", messiah, because they were indeed specially anointed with oil for service to God. A King of Israel was considered to have been sent or set apart by God, and in a sense adopted by God, and thus always in the Old Testament he was termed a Son of God.

No doubt John understood that Jesus was more than a typical Israelite King or Prophet. And, He was more than a typical **Tzadik**. But we do NOT find John ever uttering the word "Messiah" as the identification of Yeshua; and neither do we find (to this point) Yeshua uttering that word about Himself. Let me be clear so that there can be no mistake: I am not saying that this should bring doubt to our minds about Jesus as Messiah. We have the benefit of 2000 years of hindsight, and so we know firmly, without reservation, that Yeshua is God's divine Messiah and Our Savior. However this was not at all understood among the people Jesus's ministry encountered up to the point of John the Baptist's execution, because Jesus had not clearly said so..... even though Bible academics often try to put those words into John's and Yeshua's mouths.

As for the issue of John identifying Yeshua as "the Lamb that takes away sin". Lambs had been used for centuries virtually daily, by the thousands, as sacrifices burnt up on the Temple altar to take away the sins of the penitent Jews who brought them. Therefore it is questionable to me that John was envisioning Yeshua in the same light as the Passover Lamb of the Exodus because the Passover Lamb had little to do with sin. Rather, the Passover Lamb had to do with delivery from bondage from an oppressing nation, and God averting judgment from His faithful worshippers. Christians sometimes try to mince words and say things like "in the Old Testament sins were atoned for, but in the New Testament sins are taken away". That is a contrivance that attempts to make "sins atoned for" and "sins taken away" as having a fundamentally different meaning. In fact, in the Yom Kippur Scapegoat ritual, a goat is sent off into the wilderness to its death as symbolic of sins being taken away and returned to their source. But that doesn't mean the end of sin itself, as it is sometimes taken among some Christian denominations to mean.

Here's the point: John the Baptist sent his message to Christ about whether He was the one to come, because he simply wasn't certain as to exactly what or who Yeshua was. Just as today there are vast gulfs among denominations and various solid Bible commentators in their understanding of the Book of Revelation concerning how those ancient prophecies about an Apocalypse that is still future to us are to going to play out, so it was for the Jews of Christ's day about the nature and identification of a Deliverer that would be sent from God. They didn't have the insights and hindsight that we have today to know precisely who Jesus was, or how to identify the true Savior; or even exactly what he came to do. The Jewish people had a number of prophecies (that were even ancient to them) to try and glean information about a Messiah; but for them, interpreting those prophecies could mean a number of different things..... even though in the end history would show which one of those interpretations would turn out to be correct. But it wasn't for the lack of trying.

John the Baptist (despite being rather weird) was an ordinary man. It's only that God used him in an extraordinary way, and His cousin Yeshua held him in the highest regard. But John had faults and quirks and frailties and seems to even have gotten some things wrong. Apparently he was also kind of hot headed, imprudent, and had a hard time controlling his tongue, because he was arrested and put in prison for the crime of publicly denouncing Herod Antipas's marriage to Herodias. Why would he do that? For what good purpose in service to God might that have served? If John truly understood that Yeshua was the divine Messiah,

why would he continue to maintain a separate flock of disciples of his own that openly questioned why Yeshua's disciples would believe different things about fasting, prayer, mourning, etc., than they did? Things simply weren't sorted out enough, just yet, such that John could have a settled understanding of Yeshua. Therefore, we need to give the imprisoned John a break, and at the same time trust the Scriptures that we claim that we do. The man was under incredible stress, knowing he had days, at most, to live; and he simply did not know if Yeshua was the "one to come" or (as great a miracle worker and teacher as He was) was He a precursor to another.

In fact, what did John mean by asking Yeshua if He was "the one to come"? I can only surmise that he means the one that he firmly believed he was supposed to make a way for in the wilderness, and to his mind he had already accomplished this task. And if that was to be the peak purpose of his life's labors, and his service to God, wouldn't he want to know for certain if Yeshua was that one? Or if maybe another prophet like himself might also be making a way in the wilderness for yet another person to arrive? So when we re-make John back into a real person, and stop injecting Christian doctrines and dubious assumptions into the equation, we can properly understand what is taking place in this scene. And this conclusion is further verified when we read Yeshua's response to John.

Starting in verse 4 Jesus tells John's 2 disciples to take back with them both what they have seen with their own eyes, and what they are hearing; that is, what they are witnessing along with the testimony of others. So, not surprisingly, they no doubt saw Christ do at least some of the miraculous things they had until then only heard about. But more, for proof of who He is, Yeshua characterizes His deeds in a way that at least the more learned Jews might have understood (and I assume He believes John would understand). He goes on to say that He has healed the blind, made lame people to walk, cleansed the unclean from **Tzara'at**, cured the deaf and even resurrected dead people back to life. This is not a random choice of accomplishments. What Jesus does is to list a series of prophetic fulfillments in Him (in verses 4 and 5) that are taken from several messianic predictions in the Book of Isaiah.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Isaiah 26:19** *Your dead will live, my corpses will rise; awake and sing, you who dwell in the dust; for your dew is like the morning dew, and the earth will bring the ghosts to life.*

<sup>CJB</sup> **Isaiah 29:18** *On that day the deaf will hear the words of a book, and out*

*of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.*

<sup>CJB</sup> **Isaiah 35:5-6** <sup>5</sup> *Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped;* <sup>6</sup> *then the lame man will leap like a deer, and the mute person's tongue will sing. For in the desert, springs will burst forth, streams of water in the 'Aravah;*

<sup>CJB</sup> **Isaiah 61:1** *The Spirit of Adonai ELOHIM is upon me, because ADONAI has anointed me to announce good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted; to proclaim freedom to the captives, to let out into light those bound in the dark;*

Included is the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1 because of the mention of Good News to the poor. But I don't want you to miss the matter of freedom to the captives. This isn't about the Baptist being in jail because clearly Yeshua has no intent of finding a way to get John released. Rather this is about the messianic prophecy of Psalm 68:18 that Paul would rightly understand and speak about in Ephesians 4:8. It referred to Yeshua, after His death and resurrection, descending into Abraham's Bosom to let the righteous dead free that they might go to Heaven.

Verse 6 (which continues the response to John's inquiry) concludes with: ***And how blessed is anyone who is not offended by Me.*** Although this is a general statement, Jesus was still reacting to John's question. We find the same words in Luke 7:23, so these haven't come from Matthew's own mind. Yeshua has pronounced a beatitude... a blessing....to end His 6 brief clauses about who He is. Ben Witherington III has noticed that when you convert into Aramaic those 6 clauses plus the blessing that ends them, you get something quite poetic. It is becoming more and more clear among Bible historians that Aramaic was widely spoken among the Jewish people in Jesus's time, and Jesus was fluent in it as well.

English translations of verse 6 vary widely from meaning how blessed is anyone who is not offended **by** Me, to how blessed is anyone who is not offended **because** of Me; even how blessed is anyone who doesn't **stumble over** Me. Frankly, I'm not certain how best to take the meaning although I don't understand why John might be blessed by not being offended by Christ; Christ has certainly not said anything offensive to him that is recorded. If Mr. Witherington is right and the words of Christ were originally said in the form of Aramaic poetic saying, that may be the key behind properly understanding the

meaning behind Yeshua's words. Therefore I want to put forward one intriguing possibility.

One of the issues that may have caused John the Baptist to doubt or be offended (so to speak) that Yeshua was the Messiah is because John believed that Judgment Day was supposed to have arrived along with the Messiah; and as of his jailing it certainly hadn't. For Jewish society of his day, it wasn't miracle healings that were the expected sign of the Messiah, but rather the Messiah would be God's hand of judgment on the Romans who were oppressing the Jews, and secondarily upon those Jews who were viewed as wicked. So one has to reasonably imagine that John is making the calculation that if Yeshua were the Messiah, then where is the divine judgment? And if there is no judgment, then probably Yeshua is NOT "the one who is coming" (which would have been a great disappointment to John). John expressed His view on the relationship between the Messiah and Judgment Day in Matthew back in chapter 3.

**CJB Matthew 3:1 *It was during those days that Yochanan the Immerser arrived in the desert of Y'hudah and began proclaiming the message, <sup>2</sup> "Turn from your sins to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!" <sup>3</sup> This is the man Yesha'yahu was talking about when he said, "The voice of someone crying out: 'In the desert prepare the way of ADONAI! Make straight paths for him!'" <sup>4</sup> Yochanan wore clothes of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> People went out to him from Yerushalayim, from all Y'hudah, and from the whole region around the Yarden. <sup>6</sup> Confessing their sins, they were immersed by him in the Yarden River. <sup>7</sup> But when Yochanan saw many of the P'rushim and Tz'dukim coming to be immersed by him, he said to them, "You snakes! Who warned you to escape the coming punishment? <sup>8</sup> If you have really turned from your sins to God, produce fruit that will prove it! <sup>9</sup> And don't suppose you can comfort yourselves by saying, 'Avraham is our father'! For I tell you that God can raise up for Avraham sons from these stones! <sup>10</sup> Already the axe is at the root of the trees, ready to strike; every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown in the fire! <sup>11</sup> It's true that I am immersing you in water so that you might turn from sin to God; but the one coming after me is more powerful than I- I'm not worthy even to carry his sandals- and he will immerse you in the Ruach HaKodesh and in fire. <sup>12</sup> He has with him his winnowing fork; and he will clear out his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn but burning up the straw with unquenchable fire!"***



So John is loudly and unequivocally proclaiming that when the Kingdom of Heaven arrives, so does God's judgment. And that the one John is paving the way in the wilderness for .... the one whose sandals John is unfit to even carry.... will be the same one who winnows the Lord's harvest and burns up the straw (the chaff, the unrighteous) with a terrible fire. All of these were common Judgment Day terms and beliefs in the 1st century so obviously John is speaking about Judgment Day and the divinely sent one who will usher in the Apocalypse. So the problem is that Jesus is here but God's judgment isn't. The Kingdom of Heaven has arrived, but the apocalyptic End hasn't happened. Yeshua's response essentially says to John: right aisle, wrong pew. Yeshua lists Isaiah's messianic prophecies that He has publicly fulfilled, and so essentially tells John to draw his own conclusions. Yeshua isn't bringing the judgment with Him that Isaiah and other Prophets foretold and the Jewish people expected. Instead, for now, He is bringing with Him the other things Isaiah spoke of: the good things. The Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven accompanied with things that must come before Judgment Day: healing and miracles.

How were John and the Jewish people to untangle this? Understand: the idea of a 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Latter Days didn't exist in the minds of Jewish religious authorities. The idea of 2 separate appearances of a Messiah wasn't widely known or accepted. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century the main proof of a man being the God-sent Messiah was that the End of Days and judgment upon Rome would come with him. It is these very same issues that vex Christianity to this day, and has elicited all kinds of beliefs and Church doctrines concerning the sequence and timing of Christ's advent, whether or not the End Times has already happened, whether or not the Kingdom of Heaven is here now, is there going to be a Rapture of Believers..... and I could list a dozen more issues that are unresolved (to put it nicely).

So taking all of this into consideration, in John's eyes who is Yeshua? And perhaps who is He even in the eyes of Yeshua's own disciples? The expected Judgment has not happened. The world has not ended. Yeshua hasn't named Himself as the Messiah nor even as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. He has also not said He is the Prophet Elijah. But.... He has said that He is the Son of Man. It's no wonder that John is a bit confused. And I'm not at all sure that the answers Yeshua sent back to John's inquiry sorted things out for him.

Jesus is continuing to teach His people and His followers what Scripture says about Him and what prophecies He will visibly fulfill, versus what Jewish traditions say about a Messiah (especially that he would lead the Jews into a

successful revolt against Rome and into a new Golden Age of Israel). He **is** doing the amazing things that prophetic Scripture says He would do, as opposed to introducing Himself by title and counting that as sufficient proof.

I want to pause momentarily in hopes of making an impact. What the Jews believed in Christ's day, they trusted as truth. They thought.. they were certain... that they were correct and that their belief in their correctness about a Messiah was well founded because the vast majority of Jewish society agreed. But as Yeshua was regularly demonstrating to them.... especially in His Sermon on the Mount.... they didn't really know Holy Scripture. The average Jew got his and her religious training in the local synagogue, operated mostly by the Pharisees, who had their own interpretations, agenda and set of doctrines. Whenever Scripture was taught, it was taught through this lens and intended to fortify and validate the doctrines that they already held; certainly not to hold those beliefs up to the light of the Bible to examine them. It is the same today within the institutional Church.

CNN took a poll at least a decade ago and most regular Church goers they polled listed a series of Christian platitudes that they claimed were biblical in their source, when in fact most were not. I can tell you from first hand experience that several years ago at a preparation course for door to door evangelism, very few who came could define the term "sin" beyond "anything God doesn't want you to do". I knew people who thought that Christ was the first Christian. I knew others who said that there was no point to studying the Bible because if God felt they needed to know something, their Pastor would tell them. The Church today is very much like the Synagogue was 2000 years ago. The Bible is present but mostly in name only. Rather, it is the interpretation of the Bible that is taught and few of the congregation know what is actually in The Word itself. Therefore the understanding of what a Messiah is, what He does and why He does it, who God is, the moral principles we are commanded to live by, what is ahead of us and more are taught not according to Scripture, but according to Christian traditions. Such a folly cost the Jewish people of Yeshua's day dearly because they couldn't square what they were taught to believe versus what Jesus showed them was actually there in the Torah and the Prophets.

Seed of Abraham Torah Class isn't Jesus. But, it is our purpose to help as many Believers, Jew or gentile, as much as possible to have their eyes opened to God's Word. When we learn His Word, then our questions (like John's question to Yeshua) get answered. But more, when we heed His Word we learn how to obey God, which He says over and over is the basis for our relationship with Him.

We also inoculate ourselves against confusion, fear, untruths and heresy that can cost us dearly even when we are so very certain we have our spiritual houses in order.

The message Yeshua was sending back to John must have been in the form it was brought to Him: verbally. It may well have been that the 2 disciples John sent asked Jesus John's question publicly and so Christ answered publicly. Verse 7 continues with Yeshua having some things to say about John the Baptist to the crowds. Likely this took place after John's disciples left. Interestingly we see that the subject changes from "who is Jesus" to "who is John". Thus after using the response to John as a public teaching about Himself as the Messiah, now Yeshua wants to say some things about John. Or, it could also be that, as some Bible scholars claim, verse 7 begins a different and separate episode and since it concerned John the Baptist Matthew simply inserted it here. You be the judge. Either way, the following verses contain the same meaning.

Yeshua asks the crowds who they went out to see (when they went out to see John the Baptist). This question is meant to get the people to think. It also assumes that some or much of the particular crowd He was talking to had indeed gone to see and hear the Baptist, and had been immersed by Him. Otherwise the "what did you go out in the desert to see, reeds swaying in the wind" seems disconnected. It makes me think that Jesus had traveled south a ways so as to encounter people (a crowd) from Judea, where the desert was located (in contrast the Galilee is hilly, fertile, and has the large fresh water Sea of Galilee for fishing). Reeds were usually located in shallow bodies of water or along river banks; but such sights were commonplace. So the meaning is kind of a gentle sarcasm that says "obviously you didn't travel out into the desert wilderness to see something you could see every day". Or, Jesus continues, did you go out to the desert to see some well dressed person? More gentle sarcasm. A well dressed person was usually a king or a prominent wealthy aristocrat. But not only would people not usually travel just to get a glimpse of them, but such a person of status and wealth certainly wouldn't be standing around out in the barren desert wilderness, so the people wouldn't have foolishly gone seeking someone like that, which might just happen to be out in the desert. In our day, we would say it is a no-brainer.

So, asks Yeshua, why did they go out? Finally.... no more sarcasm but rather the answer to the question. They went out to the desert to see a prophet. A man they believed to be a true prophet of God because of his sudden appearance at a

time of national oppression and moral degradation within the Jewish religious system and among many segments of Jewish society. But also because of John's message that brought hope that the end of the long wait for a Deliverer had arrived. Jesus says John is more than a prophet (more meaning a run-of-the-mill prophet) and then proceeds to quote from Malachi 3:1.

**CJB Malachi 3:1 *"Look! I am sending my messenger to clear the way before me; and the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple. Yes, the messenger of the covenant, in whom you take such delight- look! Here he comes," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot.***

In Matthew 11 verse 10, Christ plainly says about John the Baptist that he is the one about which Malachi speaks. Therefore John is that messenger. But there is more we need to take from this simple quote. Remember: there weren't chapters and verses in Yeshua's day. So the way to direct a person to a passage in Scripture was to quote a snippet from it. The hearer was then to proceed to find (or recall) the whole of the passage... not merely the snippet that was quoted. So when we read a bit further into this passage from the Book of Malachi we get to this:

**CJB Malachi 3:23-24 <sup>23</sup> *Look, I will send to you Eliyahu the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible Day of ADONAI.* <sup>24</sup> *He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers; otherwise I will come and strike the land with complete destruction.*" [Look, I will send to you Eliyahu the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible Day of ADONAI.]**

Thus the messenger is Elijah the prophet. Elijah never died and was taken up to Heaven still alive. In a couple more verses Yeshua will directly address that. In the meantime, Yeshua continues to extol the high place in God's eyes of John the Baptist by saying that among those born of women (a fancy way of saying of all human beings ever born), there has not arisen anyone greater than him. But then Yeshua colors that statement with a qualifier..... a "however". He says that the least in the Kingdom of Heaven will be greater than John. This is another of those statements that cause headaches for Bible scholars and heartburn for Bible teachers. Clearly Christ is making some kind of a word play to make a point. But what it is it? Bible academics have rightly pointed to the part of the statement that says "the one who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven" as the key phrase to unlocking Yeshua's meaning. So, what is Christ getting at about "the

least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he (John)"? All sorts of answers with their strange twists and turns have been put forward including that Christ was actually referring to Himself (if you can believe it!). But for me the obvious answer has been overlooked.

**CJB Matthew 5:17-20 <sup>17</sup> "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete. <sup>18</sup> Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened. <sup>19</sup> So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you that unless your righteousness is far greater than that of the Torah-teachers and P'rushim, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven!**

Yeshua is repeating a term He used in this famous passage from His Sermon on the Mount that had to do with an individual's eligibility for membership in the Kingdom of Heaven, as well as a member's status within a hierarchy of members of the Kingdom.

Next week we'll begin with just how this might pertain to John the Baptist.