

Matthew 3:1-2

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Matthew changes the scene from Nazareth to the Judean wilderness. He describes Jesus's childhood to just before He begins His public ministry. Matthew introduces John the Baptizer and his main message: "Repent, because the Kingdom of Heaven is coming very soon."

The parallel accounts of this event are found in Mark 1:4, Luke 3:2-4, and John 1:6-8.

Matthew informs his readers of a shift in time within his Gospel narrative through the phrase, *Now in those days*. The time is just before Jesus begins what is often referred to as His "earthly ministry" which began in the vicinity of 26-27 A.D. The Gospel writer, Luke, informs us that "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar... the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:1-3). The place is *the Judean wilderness*, a rugged landscape north of the Dead Sea located between the mountains of Jericho to the west and the Jordan River to the east.

The central figure is *John* "the Baptizer," more commonly referred to as *John the Baptist*. *John* was Jesus's kin. He was born to Mary's relative, Elizabeth, and her husband, Zacharias the priest. (The unusual and divinely orchestrated circumstances announcing *John's* birth are recorded in Luke 1:5-25.)

From Luke's account, we know that John was already living *in the wilderness* when God commissioned him to begin preaching. Matthew simply states that *John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea*. The fact that John was already "in the wilderness," coupled with his extremely strict lifestyle (Matthew 3:4) provides a clue that *John* the Baptizer may have belonged to a group of Essenes.

Though not mentioned by name in scripture, the Essenes were a Jewish sect that had largely withdrawn from the wider society. They removed themselves from the influence of Pagan cultures, first from the Seleucids and later from Rome. Neither did they participate in the Temple ceremonies administered by the Sadducees. The Essenes' limited way of life reflected their limited company. Rejecting luxury and finer things, they chose instead to focus on studying and copying the Jewish scriptures. Essenes were known to have lived in the monastic village of Qumran, between 200 B.C. (a generation before the Maccabean Revolt ousted Seleucid tyrants) and 70 A.D. (when Rome destroyed the temple and forcefully put down the Jewish uprising). Qumran was located due east of Jerusalem near the Dead Sea. It was in the caves near Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947.

The message *John* was *preaching in the wilderness of Judea* was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The Greek word for "repent" is "meta-noia." It literally means "to change one's mind or one's thinking." John's message was simple: "Turn from your old ways because there is about to be a complete change of who's in charge."

Whoever is in charge makes the rules. It is generally considered right and wise therefore to adhere to the rules of the one who is in authority. Paul tells the faithful Christian believers in Rome, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." (Romans 13:1) Under the PAX ROMANA or "Peace of Rome," people of other faiths (including the Jews) were allowed to continue practicing their faith so long as they paid their taxes and acknowledged Rome's authority.

It was challenging for Jews living under Roman rule to be faithful to God. Some, like the Jews who compromised with Rome (the Herodians) eagerly obliged, embracing Rome's pagan culture and sexually immoral lifestyle. Others, like the Zealots (another Jewish political movement), were dedicated to ending Roman rule. The Zealots stealthily prepared for the day when they could openly overthrow the Roman yoke. Some, like the Essenes, withdrew from the temporal affairs of this world altogether to study the eternal truths of God's word. Others, like the Sadducees and Pharisees, sought to continue the Jewish traditions and customs active and alive among the people under the grim shadow of Roman rule.

But no matter where one was from or with whom they were affiliated, everyone in Judea felt Rome's presence. Among many, apparently including the Essenes, there was great longing for the Messiah to appear; for God's Anointed King to set Israel free and usher in a golden age among His people.

The people of Judea's hearts were pricked by *John* the Baptizer's message. *Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.* It is time to change your thinking. It is time to change your ways. It is time to change your behavior and allegiance because God is about to usher in His *kingdom*. The fact that this will be a Messianic kingdom is apparent, for John proclaimed that the kingdom would be *of heaven*. The moment you have been waiting for is about to arrive. Such a message would have profoundly resonated among the Jews.

One of the central themes of Matthew's Gospel is that the King does return and He establishes His Kingdom. *Jesus* is the King. But He is a King unlike any other and His Kingdom is more expansive than any earthly kingdom (such as Rome's.) As Matthew will demonstrate, *Jesus* goes largely unrecognized as King, and the inauguration of His kingdom will go unnoticed by the very people who are looking for Him because *Jesus* does not fit their expectations.

It is thought that the reason Matthew uses the term, *kingdom of heaven* instead of "kingdom of God," is because He is writing to a Jewish audience. Jews did not speak the name of God, lest they violate the third commandment even by accident: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain" (Exodus 20:7). Matthew, substitutes *heaven* for "God" to solve the problem. Mark and Luke are writing to a Gentile audience where God is a more apt term to communicate the Gospel, so they use the phrase "kingdom of God."

Biblical Text

3:1-2 Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."