

Matthew 3:4-6

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-3/matthew-34-6/>

Matthew describes John's strange appearance and extreme diet. Many from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas were attracted to John and drawn by his warnings to repent. As they came to him they confessed their sins. As a sign of their commitment to God they were baptized by John in the Jordan River.

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

Whether or not *John* was originally part of an Essene community, his appearance was startling. He wore a coarse *garment of camel's hair* tied by a *leather belt around his waist*. He probably didn't have many (if any) possessions besides his clothing. During his ministry, *John* was likely a nomad who slept outdoors and away from towns. He foraged the wilderness for *food*, which consisted of *locusts and wild honey*. As a prophet of God, *John* was utterly unconcerned about the pretense of appearances and comforts of society. His care was for God and proclaiming the message God gave to him.

John's message of repentance and the coming *Kingdom* resonated far and wide throughout *Judea*. Crowds gathered to see this strange man and hear what he had to say. They traveled from as far away as *Jerusalem* (approximately twenty miles to the west); *and all Judea* (the south-central region of the Roman province, including towns such as Bethany and Bethlehem); *and all the district around the Jordan* (the city of Jericho and the Jordan river valley feeding into the Dead Sea). For many in the crowds it required intention and commitment on their part to make the journey to seek out and listen to *John*. And the message God gave *John* to preach attracted Jews across diverse beliefs and different backgrounds and different territories.

Jesus would later ask the crowds following Him, (many of whom sought out *John*) what it was they hoped to find or hear when they found *John*.

“Jesus began to speak to the crowds about *John*, ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ palaces! But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet.’” (Matthew 11:7b-9)

Jesus tells them they did not go to see the scenery or to see a rich, finely-dressed man. He reminds them that they left their daily responsibilities and the affairs within their town hoping to hear a prophet of God in the Judean wilderness. Jesus tells them that they wanted to find *one who is more than a* (mere) *prophet*, possibly indicating that they hoped to discover the Messiah himself. If true, it would not be without irony then that Jesus, the Messiah, is the one telling them these things.

As *John's* crowds heard his message to “Repent” and “Prepare for the coming Kingdom,” they do just that. Matthew tells us *they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they*

confessed their sins. Baptism simply means to be immersed. John *baptized* (immersed) them in the waters of the *Jordan River*, as a sign that those *being baptized* had *confessed their sins* (i.e. agreed that their old way of living was unfit for the coming Kingdom of Heaven with which they wished to be identified.) Matthew uses the “Imperfect” Greek verb tense for the main actions of verses five and six: “*was going out*” and “*were being baptized.*” This tense indicates that these actions were not singular events that simply occurred once and then were over. Rather they happened over and over again. *Jerusalem was going out to him* and the people *were being baptized by him* with continuous regularity.

The Greek word that is translated as *baptized* in this verse comes from the Greek word, βάπτισμα (G908 – pronounced: “Bap-tis-ma”). It describes an immersion. To be baptized is to be immersed into something. The act of baptism usually involves water, as a way to symbolically demonstrate the immersion. We will explore additional aspects of baptism later in this entry.

Baptism was an integral part of Jewish rituals. It represented purification prior to being in the presence of God. If you visit Israel today, you can see ruins of ancient baptismals (called “mikvahs”) at the Temple, where pilgrims bathed prior to going into the Temple complex. There are baptismals at the homes of priests, presumably because the high priests were required to purify often. The Essene monastery at Qumran also had baptismals. The Essene scribes copying the Bible would baptize themselves in the mikvah each time they came to the word “Yahweh” (God), prior to writing the word. John’s baptism was specifically geared toward demonstrating an inner reality: repentance. A change of heart.

It was symbolically appropriate that *John* baptized people in the waters of the *Jordan River*. The *Jordan River* held significance throughout the history of Israel. Its current ran about a hundred miles, down from the Sea of Galilee in the north and into the Dead Sea to the south. *The Jordan River* was the site of the spectacular moment when Joshua and the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land after they wandered for forty years in the Sinai wilderness. (Joshua 3-4) Just as the Israelites crossed the Jordan from a fruitless era wandering in the wilderness and into the reality of God’s promises, so now those baptized by John in *the Jordan* signified that they were crossing from an old way of living into the promise of God’s coming *Kingdom*.

The *Jordan* was also the body of water that Elisha told the God-fearing Syrian general Naaman to go and wash himself seven times in order to cleanse himself of leprosy (2 Kings 5). Just as Naaman had faith to publicly trust in the Lord to wash away his affliction, so too did those who *were being baptized* by John publicly confess their sins, and trust in God for cleansing.

Whoever is in charge makes the rules. And it is generally considered prudent, if not right and wise, to adhere to the rules of the one who is in authority.

Biblical Text

3:4-6 Now John himself had a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 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.