

Matthew 11:2-6

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John, who has now been imprisoned sends a cryptic question to Jesus inquiring if He is the Messiah or not. Jesus responds with a clear, but coded, answer.

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in Luke 9:18-23.

The news of Jesus's ministry spread far and wide. It even found its way to the dungeons of King Herod Antipas. *John* the Baptizer had been *imprisoned* by Herod Antipas and would soon be beheaded by him (Matthew 14:1-12). The Jewish historian, Josephus reported that John the Baptist was *imprisoned* (and executed) at Machaerus: one of Herod's fortresses (Antiquities 18:116-117). Machaerus was more than a hundred miles south of Capernaum, and a few miles east of the Dead Sea (See map at bottom of page). *John* the Baptizer had been arrested by Herod because he spoke out against the unlawful union of Herod and Herodias who was his brother's wife. Matthew indicates that *John* was *imprisoned* at the behest of Herodias (Matthew 14:3). *While he was imprisoned*, Matthew tells us, that *John* had *heard of the works of Christ*.

The *Christ* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "Messiah" or "Anointed One." Many Jews expected God to send His Messiah to rescue His people from the yoke of Roman bondage. Naturally, many people began to see Jesus as possibly being this *Christ*. The miracles He performed curing diseases and expelling supernatural diseases, the proclamations He made about the nearness of God's kingdom, and the authority with which He delivered His moral teachings all gave people reason to hope that He was *the Christ*. Even so, *Jesus* had not yet come out and directly claimed to be the Messiah. Perhaps His indirectness in words or His seeming unwillingness to go after Roman authority gave some reason to doubt.

John had known *Jesus* and His mission perhaps better than anyone besides the Lord Himself. *John* had baptized *Jesus* in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:13-17). He declared of *Jesus*, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Indeed, *John* was sent as God's messenger to prepare Israel for the coming of the Messiah (Matthew 3:3). Now *while he was imprisoned* and *heard about the works of the Christ*, *John* sent word by his disciples and instructed them to ask "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" They were asking whether *Jesus* was really the *Christ*.

The Gospel writers do not tell us why *John* instructed his disciples to ask this question, only that he did. It is possible *John* had begun to doubt. Perhaps he had become discouraged while in prison, wondering why *Jesus* didn't come to rescue him. Perhaps *Jesus* was not meeting *John*'s expectations about the Messiah or what He would do in some other way.

It also might be that *John* the Baptizer was setting up his disciples to shift from following him to following *Jesus*. If so, *John* was recognizing that this would be between his disciples and *Jesus*. In this sense, *John* had trained his disciples correctly. He had not trained men to follow him, but to follow God (John 3:25-36, especially verse 30 – "He must increase but I must decrease").

John was in prison, facing an uncertain future, so might well have been demoralized. It is worth considering John's first-hand experience with Jesus. After John baptized Jesus, whom he recognized as his spiritual superior, he saw the Spirit descend in the form of a dove, and heard God speak from heaven, testifying of Jesus as His Son (Matthew 3:11-17).

John sent word by his own disciples to ask for him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" It could be that in directing his disciples thusly, John was inferring a request for help as well as offering his disciples an opportunity to shift their master to one of superior rank. The question could be heard as "Are you going to help us?" It can also be heard as "Should we follow You?" Perhaps it was both.

John's question was also shrewdly cryptic; He did not use the word, "*Christ/Messiah*" in his question. Perhaps the thinking was that in the event that unfriendly ears heard what John had asked, his vague "*Expected One*" could help *John* evade accusations that he was stirring an insurrection or prematurely draw attention to *Jesus* as a threat to Roman power. After all, John is in prison, due to criticizing a Roman authority. It makes sense that he would desire to be shrewd.

But it likely would have been plain to *Jesus* what *John* was asking, and what application it might have had for his disciples. And Matthew makes the Messianic nature of the question clear to his readers by using the term *Christ* as he constructs the narrative preceding John's question.

Jesus too answers in code that *John* would understand. He said to John's disciples, "*Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.*"

The Baptizer's *disciples* were to *report back to John* six observations of *what* they saw *and* heard, and one conclusion. Five of these observations were of miracles that John's disciples were able to witness or easily investigate. These miracles: *the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up to life.* A sixth observation John's disciples were to report back was *the poor have the good news preached to them.*

Moreover, at least four of these actions were a fulfillment of Messianic prophecies from Isaiah. As the forerunner of the *Christ*, these scriptures would have been very familiar to *John*.

"On that day those who are deaf will hear words of a book,
And out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of those who are blind will see.
The afflicted also will increase their joy in the Lord,
And the needy of mankind will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel."
(Isaiah 29:18-19)

"Your dead will live;
Their corpses will rise.
You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy,
For your dew is as the dew of the dawn,

And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.”
(Isaiah 26:19)

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
Because the Lord anointed me
To bring good news to the humble;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim release to captives
And freedom to prisoners;”
(Isaiah 61:1)

Jesus’s cryptic-to-some, but clear-to-others conclusion was “*And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.*” In other words, “*Go and report to John* that I am the Messiah you have been expecting!”

Additionally, Jesus is likely sending a cryptic message back to John. As an observant Jew, John would have memorized the entire Bible. He would have recognized that Jesus omitted from His quote “To proclaim release to captives and freedom to prisoners.” In this way, Jesus is likely telling John’s disciples “Yes I am the Messiah” while also telling John “You are not going to be released from prison.” As we will see in Chapter 14, John will in fact be beheaded for his testimony.

Biblical Text

11:2-6 Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.”