

Mark 1:4-6

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Mark now reports an oddly appareled John the Baptist actively fulfilling his Messianic forerunner role as evidenced by all the country of Judea going out to him in the wilderness, confessing their sins, and being baptized in the Jordan river.

The parallel gospel accounts for this passage are Matthew 3:4-6; Luke 3:1-3; John 1:6-8, 28.

After beginning his gospel by identifying Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God (Mark 1:1) and citing two prophecies about the Messiah's herald from the Jewish scriptures (Mark 1:2-3), Mark now identifies *John the Baptist* as the Messianic forerunner.

As was Mark's writing custom, he states the main point without any preliminary remarks. Mark writes: *John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* This assertion of the facts is offered as Mark's unfiltered fulfillment of the prophecies of both Isaiah and Malachi as quoted in Mark 1:2-3. Therefore, the prophecy and the subsequent historical record combine to form powerful evidence that Jesus is in fact the Christ (Mark 1:1).

Who was John the Baptist?

John "the Baptizer," more commonly referred to as *John the Baptist* was Jesus's cousin. 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.)

Mark's account gives the impression that *John* and his ministry suddenly *appeared* out of nowhere *in the wilderness*. It was as though no one knew who *John* was, and then in a very short time, everyone in *Judea and Jerusalem* seemed to know about *him*.

Matthew similarly, but less dramatically, tells that *Jerusalem, Judea, and all the district around the Jordan was going out to him being baptized and confessing their sins*, without any mention of preaching (Matthew 3:5-6).

But the more historically-minded 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). From Luke's account, we also know that *John* was already living *in the wilderness* when God commissioned him to begin *preaching*.

According to Mark (and Luke), *John* was *preaching in the wilderness of Judea*, calling his audience to undergo *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*.

The Greek word that is translated as *baptism* 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.

The Greek word that is translated as *repentance* in this verse is a form of μετάνοια (G3341 – pronounced: “me-ta-noi-a”). It is a compound word consisting of “meta” meaning “change” or “transformation,” and “noia” meaning “mind” or “perspective.”

Mark’s (and Luke’s) phrase, that *John was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins* (Luke 3:3) indicates that *John* was calling people to radically change their perspective on life and consequently how they lived so that their *sins* would not be held against them.

It is interesting to note that in Mark and Luke the *repentance is for the forgiveness of sins*, whereas in Matthew the repentance is “for the kingdom.” In Matthew’s gospel there is an urgency to *John*’s message, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Matthew’s language of repent “for the kingdom” would have resonated with his Jewish audience who were looking for the kingdom (Romans 9:31; 1 Corinthians 1:22a). Luke and Mark’s language of repent *for the forgiveness of sins* would have better resonated with their Gentile audiences (Luke, Greek; Mark, Roman) who were looking for a better way to live (Romans 9:30; 1 Corinthians 1:22b).

This was *John*’s way of telling the people of *Judea* that the King (Messiah) was coming very soon to establish His kingdom and that now was the time to get yourself ready in advance of His arrival. It was not normal for itinerate prophets to preach a message of personal pardon and *forgiveness*. *Forgiveness* came from God alone (Mark 2:7).

According to the Jewish customs of the era, forgiveness was transactionally accomplished through the making of official sacrifices offered in God’s holy Temple administered by God’s holy priests, according to the Law of Moses (mostly described in the book of Leviticus). So, for *John* to preach a message of *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*, indicated that he was either a religious lunatic, or he was a prophet from God.

Taken together, *John*’s message of *repentance for the forgiveness of sins* and because of the imminent arrival of the Messianic Kingdom as recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke was, a call to stop living according to the corrupt systems of this world and live according to the good principles of the Messiah. In essence, *John* was saying, “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. And it is generally considered prudent, if not right and wise, to adhere to the rules of the one who is in authority.

In first-century *Judea*, there were basically two groups in power: Rome and the Jewish Religious Authorities. Rome had political power over the province of *Judea*. Rome imposed a rule of law on those it conquered, and it brutally enforced the rule of law with military might. Many

conquered people groups welcomed Roman rule because its system, though harsh, brought order and provided stability for greater prosperity than the chaos of tribal feudalism. Rome was no worse an alternative than the local tyrants and was seen as an improvement in many other respects.

Many Jews did not share this perspective. They saw Rome as an oppressor and were appalled at its celebration of pagan practices that were an abomination to God. Jews were ashamed to be a part of the Roman Empire. But because of Rome's military superiority, they had little choice but to comply with its power.

The Religious Authorities (Pharisees and Sadducees) were the main cultural influencers. The Pharisees taught the Jewish scriptures and their traditions in the local synagogues. The Pharisees were regarded as the cultural heroes by many Jews and were widely respected for their righteousness and knowledge. The Sadducees operated the Temple in Jerusalem. Together these two groups were the cultural gatekeepers of Jewish society.

Success, if not survival, for first-century Jews often meant compromising with Roman rule and/or Jewish legalism.

But Jesus was not coming to compromise with anyone. He did not come to follow or fit into any man-made system. He came to establish His own kingdom. *John's* message of *repentance* was a call to affiliate with the coming Messiah instead of the Roman Empire or the religious leaders of the day.

Once again, *John's* message was, "Now 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 (Matthew 3:2). The moment you have been waiting for is about to arrive. Such a message would have profoundly resonated among the Jews.

And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem.

John's message of *repentance* 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 the country of Judea*. In this context, *Judea* describes the south-central region of the Roman province in and around the city of *Jerusalem* (and not the entire Roman province of Jews stretching from the western shores of the Dead Sea to north of the Sea Galilee). We know this because Matthew uses the word "district" when he describes this movement (Matthew 3:5). The district of *Judea* was located south of the district of Samaria, West of *the Jordan River* (the city of Jericho and the *Jordan River* valley feeding into the Dead Sea), and North of the district of Idumea. It included not only the capital city of *Jerusalem* but also the towns of Bethany, Bethlehem, and Jericho.

For many in the crowds, it required intention and commitment on their part to make the journey to seek out and listen to *John*. So many people came that *John* was given the nickname, *John the*

Baptist or more literally, “*John the Baptizer*.” And the message God gave *John* to preach attracted Jews across diverse beliefs and different backgrounds and different territories.

As *John*’s crowds heard his message to “repent” they did just that. Mark tells us *they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing 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.)

Just like Matthew, Mark uses the “Imperfect” Greek verb tense for the main actions of verse five: “*was going out*” and “*were being baptized*” (Matthew 3:5). This tense indicates these actions were not singular events that simply occurred once and then were complete. Rather they happened over and over again. *Jerusalem was going out to him* and the people *were being baptized by him* with continuous regularity.

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. Though not mentioned by name in scripture, we know from other reliable texts and archeology that 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. (*John the Baptizer* may have been an Essene).

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 where 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 in seven times to cleanse himself of leprosy (2 Kings 5). Just as Naaman demonstrated 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.

When all the people heard his *preaching*, they repented (changed their perspective about their life). They were *confessing their sins*. They *were being baptized by [John] in the Jordan*. And in the process, they were publicly identifying with the coming Messiah and His kingdom.

After describing *John's* message and ministry, Mark then describes *John's* appearance.

John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.

From Luke's account, we know that *John* was already living *in the wilderness* when God commissioned him to begin *preaching*. The Judean *wilderness* is 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 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.

Regardless of whether or not *John* was originally part of an Essene community, his appearance was startling. He *wore* a coarse garment of *camel's hair and 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*.

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.

Biblical Text

⁴ John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. ⁶ John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.