

Synopsis 012a The Ministry of John the Baptizer Commences

I want us to compare and contrast three passages in which all three tell of the same event; the Commencement of the ministry of John the Baptizer. [Matthew 3:1-6] Matthew's story of the Messiah King skips 30 years or so of the life of Jesus, then picks up with the commencement of John the Baptizer's ministry as the "ambassador" to the King. The Jews were familiar to self-imposed baptism, but John came baptizing others, symbolizing the repentance of sins. They are binding themselves to a new life, which is symbolized by the immersion in water; the baptizing does not cause them to have a new life; it doesn't let them obtain it; it symbolizes it.

John came preaching in the wilderness. Noah was called a "preacher of righteousness" in 2 Peter 2:5. Preaching is heralding or proclaiming something. We should all be preachers of the Gospel and preachers of righteousness.

The "wilderness" spoken of here is not an area of absolute barrenness, but it's a territory that is more or less unsettled and rural. It is an area that would afford free range for shepherds and their flocks. Hepworth Dixon once quoted, "Even in the wilderness nature is not so stern as man. Here and there, in clefts and basins, and on the hillsides, grade on grade, you observe a patch of corn, a clump of olives, a single palm." It's not completely barren; there is some life there.

John started preaching in the wilderness, among the sheep, the goats, the shepherds, and the few people scattered throughout the area. He was preaching an unconventional message at the time, and this drew crowds to hear what he had to say. He spoke the truth, and it disturbed a lot of people. Today, if a preacher speaks the truth, he will drive crowds away. So many people are complacent; they want their ears tickled with pleasing things. But, in that day, many people wanted truth. John preached it. But, it eventually cost him his head, because then, just as today, if you speak the truth, you will be hated.

[Mark 1:1-6] Mark puts his account in Scriptural context. Other than OT quotes by Jesus, this is the only place that Mark references the OT. Verse 2 blends Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1 and verse 3 is from Isaiah 40:3. It says in the beginning of verse 2, "In the prophets", not "by the prophet". This is a common way of blending things to extract meaning when an exact quotation is not needed.

Verse 3 says, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord". The expression, "the way", is the Greek word "hodos", which is a road or a highway. This is an important theme in Mark's explanation of discipleship. John the Baptizer was preparing "the way" for Jesus the Christ, and as disciples, we are to follow "the way"; we're to follow the same road.

John was preaching, or as Mark says, "crying" or "imploring" in the wilderness, and he was imploring to "prepare the roads for the Lord and make them straight". The Persian roads would be prepared for the couriers of the king and then the king himself by sending out forerunners. The Roman Empire was knit together by roads, some of which still survive today. John had a high and holy mission as the forerunner of the Messiah.

John baptized in the wilderness and he taught the baptism of repentance for the remission or pardon of sins. The symbolism of this baptism was repentance, which of course involved an obligation to repent. Repentance requires you to repent.

He went all over Judea and many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem were baptized and they confessed their sins. The KJV here says, “were all baptized of him in the Jordan”, but the grammar does not mean that every single person was baptized. But, there were many, and all of those many were baptized by him in the Jordan River. We’ll find out later that this sort of upset the Pharisees and Sadducees.

[Luke 3:1-6] Luke makes a six-fold attempt here to indicate the time when John the Baptizer began his ministry. John revived the function of the prophet and it was a momentous event after centuries of prophetic silence. Luke begins with the Roman Emperor, and then mentions Pontius, Pilate Procurator of Judea, then Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee (and Perea), then Philip, Tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, then Lysanias, Tetrarch of Abilene, and then he concludes with the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas (son-in-law and successor of Annas). It should be noted that there was supposed to only be one high priest, but the Jews had embraced the Romans to the extent that they had the “real” high priest and the one approved by the Romans. That’s not important now, but remember it for later. They didn’t use our modern system of dating things; the common way of dating events was using rulers and events, as Luke uses here.

Many people have tried to cast doubts on the Bible by showing that this could not be true by raising an objection to the mention of Lysanias here, because Josephus tells of a Lysanias who was King of Abila up until 36 BC, and it’s assumed this is the same as the one referred to by Luke, but with the wrong date. But an inscription has been found on the site of Abilene with mention of “Lysanias the tetrarch”, and it was at the time to which Luke refers. The rocks vindicate Luke, and once again, the detractors are nullified. The Bible is truth, and you should believe it!

In Mark, we saw that John taught the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, and here in [Luke 3:3]. [James 5; keep your place] This word “remission” was used in medical language of the relaxation of disease. That’s what sin is; it’s a disease that will kill you. [James 5:13-15; forgiven – from the same word].

Luke 3:4 once again mentions some prophecies and says to make his way straight, but the word “way” is a different word than the one Mark uses. Here, instead of “hodos” or “highway”, it’s “tribos”; which is from “rub” or “wear”, and so it means “beaten tracks”. “The way” is something that we need to continually follow in; we need to follow in the beaten tracks of Jesus.

Then, in verse 6, Luke emphasizes the universality of the gospel, by using the words, “And all mankind”; literally, it says, “All flesh”. All flesh shall what? “Shall see the salvation of God.” That’s the message of Christ for all men.

There are several unifying themes used in these three stories. First of all, we see that he baptized a whole bunch of people. He baptized them unto the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

He was preaching. He was doing a whole lot of preaching, apparently. What was he preaching? He was preaching “repent!” and he was preaching and proclaiming the Kingdom of the Heavens; “The King is coming!” That’s what he taught; that’s whom he was the forerunner of.

He didn’t spend a lot of time teaching the message of common salvation. That was old hat to the Jews. Even the teaching of the Kingdom was nothing new. But, the idea of “repent!” became a stumbling block to many. They thought that as children of Abraham, they had automatic entrance into the Kingdom. But, Abraham had an earthly seed and a heavenly seed, and many people did not realize just how far they had drifted from God’s law. They had taken to following man’s law, and as such, they needed to change or repent; they needed to reform the way they lived and they needed to change directions.

This message would disturb large numbers of VIP’s, particularly the Pharisees and Sadducees. They had the power, and they wanted to keep it! They taught that as Abraham’s seed, they were automatically qualified, but as we’ll study later, we’re told that, “God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.” This was a calling to the Gentiles who were at that time stone dead in their sins, and just as unconscious of it as the stones to which John was pointing. He was telling them, “Times they are a changin’!”

Another of the unifying themes in these passages is the words of the prophets. Those found in Malachi 3:1, which says, “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.” Those found in Isaiah 40:3-5, although this passage is quoted across all three of the passages about John: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see *it* together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken *it*.” Sound familiar?

We see that John wore raiment of camel's hair and a leather girdle about his loins and he ate locusts with wild honey. This is a vivid picture of the way he dressed, his behavior, and his food. Would such an uncouth figure be welcomed today in the pulpit? Most churches expect someone to always wear designer suits and have multiple PhD’s. They compete over the most prestigious and wealthiest churches. John, on the other hand, came preaching to those who needed it, and he wasn’t too terribly worried about prestige.

In fact, the way he dresses brings to mind the way Elijah dressed, and we know that John came in the power and spirit of Elijah. 2 Kings 1:9 says, “And they answered him, *He*

was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said, It *is* Elijah the Tishbite.”

As far as his food goes, I don't know what the locusts represent. I do think they are significant, because usually, when the Bible lists specifics, such as a particular date, or something, or in this case his specific diet, there is significance to it.

I do know that locusts are clean animals, and it's OK for the Jews to eat them. So, in small numbers they are fine. But, in great numbers, they destroy crops, they destroy every plant, and they destroy the work of man. Although, in swarms of locusts, even though they may cause great damage, there is a large supply of food available. Even after they destroy your work (your crops), you can still benefit by consuming them. But, I don't know the overall significance of locusts as the diet of John the Baptizer.

[Isaiah 7:15] tells us what honey is: “Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good.” It's the food that lets us discern between good and evil.

What is honey? Israel is called “the land flowing with milk and honey”. Exodus 16:31 tells us that manna tasted like wafers with honey. In Judges, Samson took honey out of the carcass of a lion.

In [1 Samuel 14], Saul had sought vengeance on his enemies, and his men went into the land of the Philistines. In verse 24, Saul announced that anyone who ate before evening would be cursed. This was a rash and foolish decision that was made because Saul wanted revenge on an enemy. (“Vengeance is mine”, saith the Lord.) Jonathan had not heard his father swear an oath unto the men not to eat until they had taken vengeance, and verse 27 tells us, “he put forth the end of the rod that *was* in his hand, and dipped it in an honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his eyes were enlightened.”

His eyes were enlightened. Then in verse 28, one of the men said, “Thy father straitly charged the people with an oath, saying, Cursed *be* the man that eateth *any* food this day. And the people were faint.” [1 Samuel 14:29-32] This was a terrible sin. They were denied food; they were denied this honey, and it was a stumbling block to them and it caused them to sin.

Then, down in verse 43, we see that Jonathan is going to die for tasting a little honey and being enlightened. That's what happened in the Garden of Eden. They were enlightened. But, the people persevered and Jonathan was spared.

What Jonathan had done was not wrong in itself, but became wrong simply on account of the oath with which Saul had forbidden it. But Jonathan did not hear the oath, and therefore had not consciously transgressed. Nevertheless a curse lay upon Israel, which was to be brought to light as a warning for the culprit. Therefore Jehovah had given no reply to Saul. But when the lot, which had the force of a divine verdict, fell upon Jonathan, sentence of death was not thereby pronounced upon him by God; but what he

had done was simply made manifest; that through his transgression of his father's oath, with which he was not acquainted, guilt had been brought upon Israel.

The breach of a command issued with a solemn oath, even when it took place unconsciously, stirred up the wrath of God, for making profane his divine name. But such a sin could only rest as guilt upon the man who had committed it, or the man who had indirectly caused it. Now where the command in question was one of God himself, there could be no question that even in the case of unconscious transgression, the sin fell upon the transgressor, and it was necessary that it should either be atoned for by him or forgiven him. But where the command of a man had been unconsciously transgressed, the guilt might also fall upon the man who issued the command; that is to say, if he did it without being authorized or empowered by God, he could be equally at fault.

In this instance, Saul had issued the prohibition without God's authority, and had made it obligatory upon the people by a solemn oath. The people had conscientiously obeyed the command (and sinned otherwise), but Jonathan had transgressed it without being aware of it. For this Saul was about to punish him with death, in order to keep his oath.

But, if you read this entire story, from beginning to end, Jonathan slew a whole bunch of Philistines, and he was obviously working for God, so the people opposed this sentence of death that had been placed upon him. They not only pronounced Jonathan innocent, because he had broken the king's command unconsciously, but they also exclaimed that he had gained the victory for Israel "*with God.*" In this fact (Jonathan's victory) there was a divine verdict; Jonathan had transgressed Saul's oath, but Saul's oath was faulty. And Saul could not fail to recognize now, that it was not Jonathan, but he himself, who had sinned, and through his arbitrary and tyrannical command had brought guilt upon Israel, on account of which God had given him no reply.

This story ends with Saul ending his pursuit of the Philistines. His departure from God's will, no matter his intent, caused him to miss out on blessings that he could have had.

Honey enlightened Johnathan's eyes, and he had responsibility. You will too. So did John, and his head was served on a platter. The world hates truth and enlightenment.

[Proverbs 24] Psalm 119:103 says, "How sweet are thy words unto my taste! *yea, sweeter* than honey to my mouth!" [Proverbs 24:13; 25:16; 25:27] That's what the Jewish leaders had done; that's what the Pharisees had done. They had taken the law, which was a discerner of good and evil and had used so much of it that they had become sick as a nation. They had searched for their own glory in the Law. What had happened? It had become a burden instead of a blessing, and it brought them glory among other men; but it was vainglory. Do we see this happening today?

We looked at Isaiah 7:15, which say, "Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good." It's the food that lets us discern between good and evil. What does "discern" mean?

[Hebrews 5:14] “Strong meat” or “solid nourishment”... Proverbs says that honey is good for the diet. You can’t live on honey alone, though. A little honey goes a long way. You might be able to sit down and eat a whole box of cookies, but I bet you can’t just sit down and eat a jar of honey. (Now, this is not a challenge!) It will make you sick. You need more than mere discernment between good and evil; you need to act upon it.

But, “solid nourishment” belongeth to them that are of full age (full grown Christians; not immature Christians), *even* those who by reason of use have their senses exercised (they’ve practiced or used) to discern both good and evil. “Pros diakrasis”; “deciding between” good and evil. You have to do more than just decide; you have to act; that’s what mature Christians do. They are obedient and faithful.

This is not simply referring to moral good and evil, but also wholesome and corrupt doctrine. Mature believers have exercised their senses (their organs of perception; in this case, their hearts and their minds) to reject evil and also reject unsound doctrine. “Discern” means to “decide between”, and honey lets us discern between good and evil.

In Isaiah 7:15, butter is doctrine and honey is enlightenment. Sound doctrine goes along really well with enlightenment. Together, it helps us reject false doctrines and false teachers and false christs. That’s one of the things we have to watch out for in the last days, isn’t it?

[2 Corinthians 5] We need to reject false doctrines and false teachers. But, why do we need to be able to discern between good and evil? [2 Corinthians 5:10; bad-evil] Because we’re accountable; that’s why. Enlightenment is not always pleasant, other than wanting to please the Lord. Sometimes, it forces us to make decisions we don’t want to make. Sometimes it makes us really unpopular with the world. We know that the world hates the truth especially truth about discernment between good and evil. The world wants to call good “evil” and evil “good”. The world wants to embrace very deviancy and every abomination, and, if you don’t go along with them, they may just serve your head on a platter. Figuratively, of course. (But for how long?)

I want us to look at one more example of honey. [Revelation 10] John sees another mighty angel come down from heaven. This angel had a little book open in his hand, and he had his right foot upon the earth and his left foot upon the sea. And this angel cried with a loud voice, and John was ready to write about the angel’s cry, and this voice from heaven told him to seal up those things and write them not.

Then the angel lifted up his hand to heaven and [Revelation 10:6-7]. [Revelation 10:8-9] Honey brings enlightenment. But, this enlightenment will be bittersweet. It says that “it will make they belly bitter”. Why is this? Because John was enlightened about something that was unpleasant. Why can it be bittersweet? Because we don’t always want to know. Sometimes, we’re better off not knowing. Sometimes, we are enlightened about things that we would rather remain in ignorance about. Is there something like that in your life? Do you need a little honey in your life?