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John The Baptizer

Question: Is Jesus a Jew? If Jesus' true father was not Joseph then how is Jesus a Jew since Scripture teaches that Jewishness is passed on by the father and not the mother? First, there is no question that Jesus is a Jew. In John 4 the Samaritan woman says to Jesus, "How is it that you, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman? (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)" Jesus went on to say "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is of the Jews," thus identifying himself as a Jew. Yet how was he a Jew if Joseph was not his father? Second, His only national connection was through His mother Mary who was a Jew. So He couldn't be anything other than a Jew. Third, it's possible that Jesus' Jewishness can be explained by the similar, though not identical, example of Timothy. Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Greek father. In Acts 16 Paul wanted to take Timothy with him in his ministry which commonly involved synagogue entrance. However, everyone knew that Timothy's father was Greek so Timothy would have been barred from the synagogue. Therefore, Paul took Timothy and had him circumcised. Most people condemn Paul for this action saying he denied grace. But Paul did nothing of the sort. Paul only wanted Timothy to have access to the Jewish synagogues for evangelism. He was not having Timothy circumcised as a means of justification or sanctification. Under Jewish law if a boy was born of a Gentile father and a Jewish mother then when he came of age he could decide to identify with the Jews or with the Gentiles. In order to identify with the Jews he would simply be circumcised. Thus Timothy was a Jew because he had a Jewish mother and was circumcised. Jesus fits a similar scenario, though He had no Greek father. His mother was a Jew and He was circumcised on the eighth day. Whatever the case, Jesus was a Jew.

Tonight we come to Matthew 3. The first six verses are extremely important. Dr Pentecost says, “these first six verses are perhaps the most important verses in all the Gospel to understand what’s going on.” Typically the discourses are correctly considered to be the most important sections but the underlying key to understanding them is John’s message in Matt 3:1-6. So we don’t minimize the importance of the discourses but we simply are seeking here to form a basis for understanding them. Matthew 3 introduces many new issues without any contextual background. For example, who is John the Baptist and where did he come from? Why is he preaching in the wilderness? What is the significance of his clothing and food? What does he mean by repent? What is the kingdom of heaven and what is it’s relation to the kingdom of God? What does the expression “at hand” mean when John says the kingdom of heaven is at hand? How is John related to OT prophecy? Why are so many people going out to John to be baptized? Who were the Pharisees and the Sadducees? These verses stimulate a lot of questions and so we want to spend some time here trying to find the answers.

What’s the timing of Matthew 3 with respect to Matthew 2? Matthew 2 closed with Jesus as a young boy settling down with His parents in the despised town of Nazareth. Where does Matthew 3 begin? With John the Baptist. Who’s John the Baptist? Matthew just skipped over about thirty years. He didn’t tell us anything about Jesus’ childhood or upbringing in Nazareth. He simply jumps all the way to John. There’s about a thirty year gap between Matthew 2 and 3.

When did John’s ministry begin in Matt 3? In verse 1 Matthew says, **Now in those days John the Baptist came preaching.** In what **days**? **Those days** isn’t very specific. Toussaint says the expression **those days** is a general time designation. Matthew’s point then was not to specify when John’s ministry began but simply to give a general time designation. A. T. Robertson says the pronoun **those** “usually occurs at a transition in the narrative.”ⁱ Luke, however, was interested and he gives five indicators concerning the specific time. If you work through the indicators then John’s ministry began between September of AD27 and December of AD29. Within this time period there are two favored views among scholars as to precisely when it began. This explains the discrepancy between an AD30 vs AD33 date of the crucifixion. The early view begins John’s ministry between September of AD27 and October of AD28 and has Jesus being crucified in AD30. In this

view Jesus' ministry could not extend much more than two years. The later view begins John's ministry between August of AD29 and December of AD29 and has Jesus being crucified in AD33. On this view Jesus' ministry could extend a little over three years. Because I think Jesus' ministry was about three years I think that John's ministry began in AD29 and Jesus was crucified in AD33. So **in those days** was most likely in AD29 but Matthew's description is simply stylistic, he's indicating a transition in his narrative.

In those days John the Baptist came. There is no explanation of where he came from, who he was, etc...he just introduces him suddenly. Who was John? Why does Matthew introduce John at this point in his argument? What is his argument up to this point? That Jesus is the King and that the leadership of the nation Israel did not respond well to the King's arrival. Remember Matt 1 Jesus is the King; Matt 2 the leadership don't budge one inch to go see the King in Bethlehem? Here again the leadership is resistant to John. But who is John? There's something more here. He's a prophet. Who always preceded a king in the OT? A prophet. A prophet always precedes and announces the king. So if Matthew's argument is that Jesus is the King then what would every Jew ask? Who is the prophet who preceded Jesus? Matthew's answer is that it was John. John is the prophet. That's why he brings in John.

What is the significance of John being a prophet? Two things. First, he was a prophet. What was a prophet? If you tell me someone who told the future I'm going to be mad. That is not the first and predominant thing they did. They were prosecuting attorneys; they prosecuted the nation, called them back to the Law. What is John doing in verse 2? Calling on them to **repent**. All the prophets did this. He's trying to bring them back to the Law. They had abandoned the Law. There's another significance though about John being a prophet. What is it? "There had been no message from God delivered through a prophet to Israel in more than four hundred years. God was now ready to break the silence by sending the last of the Old Testament prophets to Israel."ⁱⁱ The silence is being broken. And isn't it interesting that John is the last of the OT prophets. What's the implication for the Gospel of Matthew? It's under the OT dispensation, it's under the Law. And here comes the last of the OT prophets acting as a prosecuting attorney calling the nation back to the Law.ⁱⁱⁱ

Who had been the last prophet before John? Who's the last prophet in the OT canon? Malachi. So we have Malachi, then four hundred years of silence and finally the silence is broken with John. What had been Malachi's message? What were the last words of God before He went silent? Last words are very important. What did God say through Malachi? Three things. First, repent of your sins (Mal 1:1-4:3). The majority of the book points out six sins, these were just the tip of the iceberg, there were many others, but six in particular were pointed out to represent their failures. The majority of them were directed at the priests, those in leadership, and they were told to repent or else the Messiah was going to come suddenly and judge the priesthood, judge the nation, separate the remnant from the non-remnant. Second, remember the Law of Moses (Mal 4:4). Do you think that might be important? The Law of Moses was the standard by which they were to live. If they obeyed they would be blessed. If they disobeyed they would be cursed. So the second big message was remember the Law of Moses. What would happen if they forgot it? More sin and calling down judgment. Third, look for Elijah (Mal 4:5-6). Elijah the prophet was the next prophet to come. What was his role? He would restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that the LORD would not come and smite the land with a curse. So the nation was expecting, or should have been expecting Elijah the prophet to lead the restoration of the nation.

What's the question when **John** comes on the scene? Is **John** Elijah? They asked him. He said, no. But he is unquestionably an Elijah of sorts. Jesus said he would have been Elijah if they had received him. He certainly carries the message of the OT prophet Elijah, repent. So he's very much along the vein of Elijah. And what Matthew is doing beginning with **John** was to (because **John** is doing what Elijah was to do) lead the nation to repentance. Why repentance? To prepare the nation to meet and recognize their King.

What else do we know about **John**? **John** is the name of four men in the NT. It had become a popular name after John Hyrcanus. Do you remember Hyrcanus from the Intertestamental times? He was a member of the Maccabee family who took the high priesthood about 135BC. He was not of priestly lineage so it offended a group of Jews and they *separated* from Hyrcanus. What group in the NT do we find whose name means "separate?" It's one of the groups in verse 7. The Pharisees. Interestingly, **John the Baptist** was given the same name as the man who caused the offense that

spawned the formation of the Pharisees. And this **John** is going to offend the Pharisees too but for different reasons.

Why was he named **John**? Luke tells us **John** was not a family name. An angel appeared to his father Zacharias and told him to name him **John**. Everyone thought that was strange. What does the name **John** mean? YHWH has graciously given. The Lord had graciously given a unique individual. What's so unique about him? You can tell he was unique in that time by the nickname everyone called him. **John the Baptizer**. **Baptizer** is probably more accurate than Baptist. Why do you think they called him **the Baptizer**? And don't tell me it's because he established the first Baptist church. It was because of what he was doing. He was baptizing people. In verse 6, **they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins**. It was a baptism in conjunction with confession of sin. Now it may not sound strange to you that people were being baptized by him because we practice Christian baptism and in Christian baptism one person baptizes another person. But this was very strange to a 1st century Jew. Why? Because Jews didn't baptize others, they had two baptisms and in both of them you baptized yourself. So they looked at John and his ministry and they said, "This guy baptizes other people." So they called him **the Baptizer**.

Do you think they knew of baptism? Clearly they did or they wouldn't have called him that. They'd known about it for centuries. What was baptism for the Jews? In the common use of the word baptism or baptize it refers to the work of someone in the fuller's profession. Who was a fuller? Someone who washed or prepared clothes. The fuller would take a dull or dirty garment, dip it in bleach to clean it and then dip it in a dye to change the color. It was a two-step process but the emphasis was not on the process but on the end result. What was the end result? The original appearance of the garment was so altered that it was said to be a new or different garment. That's the literal and common use of the word. It came from the profession of a fuller but like many words it also had a metaphorical use. In the metaphorical use it meant to so change the appearance of someone or something so thoroughly that it had a new identity. So to the Jewish mind baptism and baptize included two ideas; the cleansing of something but more importantly, the new identity that resulted, identity is the key!

I mentioned the Jews had two baptisms, both were metaphorical. One was a baptism related to the Levitical law and the priesthood, the other was related to proselytes to Judaism. If we look at the first, under Levitical law the priest serving in the Temple would rinse his hands and his feet at the laver in order to cleanse him ceremonially so he could function in the Temple. That was a baptism. It was a sprinkling or pouring of water over the feet and hands. Through it he was ceremonially cleansed for service. Another Levitical baptism was required of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would cleanse himself by immersion in water in order to fulfill that service. So we see sprinkling, pouring and immersion all involved in Jewish baptisms. The mode is not the issue, the issue is the ceremonial cleansing by water. Water was viewed as a cleansing agent. It cleansed them for service. Of course, it was metaphorical for the blood which was the real cleansing agent; the water was symbolic of the cleansing. That was the original intent of the law. But interestingly, what had the Pharisees come to emphasize by the NT? The water as an end in itself. It was all external. They had become obsessed with the water. The archaeological testimony of this is if you go to Jerusalem today you'll see remains of hundreds of baths, what they call *mikvah's*. A mikvah is a bath carved out of rock. They have one set of steps leading down into the water and another set of steps leading up out of the water. That way, if a Pharisee became defiled by touching something or someone unclean he could walk down one set of steps, be cleansed and walk out the other set of steps without touching the next Pharisee who was walking down to be cleansed. They put a huge emphasis on the external cleansing of water. Of course, this was distorting the original signification of the water which pointed to the blood and its role in internally cleansing. But this was the first Jewish baptism. It was a baptism under Levitical law for the priests, it was a self-baptism and it was necessary for ceremonial cleanness.

The second baptism was for proselytes to Judaism. What's a proselyte? A proselyte was a Gentile who wanted to convert to Judaism. There were steps he had to go through to be received into the community. What were the steps? There were three steps; circumcision, that was how you were initiated into the Law so you could come under the blessings of the covenant, baptism and then sacrifice. Once you went through those three steps you could formally be admitted as a full participant in the community of Israel. What was the baptism accomplishing? Once you had undergone circumcision you were

baptized in order to be cleansed from all defilement. That way you could walk about freely in the Jewish community without defiling everybody you had contact with. What else did the baptism do? It changed your identity. This is the key to baptism. A Gentile had been identified with the pagan Gentile world and all the gods of heathenism, at baptism he was identified with Judaism. Pentecost says, "A proselyte by his baptism signified that he was terminating his relationship in his old society, including his allegiance to his old gods. He was joining himself with the community of Israel and submitting himself to Israel's God."^{iv} So the second Jewish baptism was a baptism for proselytes to Judaism, it too was a self-baptism and it was necessary for cleansing and more importantly, for changing his identification.

With that background, what baptism is John doing? Are the people coming to him Gentiles who want to convert to Judaism? No. They're Jews. Verse 5, **Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan.** These are not Gentiles coming to convert to Judaism. Besides, Gentile converts would baptize themselves so they didn't defile anyone else but John is doing the baptizing here. So they're not Gentile converts. Are the Jews coming to him priests? No. These are your average Jews coming for baptism. Lenski speculated that between 200,000-500,000 Jews were coming and not a one of them is coming for some baptism related to temple service. The fact is this baptism was disturbing to those in temple service. That's why some of the leadership are coming out in verse 7. So John's baptism is unique, it was popular. That's why they called him **the Baptizer.** He was doing was something new.

Another observation in verse 1. We're building a pile of observations. Where was John preaching his message? **In the wilderness of Judea.** Where would we expect John to be preaching? In Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the city where God chose to put his name. John is out **in the wilderness.** This was over by the Dead Sea, just north of the Dead Sea. It's not a wilderness like we might expect, a forest wilderness, it's a desert wilderness, it was a dry, barren place, still is today.

What else do we observe about John before we get to his message? Note his clothing and food in verse 4, **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.** This is not just interesting information. There's something

about his dress and his diet that is tremendously significant. To understand it, what was John's family background? Luke tells us he was the son of Zacharias. Who was Zacharias? He was a priest! He was in the temple performing his priestly function when he found out from the angel that he was going to have a son. John is of the priestly tribe. What profession would we expect to find John? A priest. Where do priests minister? In the temple. Is he in the temple? No, the wilderness. Did Jewish boys have much choice about their profession? No, if they were born into a carpenter's home they would be a carpenter. How would they learn to be a carpenter? Tag around with dad. If they were born into a priestly home, and certainly the first-born son, they would expect him to be a priest. How would John have learned to be a priest? Tag around with his dad. Why isn't John a priest? His mother and father were old when they had John, very old. Apparently they died. John was never trained to be a priest. He grew up in the wilderness. Some suspect he grew up in that community by the Dead Sea where the Dead Sea Scrolls were produced because of his ascetic appearance and diet. We don't know that but he's near that community.

What we do know is we would expect John to be wearing the dress of a priest, a beautiful white flowing robe in the temple but we find him wearing a **garment of camel's hair** out in the wilderness. What kind of garment is this? A prophet's garment. Elijah was wearing this garment in 2 Kgs 1:8. What was a garment of camel's hair? It was sackcloth, something like a black burlap sack. Why did the prophets wear black burlap sacks around? To signify mourning and grief. Whenever the prophet wore these clothes it signified a message of doom and was a visible call to repentance!

Further, what did John wear to hold his black burlap sack on? **A belt**. What kind of belt? **Leather**. Is that a priestly belt? No. No priest ever wore a leather belt. A priest wore a beautifully embroidered sash of gold, scarlet and purple. Putting these observations together what is Matthew's point? John is not coming as a priest, he's technically from within that order but he's coming from outside that order, as a prophet calling the priests and the nation to repentance!

What about John's diet? Did John eat a priest's diet? What did the priest's eat? The priest could cut off any portion of the sacrifice that he wanted, the best, he could take home a leg of lamb, he could take home the choice cuts, he

could take home the best oil and wine; the finest flour that was offered. The priests were probably the best fed people in all the country of Israel. I highly doubt there were any skinny priests. What did John eat? Nothing that came from the temple; the products of the desert; **locusts and wild honey**. People think this is strange food. It's not really that strange. Some people today still eat locusts; you remove the wings and legs and fry it in oil and salt. I haven't tried it but if you have I'll take your word for it. This was common food for those who lived in a desert wilderness. **Wild honey** could be found under rock or in hives. That sounds pretty good. The point is not that this is strange food or John was weird. What is the point? This is not a priest's diet. We would expect John to be wearing a priest's clothing and eating a priest's diet but he's not.

What's the big idea? We've built an observational picture of John. John is baptizing people; that was unique. John is of a priestly lineage but he's not ministering in the Temple; he's in a wilderness; he's not dressed as a priest; he's dressed as a mourning prophet; he doesn't eat the choice food of the priest; he eats locusts and wild honey. What is Matthew's point? This is the big point. John is not working within the established religious system. John is in opposition to the established system. Who was in control of the established religious system? The Pharisees. The Sadducees are there and they were in control of the Temple but as Edersheim reminds us, the Pharisees were the dominant party and they controlled the field. The Sadducees even had to make their rulings in terms of Pharisaism. So the Pharisees were the top dogs, they controlled the official religious system. And John is coming against them. Everything in the description of John screams that John is not operating under the official code of the established religious system. What's the implication? The official religious system is beyond reform, it's so corrupt there's only one thing to be done, start a new system and call the people to repent. John is the author of new movement in Israel.

Now do you understand why he's baptizing? What was the core of baptism? A new identity. The Jews identified with the official system run by the Pharisees, which was virtually everyone needed to be baptized. What would that accomplish? It would formally terminate their identification with that corrupt system and identify themselves with John and his new movement. And look how many people are responding to John's message. Jerusalem is going out, Judea is going out and all the district around the Jordan are going

out. This was a significant amount of people. Do you think that threatened the Pharisees and Sadducees? We know it did. These guys have it out for John. They can't get rid of John fast enough. John was a threat. And we can tell that the people were simply unsatisfied by the system of the Pharisees. They're coming in droves to John wanting to be baptized, terminating their association with the Pharisees and identifying with John and his message.

Well, what is his message? We come to the message in verse 2, **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.** There are three elements in the message that we need to define. First, **repent.** What is the meaning of **repent?** The English word is derived from the Latin translation "do penance" which later became in the English "repentance" meaning "to do penance again." Since penance means to be sorrowful for sins or faults this word is now one of the most confusing words in the NT. Toussaint says, "Contrary to popular thinking, repent does not mean *to be sorry*."v The Greek word is *metanoeo*, it is a compound word from *μετα-* frequently meaning "to change" and *νοεω* meaning "to think." The word essentially means "to change one's thinking." This change of thinking should be accompanied by a change of attitude and direction in life and may be accompanied by grief or sorrow, but these concepts are not involved in the essential meaning of repentance. The essential component is a change of thinking.

So what is John calling for? A change of thinking. In context what were they to change their thinking about? The validity of the officially endorsed religious system led by the Pharisees. Did the Pharisaic system please God? What was it like? They had built up oral tradition as a hedge around the law. This oral tradition was more authoritative than the word of God. Ultimately it negated the word of God. So was God pleased with Pharisaism? No. What did the system of Pharisaism do? It led people away from God. This is always the problem with a false religious system. It leads people away from God. When you're walking away from God what happens? Sin, sin and more sin. What does sin do to you? It blinds you. So the Pharisees were blind, they were the blind leading the blind. So were they in need of repentance? Were they in need of a change of mind? John came from outside of both systems and in opposition to both systems as a voice crying in the wilderness for the people to have a change of mind. So the repentance has to do with a change of mind about the official religious system but it goes deeper than that because it was that system that led them away from God and into sin. And in verse 6

you see them being baptized and simultaneously confessing their “sins.”
Breaking with that system; identifying with John and his message.

So what was the pre-requisite to John’s baptism? John wouldn’t just baptize anybody. They had to repent. Note in verse 7 that he immediately recognized those who did not come for baptism with genuine repentance. “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Then, in verse 8, he calls on them to bring forth fruit consistent with repentance. John wanted to see fruit. What fruit? It would have been humility first of all. Did they come in humility? Absolutely not. How did John know they did not come in humility? By their dress. The Pharisees had a very distinctive dress. It set them apart from the lowly Jew. They wore eighteen different garments; inner garments, outer garments, even gloves to protect them from touching those lowly Jews. They bound phylacteries, small enameled boxes that contained Bible verses, with leather thongs to their forehead and upper left arm. The garb was a sure sign of identification with Pharisaic doctrine. So when these guys waltzed up to see what John was doing he immediately knew they had not repented, they had no humility. If they did they would have cast off all the identifying signs of superiority! This was a brood of vipers, and if you replace vipers with snakes you get the sense that John was not being very nice here, he was identifying them with Satan.

The point is that John was a prosecuting attorney calling the nation to have a change of thinking about the official religious system which had led them away from God and into sin in order to be prepared to recognize their King when John pointed Him out. John’s baptism formally terminated their identification with the official religious system and gave them a new identity with John and his message. He was leading a Messianic movement.

What was the second element of the message? **For the kingdom of heaven is at hand.** At stake here is the definition of **the kingdom of heaven.**

Matthew is the only one who uses the term kingdom of heaven and he uses it thirty-two times. Three issues must be addressed. First, the relationship of the expressions kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven. There has been much ink spilled by dispensationalists trying to show a distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. Older dispensationalists like Scofield held that the kingdom of heaven was a wider sphere and included

believers and professing believers while the kingdom of God was narrower and contained only true believers, though at times he admits they are synonymous.^{vi} Walvoord agreed saying, “The kingdom of heaven refers to that which is obviously in its outer character a kingdom from above and seems to include all who profess to be subjects of the King. The kingdom of God is more specific and does not seem to include any but true believers who are born again.”^{vii} This distinction gave rise to a present mystery form of the kingdom defended from the parables of Matt 13. However, the distinction of kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God seems unwarranted. In parallel passages where Matthew uses kingdom of heaven Mark and Luke use kingdom of God showing they refer to the same kingdom. Even within Matthew he uses kingdom of God a few times and on one occasion as a synonym for kingdom of heaven (cf Matt 19:23-24). It seems then that the terms kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God are equivalent.

Second, why does Matthew alone use the expression kingdom of heaven? There are two reasons. First, because Matthew is written to a Jewish audience and the name of YHWH was held in reverence. He did not want to use the name of YHWH so often that it was perceived by his readers to be held as common and not sacred. Second, because the expression kingdom of heaven, or technically, kingdom of the heavens, is expressly rooted in the prophecies of Daniel 2, 4 and 7. This portion of Daniel’s book was written in Aramaic. Most Jews in the 1st century could not speak Hebrew but did speak Aramaic. Because this Aramaic expression kingdom of the heavens was commonly known to Jews Matthew employed it. Its meaning would have been readily known by Jewish readers.

Finally, what do the terms kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God refer to? That is, what is the nature of the kingdom? Remember, Matthew doesn’t give us a kingdom concept. Where did Matthew get his kingdom concept? From the OT. What kingdom concept does the OT give us? It reveals to us an earthly kingdom as promised by the covenants. As Toussaint says, “Throughout the entire Gospel of Matthew both terms always refer to the literal, earthly kingdom promised and prophesied in the Old Testament. When the church is mentioned in connection with the kingdom, the church and the kingdom are not to be confused. The church will be in the kingdom as its spiritual nucleus, but the church is not the kingdom or *vice versa*.”^{viii} This is the one kingdom view.

This one kingdom view is proven by three lines of argument. First, neither John nor Jesus re-defined the kingdom to mean anything other than the OT kingdom promised in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. If a new concept of the kingdom had been introduced, surely this concept would have been explained by John and Jesus. The fact they did not proves that the kingdom in view is the same one promised in the OT and the expectation of all the prophets. Second, the disciples are told to restrict the offer of the kingdom to the nation Israel in Matt 10:5-6. If there was another form of the kingdom that could be entered into at that time then why limit it to the nation Israel? Third, even after the cross the kingdom is still being anticipated by the disciples in Acts 1:6. If a form of the kingdom had already begun then why did the Lord not assure them that they had already entered an inaugurated form of the kingdom? Even after Pentecost and the formation of the church the kingdom is continuing to be anticipated by Peter and the disciples in 3:19-21. The conclusion should be clear. There is but one kingdom, it is defined by the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. It is earthly and involves the installment of the King on David's throne in Jerusalem. This kingdom had drawn near when the King was present but it did not come because its arrival was contingent on the nation Israel's acceptance of her King. When she does receive her King in the future then the kingdom will come and God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In the meantime there is the mystery church which is not the kingdom.

The third part of John's message is the end of verse 2, this kingdom was **at hand**. This expression evidently indicates something about the kingdom that had not always been true. No prior prophet announced that the kingdom was **at hand**; now it was **at hand**. Why was it now **at hand** whereas formerly it was not **at hand**? There are two prophecies which had to be fulfilled before the kingdom could be said to be **at hand**. First, the four Gentile kingdoms predicted by Daniel 2 and 7 had to run their course. If John had come during the third kingdom of Greece how could John have said the kingdom was **at hand** since the fourth empire of Rome had not come? It's clear that the kingdom was not **at hand** during any of the first three kingdoms predicted by Daniel. But now that the fourth kingdom of Rome had come it could be said that the kingdom was **at hand**. What other prophecy made it now **at hand**? Second, the seventy weeks of Daniel were coming near to their completion. Dan 9 had predicted seventy weeks of years, or 490 years, before

the kingdom of God would come. The 490 years had begun in 444BC with the decree of Artaxerxes. Messiah was scheduled to come after the first sixty nine weeks or 483 years. It was just now at this time, around AD29, that they had entered this 69th seven. If John had come even four years before he could not say the **kingdom** was **at hand** because they would have been on the 68th seven and not the 69th. Now that they were in the 69th the kingdom was **at hand**. So two prophecies in the OT establish the timing of John's coming and his message as unique; first, they were living in the fourth and final kingdom before the kingdom of God was to come and second, they were living in the 69th week when the Messiah was to come. In this sense, the kingdom was near but it cannot come until the 70th week has run its course.

Now this is very interesting because John is preaching that the kingdom is at hand but he does not know who the King is. We know that John knew Jesus because they were cousins but in John 1 John the Baptist tells us that he did not recognize Him as the Messiah. That is why he came baptizing in water, so that the Messiah would be made known to all Israel. And when the Spirit descended as a dove and lighted on Him John pointed Jesus out as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." But at this point, it is enough to say that John did not know who the Messiah was, instead He was baptizing in order to draw the Messiah out so that He could make Him known to Israel. In any case the kingdom was **at hand**.

Now it's critical to understand that the kingdom **at hand** does not mean the kingdom had come. Toussaint says, "The verb here is εγγιζω which means *to draw near* and not *to be here*. A good illustration is found in Matthew 21:1 ("And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem,..." KJV)."^{ix} The verb is in the perfect tense which means the kingdom had drawn near and remained in a state of nearness. When the King came into the world the kingdom had drawn near in that the King was now present and it was the King who would bring in the kingdom.^x However, for the King to bring in the kingdom the nation Israel would have to accept Him. Because they did not the kingdom only came near, it never arrived.

This understanding, however, is disputed by those who hold to a dual kingdom view. They claim that the expression **at hand** should be translated as *here*. For example, Progressive Dispensationalist Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary says, "The kingdom has drawn near," meaning it is

“here” in the sense of “arrival.” The kind of kingdom Bock claims had already arrived was a spiritual kingdom of Christ’s reign in the heart. All who repented had Christ’s reign of righteousness enter their hearts. However, there are several objections to this view. First, none of Bock’s examples prove that the word means “here.” Lane says, “The linguistic objections to the proposed rendering ‘has come’ are weighty, and it is better to translate ‘has come near.’” Second, “the Lord Jesus never spoke of the kingdom entering people; He only said that people will enter the kingdom.”^{xi} In other words, if those who repented had the kingdom entering them, this concept was never explained. The popular citation of the KJV translation of Luke 17:20-21 that “the kingdom is within you,” is terribly mistranslated. Most recognize that Jesus could not have meant that the kingdom enters people since the people He is speaking to are the Pharisees. However, the passage is used by Progressive Dispensationalists to prove that the kingdom was already present since the King was present. This may seem like a forceful argument until the context of Luke 17 is understood as referring to the future second advent and not the first. Jesus’ point by the expression “the kingdom is among you” is that the kingdom will suddenly arrive in the world, it will not come gradually with an accumulation of signs that can be observed, but rather like lightning it will suddenly be among you.^{xii} In the end it is far better to understand the expression **at hand** as referring to the fact that the OT kingdom was on the brink of being restored since the King was present and He was the one who would inaugurate the kingdom if Israel accepted Him as the Messiah. Since they rejected the kingdom never arrived and the offer was gradually withdrawn.

In conclusion, John the Baptist came as a prophet like-unto Elijah, prosecuting the nation and calling them to repent of the official religious system which had led them away from God and into sin. If they did he would baptize them, thus terminating their association with the official religious system and identifying them with His message of the at hand kingdom. The repentance would free them from the shackles of their sin so that they would be prepared to recognize their King when John pointed Him out. If the nation would repent the King would inaugurate the earthly kingdom as defined by the OT covenants.

ⁱ A. T. Robertson quoted by Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 58.

ⁱⁱ Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 78.

iii Walvoord agrees saying, “For four hundred years since the close of the Old Testament, no prophetic voice had been raised in Israel. To be sure, God had spoken by angels to Zacharias and Elizabeth, to Joseph and Mary, and to the Magi, but no human voice had spoken for God...”

iv Ibid., p 84.

v Toussaint, Ibid., p 60.

vi Cf New Scofield Reference Bible, NIV, p 972.

vii Walvoord, Ibid., p 30.

viii Toussaint, Ibid., 68.

ix Toussaint, Ibid., p 63.

x The concept of drawing near does not preclude proximity but is probably best understood as imminence. The OT uses the corresponding adjective with respect to the imminence of the day of the LORD (e.g. Isa 13:6; Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14; Obad 15; Zeph 1:7, 14). The expression was one of imminent danger if the corresponding message was not heeded.

xi Herbert Bateman IV, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, p 235.

xii A futuristic present. See that the context favors the futuristic sense.

[Back To The Top](#)

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