
The Identification of the King

Matthew 3:1-17

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Introduction

Don't you just love modern news conferences?

In the ancient days, heralds went into towns ahead of the king to announce his coming and arrival...

As children and young people, ancient kings often grew up in relative obscurity...

Matthew is laboring in his writing to present Jesus as the King. So, the King Jesus has His messenger, His herald...

By the Messenger

(v.1-4)

On the edge of the Judean wilderness by the Jordan River there is seen a strange man and heard a startling voice.

¹ In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" ⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. (ESV)

His Fruitful Preaching

(v.1-2)

Matthew introduces us to a familiar person. His name is John bar Zachariah¹¹. We know him as John the Baptist. He comes preaching a call for repentance. I am sure that this sentence is not all that he said. He proves elsewhere to be an eloquent and Spirit-enabled preacher/prophet. Since the King has now come and the launch of the new kingdom is near, then repentance from sin is required. The nearness of the king and His kingdom illuminates their sin and the need to repent in order to enter the kingdom. Jesus will also preach this message as well the disciples who are sent out during Jesus' ministry.

His Fulfilling Prophecy

(v.3)

Matthew is clear about who this person is by connecting him, not with his family, but with the prophecy about him. That prophecy quoted here is from Isaiah 40:3. But once again, to see what Matthew is doing, we need to read what surrounds that text. Turn to Isaiah 40:1-11.

COMFORT for sin has been dealt with and God's people are reconciled and no longer at war with God. The King has provided a royal pardon.

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

CALL to prepare to see the glory of the Lord. But that glory will come in an unexpected way.

³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

CONTRAST of the passing frailty of man to the sure standing of God's Word, forever. The Word stands sure even when it is being fulfilled differently from what was expected.

⁶ A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

CONNECTS to the king and shepherd motifs in chapters one and two of Matthew. The true King will be a genuine and gentle shepherd.

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" ¹⁰ Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Matthew then sees John the Baptist as the forerunner of the redeeming ruler, the saving shepherd. The story line of Matthew is designed to parallel the story line of the Old Testament with Jesus as the new King, the new Israel, the new Moses and so on. He also gathers up the royal and redemption themes in the Old Testament and points us to Christ as the great "end of the story!"

Now, I want to be as clear as I can. The forerunner to the Messiah *has already come*. Notice what Matthew says, "He (John) is the one spoken of by Isaiah." He does not say he could be if something happens. In other words, Matthew, writing after the death and resurrection of Jesus and after the coming of the Holy Spirit, understands that the true forerunner has already come. He has announced the King, the Messiah. The Messiah, the King came. Now the Messiah's kingdom is in the process of expanding through those who repent and believe the gospel.

His Fundamental Persona

(v.4)

Matthew reminds the readers of the wildness and strangeness of John the Baptist. Why do this? This connects John the Baptist to the long line of Jewish prophets. He was a rough and simple in his attire and his food. A coarse camel hair coat belted about with leather. Simple ascetic wilderness fare – yes, locusts are not only edible but actually good when fried. He was like the One he was proclaiming. He was not dressed in heraldic finery. He did not eat of the delicacies of a King's table. He was one preparer of the way. He opened the road through the mountain and valleys of prophetic literature through the proclamation of the Word.

In Matthew 11, Jesus tells the disciples that the life and ministry of John the Baptist brought the age of the Prophets and the Law to a close. Listen to Matthew 11:7–20 (ESV).

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, “ ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ (Malachi 3:1)

¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

¹⁶ “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ¹⁷ “ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

²⁰ Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.

These two texts bookend the life and career of the forerunner of Christ.

With the Message

(v.5-12)

John the Baptist was a successful messenger. What follows is not merely meant to convey what happened in his ministry, but anticipates the national response to Jesus and His own interaction with the religious leaders of his day.

The Genuine Converts

(v.5-6)

⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

In response to John’s preaching, multitudes repented of their sins and were baptized. This was a significant act. It was a public acknowledgment that Judaism was apostate. It is likely that some of the crowds who later took up following Jesus came from these converts.

All protests to the contrary, this is not a baptism for cleansing in the Old Testament nor is it a confirmation into the true Israel. This is the introduction of something new. Upon confession of faith and sin, John is immersing people as a public affirmation and identification with the message John is preaching. Again, it is important to remember that Matthew is written after the cross and the establishment of the church.¹² If he meant something different than the plain, New Covenant understanding of what John was doing, then he would have done so. In other words, the way I am taking this is almost certainly the way the original readers of Matthew, as Christians, not as adherents of Judaism, would have understood it.

The Damning Challenge

(v.7-10)

Then in an interesting switch, Matthew records John challenging some who came forward.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

This is intended to set the stage for the later rejection of Christ by the Pharisees and Sadducees. He challenges them in several ways:

They are not genuine in their faith. They are pretending what is not real. They see a popular movement of the people who are repenting of sin. They want to be their leaders. So, without genuine faith or repentance, they come. But John simply exposes them. Jesus certainly will pick up on this and accuse them of the exact same thing later.

They cannot claim a relationship with God based on a physical relationship with Abraham. In other words, John is preaching in seed form what Paul later expanded on and expounded for us. Only those who believe are the true sons of Abraham. Physical descent guaranteed them nothing.

In New Covenant language, Matthew announces that God is able to bring stones to life as sons if necessary. And this is exactly what God has done. He has granted life to dead hearts. Through regeneration He gives birth to sons.

Finally, in words that are echoed all through the gospel of Matthew, John announces their imminent destruction. Their reliance on the religion of Judaism and on their lineage to Abraham cannot and does not bring forth good fruit. This all comes to head in Matthew 7 where in verses 12-29 when Jesus closes the Sermon on the Mount as the new Moses with these powerful words.

¹² "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. ¹³ "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

²⁴ "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and

beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

²⁸ And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹ for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Remember that this is Jesus’ closing on the Law. His call is to true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, to believing in Christ in an obeying way. Those who build on the sand of the Law and legalism will be swept away and not recognized on the day of judgment. Those who rely on the rock (an allusion to many Psalms) will stand in the day of judgment.

The Person Coming

(v.11-12)

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John understands what his role and responsibility are. He is to point to someone greater. He is preaching with fruitful effect. He is challenging and correcting where needed. He is baptizing many. But, all this is in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is but the unworthy servant – not even to carry his shoes.

While he has been baptizing with water, the One who is coming will bring about the greatest change in redemptive history. Here really is “change you can believe in.”¹³ He will baptize with the Spirit and with fire. This is a clear allusion by Matthew to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Then, the once for all baptism with the Holy Spirit prophesied by John and promised by Jesus took place. Jesus’ own baptism and coming of the Spirit was a foretaste of that great day.

But there is a second aspect of John’s ministry and of the One who is to come. He will also judge those who refuse to believe and continue on in their sins. John describes this using a common scene from their day. The wheat would be cut and gathered onto a hard surface called the threshing floor. Then a winnowing fork, which was usually a long stick with the ends of branches tied to the end. The wheat would be beaten in order to break open the chaff, the hard shell around it. Then the whole would be thrown up in the air so that the wind would blow away the chaff and the wheat would fall back to the surface. Then it would be swept up into bushel baskets. The left over chaff would then be gathered up and used for fuel.

The Lord Jesus Christ is both redeemer and judge. His coming has made a clear division between those who believe in Him and those who do not. He will bring great blessing to those who believe. He will judge with eternal fire those who do not. While this is a hard thing to hear, it is nevertheless the truth.

Notice how John’s message about Christ intentionally draws from Malachi 3:1-4. There, Malachi prophesies about the ministry of John the Baptist as the messenger sent to do what Isaiah 30 commands to be done – that is, to prepare the way.

¹ “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. Malachi 3:1–4 (ESV)

Jesus will not only bring us blessings including the Holy Spirit, but He will also purify His people. He will refine them and make them holy. Then, our worship, represented here in the Old Testament cultic language, will be offered acceptably to our great God.

As the Messiah

(v.13-17)

Jesus is identified with the righteous remnant of true believing Israelites. Thus, he will be their promised Messiah whose holy life *is lived on the same terms as theirs*.

The Obedient Actions

(v.13-15)

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.

Matthew’s emphasis here is the obedience of Jesus and John. Jesus comes to be baptized, to be identified with God’s repentant and believing people. He Himself has no sin to be repented of, but he does live as the only human being who has totally and completely in every way possible believed God in an obeying way. Jesus lived by faith. How do we know that? Because He lived obediently in a way that was pleasing to God.

John, recognizing who Jesus was as the Messiah, protests. He needs and wants the baptism that Jesus provides. Jesus responds basically with, “Not yet”. In order to bring to perfect completion all aspects of righteousness, Jesus needs to be baptized as a matter of personal obedience and public identification with the true people of God.

I want to be careful here to follow Matthew’s purpose here. It is to show us that God’s people ought to be baptized. They were baptized under the preaching of John. Jesus is baptized to fulfill all righteousness. New Covenant baptism is an aspect of kingdom obedience and living. The language all through this text makes a clear and unmistakable argument for baptism as a part of God’s new kingdom. Since the King has come and has Himself been baptized then there is an “ought” that arises from it.

The Divine Approval

(v.16-17)

¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

As Jesus is coming up out of the water¹⁴ after his baptism, two significant events take place. Both of these are important for Matthew's teaching of Jesus' incarnation and Messianic kingship.

Jesus receives the Holy Spirit at this point *in a new way not received in the Old Testament*. It is intended to be the initial of which Pentecost is the final. All of the gospels, including Matthew, portray Jesus as living His holy life and doing His powerful miracles within the plan and at the permission of the Father and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus receives the Father's affirmation and approval.

- He is openly affirmed to be the beloved son. The Father declares the full divinity of Jesus, the Christ. Thus He is Lord as the Divine King. This affirmation then points back to a whole cluster of texts in the Psalms where the final Davidic King is addressed as God (see Hebrews 1:5-9 citing Psalms 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 104:4).
- He is openly approved as pleasing God. At His baptism and at the transfiguration, you have God specifically and pointedly approving Christ. His believing His Father in an obeying way, even to submitting to baptism, brings the Father's thunderous approval and pleasure.

This sets the stage for the next chapter of Matthew – Jesus enters the wilderness to see if He will obey God from the heart while Satan will challenge both of these affirmations by God.

Reflect and Respond

Biblically powerful preaching will do the same two things that John, the Baptist's did. It will lead to the conversion of some sinners and to the challenge and condemnation of others. This is why watered down, sinner-friendly preaching is unloving to the lost.

Jesus lived as the first New Testament person while still living in the Old Testament period. This living in both worlds anticipates our own situation: we are new persons, new creations, with life from the Spirit hidden in Christ in heaven but who still live in the old, fallen realm.

Just as Christ lived and ministered by the power of the Spirit, so are we. The Spirit has been given to the church at Pentecost and to believers to indwell them at their conversion. So, now we live as sons by the Spirit (Romans 8).

Are you pleasing to our Father? As we come to reflecting on the cross and Jesus' saving work for us, let us learn, live and love as pleasing and worthy of the One who has died and was raised for us.

Notes

- ¹¹ Men tended to have a first name, “bar” and the father’s name. Thus they were identified by the “bar” as being “the son of”. So, John, son of Zechariah. See Luke 1-2.
- ¹² Just for clarification – saying all this does not mean that John the Baptist is the founder of the Baptists.
- ¹³ “Change you can believe in” was a political slogan used by the candidate for president of the United States, Barack Obama. For many, this president’s changes brought great trouble and difficulty economically and socially in the country.
- ¹⁴ While this is not intended by Matthew to be a definitive defense of immersion (down into, up out of water) as the mode of baptism, it at least cannot be dismissed as illustrative of baptism as immersion. The New Testament church reading this would have understood the normality of immersion.