



# *The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom*

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*Volume I:  
From Bethlehem to  
the River Jordan*



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THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: A JOURNEY INTO THE KINGDOM: VOLUME I: FROM BETHLEHEM TO THE RIVER JORDAN.  
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# Out of the Old Order and into the New: John Proclaims the Ultimate Return from Exile

**S**o far in our synoptic journey, we have not studied any true parallel or similar episodes reported in more than one gospel account. In this chapter for the first time you will begin to study the earliest of these episodes, and to experience the richness of them and their tradition. We will look at how the meaning of some segments are intertwined with other segments, we will study the details and how these will tell us something about what was said to each of our evangelists and their respective communities.

† **MATTHEW 3:1–6 The Coming of John the Baptist,  
According to Matthew**

**<sup>1</sup>In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup>This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,**

*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”*

**<sup>4</sup>Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.**

1. Do you notice any differences between Mark’s version and Matthew’s?
2. If the weight of scholarship is correct, and Matthew relies on Mark, what do you think might underlie the changes Matthew makes?

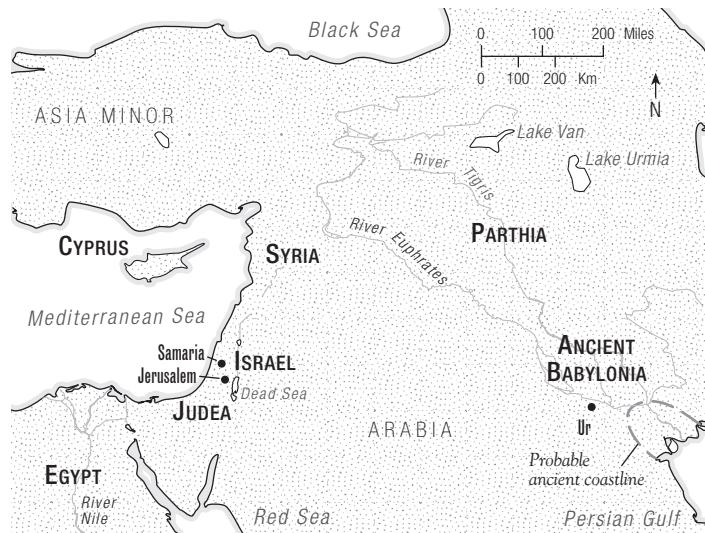
The connections Mark draws between Elijah and John the Baptist would have been clear to a large portion of his audience, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. These connections would have been even clearer to Matthew’s predominately Jewish-Christian audience, whose members were well-versed in the Old Testament tradition.<sup>5</sup> This latter group, heavily grounded in Judaism, was painfully aware that the authentic voice of prophecy had been silent in Israel for hundreds of years before John’s arrival. The last major prophet, Daniel, had spoken in the days of exile during the sixth century B.C.E.

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<sup>5</sup>It is likely that Matthew’s church used Mark as an authoritative text, at least before Matthew was written. The author of Matthew incorporated as much as ninety percent of Mark into his gospel, modifying it and adding additional material from Q and M to meet the emerging needs of his own community. While The Gospel According to Saint Matthew may have then become their most authoritative work, Mark was still known within the community.

## The Ultimate Return from Exile (circa 30 C.E.)

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After such a long silence, John's commanding presence ushered in dynamic change. It was strong enough to draw many people of Jerusalem, and other parts of Judea, away from the comforts of home and into the desert to be baptized. They were a people in need of spiritual renewal, ready to embrace even the stern message of John that we will soon hear.

While relying heavily on Mark's version of the appearance of John, Matthew describes his baptismal practices in a different way. To Matthew, John's is *not* a baptism "for the forgiveness of sins" (see Mark 1:4). Forgiveness is a function left for Jesus. But, John's baptism is about repentance and confession (see Mat. 3:6). It is about a change of heart and of life itself. It is a reorientation toward the prophetic traditions of the past. These traditions were about living in a right relationship with God and with one's neighbors. They are embodied in what Micah is said to have proclaimed to the Israelites during other troubled days three quarters of a millennium earlier:<sup>6</sup>

**<sup>8</sup>He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?**

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<sup>6</sup>See Mic. 6:8. Most scholars date the historical Micah, and the early parts of the book bearing his name, to the time of the Assyrian conquest that resulted in the northern kingdom of Israel falling in about 722 B.C. The possible circumstances of authorship of the remainder of the book, including chapter 6, are the subject of greater scholarly debate. They may date to as late as the Babylonian exile.

Religious people through the years have often forgotten this simple ethos as they focused on matters of doctrine and ritual and polity.<sup>7</sup> Ignoring it too long almost begs for a John the Baptist to come forth and proclaim the tradition anew. Matthew's John speaks out about the "kingdom of heaven"—what Mark and Luke call the "kingdom of God."<sup>8</sup> Because the kingdom is the core message of the synoptic Gospels, it is represented in the title of this series. Throughout our journeys, we will continue to explore what this proclamation of the kingdom means, and witness it in Jesus' simple presence, his power to heal, teach, preach, and to tell stories that to this day impart depth, direction and purpose for our journey.

1. Mark identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, in the verse before introducing John the Baptist. Matthew does not. Why might this be?
2. How do you react to the sort of prophecy that John embodied? Does it make sense to you? Or, is there too great a cultural disconnection?
3. What do the prophetic messengers of our culture look like?



† LUKE 3:1–6 The Coming of John the Baptist, According to Luke

<sup>1</sup>In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, <sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

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<sup>7</sup>Micah's prophecy is arguably the heart of life itself. It is displayed in my rector's study where he reads it every day. My father considers it to be the standard of true religion. As much as I enjoy a good debate, I have had trouble finding a principled way to disagree with the emphasis that either of them places on this powerful verse.

<sup>8</sup>We will more closely consider the likely reasons for the evangelists' different wording later in this series.

2. John is challenging a crowd that has come a long way just to see him. What is your response to that? How do you compare his behavior to modern ideas about the ways we communicate with those we are trying to persuade?
3. Have you ever listened to a street preacher? Or maybe one that frequents college campuses? How do you react to them? How do you think others react? Can you compare these evangelists to John the Baptist?
4. Is John trying to appeal to fear? To hope? How does he balance the two? Which way speaks more clearly to you now? Has it always been that way?



† **MATTHEW 3:7–10 John Preaches Wrath and Repentance,  
According to Matthew**

**<sup>7</sup>But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them,**

*<sup>8</sup>You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.*

*<sup>10</sup>Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

1. How does Matthew's version differ from Luke's? How is it the same?
2. What do you believe are the reasons for the differences between Luke's and Matthew's versions?

Matthew's gospel follows the Q source closely, though with one major variation. The recipients of John's invective are not the generic "crowds" of Luke (and, presumably, Q), but are two quite specific groups: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. We often lump these two groups together because they are considered opponents of Jesus. But that quick association is only marginally helpful; a more thorough understanding is better for our interpretive process.

Rather than being monolithic, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were actually often at odds with each other. The word "pharisees" means "separated ones." The Pharisees, who were part of a reform movement, founded a rabbinic tradition. They made the Judaic law applicable to all aspects of life and practiced a strict, ritualistic faith. Their zeal for the law—both as written in the Old Testament and as practiced through their oral traditions—caused them to set themselves apart from the rest of the community. They accepted the entire Hebrew Bible as authoritative, and believed in resurrection. Pharisees were relatively popular with the common people. Their movement was essential to the survival of Judaism after the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. at the close of the Jewish-Roman war.

The Sadducees did not leave a rabbinic record. Most of what we know about them comes from their opponents. The Sadducees were aristocratic and wealthy, and controlled the Jerusalem Temple apparatus. They accepted only the first five books of the OT—sometimes called the Pentateuch or the Torah—as authoritative. They preserved their power partially through collaboration with Rome, something the "separated ones" would not have dreamed of doing, as Gentile contact would have defiled their ritual purity. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. They were harsher on issues of crime and punishment than the Pharisees, and were less popular with the people.

The two parties also differed on the question of human freedom. Sadducees believed in free will. Pharisees had a more complex view: not exactly free will, nor quite yet the determinism that another group we have met, the Essenes, embraced. The distinctions among these groups, and the practices that defined them, will be important to us throughout our synoptic journeys, as we seek to understand the world in which Jesus walked.

It is remarkable that the Pharisees and Sadducees are depicted as coming to hear John, someone who may have once been associated with the Essenes. If so, he was an adversary to both movements. The context of John's speech suggests that the Pharisees and Sadducees had not come to the river Jordan for purposes of demonstrating religious commitment. As both groups will be opponents of the Jesus movement in Matthew's gospel, we can deduce that they are present—at best—as observers or opponents, and—at worst—as spies or agent provocateurs.

Given how the characters of this pericope are cast, we can see a concern of Matthew's church. The Sadducees were among Jesus' most powerful opponents during Holy Week.

Between that point in time (around 30 A.D.) and when Matthew was written, much had changed. The Church had been founded and the Jewish rebellion had occurred, leading to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D. By Matthew's day, some five-to-fifteen years later, the temple-based Sadducees had begun to dissipate into a memory. Even so, a substantial recollection of their power would have remained.

On the other hand, the Pharisees were a group that was actually strengthened in the post-temple era. In all probability, they were fierce opponents of Matthew's church. The Pharisees of Antioch, in the late first century, may well have precipitated the excommunication of the Christians from Matthew's hypothetical "synagogue across the street."<sup>14</sup> In this light, we should view a convergence of Pharisees and Sadducees at the river Jordan, just prior to the appearance of the adult Jesus, as a dark shadow. It is much like Herod's presence at the time of the nativity.

Yet, it would be a mistake to view Matthew's purpose in drawing attention to these groups as simply being a way to separate "us" from "them," "good" trees from "bad." These groups also represent improper directions in religious life. The Sadducees were powerful collaborationists, steeped in liturgy, worldly, and supercilious. The Pharisees were legalistic and literalistic, more wedded to the written word than its underlying meaning. Both represent faith gone awry. They stand as examples not to be followed, as warnings to Matthew's own church. By extension, they are warnings to us as well.

1. Had you thought of Pharisees and Sadducees as being alike? Allies? Do they bring to mind the Eastern maxim, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend?" Are we, too, guilty of drawing such divisions?
2. Does it feel better to see John's ire directed specifically at Jesus' eventual opponents, rather than broadly at "the crowd"? Why (not)? Do we lose the possibility of hearing a call to us when we view his denunciation that way?
3. The Pharisees and Sadducees may have been aligned only in their opposition to the Jesus movement. It is not a holy alliance. Conversely, are there holy alternatives for us today? Have you participated in any constructive ecumenical and interfaith

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<sup>14</sup>See chapter 2, The Rabbi's Journey.



alliances? Have you been able to reach common ground while maintaining your own identity? Examples might include service projects, such as Habitat for Humanity or urban ministries.



† LUKE 3:10–14 John Proclaims his Message to Special Groups

**<sup>10</sup>And the crowds asked him,**

*“What then should we do?”*

**<sup>11</sup>In reply he said to them,**

*“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”*

**<sup>12</sup>Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him,**

*“Teacher, what should we do?”*

**<sup>13</sup>He said to them,**

*“Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”*

**<sup>14</sup>Soldiers also asked him,**

*“And we, what should we do?”*

**He said to them,**

*“Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”*

1. Why does John single out these groups for special attention?
2. Are there any unifying themes in the instructions that John gives?

# From Nazareth to the River Jordan: “You Are My Son, the Beloved; with You I Am Well Pleased”

**W**e have arrived at the first chapter of the first volume in this series. If we have not yet met the adult Jesus, we have received many clues about what he would be like. The foreshadowing events of Matthew and Luke’s birth narratives set the stage for all we can expect. Luke’s story will show us how Jesus began to live into his plan for the disciples who he will become. It may seem a little blunt, but his bluntness comes from a deep spiritual conviction about who,

2. The Holy Spirit might well be considered the most elusive face of God. Yet, it remains our constant companion. Do these characteristics lead you to a sense of contradiction? Of paradox? Do they transcend definition and description for you?
3. How do you experience the presence of the Spirit in your life? In the lives of those around you, such as your family, neighbors, co-workers, friends, or church community?



† **MATTHEW 3:11–12 John Preaches about the Coming One, According to Matthew**

**<sup>11</sup>[John said]**

*“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

1. What do you notice about the similarities and differences between Mark’s version and Matthew’s? What might these signify?
2. Mark did not use the fire metaphor in his parallel. Do you think Matthew’s use of it makes a difference to the meaning of his text?
3. Matthew’s John speaks of being unworthy to “carry,” rather than “untie,” the sandals of the coming one. Is there a reason for this difference? What might it be?

In both Matthew and Luke, we see John the Baptist use fire as a metaphor for judgment. Fire awaits the trees not bearing fruit worthy of repentance (Matt. 3:10; Luke 3:10). Here, when coupled with the Holy Spirit and connected to baptism rather than to destruction, fire carries a different implication. It is, first and foremost, a force that illuminates and purifies.

Yet John, having just made such a positive use of the fire metaphor, immediately swerves back to a destructive and judgment-oriented use of fire. His vacillation can leave us unsettled. We can appreciate our need for the refining fire, even if we don't enjoy it; the consuming fire is another matter. Moreover, its "unquenchable" nature exceeds mere consumption and destruction. It carries a supernatural threat that is everlasting.

Let us consider, though, whether there might be more congruity than incongruity between these paired images of fire. The threshing floor represents the end of the harvest, when wheat and chaff are separated. The time for reckoning has come. To Professor Boring, it carries a twin purpose: the fire destroys the unholy, and purifies the holy (See *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary on Matthew, at 157–58). Judgment and purification are two sides of the same coin.

Moreover, the text connects the power of fire to the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is often symbolized by wind; it is God's power to move and to change. Elusive as the Spirit may be, we are guided by its symbols—not only the wind, but also the breath and power of God bearing truth and understanding. It is a redemptive and refreshing force. When combined with the refining and judging character of fire, it bears us mightily along in a positive direction—the direction of the coming one.

The baptism Jesus offers is qualitatively different from John's. It is not simply performed in water, for repentance. It is not even limited to the destroying and refining power of fire. This baptism exceeds all; it is found in the transforming power of Joel's vision, where men and women become nothing less than spirit-filled prophets.

1. Are you tossed about by John's imagery, unable to get a consistent picture? Does John leave us more with image, or with substance?
2. How do you compare John's imagery to the imagery Jesus used, for instance, in his parables?
3. Elijah, the harsh OT prophet, was succeeded by Elisha, a gentler figure. Is this a pattern we see repeated in John and Jesus? Do shifts in temperament from one generation of leaders to another pose problems to our human desire for predictability? How do we overcome these challenges?