

# 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 power 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 they will tell us something about what was said to each of our evangelists and their respective communities.

Where parallel texts appear in the same sequence in the synoptic Gospels, we will usually begin by studying Mark, the oldest gospel. Then, we can see how Matthew and Luke follow or modify this source as they tell their own stories of Jesus. By the time we get to the end of this chapter, we will be prepared to meet the adult Jesus.



## John the Baptist Appears

† MARK 1:1–6 The Coming of John the Baptist, According to Mark

**<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

**<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,**

*<sup>3</sup>“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;*

*<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”*

**<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.**

1. Mark’s suddenness confronts us. Its introduction is direct; there is no scholarly prologue, no studious genealogy. In fact, the story seems to start in the middle, and to assume an audience already knowledgeable about Jesus’ and John’s identities. How do you react to Mark’s style? How do you compare it to Luke’s and Matthew’s styles?
2. Given Mark’s assumptions about his audience, do you believe it was written primarily for the faithful? Luke is more explicitly a persuasive work composed to show Theophilus “the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (See Luke 1:4). Do these differences affect the way you read each gospel?

Mark's opening goes straight to the point. He identifies what he is doing in four ways: (1) He is telling good news; (2) about Jesus; (3) who is the Christ—the Greek version of the Hebrew word “Messiah,” meaning “anointed”; (4) and who is also the Son of God. Each one packs a wallop. Let's look at them, using these four numbered points for ease of reference.

1. Mark is the first Christian book that uses the term “good news”—“gospel”—to describe itself.<sup>1</sup> Mark's book proclaims the good news in the form of a story, pointing the reader to the defining moments in Jesus' earthly life and moving quickly along the paths Jesus walked.

2. The book is about Jesus. It is *his* story.

3. Jesus is the Anointed—one set aside by God for some particular purpose.

4. Jesus is the Son of God. This title is not found in verse one of some ancient manuscripts of Mark, and may have been inserted in later manuscripts, as the book circulated, to reflect a developing understanding of Jesus' identity. In the Markan context—which arose quite early in the Christian tradition—the phrase “Son of God” does not necessarily suggest a specific set of ideas about Jesus' divine nature, such as the ones used in the Nicene Creed. Rather, Mark likely uses “Son of God” to describe Jesus' special relationship with, and close connection to, the Father. As we have already seen, the phrase “son of God” was used in the Old Testament to describe angels, kings of Israel, righteous people, and even Israel itself. Only later was that connection made to Jesus in an especially unique way.

After the introductory verse, Mark abruptly shifts to Old Testament prophecy. There, as we often see in our studies of the Gospels, we find more than first meets the eye. His specific reference is to Isaiah 40:3, an OT passage which the NRSV translates this way:<sup>2</sup>

**A voice cries out:**

**“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”**

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<sup>1</sup>Letters of Paul, all of which were likely written earlier than Mark, make reference to Paul's gospel. However, the connotations are different. Paul has already *spoken* words of good news about Jesus (See, e.g., Gal. 1 and Rom. 1). His letters serve as reinforcements of that oral gospel. And, of course, there is no book we possess called *The Gospel According to Saint Paul*.

<sup>2</sup>Mark's “quotation” of Isaiah is actually a paraphrase which combines an Isaiah passage with Malachi 3:1, a prophetic verse showing Elijah as the forerunner of God.

There is a subtle difference between the text of Isaiah itself and how Mark paraphrases it. By looking at both, we can open ourselves to new interpretive possibilities.

In the NRSV, Mark's arrangement of key words suggests that the *voice* is to be found in the wilderness. Isaiah itself, however, has a different emphasis. The word "wilderness" does not so much describe the location of the voice as it does *the place where the highway is to be built*. To Jews living in first-century Judea—and understanding the prophetic tradition—Isaiah's road through the wilderness is none other than the route their ancestors took when returning home from the Babylonian exile 500 years before.

And yet, the post-exile restoration of Israel had proven incomplete. Some Israelites had stayed behind and been assimilated into Babylonian culture. Those who did return carved out a new life, but the Davidic glory was not restored. When John proclaims anew the way in the wilderness, it means that a complete return from exile is close at hand. Judea is on the threshold of receiving the full fruit of restoration, far beyond what was earlier realized. When understood this way, John is indeed delivering good news. To a people under occupation, who had lost their way even in their own homeland, the promise of complete renewal was an especially welcome proclamation.

And the wilderness through which the road goes—where Mark tells us the voice is crying—is not just any wilderness. It is not the Black Forest of Germany, or Pisgah Forest of North Carolina, or the Cascade Mountains of Oregon and Washington. Nor is it just any arid desert, such as the Gobi or the Sahara or the Sonora. It is a desert route that begins in Babylon and ends in Judea, the predominately dry wilderness where the Jordan River runs. Biblical scholars, including Professor Crossan and Professor Pheme Perkins of Boston College, who is affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, show how the wilderness site is filled with powerful associations. It is a place of refuge, where Moses, Elijah, and David all fled in times of trial. It is the place where one goes to regroup, and then to return and reassert.

This wilderness was also the place from which deliverance came. Moses led the people out of Egypt, through the desert, and toward the Promised Land. Then, under Joshua's leadership, they gained entry into Canaan from the desert. If a human tendency is to attempt to replicate the successful patterns of the past, we should not be surprised that first-century Judaism displayed a powerful connection to the wilderness near the Jordan. It was a place charged with expectations.

More than once during the decades around the life of Jesus, Jewish gatherings in the wilderness were associated, fairly or otherwise, with nationalistic or rebellious intentions. At least two movement founders had the specific goal of gathering the people in the wilderness and reenacting Joshua's conquest of the Holy Land—now under Roman arms—by crossing the

Jordan and marching toward Jerusalem. Rome crushed every such venture. On at least one occasion, the decimated marchers were unarmed.

A gathering of Jewish people in the desert, at the Jordan River, east of Jerusalem, was not to be taken lightly. It signaled an extraordinary occurrence. And, in his opening verses, Mark uses one such occurrence during the days of John the Baptist to put us on notice that we are witnessing the extraordinary. But, it is not taking place in the way conventional wisdom dictated. We see no evidence of a rebellious plot. What we see is a different sort of revolution: one of the spirit. By repenting (a word which means turning away from one direction and heading in another), the people were physically acting out changes of heart, word and deed. Repentance is not about tucking our tails between our legs in response to finger-wagging lectures; it is about a liberation from sad and sick patterns and a return to a healthier way of living. Baptism in the Jordan was an outward and visible sign of this inward and spiritual grace. We are witnessing a transformative and sacramental experience.

No doubt, the people participating in the ritual and practicing the repentance that John preached were hoping to experience God's favor as a result of their actions. The fact that they were carrying out this rite in the waters of the Jordan at the eastern wilderness suggests they were not merely seeking forgiveness, but restoration. As Crossan states, "[w]hen people came to [John], he kept sending them back *from* the wilderness, *through* the Jordan, which washed away their sins, and, purified and ready, into the Promised Land, there to await the imminent coming of the redeeming and avenging God."<sup>3</sup> This was powerful business.

The person who is baptizing them also powerfully captures our attention. John the Baptist, wild man of the desert, was a sight to behold. He had the sparse and bizarre diet of an ascetic. He was "clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6). The camel's hair would have been itchy and uncomfortable. The locusts—like our grasshoppers—would have been protein-rich, but hardly of good flavor. The picture Mark paints is an earthy, real, and palpable one.

To describe John is to make a clear connection to the return of Elijah, the forerunner of the Lord proclaimed in Mal. 3:1.<sup>4</sup> Elijah was a powerful OT prophet. Living in the northern kingdom of Israel, after its rift with Judea in the south, Elijah had single-handedly defeated the priests of the pagan idol, Baal. We are told that, at the end of his days, Elijah did not die, but was taken bodily into heaven in a fiery chariot. This Elijah was "a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist" (See 2 Kgs. 1:8).

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<sup>3</sup>Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, at 43.

<sup>4</sup>See footnote 2, *supra*.

In a later volume of this series, we will see an image of Elijah in the company of Jesus and Moses at the Mount of the Transfiguration. Right now, though, there is a different image of the spirit of Elijah. It is found in the time of John the Baptist, with all his rugged glory, who makes his first appearance in the first verses of Mark. We will see that he is the forerunner of the One who is to come. And, he is baptizing the people in, of all places, the river Jordan!

1. How do we relate to a character like John? From our comfortable surroundings, we might look upon this wild man of the desert as mad if we had not been taught that he was holy. After all, would we live like that? Could we give up our creature comforts, such as hot and cold running water, indoor plumbing, soft furniture, and microwave ovens, in order to respond to God's call? Could it be that John, who chooses this ascetic lifestyle, was compelled by a divine madness? Keep this thought in mind as we continue to study his appearance.
  
2. In *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg argues that there are three macro-stories, or overriding epics, in the Bible. The first is the Exodus. It is about escape from bondage. The second is the Babylonian exile. It is about return from exile and estrangement. The third is the Priestly story. More of a theme than a story proper, it is about repentance and forgiveness of sins. We find strands of all three macro-stories in this passage:
  - a. Mark commemorates the Israelites' escape from bondage as the Judean people under Roman occupation reenact the ancient crossing of the Jordan.
  - b. Mark commemorates the return from the Babylonian exile with the voice crying, "in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord."
  - c. Mark commemorates the Priestly story with baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

If Borg is correct about the three macro-stories, do they all converge right here in what Mark calls "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ?" And, what might that say about the passages we are now interpreting?