

**1.C The Arrival of Heaven's Regime 3.1-4.16**

The genealogy, naming, and persecution narratives of Mt 1-2 are followed in Mt 3 by the appearance and ministry of John the Baptist (3.1-12), Jesus' baptism (3.13-17), and his subsequent testing (4.1-11). In this second half of Part 1 (1.1-4.16), Matthew introduces the basic theological themes of the 'good news' about Jesus, as such.

John the Baptist undertakes his ministry to Israel (3.1-12) to prepare for Jesus' ministry. As Jesus' forerunner, he typifies Jesus' person and work. The Israel he confronts in the Pharisees and Sadducees (3.7-10) foreshadows the Israel that Jesus, too, will confront in the Pharisees and Sadducees (16.1,6,11,12; etc).

The whole of Part 1 (1.1-4.16) culminates in Jesus' baptism, at which the Voice from the sky declares: 'This is my Son, the Beloved' (3.17).

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**1.C.1 John the Baptist and His Proclamation 3.1-12**

In two ways Mt 3 elaborates the key point of the first narrative block, God's initiative in commissioning Jesus (1.18-25, the 'birth and naming narrative'):

- John's testimony about Jesus (3.11-12; cf 1.21,23; 2.15) expands on God's commission.
- The conflict between the center (where the political, economic, social, and religious elite act) and the margins (where God acts) continues, as the prophet John confronts resistant religious leaders in the desert.

The narrative locates John in the desert, a place marginal to the centers of power. His call for repentance (3.2) and scathing denunciation of the religious elite (3.7-10) indicate a role antithetical to the center's interests. Yet he interacts with both the religious (3.7-10) and political (14.1-12) centers.

This liminal location and role are akin to those experienced by Israel's prophets, who spoke against the society in which they lived. They interacted with kings, prophets, and priests, yet in speaking of an alternative world, they did not say what the elite wanted to hear. Elijah's confrontation with Ahab and the prophets of Baal over false worship is a classic scenario (1Kg 17-19). Amos, even though perhaps himself a wealthy landowner, condemned greed and injustice, militarism and shallow piety (Amos 2.4-16; 4.1-13; 6.1-7; 7.10-17; 8.4). Isaiah of Jerusalem spoke *with* and *against* kings (Isa 7-8). Jeremiah, although himself a priest, confronted nations, the people of Judah, and the unjust kings (Jr 22.10-30; ch. 23), and countered prophets and priests (5.31; 6.10, 13-15). Ezekiel the priest attacked the abuses of the temple (Ez 8-11; 40-48), countered other prophets (13.1), spoke to the 'elders of Israel' (14.1), condemned the kings and envisioned Israel's future without a king (ch. 34). John the prophet exists in this tradition.

John's stance against and challenge to the elite link him with numerous other figures who employed various strategies against Roman power and injustice. We know from other sources of an assortment of figures who looked for God to take Judea back from Rome. In his proclaiming and confrontation with the local Jerusalem elite, allies of Rome, John proclaims judgment on them and on the world dominated by Rome.

In addition to his marginal location, conflict with the elite, and rejection by them (3.7-10; 14.1-12), several other prophetic features mark the presentation of John the Baptist.

1. John is a *proclaimer*. 3.1 introduces him as such; 3.2 identifies its content; 3.3 supplies scriptural support for his proclaiming activity; 3.5-6 narrate its effect; and 3.7-10 offer an example of his proclaiming against the religious elite.

2. Like the prophets, *John sees a bleak contemporary situation which requires change*. His proclaiming has a prophetic theme, 'repent' (3.2), ie, 'turn around,' 'return' to faithful relationship with God. Compare Dt 30.2,10, Ho 2.7; 3.5.6.1; 11.15, Am 4.6,8-9, Isa 6.10; 9.13; 31.6, Jr 2.27; 3.10,12,14,22, and Ez 14.6; 18.30, 32. Dire consequences will result from refusing to embrace the prophet's message (3.10-12).

3. John's proclamation also prepares for and bears witness to Jesus' ministry. In 3.2 repentance is necessary because 'the empire/reign of the heavens has arrived'. The next Part of the gospel (4.17-11.1) will indicate that proclaiming and inaugurating God's empire is central to Jesus' commission to manifest God's saving presence (1.21,23). In 3.11-12 John announces aspects of Jesus' mission: Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (3.11) and will judge (3.12).

4. Like the prophets, John performs sign-actions in his baptism, location, diet, and clothing. Hosea married a prostitute and gave symbolic names to their children (Ho 1). Isaiah went naked for three years (Isa 20.1-4). Jeremiah did not marry or have children (Jr 16.1-4). Ezekiel ate a scroll (3.1), made a model of the siege and fall of Jerusalem (4.1-3), lay on one side for 390 days and the other for 45 days to symbolize punishment (4.4-8), shaved his head (5.1-4), and did not mourn his wife's death (24.15-27).

5. John's clothing (Matt 3.4) echoes that of Elijah in 2Kg 1.8 almost word for word. Elijah too called for repentance from the nation and its leaders and prosecuted a life-and-death confrontation with the political and religious powers of Ahaz, Jezebel, and Baal. Later, the gospel will identify John 'as' Elijah (11.14 and 17.11-13).

6. Echoes of the prophetic traditions resound in the narrator words, ('in those days', 'proclaim'), in his images ('desert', 'fruit', 'fire', 'water', 'winnowing fan'), themes ('repentance', false piety, 'Spirit'), and ways of stating a position in order to reject it, 3.9; perceiving what is already taking place, 3.10a; stating the destructive consequences of not heeding, 3.10b), and so forth.

### 1.C.1.a Appearance and Proclamation 3.1-2

In Mt 1 and 2, Jesus was an infant; in Mt 3, he is a grown man. By the time John appeared, Jesus and his whole generation had grown up. Why then does Matthew say, 'in those days' (3.1), as though John's appearance took

place when the holy family settled in Nazareth? Is Matthew just ignoring the passage of time between Jesus' infancy and the appearance of the Baptist? Or is this just a 'biblical' way of connecting one sequence with another— perhaps a way of saying, While Jesus was dwelling in Nazareth (2.23), John's ministry began?

To think so, or just to brush past this phrase, would be to miss a key point. In the books of the OT that Matthew explicitly quotes, 'in those days' refers either to the ongoing narrative moment,<sup>4</sup> or it's *eschatological*.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, in the flow of Matthew's story, the phrase calls attention to itself. Throughout Part 1 (1.1-4.16), Matthew begins each episode either with a participle that would best be translated with a 'when' clause—

2.1 Now when Jesus was born...

2.13 And when they were departed...

2.19 But when Herod was dead...

4.12 Now when Jesus had heard...

—or else he begins with the adverb 'then':

2.16 Then Herod... was exceedingly angry...

3.13 Then Jesus comes from Galilee...

4.1 Then Jesus was led up into the wilderness...

Disrupting this pattern, the phrase 'in those days' (3.1) stands out and makes us wonder whether Matthew has something special in mind.

It turns out that Matthew uses this expression, 'in those days', only five times— one, here at 3.1; and four times during the discourse on the *coming of the Son of Man* (24.19,22a,c,29). Now, Matthew gets that discourse from Mk 13.17,19,24,20a,c, but where Mark sometimes wrote 'those days' and sometimes just 'the days', Matthew *always* writes 'those days' and makes it very clear that he's talking about the days of the Son of Man's coming. He makes the expression 'in those days' uniform, to signal a uniform idea. And by contrast, when Mark used 'in those days' just to indicate a particular moment in Jesus' ministry (the feeding of the four thousand, Mk 8.1), Matthew takes up the episode, but omits 'in those days' (cf 3.13; 15.32). So everywhere except here at 3.1, he reserves that expression *only* for the days of the coming of the Son of Man. In other words, whenever Matthew says something happens 'in those days', it belongs to *the time preceding the consummation of the Age and the coming of the Son of Man* (24.19,22a,c,29; also 24.37,39). So, when he breaks his usual pattern of 'when' and 'then' here, and says 'in those days' at the appearance of John the Bap-

<sup>4</sup> Cf Gn 6.4, Dt 17.9,12 LXX; 19.17; 26.3 LXX; Dn 10.2.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Jr 3.16,18; 31.33 [Lxx 38.33]; 50.4,20 [LXX 27.4,20]; Zc 8.23.

tist, is Matthew signaling that *the time of consummation broke in upon Israel when John the Baptist began his ministry?*

It seems so. Matthew does two interesting things with Mark's story of John.

Mark used the phrase 'in those days' for the first time when he wrote of the beginning of Jesus' ministry: 'it came to pass *in those days*, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan' (Mk 1.9). That this was the beginning of the last times, Mark made clear when he wrote of Jesus' first proclamation: 'Now after John was handed over, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God's regime and saying, Time's up! God's regime has arrived! Change your ways and trust the good news!' (Mk 1.14-15).

Matthew has moved 'in those days' up to the beginning of *John's* ministry, and has *John* proclaim, *in the same words that Jesus will use*, the arrival of heaven's regime (3.2, 4.17). Mark already described John as the eschatological Elijah who was to prepare the people for the last times (Mk 1.6, cf Mal 3.1, 4.5); Matthew sees him in the same role (3.4), but his appearing itself inaugurates the time of the end (3.2, 11.13-14; 17.10-13).

Both John and Jesus are heralds sent by God (11.10; 10.40) to announce the time of fulfillment (3.3; cf 1.23). They both proclaim the same message (3.2; 4.17), and indeed the disciples will proclaim it as well (10.7): 'The regime of the skies has arrived'. Jesus fulfills the last times, but John the Baptist initiates them.

John 'appears' (*paraginetai*, literally translated something like 'becomes alongside'), and starts 'proclaiming' something: 'Appear' (*paraginetai*) is what the magi did in 2.1. Pointing to John's appearance with the same word, Matthew subtly links their common concern for God's purposes.

The 'desert' (or 'wilderness') where John appears is the area east of Jerusalem toward the Dead Sea, and north through the Jordan Valley. It is relatively far from Jerusalem (2.1-4), the central location of the powerful elite, which cannot control or contain his mission (3.5). Like Bethlehem (2.6) and Nazareth (2.23), the 'desert' is an apparently insignificant place— which is central to God's purposes.

The 'desert' appears in the prophetic traditions over 30 times in Isaiah and Ezekiel, and almost 30 in Jeremiah alone, with rich and diverse associations.. The desert is a place of

1. Redemption/liberation in the exodus from Egypt (Ex 5.1,3; 7.16; 13.18,20; 14.3,11,12; etc.);
2. God's faithful guidance to the promised land,

3. The people's faithlessness (Ho 2.14; 9.10; 13.5; Am 2.10; 5.25; Ez 20.10,13,15);
4. Revelation (Ex 19.1-6);
5. Punishment (Ho 2.3; 13.15; Isa 1.7,5,9; 6.1; 14.23; Jr 9.10,12; Isa 50.2; Ez 5.14; 6.14; 20.35; 29.9);
6. Testing (Ex 16.4; 20.20; Dt 8.2);
7. God's redemption in a new exodus and new creation (Isa 40.3; 41.18; 43.19-20; 48.21; 51.3; Ez 36.33, 35, 38);
8. Refuge/escape for Elijah (1Kg 19.4, 15);
9. Danger where demons reside (Lv 16.10; Tb 8.3; 1En 10.4; 4Mc 18.8a)

John's proclaiming 'in the desert of *Judea*' also recalls Jesus' birth in 'Bethlehem of *Judea*' (2.1,5), where he was perceived as a threat to Herod and to 'all Jerusalem' (2.3). Now that Herod is dead, 'Archelaus *reigns* over *Judea* in the place of his father Herod' (2.22). John proclaims the heavens' '*reign*' (3.2) in this same *Judea*. Conflict seems inevitable.

'All Jerusalem, *Judea*, and the Jordan districts' — neither Matthew nor Mark mention Galilee here— go out to him in the desert. The place Israel sojourned before entering the land of the promise, is where the Baptist now prepares Israel for the coming of her Messiah (3.1-12). It will also be a place of testing, where Satan will tempt Jesus to break faith with God, and where Jesus', unlike Israel, will remain faithful (4.1-4), and where Jesus will later have the disciples realize that they already possess the authority to feed the hungry crowds (14.16; 15.33).

Matthew introduces John as the *Baptist*, but he says nothing about his actual *baptizing* until 3.5. He first focuses on John's 'proclamation'. We need to emphasize that this was not 'preaching', which is an activity done in a church. *Kēryssō* is a political term; it's what a 'herald' (*kēryx*) does: he makes an official public announcement on behalf of the king. Or a king himself 'proclaims' decrees, etc. John is a *herald*, not a 'preacher'. He is *proclaiming* the arrival of a new regime in a highly charged political, economic, social, and religious situation— *not* just preaching sermons on 'repentance'.

In English 'repent' might connote sorrow or contrition for sin, but the Greek envisions a *change* in thought (the verb *metanoō* literally means 'afterthought'), while the Hebrew *teshuvah* refers to 'turning around' in *behavior*. Real repentance actually requires a change in both thought and behavior, so there is no opposition— rather, for example, in Mt 3.7, Lk 3.8, Hb 6.1, and Ac 26.20, we find that, despite the literal meaning of the Greek as 'rethink', Matthew and the New Testament generally

envision repentance as a change of *behavior*, not primarily of mind or of feeling. 'Repent' is a prophetic call<sup>6</sup> to abandon lives of unfaithfulness, injustice, and false allegiance, and to turn back to faithful living within the covenant. Dire consequences will result from refusal to embrace the prophet's message (3.10-12).

As we seek to 'apply the Scriptures to our everyday lives', we've grown used to thinking of repentance in individual terms. But the glimpse of John's actual proclaiming that Matthew gives us is quite different from this. Matthew's John singles out one group and one situation only: that of the 'Pharisees and Sadducees' who come to him (3.7-12). John views life as currently organized under their leadership— who seek their own benefit at the expense of the rest— as far from how God wants it to be. God is demanding a change. Repentance is a means of averting judgment and disaster. The repentance of the leaders is crucial, because they will take the rest of society with them, whichever direction they go— toward blessing, or toward catastrophe.

The Baptist's mission is to 'restore all things' (17.11, cf Mal 3.1, 4.5). His message is to prepare for the arrival of heaven's regime. To accomplish this preparatory restoration, he proclaims repentance to Israel. At the heart of his summons lies the notion that Israel has lost its way. Israel has to turn from evil, trust God, and obey him. And it has to do that *now*, because God has set in motion the final events that will end in judgment. The Coming One is soon to appear.

Neither John nor Jesus (nor Matthew) is talking about a 'kingdom', in the sense of a place ruled by a king. Nor are they saying that there is a kingdom in 'heaven' that we can *go* to. A 'kingdom' would be a *basileion*. Jesus and John (and Matthew) are talking about a *basileia*, an 'act of ruling', a 'reign', or a 'regime'. This 'reign' or 'regime' is said to be that of 'the skies'— Matthew avoids referring to God directly, so he writes 'the skies'<sup>7</sup> wherever Mark has 'God', much as we might say 'the White House' rather than 'Obama'. Nor are John, Jesus, or Matthew saying that the 'regime of the skies' is 'coming' sometime in the future: it has 'arrived'. Still less are they saying that people will be able to go to it when they die, as long as they perform a religious act called 'repenting'. John and Jesus are saying— one in a preliminary way, and the other final— 'Change your ways *now*, because the regime of the skies has *arrived!*'

<sup>6</sup> Compare Moses (Dt 30.2,10), Hosea (Ho 2.7; 3.5.6.1; 11.15), Amos (Am 4.6,8-9), Isaiah (Isa 6.10; 9.13; 31.6), Jeremiah (Jr 2.27; 3.10,12,14,22), and Ezekiel (Ez 14.6; 18.30, 32)

<sup>7</sup> English is the only language that distinguishes between 'heaven' and 'sky'. In Greek, they are the same: *ouranos*.

Again, *this is what Matthew himself is saying* by telling his story. What will it mean for his audience in 1<sup>st</sup> century Antioch? What will it mean among the poor of Africa, or the rich of Marin?

### 1.C.1.b John's Identity as Forerunner and as Eschatological Elijah 3.3-4

Matthew next identifies John as the one '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'"' (3.3; cf Isa 40.3), and further identifies him as Elijah (3.4; cf 11.4, 17.12) by his clothing (cf 2K 1.18) and his Exodus/desert diet (cf Ex 16.31; Lv 11.22).

#### 1.C.1.b.1 As Forerunner, cf Isa 40.3 3.3

3.3: 'This is the one or whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said....': Matthew affirms John's role as a prophet and his message from God with a citation from the prophet Isaiah. A prophet speaks a dangerous and challenging word. The citation claims that John's appearing is not a surprise or an accident but enacts the divine will stated in Isa 40.3. Matthew's other citations of Isaiah also evoke contexts of imperial domination (see 1.22-3; 3.3; 4.14-16; 8.17; 12.17-21, 13.14-15, 15.7-9; 21.4-5; 21.13; 26.31-2). They underscore God's saving work (which includes Gentiles, 4.14-15; 8.17; 12.17-21) and its rejection by some (13.13-15; 15.7-9).

The citation of Isa 40.3 is taken not from the Masoretic (Hebrew) Text but from the Septuagint. In Isaiah 40, the reference is not to John. The text addresses the community exiled in Babylon after Babylonian imperial expansion had conquered Jerusalem in 587. The text promises that God will reverse this situation. There, the identity of the voice who cries is not clear, perhaps the Lord, or a member of the heavenly council, or another proclaimer. But the voice asserts that God will end Babylonian power. God will 'anoint' (make a 'messiah' out of) the Persian ruler Cyrus to overthrow the Babylonians and liberate the exiles (Isa 44.28-45.1). The voice urges its hearers to prepare for God's action.

In Matthew, the 'voice' is now John; the focus is on Jesus, not Cyrus; the place is Judea, not Babylon, and Rome, not Babylon, is in power; the time is six centuries later. But biblical texts are polyvalent, capable of new and different meanings in different circumstances (see on 1.23; 2.6, 15, 18, 23). But there is a fundamental continuity. God now asserts, as he formerly asserted, his empire in liberating people from oppressive imperial power. Babylon no longer holds power. Rome, like Babylon, can't resist God's purposes forever, and will experience Babylon's fate. God's liberating work is encountered now in John's ministry in the desert, on the margins not the

center, just as it was in the liberation from Egypt's Pharaoh and from Babylon.

The verse underlines John's proclaiming (voice crying) and its location (in the desert). It also elaborates John's call to change. By changing in the ways that John demands, people 'prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight'. 'Way' and 'path' are metaphors for God's will and purposes (7.13-14; cf Dt 5.33, Jr 7.23). God's purposes, manifested in Jesus, will be experienced either as salvation or as condemnation depending on one's response to John's call to repent. To repent signifies specific changes in structures and ways of living, and a basic receptivity to God's purposes.

### **1.C.1.b.2 As Elijah, cf 2K 1.18; Mal 3.1, 4.5) 3.4**

3.4: 'Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist'. John is an Elijah look-alike. His food was locusts and wild honey, food that derives from a desert or desert location. His food denotes poverty, as well as his commitment to and trust in God by not being distracted from the reign because of concern with daily food (cf 6.25-34; cp 6.11). He is indebted to no one.

John has good company in not letting food distract him from serving God: apart from the levitical purity laws, the nazirites refused strong drink (Nm 6.3; Jg 13.4-5,14), various national heroes and heroines maintained faithfulness to God by not eating idolatrous meat (Dn 1.12,16; Jdt 10.5; 12.2-4,17-20), and the Rechabites renounced wine, houses, and agriculture (Jr 35). John's unusual food attests a way of life centered on faithfulness to God. It presents a critique of the economic extravagance of the powerful elite, who enjoy abundance at the expense of the poor (see 11.8-9; 12.1-8; 14.13-21).

### **1.C.1.c John's Popularity and the Baptism for Repentance 3.5-6**

Matthew doesn't even mention that John was baptizing until after he has identified him as the voice crying in the wilderness, and as Elijah. In fact, even now he first mentions that people from Judea, Jerusalem, and around the Jordan were coming to him (3.5). Only then does he finally get around to saying why: they were getting baptized by him, confessing their sins as they did so (3.6). And only after describing John's outspoken rebuke of the Pharisees (3.7-10) does Matthew have John actually explain what he's doing.

3.5 'Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.' Three regions were going out to John to be baptized by him. The first is Jerusalem— somewhat

surprisingly, given the alliance between Jerusalem and Herod in responding negatively to Jesus' birth (2.3). But 3.5 doesn't say 'all', as in 2.3; thus we discern that despite the opposition of the political and religious elite, some in Jerusalem do respond positively to God's will. Two other groups— 'all Judea', the area around Jerusalem, and 'all the region along the Jordan'— also respond positively.

Washing in water for purification is a religious ritual found in practically every society, and Jews were no strangers to such rites. In a passage Matthew largely omits, Mark mentions how the Jews, 'when they come from the market, do not eat unless they wash (*baptisōntai*)', and that they practice 'the washing (*baptismous*) of cups, and pots, brass vessels, and beds'. (Mk 17.4; cp Mt 15.2). But John is baptizing in the *Jordan*, the river through which the Israelites passed as they entered the land after their journey in the desert (Josh 3.14-17). Exodus echoes indicate that John's baptism is, at least in part, an act of liberation from the oppressive political and religious leadership exemplified in Mt 2.

This involves a confession of sins (3.6). In the context, these would not be so much private peccadilloes, but ways in which people had breached the covenant order which God had prescribed long ago for his people. As a response to John's proclamation of repentance, the baptism demonstrates acceptance of John's verdict on the present as sinful, recognition of participating in 'unrighteous' behaviors, and a commitment to turn and to live differently. Water symbolizes a clean start. Baptism in water may also express, as in Ps 69.1-3, being saved by God from a terrible situation.

Mark wrote that John offered 'a baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins' (Mk 1.4). That did not mean that John's baptism effected such remission; it was a baptism undertaken as a sign of repentance and '*unto*', that is, *in view of*, the remission of sins that was to be granted when God's regime arrived. John was only 'preparing the way' for it (Mk 1.2-3). When Jesus began his ministry, he announced that 'God's regime has arrived' (1.15), and one of the first things he did was to forgive and heal a paralytic (Mk 2.1-12).

Matthew treats this a little differently. He has John announce the arrival of heaven's regime (3.2), but clarifies Mark's statement about the 'baptism of repentance' by omitting reference to 'remission of sins'. This is not the only time that Matthew reduces what might be ambiguous in Mark's version. Matthew inserts the expression '*unto remission of sins*' into the last supper narrative, when Jesus blesses the cup for the disciples (26.28). Jesus is the one who will 'save his people from their sins'

(1.21) by his death (20.28), which is appropriated in the eucharist.

John makes no mention of the temple cult, the normal site of purification and remission. He bypasses the religious elite's central institution. Jesus is also the one who manifests God's presence (1.23).

John's baptism thus expresses an openness to heaven's regime insofar as it will be manifested in Jesus. It anticipates participation in that reign. Those who accept John's baptism will encounter present and eschatological salvation from sin through Jesus.

### **1.C.1.d Against the Pharisees and Sadducees**

**3.7-10**

3.7a: 'Many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming' to John. Five times Matthew makes the 'Pharisees and Sadducees' a single group, even though in Jesus' day, they were two distinct parties with sharply contrasting views and theologies. The Pharisees had a progressive program. They wanted to adapt the Torah of Moses to the changing demands of the time. But they also tended to want to keep separate from the Romans. The Sadducees were a wealthy, conservative party that advocated rigorous application of the Torah to the life of the nation, but they espoused collaboration with the Romans, in order to preserve the status quo.

Matthew could treat the two parties as one because he was not writing a historical biography as we would conceive it. He is literarily and theologically motivated. For him, the groups are united by one thing. As religious leaders, they are opponents of John and his preaching. As such, they are also opponents of God's purposes. This also allies them with the chief priests and scribes in 2.4-6 who, in support of Herod, did not welcome Jesus' birth. Mt 2-3 thereby present a coalition of religious and political leaders allied against both John and Jesus. They are members of the imperial/colonial society's ruling elite. They defend its current hierarchical social order. They are allies of Herod and of Rome (see also at 2.4; 5.20).

Why do they come to John? Many translations say that they came 'for baptism', suggesting that they intended to be baptized. John's immediate hostility in 3.7b doesn't quite make sense, then. We tend to gloss this over by saying that they intended to undergo an external washing only, one that left their commitments and practices unchanged (cf 23.25-26); John of course would reject such role-playing. But nothing so far has led us to suspect them of hypocrisy. What is more, Matthew mentions the 'many Pharisees and Sadducees' (3.7) separately from the positive respondents identified in 3.5-6.

The phrase 'coming for baptism' can also be translated, 'coming *against* the baptism'. The Greek preposition *epi* can mean against. John's prophetic identity suggests likely conflict with the religious elite, and in 2.4-6 the religious leaders are introduced as resistant to God's purposes. Thus the leaders seem to have come in order to *oppose* John's baptism and to persuade others not to be baptized.

John immediately rebukes them personally ('you') and graphically with a metaphor that emphasizes evil and destructiveness— 'brood of vipers!' (3.7; see 12.34; 23.33); that is, persons who are poisonous at the very core of their being (cf 12.34, 23.33). Since social standing and honor have to do with birth, this harsh insult, which refers to their parentage, places them at the lowest levels of illegitimacy.

John's rhetorical question, 'Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' is sarcastic— they actually oppose John's baptism and have not repented (3.8-10). The notion of wrath refers to God acting righteously and in holiness against Israel and the nations to judge injustice, idolatry, and rebellion. Humans are accountable to God. Wrath can be expressed in the present (disease, pestilence, weather disturbance, drought, flood, devastation of land, famine, death, defeat in battle, exile) or in God's final judgment which ushers in a new Age. The notion is evident in historical (Ex 4.14; Dt 4.25; 6.15; 1Kg 14.15; 16.33; 1Chr 13.10), cultic (Ps 2.5, 11; 78.31), prophetic (Ho 13.9-11; Jr 4.4, 8,26; Ez 5.15; 6.12), and apocalyptic traditions ("the day of the Lord," Isa 13.9; Zp 1.14-16; 2.2; Dan 8.19; 11.36; 1En 90.15-27; Apoc. Ab. 29.14-21 ).

From the margins and contrary to the perceptions of the religious center, John sees the corrupt nature of the present and the inevitability of God's wrath to come, which holds people accountable, and for which repentance is the only preparation. Interpreters usually assume that John sees a cataclysmic apocalyptic, future scenario (supported by "in those days" in 3.1). While this is probably correct, several factors do not rule out his warning against expressions of God's wrath also in the present. (1) The Hebrew Bible traditions outlined above do not reserve God's wrath only for an end-time event. (2) The participle 'to come' or 'coming' (*mellousēs*) indicates a future event that will certainly, or is (divinely) destined to, take place, but it does not automatically assume an eschatological occurrence. (3) John's proclamation of God's imminent empire holds together present and future dimensions. John sees God's approaching wrath or judgment, which may be expressed within imminent history and as a cataclysmic apocalyptic event. The fall of Jerusalem expresses God's wrath. The religious elite do not see wrath coming at all.

3.8-10: Their presumption that all is well provides the basis for John's condemnation of them. John exhorts the leaders to 'bear fruit worthy of / that befits repentance'. The image of bearing fruit denotes behavior that embodies God's will (Ps 1.1-3; Ho 9.16 [its absence]; Isa 27.6; Jr 17.7-10; Ez 17.8-9,23). John does not think they have repented and calls them to a way of life marked by covenant values of trust, worship, and justice. John's preaching and baptism divide the repentant and unrepentant.

The religious leaders belong to the latter. John warns them: 'Do not presume to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our ancestor.' John employs a common prophetic technique of quoting a position only to refute it (cp Jr 8.8-9,11,18-21). Having Abraham as an ancestor is not a bad thing (cf 1.1), but neither is the mere fact of being descended from the one who received God's promises enough to ensure participation in his purposes (cf Si 44.19-21). The covenant carries obligations.

We should keep in mind that polemic is always about a group's perceptions of others and of themselves, not about historical accuracy or just charges. We can't rely on John (or Matthew) to give us an accurate picture of Jewish religious life in the first century. Matthew is depicting the *attitude* of Jesus' antagonists, not a position historically held by any group.

God's power and action, not human descent, are central to the explanation John offers, 'for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham'. The link between stones and Abraham derives from Isa 51.1-2: 'Look to the rock from which you were hewn... Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you, for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many.' The passage emphasizes God's action in calling, blessing, and multiplying Abraham. A rock is lifeless and cannot produce offspring, just as Abraham and Sarah were too old to have a child, but God made it happen (Gn 16.2; 17.17; 21.6). God's action determines Abraham's children, not physical descent (so Jesus, 1.1, 18-25; Romans is all about this).

The exhortation to fruit is reinforced in 3.10 with a warning of immediate and inevitable punishment. God's wrath is imminent: 'even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees.' The marginal prophetic figure John sees something that the religious center cannot see. John borrows this image of judgment from the prophets, where it describes the fall of the powerful nations (Isa 10.33-34 ["the lofty" Assyrians]; Ezek 31 [Assyria]; Dan 4.9-27 [the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar]). He turns back on the religious leaders an image previously used against Israel's enemies and opponents of God's rule and purposes (so Am 1-2).

Even more, the axe was a symbol of Roman authority and a means of Roman execution. It was part of the *fasces*, a bundle of wooden rods enclosing an axe, carried before Roman officials at civic functions, which functioned as a portable kit for flogging and decapitation, a symbol and instrument of executive [and executing] power. The *fasces* denoted the Roman official's authority to maintain public order and exact punishment. They were paraded in Rome and in the provinces as a vivid symbol of subjection to Rome, as tokens of absolute, imperial power (cf Josephus, *JW* 2.365-66). But God defines acceptable order, and God wields the axe of punishment against all, including the elite.

The exhortation to bear good fruit, to repent and to live according to the divine will, is now presented in a description of judgment for failing to repent: 'Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire'. The singular 'every tree', after the plural 'trees' in 3.10a individualizes the warning. The element of punishment is intensified by adding the image of being thrown into the fire (3.10b). Fire is also a prophetic (Isa 10.15-19 [Israel]; Amos 7.4 [Israel]; Ezek 38.22 [Gog]) and apocalyptic reference to judgment (Zp 1.18; *1En* 90.24-27; 48.9; 54.1-2 [destruction of 'kings and potentates']). The intensely negative statement, which recognizes the lack of fruit and the inevitability of judgment, suggests little hope that the religious leaders will change their ways. Their fate— judgment by God (the passive verbs is cut down and thrown imply God as the agent)— seems sure.

For both Jesus and John, the leaders' opposition is implacable from the outset (3.7-10; 11.3), and the attitude that John assumes toward the Pharisees and Sadducees in their first major appearance announces the attitude that Jesus will assume toward them as well. Neither Mark nor Luke ever expressly call them evil, but Matthew does so, several times (9.4; 12.34,39,45; 16.4; 22.18). They are ripe for a final judgment, and 'even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees' (3.10).

### **1.C.1.e The Coming One, His Baptism, and Judgment 3.11-12**

As we mentioned, Matthew has trimmed and clarified Mark's potentially ambiguous words about John's baptism, as he sometimes does. At the same time he has expanded Mark's report of John's words about Jesus the 'stronger one' in the direction of a final, end-time judgment (3.11-12; cf Mk 1.7-8). Compare:

Mk 1.7-8 One who is stronger than I am is coming after me, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I

indeed have baptized you with water: but he will baptize you with the holy Spirit.

Mt 3.11-12 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he who is coming after me is stronger than I am, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry: he will baptize you with the holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the barn; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

We tend to import a reference to Pentecost— a story told only by Luke (Ac 2)— into Matthew's expression 'baptize you in Spirit and in fire' (3.11), but in Matthew fire consistently refers to judgment and purification— as indeed the following verse about the winnowing fan indicates.

3.12: A 'winnowing fan' (*ptyon*) was a fork-like shovel with which a farmer would toss threshed grain into the wind, thus separating chaff: The final separation of good and evil is a favorite theme of Matthew's. Chaff was actually burned for heating, but calling the fire 'unquenchable' makes the image eschatological.

Having harshly rebuked the religious leaders, John now addresses those who responded positively (see 3.5-6): 'I baptize you with water for repentance'. But there is another who is coming with a different baptism. John testifies about his coming by explaining the relationship of the two baptisms.

John does not name the one who is coming, but says only that 'one who is more powerful than I is coming after me'. Who is it? In the context, it must be Jesus, born in chapter 2 and living in Nazareth at the time of John's ministry ('in those days', 3.1), who appears in 3.13-17 for baptism. Jesus is more powerful in that he saves from sins (1.21) through healings and forgiveness (9.1-8; 8.17), death and resurrection (26.28), and his return in power to establish God's empire over all including Rome (24.27-31). If so, the phrase also underlines Jesus' identity as God's agent. John witnesses to Jesus' greatness ('I am not worthy to carry/remove his sandals') by declaring himself not worthy to do this slave's task.

John presents Jesus' ministry to the repentant baptized ('you') in terms of another baptism: *I baptize with water; 'he* (emphasized) *will baptize you with the holy Spirit and with fire.*' Jesus' baptism is elaborated by two elements— the holy Spirit and fire. How do these relate to each other?

Spirit/breath can signify life (Gn 1.2 etc), a gift of God's covenant with a holy and faithful people who know and

do God's will because they have a new heart and God's Spirit or abiding presence in them (Ez 36.25-28; 39.29; Isa 32.15; 44.3; Jl 2.28-29). Spirit is God's life-giving power, which empowers people to proclaim and live God's justice (Isa 61.1-3) and accomplish God's will (Matt 1.18-25). But it can also signify God's punishment (Isa 4.4; Jer 4.11-16).

Fire, on the other hand refines and cleanses (Zc 13.9; Mal 3.1-3; [cf 3.18-4.1 for judgment]; 1QS 4.21), but often it too expresses punishment (see Matt 3.10; 13.40-43; 25.41). Each term has a double meaning of blessing and destruction. John presents Jesus' entire mission, then, as one that has a double effect: some are blessed and purified (so 1.21 "save his people from their sins"); and some are punished and destroyed.

Why does John offer those who are being baptized this mixed news? And what does his baptism guarantee? John's point is that his baptism guarantees nothing. His baptism is a step in the right direction, but it is not the final baptism.

Jesus will carry out judgment, now imaged as separating wheat and chaff. Winnowing, threshing, and harvest are frequent images of judgment (Prov 20.26; Isa 18.4-5; 27.12-13; Jer 5 1.33; Mic 4.12-13; 4 *Ezm* 4.26-27; 2 *Bar* 70.1-2; see Matt 13.24-30,36-43). John doesn't say how or when he will do this. But the task of the whole subsequent narrative is to clarify that *the final judgment of the world is exercised in Jesus' present and future ministry*. Indeed, Jesus has his winnowing fork in his hand (3.12), the axe is laid to the trees (3.10)— judgment is imminent, and will involve two related tasks. He will gather his wheat into the granary/storeroom (the word is used to denote storerooms in the temple in 1Chr 28.11,12,13,20; the harvest of wheat is a metaphor for faithful discipleship in 13.23,38). But the chaff— ie, the wicked, Ps 1.4; Isa 17.13— will be burned with unquenchable fire (cf Isa 34.8-10).

Matthew's John envisions himself preparing for one who will effect God's final judgment on a corrupt society. One of the effects of John's ministry is to redescribe the center and the margins. Political, social, economic, and religious power does not define the center. John's marginal location and role (from the perspective of Jerusalem and the religious leaders) are a temporary center for God's purposes. By not being allied with the religious leaders, he is marginalized, but on the margins he is allied with Jesus, who is central to God's purposes.

John is right— he's a true prophet— but the Coming One will not be quite as he expects. This evaluative point of view explains why he later sends disciples to Jesus to ask whether he is in fact the Coming One or whether



they are to await another (11.2-3). Jesus will reassure him by pointing to the messianic signs (11.4-5).

It is not so much that Jesus will suffer and die, and the age of fulfillment be delayed until... well, he actually gets around to fulfilling anything, as that *Jesus will take upon himself the blow that falls upon Israel* (cf 8.17) and that the coming Age will be inaugurated *in him*. Then those who associate themselves with him will also participate in the coming Age. But as readers, we don't know that yet, any more than John does. We only suspect that Jesus is the 'stronger one' of whom John has spoken.

### 1.C.2 Jesus Is Acclaimed Son of God

3.13-17

By joining the account of Jesus' baptism to his account of John's ministry, Matthew shows us that the 'Coming One' whom John prophesied is in fact Jesus, whom God empowers as his 'Son', by his Spirit (3.11,13-17). For his part, God, now participating as an 'actor' in the story, empowers Jesus for messianic ministry and solemnly declares 'who Jesus is'. In 3.6, we read that people were getting 'baptized by [John] in the Jordan, confessing their sins'. But the scene is silent about sin or repentance in the case of Jesus. In fact John protests that the stronger one with the superior baptism should baptize *him*. But Jesus overrules him (showing that in fact John is right), saying that 'for now' this reversal is 'fitting for us', in order to enact God's saving will ('fulfill all righteousness', 3.14-15).

After the baptism (3.16-17), a revelatory event occurs. A vision of the opened heavens and a heavenly voice disclose Jesus as God's 'son'— that is, as his agent— anointed and empowered by God to carry out God's purposes. With its focus on Jesus and his identity, the scene continues the elaboration of the naming narrative of 1.18-25.

#### 1.C.2.a Jesus Comes to Be Baptized 3.13

3.13-14: No sooner has John foretold the imminent arrival of one who is 'coming' than Jesus 'appears'. We have noted that Mark said that 'Jesus came in those days' (Mk 1.9), but that Matthew moved 'in those days', as an eschatological marker, to the beginning of his account of John (3.1); thus he now connects Jesus' appearance at the Jordan to the account of John's ministry with the simple adverb 'then', as he has done several times in the series so far. Mark also said that Jesus 'came' (*ēlthon*), but Matthew once again uses *paraginetai* ('happened alongside'), as he did for the magi and for John. In contrast to the political and religious elite, all three are concerned with God's will.

So 'Jesus arrives at the Jordan River from Galilee to be baptized by John' (3.13). This is Jesus' first action in the gospel— contrast the passivity and helplessness of 'the child' of Mt 2.

Coming to be baptized by John signals his agreement with John on the imminence of God's judgment, the sinfulness of the present, the need for a repentance to escape God's wrath— and on the correctness of John's prophetic ministry as the divinely ordained beginning of the time of fulfillment.

#### 1.C.2.b Dialogue between John and Jesus

3.14-15

John resists baptizing Jesus, objecting that he himself has need to be baptized by Jesus instead (3.14). The Greek emphasizes the pronouns 'I... by you... you... me', which contrast the two figures. Jesus overrules John, asserting that it is fitting for them 'to *fulfill* all righteousness' (3.15).

Matthew reserves 'fulfill' to Jesus alone; for the disciples Matthew uses expressions like 'do' or 'observe'. 'To fulfill all *righteousness*', then, is not simply to do or to observe what God requires. It is actually to *complete*, to *fill up* what God intends for his world to be as it should be.

Explanations like, 'the reason Jesus insists on being baptized at the Jordan is that it is God's will, and Jesus was perfectly obedient' etc— do not go far enough. Of course he must do God's will!

Nor does Jesus undergo baptism because (despite what later tradition says) he is 'human' and feels some secret need for purification.

Nor is it even quite the case that he is baptized out of 'solidarity' with our 'human nature'.

*Jesus is Israel*— as Matthew made clear when he quoted Ho 11.1, 'out of Egypt I have called my son' (2.15; cf Ex 4.22-23)— and as *Israel* he comes to *fulfill*— at last— the *covenant righteousness* or *faithfulness* that God was seeking precisely *from Israel*.

What's almost always missing from popular interpretations of Scripture is precisely the *Israel*-shaped nature of salvation. We readily confess that God became man, but we completely miss the fact that in order to do so, God became *Israel*. God promised to bless the nations through *Abraham*, and what he sought from Abraham was trust; it was just this trust that God accounted as '*righteousness*' in Abraham (Gn 15.6), and that was the same relationship that God sought from his people— but which his people consistently failed to show. Jesus is baptized in order to fulfill that *righteousness* that God was seeking from Israel. Matthew will later explicitly

identify Jesus as the 'Servant Israel' who fulfills God's plan in Isaiah.

'Let it be so now, for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness' (3.15). These are the first words of Jesus in Matthew's story. In Mark and Luke the encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus transpires without a word from Jesus.

Matthew uses the term justice/righteousness (*dikaïosynē*) seven times (3.15; 5.6, 10, 20.6,1,33; 21.32). In Hebrew, righteousness/justice is not, as in Greek thought, an abstract ideal by which actions can be measured, but action faithful to commitments and relationships. God is 'righteous' or 'just' in that he is faithful to his covenant commitments to save and deliver his people. So, for example, *salvation/savior* and *deliverance/righteousness* are parallel terms for God's saving actions in Pss 51.14; 65.5; Isa 46.13; 51.5-8. God's people or Israel's kings are righteous or unrighteous, just or unjust depending on whether they're faithful or not to the covenant demands. So in Ps 72, the Psalmist prays that the king will act with 'righteousness' by defending the poor, delivering the needy, crushing the oppressor, and exercising life-giving dominion over the earth. Unrighteous or unjust actions are actions not faithful to the covenant requirements.

Jesus' instruction to John indicates that God's saving action, previously stated by the scriptures, is being enacted and completed in Jesus' and John's actions. On this basis, John consents to baptize Jesus.

Having thus accomplished what he came to do, John now disappears from the story, except for a brief notice of his arrest (4.12), until Mt 11 and 14. The spotlight remains on Jesus.

### 1.C.2.c Royal Acclamation as God's Son

3.16-17

How does Jesus' baptism 'fulfill all righteousness'? 3.16-17 answer the question by presenting Jesus as the one whom the Scriptures had designated as the agent of God's saving purposes. The explanation comes after Jesus is baptized, just as he comes up from the water.

Matthew doesn't describe the baptism itself. The focus is on the complex of revelatory events that follows.

3.16: 'Having been baptized, he immediately *went up* from the water'. To 'go up' is to be exalted. Seers and prophets 'go up' to the sky, to the divine throne room, and receive revelation.

So at first Jesus and John stood alone in private conversation (3.14-15). Then John consented to baptize him. Jesus now emerges unaccompanied from the waters into God's presence. Matthew says nothing at this point about the presence of any others, but we will shortly

learn that other transcendental beings such as the angels (4.11) and Satan (4.3,6) are made aware of Jesus' status. They are the normal attendants of God's throne and often present at prophetic commissionings (cf Isa 6; Jb 1; etc). It is to them that the Voice will indicate, 'This is my beloved son' (3.17— Mark 1.11 has 'You are...').

Even though the Voice points him out to the spiritual powers, the revelation is nonetheless given, as in Mark, to Jesus alone, not to any bystanders, even including John: 'suddenly the heavens were opened to him' (3.16). As in Mark, only Jesus sees the Spirit descend upon him, and only he hears the Voice from the sky (3.17). After all, if the crowds had seen or heard anything like that, they would surely have acclaimed Jesus as 'God's son' and therefore their rightful king on the spot. And had John heard the Voice, he would not have needed to send his disciples to question Jesus about his role at a later point (11.2-3).

The opening of the heavens to reveal heavenly or divine knowledge was a common motif in both Jewish and Roman literature.<sup>8</sup> In saying that the skies 'were opened', Matthew quotes Ez 1.1 almost exactly— and as in Ezekiel, the location is by a river. This links Jesus with Ezekiel, a prophet of judgment and salvation, and evokes the exile of 587 BCE at the hands of Babylonian imperial power— and God's liberation from it. And liberation from that exile recalled the exodus from Egypt (Isa 43.14-21)— which was in fact the very thing that John's baptism was 'enacting'.

In Jesus, God continues his action of saving and liberating from tyranny. Jesus' ministry initiates the time of salvation from Rome's punishment of Jerusalem and the people. Jesus forgives sin (9.1-8; 26.28), creates an alternative community which acknowledges God's regime (4.17-22), and anticipates his return to establish it in full (24.27-31). The gospel replaces the empire of death and tyranny with another marked by justice and mercy.

The revelation is visual and auditory. Jesus 'saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him'. The Spirit of God, already active in Jesus' conception (1.18,20), now empowers his ministry. It recalls John's promise in 3.11 of one who would baptize in the Spirit. Jesus receives God's Spirit, and he will make it available to others. He belongs to a long line of other figures on whom the Spirit has descended: Gideon (Judg 6.34), Samson (Judg 15.14), Saul (1Sm 10.6), the Davidic king (Isa 11.1-6). God anoints Jesus to proclaim liberty to the oppressed (Isa 61.1; also 42.1). He is the Messiah (1.1,16,17,18) in whom the Spirit is at work.

<sup>8</sup> Cf Ez 1.11; 3Mc 6.18; 2Bar 22.1; T Ab 7.3; Virgil, *Aeneid* 9.20; Cicero, *Div* 1.43.97.

In Gn 1.2, 'the Spirit of God hovered over the water'. The word for 'hovered' suggests a bird brooding over her eggs. The image of the dove thus continues the theme of a new genesis/creation from Mt 1. God is beginning a whole new world, an alternative way of life, because the present structures of Rome's empire allied with Israel's social and religious elite are not what God intends. God will establish his empire in full through his 'son'.

If the dove also evokes Noah's sending out of a dove (Gn 8.8), the theme of a new creation/new start is strengthened. Yet the Noah material is actually the least prominent among references to doves in the OT, at least by frequency. We think of it first because the Noah story (Gn 6-9) *does* come at the beginning of the Bible. But Noah's dove is not necessarily what a Hebrew speaker who really knew the Bible might think of first. There are in fact 52 references to a dove in the OT. In order of frequency, they relate to Jonah (ie, 'Dove'), sacrifice, Israel, exile, bride, Noah.

The name Jonah means 'dove', and his name accounts for about two fifths (19/52) of all the references to a dove in the Bible. The next most frequent mentions of a dove in the Bible have to do with sacrifices, particularly sacrifices of purification.

The details of sacrifice are not well understood, but purification is always the repairing of some breach, which is why a sacrifice is required after healing from childbirth, a running issue of blood, or etc. It generally takes place on the 'eighth day'— a symbol of new creation (the eighth day is a new first day, after a complete Sabbath cycle). The dove is also associated with *Israel*, as an offering brought by ordinary people, not priests or kings, and by the poor (who can't afford bigger sacrifices).

What is more, the prophet 'Dove'— Jonah— who spent three days in the belly of the whale, is himself a reflection on *Israel's* vocation among the nations. 'Dove' went to Nineveh, in fact; that is, to Babylon, the place of Israel's exile (and note how Israel goes into exile in Nineveh like a dove in Na 2.1-7).

Arguably, even the dove in Noah's story stands for 'Israel' as well, since Israel was to be, precisely, a sign of hope and reconciliation and new life for God's creation.

So on the whole, the dove appears to be a symbol of Israel. We can thus read the dove in the story of Jesus' baptism as *the vocation to be Israel* coming upon him. This, it turns out, is quite consistent with the theology of all four gospels in general, where Jesus is the 'true Israel'.

The Book of Dove ('Jonah') ends with a question: God asks Dove (Jonah), 'Shouldn't I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons

that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?' (Jon 4.11). He is plying that question not just to Dove/Jonah, but to Dove/Israel. So now, at the baptism of Jesus, the dove descends, Jesus becomes the true Israel, and God is going to get his answer.

Perhaps purification always requires two doves because, as Isaiah 40-55 shows us, there was always Jacob-Israel, who fails, and Servant-Israel, who does God's will. One of the doves is always sacrificed as an offering for sin, and the other as an offering for atonement. Actually the one Son fulfilled both. Curiously, he is said to have done so at age 33, and 33 is the number of references to a dove in the Bible *except* for Dove/Jonah.<sup>9</sup>

Matthew links the dove with the Spirit, who empowers Jesus to be God's 'beloved son', that is, his commissioned agent. 'The Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him' denotes the divine act whereby God empowers him to accomplish the messianic ministry he is shortly to begin (4.17). But this empowerment is not Jesus' initial endowment with the Spirit, for he was conceived by the Spirit. Rather, it is a commissioning, similar in function to the call of a prophet (see Isa 6; Jr 1; etc).<sup>10</sup> Jesus is the Mightier One John had spoken of (3.10); indeed he is greater than John (who is the greatest born of women, 11.11), greater than the Temple, greater than a prophet or a wise man (12.6,41-42). The Spirit that here comes upon him is the 'authority' with which he discharges his public ministry (7.29). Empowered by God's Spirit, Jesus speaks as the mouthpiece of God and acts as God's instrument.

In Mark, 'the splitting of the skies' at Jesus' baptism (Mk 1.10) is linked with the 'splitting of the Temple curtain' (which represented the sky) at the moment of Jesus' death (Mk 15.38). In Matthew, however, the skies are 'opened' (*√vanoigō*), not 'split' (*√schizō*), even though the Temple veil is 'split' (*eschisthē*) at Jesus' death (27.51, cf Mk 15.38). The change invokes several key OT passages:

Ez 1.1 Now it came to pass ... as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, that the heavens were *opened*, and I saw visions of God.

One of the most striking passages of the OT is Isaiah 64, worth reading in its entirety, or at least these verses:

<sup>9</sup> Since Homer (*Odyssey* 12.62), the dove was also identified in Greek culture as Zeus's servant who represented divine presence and love and conveys Zeus's messages.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew does not espouse an 'adoptionist christology'.

- 1 O that you would *open the heavens* and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence—
- 10 Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation.
- 11 Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.

Matthew is writing almost a generation after the Romans burned the Temple. Israel's wound is not quite as raw as it was for Mark, but he is still contemplating what has happened and why.

3.17: Having *seen* the skies open, Jesus now *hears* a Voice from them. John had been a 'voice of one crying in the desert' proclaiming one who was stronger than he (3.3,11); this voice is 'from the skies', the abode of God (cf 5.34; Isa 66.1), and God himself directly proclaims Jesus' identity: 'This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (3.17). In quoting Ho 11.1 at 2.15 ('out of Egypt have I called my son'), Matthew skillfully identified Jesus as God's 'son', but now God himself identifies Jesus as his 'son' by a direct word that reflects at least four OT contexts:

Ex 4.22-23, where 'my son' = Israel—

*Say to Pharaoh, Thus says the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn: And I say to you, Let my son go, that he may serve me...*

Isa 42.1, where the Servant in whom God delights is the one God has 'chosen' for ministry—

*'Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the nations' (MT).*

Gn 22.2, where Abraham's beloved son Isaac is declared to be his 'only' son—

*'Take your son, the beloved, Isaac, whom you have loved, and go into the high land, and offer him there as a whole-burnt offering' (LXX).*

Ps 2.7, where God solemnly addresses the Davidic king on the day of his coronation—

*'You are my Son; this day have I begotten you.'*

What does it mean, though, that God has named Jesus as 'my son' (see 2.15)? Is he saying, 300 years before Nicea and 450 years before Chalcedon, that Jesus is 'God from God, Light from Light, of one essence with the Father'? That can hardly be the case. But the four texts listed above associate Jesus with four very important figures and moments in Israel's history.

1. Isaiah 42.1-4 identifies a child/son or servant who seems at times to be Israel (Isa 49.3) and at times a person or group in mission to Israel (Isa 49.56). This figure is not divine. He is anointed by the spirit to save Israel and the Gentiles not through destructive military and imperial power but through proclaiming justice and through suffering its consequences. Matthew actually applies this passage to Jesus at 12.18-21, and Isa 53.4 at 8.17. Jesus is the chosen servant who liberates from oppressive forces and establishes God's justice for Jews and Gentiles.
2. Psalm 2, a royal psalm, celebrates the coronation of the Davidic king, whose task as God's chosen son (2.7) or agent is to represent God's just rule on earth. The Spirit settles on Jesus as descendant of David (1.1, 6, 17; cf 1.20) who as God's son was promised an eternal kingdom and God's love (2Sm 7.14-15). Jesus' task in saving from sin and manifesting God's presence (1.21, 23) is to represent God's rule (4.17). The combination with Isa 42 is interesting because while Ps 2 envisions God's dominating reign over all others, Isa 42 offers some critique of this view of power and points to another way of working, through gentle care and endurance of suffering.
3. Genesis 22 is the famous (and troubling) story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac. The story evokes God's promises to Abraham of blessing all the nations, a promise that would be placed in jeopardy by Isaac's death. Abraham trusts God in being willing to sacrifice his son, and God proves faithful in providing deliverance. Jesus has a mission of blessing all nations, which will also involve his sacrifice,
4. Exodus 4 is part of the struggle to set God's son/child, the nation Israel, free from Pharaoh's oppressive rule. In passing through water, Jesus continues God's liberating work.

The gospel tradition combines these verses into God's own solemn affirmation that Jesus, the Messiah-King from the line of David, is his only Son, whom he has chosen for eschatological ministry. As Matthew's audience, we recognize this as the evaluative point of view of the character 'God', and hence as the normative understanding of Jesus for the rest of the story.

The servant and the king represent Israel. Jesus, baptized in the river Jordan, represents Israel and reenacts Israel's exodus story. The references to Abraham and the servant indicate his significance for both Jews and Gentiles.

Jesus' baptism by a marginal figure in a marginal place, then, fulfills all righteousness/justice in disclosing that God has chosen Jesus ('my son the beloved') to carry out these roles concerning God's liberating justice and reign, God's new creation. Scriptural traditions expand on his task of saving people from their sins and manifesting God's presence (1.21,23). In being baptized Jesus consents to this mission.

This declaration from the sky and the empowerment of Jesus with the Spirit has brought the entire first part of Matthew's story (1.1–4.16) to its climax. There were earlier indications that Jesus is God's son, but this truth, now uttered by God as 'actor', has taken the form of an authoritative event within the story itself.

Jesus will be portrayed as the Messiah, God's son also in the culminating scenes of Part 2 (4.17–16.20) and Part 3 (16.21–28.20) of the gospel as well.

In Part 2 (4.17–16.20), at Caesarea Philippi, Peter declares on behalf of the disciples that Jesus is 'the Messiah, *the son of the living God*' (16.13-20).

Then, at the beginning of Part 3(16.21–28.20), when Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James, and John, from a cloud that overshadows them, the Voice confirms what Peter has just said— this time to the three disciples, not just to the spiritual powers or even just to Moses and Elijah— 'This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased', and instructs them to 'listen to him!' (17.1-5). Later, when Jesus dies on the cross, the Roman centurion and those with him say, 'Truly this one was God's Son!' (27.54). In this confession, Jesus' murderers vindicate and finalize the claim to divine sonship that Jesus had asserted at his trial. And at the very end of the gospel, the exalted Jesus, to whom God has entrusted 'all authority in the sky and on the ground', refers to himself as 'the Son' (28.16-20), commissioning his disciples to go forth and teach the nations.

#### **1.C.2.d The Trial of God's Anointed Son Before the Powers 4.1-11**

Jesus now stands before the audience as God's son empowered with God's Spirit and acclaimed by God before the powers on high. Matthew now continues to elaborate on God's initiative in conceiving and commissioning Jesus to save his people from their sins' (1.21) and to manifest God's presence with them (1.23).

God's purposes conflicted with the empire's interests in Mt 2, but God protected Jesus by commanding Joseph to withdraw to Egypt. In Mt 3, from the margins and resisted by the religious elite, John called for a changed society and testified to God's coming wrath and to the decisive role of 'one who is stronger than I' (3.11), which

will mean blessing for some and destruction for others (3.11-12). Jesus, the 'stronger one', came and, in order to 'fulfill all righteousness', that is, to accord with God's purposes for Israel, was baptized by John in the Jordan (3.15). As he 'went up' from the waters of new creation, the Spirit descended, and God confirmed and empowered him as his 'beloved son', his agent and viceroy (3.13-17).

Now in 4.1-11, the devil will challenge Jesus' relationship to God, just declared in 3.16-17. The central issue is one of allegiance: Who will determine Jesus' actions? Will he be faithful in carrying out God's commission, or will he allow the devil, God's opponent, to claim his allegiance and define his actions?

This scene is not simply a personal drama about Jesus' faithfulness. It actually exposes the nature of the Roman-dominated world of colonized Israel. In the third temptation, Satan claims control of 'all the kingdoms/empires of the world' (4.8-9). This startling revelation means that Satan controls the Roman empire.

Other linguistic links connect the Roman vassal Herod and Israel's religious elite with Satan, as opponents of God's purposes enacted in Jesus:

- Herod was introduced as a 'king' (*basileus*) in 2.1,3. In 4.8-9 Satan refers to the world's empires as *basileias*, 'regimes' or 'kingdoms'. Satan thus identifies Herod and his son Archelaus as his ally and agent. Their kingship, allied with Rome, derives from the devil and contrasts with Jesus who is another king (*basileus*, 2.2).
- The verb 'tempt' or 'test' provides a second link. It denotes the devil's actions in 4.1,3— and it also describes what the religious leaders do to Jesus in 16.1; 19.3; 22.18,35. The temptation story thus discloses this diabolical alliance and the demonic nature of Jesus' opponents. The devil is the inner spirit of the empire and the religious elite. They are the visible, institutional form of an inner reality that resists God's purposes and pursues its own agenda through injustice and oppressive power.

The narrative does not explain who the devil is. Matthew assumes that the audience knows traditions that identify the nonhuman powers (angels and demons by various names) that impact institutions, structures, nations, and individuals and resist God's purposes. For instance, Dn 10.10-21 identifies conflict among the angels or 'princes' of Persia, Israel, and Greece, reflecting the situation between the 'princes' on the ground. In *Jub* 15.31-32, God appoints spirits over all the nations, which lead them astray. But no spirit rules Israel because God rules it directly. In *Jub* 12.20 evil and misleading spirits 'rule over

the thought of (human) hearts.’ In the *Testament of Solomon*, numerous demons led by Beelzeboul (*T Sol* 3.6) cause people to commit evil actions and to suffer various physical deformities and sicknesses. Each demon has a thwarting angel. Jesus is tested in the desert, an area empty of the empire’s material presence, after fasting, that is, after emptying himself of personal material concern. This invisible world of supernatural opposition thus discloses itself to him.

The scene invites the audience to consider afresh the issues of control and allegiance implicit in their world:

- Israel’s colonial situation is part of a *basileia*, an imperial status quo that opposes God’s purposes, is oppressive, and is committed to the elite’s self-interest. The scene represents this status quo as diabolical, demonic. Jesus utterly rejects it.
- If Jesus were to yield to Satan’s temptations, he will become Satan’s agent and, as such, an ally with Rome! But he resists, he does not cooperate with, Rome.
- Guided by the scriptures Jesus focuses on God’s will, resists the devil, and advocates an alternative existence constituted by God’s purposes. For this reason, and in vindication, the angels serve him.

•**4.1:** The temptation immediately follows the baptism (‘then’). Mentioning Jesus’ name recalls his God-given mission from 1.21-23. That mission is now at stake.

While Jesus is the focus, God initially moves the action forward, as in 1.18-25. The Spirit, God’s agent (1.18,20), descended on Jesus (3.16) in accord with John’s promise (3.11). The same Spirit ‘led’ or ‘brought’ plagues on Pharaoh (Ex 8.5,6,7; 10.14) and ‘led’ Israel from Egypt into the wilderness and to the land (Ex 33.12, 15; Nm 14.13; 16.13; Js 24.17). Now it leads Jesus into the desert ‘to be tested’, that is, proven.

After passing through water in their liberation from slavery (compare Jesus’ baptism in 3.13-17), the people were tested in the desert (cf 3.1). Jesus relives the desert experience of God’s ‘son’ Israel (cf Ex 4.22-23, Ho 11.1; Mt 2.15). Where Israel was unfaithful, Jesus remains faithful. The desert is associated with evil spirits and demons (Lv 16.10; Tob 8.3; *1En* 10.4; 4Mc 18.8a). The verb ‘tempted’ or ‘tested’— the same word as in the Lord’s Prayer, 6.13— denotes God testing Israel to reveal faithfulness (Ex 16.4; 20.20; Dt 8.2), and Israel’s illegitimate attempts to test God (Ex 17.2,7; Nm 14.22).

In fact this whole passage is deeply and repeatedly connected to the exodus story, and in particular with Dt 8:1-10: Jesus is *led* (8.2), into the *desert* (8.2), to be *tested* (8.2), and experiences *hunger* (8.3) after *forty days* (8.4).

He is God’s *son* (8.5), called to *obedience* (8.6). *Bread* (8.9), *stones* (8.9), and *mountains* (8.9) are part of the account, not to mention the sentence, ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD’ (8.3).

The agent of the testing here is the devil. Note the two parallel phrases ‘by the Spirit’ and ‘by the devil’.

The devil, once a member of the heavenly court (Jb 1), accuser of humans (Zc 3.1-10; Jb 1-2) and inciter of sin (1Ch 21.1), is an evil opponent of God’s purposes, who tempts people to sin and thwarts God’s plans. Testing Jesus, he ironically ends up proving Jesus’ faithfulness to God’s purposes.

•**4.2** Like Moses (Ex 34.28), Jesus ‘fasted<sup>11</sup> forty days and forty nights’, a time period that echoes Ex 34.28, Moses’ ‘forty days and forty nights’ on Sinai. Mark’s account said only that Jesus fasted ‘forty days’. Matthew has added ‘and forty nights’ in order to create a parallel with Moses’ fast of ‘forty days and forty nights’ on Sinai (Ex 24.18, 34.28, Dt 9.9,11,18,25; 10.10), as well as that of Elijah (1Kg 19.8).

The number ‘forty’ evokes numerous other significant events and themes of judgment and testing, as well:

- Forty days of rain at Noah’s flood (Gn 7.4, 12, 17), an event of judgment and of new creation.
- Forty years in the desert (Ex 16.35) for Israel after slavery— a time of divine presence (Dt 2.7), faithfulness (Dt 29.4-5), and testing (Dt 8.2-3)
- Ezekiel lies on his right side for forty days, portraying the punishment of Judah (Ez 4.6)
- Jonah predicts Nineveh’s destruction in forty days (Jon 3.4)

At the end of his fast, Jesus is ‘famished’— he relives Israel’s experience of hunger in the desert (Dt 8.3). But whereas Israel murmured against God in its hunger (Ex 16.3-8), Jesus does not.

•**4.3** Jesus’ fasting, however, provides the devil’s first opportunity. ‘The tempter’ (same verb as 4.1) thus ‘approached’ him.

The word ‘approach’ is used of those who approach God, bring sacrifices to an altar, or draw near to someone of cultic importance either to make a request or to render some form of sacral service. Matthew uses the word 52 out of the 85 times it appears in the NT; three fourths of the time, Jesus is the one ‘approached’. In 10 instances,

<sup>11</sup> For fasting, see Lv 16.29, 31 (Day of Atonement); Ps 35.13 (with prayer); Tob 12.8; Jdt 4.9; *T Jos.* 3.4; Dn 10.3; 5.7-3.4 (fasting precedes visions); Suetonius’s use of the phrase ‘fasting as a Jew’ (*Augustus* 76) attests a widespread practice; Mt 6.16-18.

those who approach Jesus do so in order to test or trap him— eg, the devil (4.3), the religious leaders, Judas (26.49), Roman soldiers (26.50), and false witnesses. But even in these adversarial approaches, Matthew demonstrates that Jesus' opponents come to him because he has authority and in every instance Jesus' authority is vindicated.

And the devil said to him, 'If you are the son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread', cunningly adopting God's evaluative point of view regarding him (3.17; 2.15). The test will be concerned with the meaning of his position as 'God's son', that is, *Israel*.

The reference to stones recalls John's reference to God's power to raise up sons to Abraham from 'these stones' (3.9). The devil tempts Jesus to display God's power to satisfy his hunger. The goal is commendable: food shortages were a major issue in the first century, often arising from the elite's control of food sources, supplies, and prices. But while food would be God's blessing (cf Pr 9.1-5; Ws 16.26), it would be procured at the devil's command.

The temptation consists not in doubting that he is, in fact, 'God's son/agent', or that he actually can perform a miracle; nor is it a temptation to display his miracle-working power— no crowd is present. Rather the temptation is to act for his own benefit as the elite do— to cease to trust and obey God, contrary to his own subsequent teaching (6.25-35). In yielding to the devil's suggestion, he would not trust God, not act according to God's will alone, as his Messiah and son (1.1,17,21-23; 2.15; 3.17). The devil seeks to control Jesus through obedience (4.3-4,9) and worship (4.9).

**•4.4** Jesus resists by evoking the exodus: 'One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Dt 8.3b LXX; cf Ex 16). The verse recalls God supplying food to hungry people in a situation that challenged their trust. God's life-giving word ensured their survival (see 14.13-21; 15.32-39; cf 25.31-46). Jesus cites the verse to express his trust in, dependence on, and obedience to God. God, not the devil nor Jesus' own hunger, defines his mission and use of power.

**•4.5** The devil instigates a second temptation at a new location: He 'took him' (we are not told how) from the desert, a marginal place, to the center, the 'holy city' (cf Isa 48.1; 52.1; Ne 11.1; Tob 13.9; 2Mc 3.1; Sir 49.6). In addition to being Israel's political-social-religious center (see 2.1-3), several traditions identified Jerusalem as the center of the world.<sup>12</sup> The description 'the holy city' is

ironic in recalling Jerusalem's vocation to serve God, for we are already aware of its resistance to God (2.3,4-6).

The specific location to which the devil takes Jesus even emphasizes Jerusalem's calling and failure— 'the pinnacle of the temple'.<sup>13</sup> The temple was a place of encounter with God (Isa 31.4-5; Jr 7.4; Ps 95; 125), of forgiveness (Ps 51) and protection (Ps 61.4-5; 91). It legitimated both worship and living in accord with God's will. It was the center of the divine order of society. Yet we have already seen it sanctioning or being co-opted by imperial power (2.4-6).

**•4.6** The devil places Jesus above this cosmic, political, and religious center and tempts him there, repeating again God's declaration of Jesus' role: 'If/since you are son of God' (see 4.3; 3.17; 2.15), 'throw yourself down'. This suggestion tries to get Jesus to presume upon his position as God's viceroy and to test God (4.4). The devil mimics Jesus by quoting scripture to show that the command is God's will (Ps 91.11a,12): 'for it is written, He will command his angels concerning you, and On their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone'. The devil omits v. 11b ('to guard you in all your ways') because Jesus must be unguarded if he is to comply with the devil's ways.

Ps 91 celebrates God's protection of the faithful. Presumably the angels (see 1.20,24; 2.13,19) would catch God's 'son'! But the devil turns the psalm into a guarantee of God's protection regardless of human faithfulness. Jeremiah counters such deception in warning those who think God will not punish Jerusalem because 'the temple of the Lord' is there (Jr 7.4). The events of the Babylonian exile of 587 and of Rome's destruction of city and temple in 70 CE indicate no place for such presumption.

**•4.7** As with 4.4, Jesus cites scripture, the address of Moses to Israel in the wilderness: 'Again it is written, Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' This text, from Dt 6.16b, refers to the people testing God at Massah (Ex 17.1-7). Lacking water, they doubted God's faithfulness, life-giving purposes, and presence. God provided water to reassure them. In citing the verse Jesus declares that he will trust God, and act at God's direction, not at the devil's. He will not turn God into a servant of his bidding.

In the same way, Jesus will forgo calling upon 'more than twelve legions of angels' for help and remains faithful to scripture at his arrest (26.53-54). Also, he will refuse the calls to descend from the cross (27.40)— again couched in the form, 'If you are the son of God...'— because he would die (16.21) in accord with God's will.

<sup>12</sup> Isa 2.2-4; Mic 4.1-41 [to which the nations come]; Ez 5.5; 38.12; Jub 8.19; 1En 26.1.

<sup>13</sup> It's not quite clear what specific architectural structure this *pterygion*— literally, a 'winglet'— refers to.

**•4.8-9** Yet again ‘the devil took him’ (see 4.5) to a new location, this time ‘a very high mountain’. This is the first of eight mountain scenes in the gospel (see 5.1; 8.1; 14.23; 15.29; 17.1; 21.1; 28.16), and it evokes important mountain scenes in Israel’s traditions, for example:

- Abraham is tested (see 1.1-2; 3.17) on a mountain and promised descendants and blessing for all the nations (Gn 22.2,14-18);
- Moses receives the Decalogue on Sinai (Ex 19.20);
- Moses viewed not only all the land of Canaan (Dt 34.1-4), but also ‘the west and north and south and east’ (Dt 3.27), from Mount Pisgah, or Nebo before his death;
- Elijah retreats to Horeb/Sinai (1Kg 19.8).
- In addition, the gods were thought to reside on Mt Olympus in Greece, or Mt Zephon in Lebanon (Baal).

From this high mountain, the devil ‘showed [Jesus] all the empires/kingdoms of the world and their glory’ and said, ‘All these I will give you’. The offer is staggering. The devil claims to control the world’s empires/kingdoms including Rome, the chief empire. Roman imperial theology declares that Rome rules by Jupiter’s will (see Introduction, section 9). Matthew is portraying Rome as allied with the devil. The devil’s claim discloses the hidden power manifested in the external actions of the empire and vassals such as Herod (ch. 2).

The world of these regimes (*basileias*) is the realm of everyday political, social, economic, and religious life. Though created by God and the object of God’s purposes (Ps 24.1), this world is claimed by the devil, organized and ruled by fallen spirits, and in need of saving (5.14; 13.38,24,21). While ‘glory’ often denotes the splendor of God’s power and presence in the world especially in liberating people from Pharaoh (Nm 14.10-12,22, linked with testing God), here it is usurped by the devil.

This is not a faithful embodiment of God’s purposes. In Ps 2 (see Mt 3.17), God invites the king, God’s son, to ask God for ‘the nations’ and ‘the ends of the earth’ (Ps 2.8; cf 72.8). Such rule is God’s to give, not the devil’s. And the risen Jesus will receive precisely that authority in 28.18— but not yet, and not from the devil. In making his offer, then, the devil usurps God’s authority and violates the first commandment (Ex 20.3). At issue is sovereignty— ‘To whom does the world belong?’ To God (cf Gn 1; Lv 25.23; Ps 24.1) or to the devil? If Jesus accepts the world from the devil, he will manifest the devil’s authority and rule. But it is God’s empire that Jesus is commissioned to manifest (1.21,23). John has already announced that God’s reign/empire has arrived (3.2), and Jesus will soon declare its definitive presence (4.17). The

play between John’s proclamation that ‘the regime of the skies has arrived’ (3.2) and the devil’s promise of ‘all the regimes of the world’ (4.8) must not be missed.

The devil offers the regimes of the world at a price: ‘If you will fall down and worship me’. Worship makes explicit the issue of allegiance. But worship belongs to God, as the first commandment, using the same verb, states (Ex 20.5; Dt 5.9). Echoing but not imitating the golden calf episode (Ex 32), Jesus refuses this idolatry. The magi came to ‘worship’ Jesus, and Herod lied about wanting to ‘worship’ with them (2.2,8,11). Herod and the devil are allies in false worship and in using worship as means to their own ends. Later, people seeking Jesus’ help will worship *before* making a request (8.2; 9.18; 15.25).

Further links between the devil’s challenge to Jesus and the empire are evident. Roman imperial theology collides with worship of God as sovereign of heaven and earth. Followers of Jesus will know the same test (10.17-18, 32-33).

**•4.10** Jesus dismisses the devil, ‘Away with you, Satan!’ (cf 16.23). The name ‘Satan’ underlines the adversarial nature of the scene by evoking Satan’s accusatory role in the heavenly council (1Ch 21.1; Jb 1; Zc 3.1-2). Jesus demonstrates his faithfulness to God and authority over the devil. This victory, though complete in the spiritual realm, is not yet manifest in the world; Jesus will later confront the devil’s reign in exorcising demons, the devil’s agents (4.23; 12.28).

With the same words, ‘Go away, Satan!’ (4.10), Jesus rebukes Peter, who would keep God’s son from suffering (16.23)— and that has been the point of the devil’s temptation all along. To Peter, Jesus speaks about suffering and self-sacrifice among his disciples. Right afterwards he ascends a ‘high mountain’ again— this time with his chosen disciples— and there God proclaims Jesus his ‘beloved son’ a second time, not just to the powers on high, but to the disciples as well (17.1-13). There, Jesus chooses not to remain with Moses and Elijah in glory, but to go back down the mountain with his disciples to his suffering and death.

Jesus again (cf 4.4,7) is directed by the scriptures: ‘for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him alone.’ He quotes Moses (Dt 6.13) but replaces ‘fear’ with ‘worship’ to be consistent with the devil’s temptation in 4.9b, and adds ‘alone’ to underline exclusive allegiance. Moses’ address to Israel reminds the Israelites not to forget God’s liberating action in the exodus and to reject idolatry. Jesus reminds the audience not to forget its foremost loyalty.

**•4.11** Jesus’ authority is efficacious: ‘the devil left him’. But his claim to control the world’s empires, his re-



sistance to God's purposes which is hidden within and operative through the political and religious powers, and the devil's limited power, have now been exposed. While not yet the end of Satan, God's purposes prevail. And suddenly angels 'approach' and serve him. This verb is not about 'serving food', but indicates primarily the actions of a go-between, of an agent who represents or acts on behalf of another. The scene presents them as agents of God who convey God's care and provision to Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus remains faithful to his identity as God's son/agent in the face of the devil's attempts to claim his allegiance. Jesus demonstrates God's sovereignty over the devil and anticipates its establishment over all resisting powers.

In his fast of 40 days and nights, Jesus has recapitulated, at the Spirit's insistence, Israel's experience. Israel's history had been one of failure, but now Jesus, the true Israel, 'fulfills all righteousness' (cf 3.15).

### 1.C.3 Jesus the Light Shines in Imperial Darkness 4.12-16

Part 1 (1.1-4.16) concludes with a scene that draws together several main themes we've seen so far.

- The scene uses the image of light to recapitulate Jesus' commission to manifest God's saving presence (1.21,23).
- God's initiative in Jesus challenges an imperial world and asserts God's sovereignty. Jesus' presence in Capernaum means 'light' in the midst of darkness and death, an image of divine presence and salvation in the midst of the political and socioeconomic hardship of imperial rule. Evoking Isa 9 recalls the expansionist threats of Syria, Israel, Assyria, and now Rome. But God provides a way of salvation.
- Jesus' presence in Capernaum enacts the divine will previously made known by the scriptures in Isaiah (4.14-16).
- The scene emphasizes the universal extent of God's purposes by identifying Galilee as 'Galilee under the Gentiles' (4.15). This reference continues the theme of Gentile inclusion: 'son of Abraham' (1.1), the Gentile women in the genealogy (1.3,5,6), the magi (2.1-12), Egypt (2.13-23), John's attack on the religious leaders (3.9), and the devil's offer to Jesus of 'all the kingdoms of the world' (4.8).

•4.12 When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. Not explained are how Jesus heard, how much time has elapsed, why John should be arrested, or by whom (we will have to wait till the midpoint of the book for that; 14.1-12). This bald and cryptic reference to John's arrest, though, does indicate that the elite

have responded negatively to John's baptism and call for repentance (see 3.7). The way he has spoken of God's regime, he was perceived to be a threat. Moreover, his arrest leads us to suspect that Jesus' own ministry, to which John bore witness (3.11-12), will likewise threaten the imperial and colonial elite, so that they will arrest him as well.<sup>14</sup>

John's arrest causes Jesus to withdraw into Galilee (see 14.13). The magi (2.12-13) and Joseph (2.14, 22) withdrew from the dangerous rulers Herod and Archelaus. But Jesus' withdrawal from the desert of Judea around the Jordan, to Galilee is not for safety reasons, as it had been in 2.12,13,14,22. The citation in 4.15-16 identifies Galilee as *occupied territory*, with its own centers of power, and in 14.1-12 we will learn that John is murdered by the ruler of Galilee, the Roman client Herod Antipas. So Jesus withdraws *into* the dangerous situation created by John's arrest, where he will now carry out God's purposes.

Matthew's community was very familiar with Jesus' situation. After 70, Vespasian and Titus claimed control of Galilee (Josephus, JW 7.216-17), redistributed land among loyal supporters, and ensured economic control of land and resources through taxation of the largely peasant economy. Loyal local elites who secured their own social and economic power through cooperation with Rome assisted in maintaining control. The powerful few benefitted at the expense of the many. Their injustice, sustained by military violence and reinforced by the presence of Vespasian's and Titus's images on coins, was a far cry from the vision of the promised land, which acknowledged God's sovereignty and justice.

But Galilee is geographically distant from and marginal to hostile Jerusalem (Mt 2). It belongs to, and symbolizes, the periphery which becomes the new, non-localized center of divine presence.

•4.13 Jesus leaves Nazareth (see 2.23) and makes his home in Capernaum by the sea, a small agricultural and fishing village (population around one thousand) on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He does not move to the larger cities, Tiberias (built to honor and named after the emperor Tiberias) or Sepphoris, the centers of imperial political, economic, social, and cultural power in Galilee, which maintain the elite's interests and control over the surrounding villages through taxation. As a Jew in Roman-controlled territory, Jesus locates himself among the marginal, with the poor, not the wealthy, with the rural peasants, not the urban elite, with the ruled, not the rulers, with the powerless and exploit-

<sup>14</sup> See 17.22; 20.18-19; 26.2, 15-16,21,23-25,45-46,48; 27.2-4,18,26.

ed, not the powerful, with those who resist imperial demands, not enforce them. He continues the gospel's preference for the apparently small and insignificant places and people who, nevertheless, are central for God's purposes (2.5-6, 22-23; 3.1).

Capernaum is in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. These are two of the twelve tribes and part of the tribal lands which God had sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, shown to Moses (Deut 34.1-4), and apportioned under Joshua.<sup>15</sup> This was land for a people who recognized God's reign. Capernaum was in Naphtali.

The tribal names continue from 3.13-4.11 the echoes of the exodus and occupation narrative, and prepare for the citation from Isaiah in 4.15-16.

The ancient tribal districts have been inoperative for decades, if not centuries. The nomenclature locates Jesus in the promised land, which God gave to the people and over which God has sovereignty. It is a daring reminder of God's sovereignty in the face of Roman claims on Galilee and the presence of Roman client rulers like Herod. The terms expose and challenge Roman claims by evoking but not explicitly articulating God's perspective.

**•4.14** Jesus' move to Capernaum happens 'so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah [in Isa 9.1-2] might be fulfilled'. Jesus again enacts the will of God previously declared by the prophets (see 4.1-11; 1.22-23; 2.15). The prophet is a destabilizing voice that challenges the self-interest of the status quo (see 1.22-23; 2.5-6,15,18,23; 3.1-3). The citation of Isa 9.1-2 has a geographical focus (as do the four scripture citations in ch. 2), and belongs, with the citation of Isa 7.14 in 1.22-23, to a long treatment (Isa 7-9) that evokes God's salvation from imperial aggression.

**•4.15-16** The citation of Isa 9.1-2 does not exactly follow either the Masoretic (Hebrew) Text or the Septuagint (Greek). In Isaiah the passage concerns the Syro-Ephraimite crisis of 735-733 BCE (Isa 7-8), in which the northern kingdom (Ephraim/Israel) and Syria threaten Judah. Isaiah's word of hope to Judah is that God will use another imperial power, Assyria, to destroy the two northern powers (Isa 7.1-9; 8.1-4), and that God will be present with the people, symbolized in the birth of a child called Immanuel (Isa 7.14; see on 1.22-23). But Ahaz's unbelief will bring it about that Assyria will punish Judah as well as Ephraim/Israel (7.17-25; 8.5-15). Isaiah's word partly comes to pass when Ephraim/Israel's capital, Samaria, falls to Assyria in 722, and Assyria exiles the

leadership and occupies Zebulun and Naphtali (2Kg 15.29).

Isaiah 8.16-22 then narrates the terrible results for a people subjected to imperial power. 'Greatly distressed and hungry' because of appropriated resources, they know 'distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness' (Isa 8.22). Isaiah 9.1 repeats the impact of Assyria's punishment, but offers hope for a reversal of the 'anguish' and 'contempt' as the 'rod of their oppressor' is broken through one who will embody God's reign of justice, righteousness, and peace (Isa 11.4-7).

Matthew transfers the Isaiah text from one situation of imperial aggression to another. He is not spiritualizing—shifting from literal destruction and political misery to moral and spiritual darkness. The political situation of Roman rule provides a parallel to Assyria's oppression that negates any attempt to spiritualize the material. Zebulun and Naphtali, land given by God to his people (Dt 34.1-4; Js 19.10-16, 32-39), are under imperial control—not Assyria's, but Rome's now—tightened since the successes of Roman troops in Galilee in 67 AD.

'Galilee of the Gentiles', a synonym for Zebulun and Naphtali, designates occupied status, a land under the power of, possessed by, belonging to, ruled by Gentile imperialists (cf 2Kg 17.24-27). The term does not emphasize, as some have claimed, that Galilee was inhabited by non-Jews or was susceptible to hellenization (though both are true), or that Jewish ethnicity and piety had almost disappeared, or that Jesus was looking only for Gentiles (both of which are not true; cf 4.18-22,23-25!). It signifies Roman control (Josephus, JW 7.216-17). 'Of the gentiles' means *possession*. It is more clear to translate, 'Galilee *under* the gentiles'.

Imperial control has turned God's land into a place of darkness and death. Into this very place, light now shines (4.16). 'Darkness' can symbolize what is contrary to God's life-giving purposes: the chaos before God's creative light and life (Gen 1.2), the oppressive reality of slavery in Egypt (Exod 10.21, 22.14.20), Assyria's rule (Isa 8.22), exile in Babylon (Isa 42.7; 47.5; 49.9). Those who 'walk in darkness' are the wicked who do injustice to the weak and needy (Ps 81.5); by contrast the righteous, those who fear the Lord, who deal in justice, who are secure in the Lord, and who give to the poor, are 'lights in the darkness' (Ps 111.4). Darkness denotes political, social, economic, and religious acts and structures such as imperialism that are contrary to God's purposes. Darkness is the rejection of God's call to a changed society, the call to repentance which John brings, and for which he is arrested (4.12).

<sup>15</sup> Js 18.3, 19.10-16: Zebulun in the Galilean highlands; 19.32-39: Naphtali, to the west and north of the Sea of Galilee.

Darkness, in short, is *death*, as the parallel lines of 4.16a and b indicate. To sit in darkness or death is to live amid actions and structures contrary to God's will (cf Isa 9.9 'inhabitants of Samaria'). Yet darkness is not the final word, even though it seems to be. Light, an image of God's life and saving power (Ps 27.1), dawns and rescues people from darkness, whether political oppression<sup>16</sup> or personal misery such as hunger or affliction.<sup>17</sup> Jesus manifests God's salvation by transforming personal and political misery, by announcing God's empire, by forming an alternative community, and by anticipating the future establishment of God's empire in full (Mt 24-25).

The imperial poet Statius praises the emperor Domitian, 'that present deity' (*Silv* 5.2.170), by noting his 'immortal brightness' (1.1.77), which shone even when he tried to dim it (4.2.41-44). He outshines constellations and the sun. People reflect his light (4.1.3-4, 23-27). Martial greets Domitian's return to Rome as restoring light to the darkness (*Epig* 8.21). But the light in 4.16 is not the presence of the Roman emperor who 'rules' Galilee. Roman rule is part of the darkness and shadow of death under which Galilee of the Gentiles now suffers. The gospel offers a counter-narrative. The light is Jesus' presence, which manifests God's empire. His public ministry is to commence. As the light of the world (5.14), the community of disciples will continue his salvific mission.

Jesus' movement from Galilee, to the Jordan, to the desert, back to Galilee and Nazareth and finally to Capharnaum have completed his preliminary travels. This is one of the signs of the unity of Part 1 (1.1-4.16): Jesus' travels prior to his public ministry end when he takes up residence in Capharnaum, and Matthew shapes 4.12-14 so that it takes up flawlessly from 2.22-27: Joseph 'went and made his home' in a city called Nazareth' (2.23); Jesus 'left Nazareth and went and made his home in Capharnaum'. The two passages are also linked by fulfillment formulas. Later Capharnaum is designated as 'his own town' (9.1), and it may be that the 'house' there is either his or Peter's.

God's initiative in Jesus challenges an imperial world and asserts God's sovereignty. Jesus' presence in Capharnaum means 'light' in the midst of darkness and death, divine salvation in the midst of the political and economic hardship of imperial rule. Evoking Isa 7-9, Matthew contemplates the imperial threat and domination of Syria, Israel, Assyria, and now Rome. But God provides salvation.

Jesus' presence in Capharnaum enacts the divine will previously made known by Isa 7.14-16 (the 'virgin with child' as a sign of rescue). Mention of the ancient Israelite tribal names Zebulun and Naphtali continue from 3.13-4.11 the echoes of the exodus and promise. It is daring to remind us of the regime of heaven in the face of Roman claims.

Part 1 (1.1-4.16) of Matthew's story has prepared us for all that follows—

- (a) by presenting the true and proper understanding of the person of Jesus,
- (b) by setting forth in stark contrast the two essential reactions to the person of Jesus,
- (c) by anticipating the rejection of Jesus by the Jews and the consequent universal appeal of the gospel,
- (d) by showing Jesus as the faithful *Israel* through whom God can redeem his world, according to the promise he made to Abraham long ago, and
- (e) by asserting that Jesus, son of David, son of Abraham, son of God will shine as light amid imperial darkness.

Very little, if any, of Part 1 (1.1-4.16) is information that the actors in the rest of the story would likely have. By making us aware of inside information, Matthew has privileged us with better information than the characters in the story have. Among other things, this has the effect of persuading us to see things as he sees them.

<sup>16</sup> Ex 10.21,22; 14.20; Isa 9.2; 42.7; 45.7; 47.5; 49.9; *1En* 1.8-9.

<sup>17</sup> Ps 90.6; 106.10-16 LXX; Isa 58.10.