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John the Baptist Ministry

Matthew 11:2-11

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

John the Baptist[[1]](#footnote-1) was a *‘missionary’* preacher active in the area of the Jordan River[[2]](#footnote-2) in the early 1st century AD.

The Jordan river rises on the slopes of Mount Hermon,[[3]](#footnote-3) on the border between Syria and Lebanon, and flows southward through northern Israel to the Sea of Galilee.[[4]](#footnote-4)

During his ministry of *‘preparing the way of the Lord’*, John wore clothing like the ancient prophets wore: his outer clothing was made of *‘camel’s hair’* [[5]](#footnote-5) roughly woven, and a leather girdle or belt made of *sheep or goat skin*.[[6]](#footnote-6) John’s plain dress was a rebuke to the lavishness of his time: the *“soft raiment”* worn *“in king’s houses”*,[[7]](#footnote-7) Palaces, Temples and so on. John’s attire was appropriate to his call of reformation[[8]](#footnote-8) against the *‘wickedness in high society’* that was prevalent in those days.

Jesus's greatest opponent was not the working-class sinners of His day but the religious establishment and the *‘rich and famous’* who liked to *‘live it up’*.

Herod, who was himself a pawn of Rome, and had his own *pawns* installed in the Jewish priesthood. By the first century the election of the High Priest was much more political than religious.

The Romans wanted the priesthood to support their *way of life*, and the Herods made sure their desire was carried out.

However, it would be unfair to categorize all the priesthood as being sympathetic to Roman high-society life-styles. Some did support rebellion against Rome, but those at the highest levels were undoubtedly in Rome's *back pocket* and we read of this loyalty to, and fear of, Rome in the Gospels.

The *kingdom* John proclaimed was *“not of his world”*[[9]](#footnote-9) in-fact his clothing took a *stand* against worldly materialism.

John lived by what he preached and what he had learned from the Zealots.[[10]](#footnote-10) [[11]](#footnote-11) John was a Nazarite from birth and his life of *abstinence* was according to the requirements of a *sacred*[*vow*](https://bibleask.org/what-is-a-vow-according-to-the-bible/).[[12]](#footnote-12) Some have speculated that John was of the Essene sect, however, his life does not support this.

[Essenes](https://bibleask.org/who-are-the-essenes/)[[13]](#footnote-13) withdrew from society and became ascetics. Although John spent considerable time alone in the wilderness, he was **not** an ascetic and so would mingle with men, even before his ministry began.

Matthew is named as one of the original disciples of Jesus[[14]](#footnote-14) and as the author of the first gospel in the New Testament. Before this, he was a Tax Collector working for the Roman government when he met Jesus and changed.

By following Him, he learned that through Jesus *“the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them”.*[[15]](#footnote-15)

Tax collectors were hated in biblical times and were regarded as terrible ***sinners***. Some were Jews who worked for the Romans, so this made them ***traitors***.

People resented paying taxes to the Roman “***foreigners”*** who ruled over them and could be vigorous and aggressive.

A tax-collector often took unpaid taxes from people and businesses for the Romans and were therefore disliked and hated.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Joachim Jeremias wrote in his book, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*,[[17]](#footnote-17) that “owners of capital had always been attracted to Jerusalem; wholesalers, tax collectors and Jews of the Diaspora grew rich … it was a city of foreign traffic and wealth, especially for Tax Collectors.”

Despite this, the Sanhedrin who were responsible for building and maintaining roads in Jerusalem, and paid to do so, neglected this duty considerably.

It was such an issue in Jewish circles in those days[[18]](#footnote-18) that Jesus was specifically asked if Jews should pay taxes to Rome!

Jesus took a coin with the image of Caesar on it and asked those protesting again the taxation of Rome, *‘whose image is this?*[[19]](#footnote-19) Accordingly, they were a little *‘surprised and confused’* because it was oviously Caesar which the currency was in those days.

Jesus then stated clearly the common sense logic to, *“render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and unto God the things that are God’s.”* Matthew 22.17-22.

John the Baptist received his prophetic call in 27AD when he was aged[[20]](#footnote-20) about twenty and, whilst he knew of Jesus[[21]](#footnote-21) and heard of His works, John needed some confirmation and asks, *‘are you the expected one … or is there another still to come?’*

Jesus responds, *‘Go and see and hear’* the role of John the Baptist by the generalised truth that people who wore *‘soft clothing’* were *‘in the main’* High Priests in Temples, Kings and Queens in Palaces[[22]](#footnote-22) and Members of Parliament and in the Palaces of Kings and Queens and so on.

John was nothing like one of these.

Ironically, it was pre-eminently the gentleness of Jesus together with His unobtrusiveness which was the most distinctive characteristic of His Messiahship, and for the most part, this is why Jesus gave strict injunctions to those whom He cured not to make Him known.

By wearing *‘rough clothing’* made of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist and His food being locusts and wild honey – **all** made a statement about John and his ministry.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Habsburg Empire lasted 600 years by wearing *‘soft and lavish clothes’* but they lost their way[[24]](#footnote-24) under the leadership of Archduke Franz Ferdinand who was said to be cold, sharp-tongued, short-tempered and rumoured to be insane: suspicious of others and cruel to animals.[[25]](#footnote-25) He and his wife were assasinated on Sunday, 28th June 1914, precipitating WW1 and ending their 600 year-reign from Vienna.

On the other hand, as The Late F F Bruce, formerly Emeritus Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis, University of Manchester wrote of **John the Baptist,** *“John is presented chiefly as the fore-runner of Christ. His imprisonment was the signal for the start of of Jesus’ Galilean ministry.”*[[26]](#footnote-26)

Jesus regarded **John the Baptist** as the last and greatestmember of the prophetic succession stating *“the law and the prophets were until* ***John****”*.[[27]](#footnote-27) And now, the good news of the kingdom is preached.”

As Moses viewed the Promised Land from Pisgah[[28]](#footnote-28), ***John*** stood on the threshold of the new order as its herald without entering in, however, ***John’s*** disciples preserved their corporate existence from a considerable time after his death.

Jesus points to John the Baptist who shocked his audiences ***by his appearance*** in a camel-hair garment and leather belt as a deliberate contrast to those in high places who wore **soft-linen robes** as do Royalty, Priests, Judges, Members of Parliament.

Was John a prophet? *‘yes’* but more than a prophet for no one was greater than John as the great paradox of his clothes alluded to: he was the ***least*** in the Kingdom of God, however, and yet his ministry was a christian affirmation that creation is good … it was created by God’s wisdom and for His purpose which is good.[[29]](#footnote-29)

There are two principals here: the **first** is in the recording of the sayings and prayers of Jesus,[[30]](#footnote-30) and the **Second** is the importance of some of the mysteries of the universe[[31]](#footnote-31) in which it causes us to consider the miracles of God? The virgin birth has always been a stumbling block to human intelligence but it can never be a stumbling block to God’s love in giving us Christ **our** Saviour[[32]](#footnote-32).

Jews are said to have visited Mary after the birth of Jesus and heard of the things Jesus did and they had no trouble believing in the miracle of His birth but some went to the Pharisees and told them a different story …..then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together a council and said, *‘What shall we do?*

1. . John the Baptist, born near Jerusalem. A Jewish prophet of priestly origin who preached the imminence of God's Final Judgment and baptized those who repented in self-preparation for it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . Originating from the Mount Hermon mountain ranges, the Jordan River covers a distance of 223 km from north to south and discharges into the Dead Sea. The river has five riparians: Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . This mountain forms one of the greatest geographic resources of the area. Because of its height it captures a great deal of [precipitation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precipitation_(meteorology)) in a very dry area of the world. The [Jurassic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jurassic) [limestone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limestone) is broken by [faults](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geologic_fault) and solution channels to form a [karst topography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karst_topography). It has seasonal winter and spring [snow falls](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snow), which cover all three of its peaks for most of the year. Melting water from the snow-covered mountain's western and southern bases seeps into the rock channels and pores, feeding springs at the base of the mountain, which form [streams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stream) and [rivers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/River). These merge to become the [Jordan River](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jordan_River). Additionally, the [runoff](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surface_runoff) facilitates fertile plant life below the snow line, where [vineyards](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vineyard) and [pine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pine), [oak](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oak), and [poplar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Populus) [trees](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree) are abundant. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . The Sea of Galilee is especially well known to Christians because it was the scene of many episodes in the life of Jesus Christ, including his Sermon on the Mount, at which he first gave the blessings of the Beatitudes and first taught the Lord's Prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. . The point being that it was ‘made of camel’s hair that was roughly woven’ as distinct from the skin of a camel with hair still on it. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. . See 2 Kings 1.8 and Zechariah 13.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. . See Matthew 11.8 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. . ‘Reformation’ clothing today is clamoring to reduce their environmental footprint, Reformation has been making sustainable fashion sexy since 2009. Its buzzy marketing, stylish product, and celebrity following have helped shift the perception that sustainable clothes are unfashionable. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. . Romans 8.28 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. . The Zealots were a political movement in 1st-century Second Temple Judaism which sought to incite the people of Judea Province to rebel against the Roman Empire and expel it from the Holy Land by force of arms, most notably during the First Jewish–Roman War. Zealots were mostly Pharisees who worked ‘under-cover’ to harm Roman rule. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. . An unknown a number of Roman coins are in various parts of the world. The Macquarie University has an unknown number of them as does the British Museum, Pinterest, Barnebys and the Smithsonian Institute. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. . Luke 1.15, Numbers 6.3 and Judges 13.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. . While there were Essene communities in the wilderness of Judea along the western shore of the Dead Sea, there is no historical evidence that supports the fact that John was part of this austere sect. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 13. Matthew 9.9-13 and 10.3 and he has traditionally been identified as the author of the first gospel in the New Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. . Matthew was a tax collector, or a publican—someone who was contracted by the Roman government to collect taxes. As early as 212BC there existed in Rome a class of men (*ordo publicanorum*) who undertook state contracts of various kinds, including the collection of tithes and other various indirect taxes and state contracts. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. . The Roman tax system, especially its poll-tax was fiercely resented by patriotic Jews as a symbol of their political subjection – twenty five years earlier a major revolt against it had been sparked-off by a Galilean popular leader named Judas (Acts 5.37) from whom the Zealots took its inspiration for forming the violent anti-Roman group called the Zealots. New Bible Commentary, IVP, Nottingham, 1994, p933. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. . Joachim Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus. SCM 1969. p28 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. . This was such a ‘sore point’ for Judaism, they asked Jesus this ‘loaded’ question to ‘trap him’ into making damaging statements which they would use against Him in the coming day. See Mark 12.13-17 and Luke 20.20-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. . Caesar’s Household was equivalent of a civil service today. Its servile origins, and the eastern responsibilities of the Caesars, made it largely Greek and oriental in its composition. His staff of servants, including some of those held in slavery, were experts in fulfilling duties needed by the Empire. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. . According to Luke 1.80 and 3.2, John the baptist was born in 7BC and received his prophetic call in 27BC. This was to go forth and to ‘make ready for the Lord a people prepared for his prophetic ministry - Luke 1.17. John may have been associated with the Qumran community or a similar Essene group but this has not established and should be treated with caution. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. .The word “cousin” is used in different places in Shakespeare, sometimes for nephew, sometimes for niece; twice for uncle, once for brother-in law, and three times for grandchildren. In the Bible it is used in only one passage (Luke 1.36 and 58) where Elizabeth is called the cousin of our Lord’s mother. ***It represents a Greek word (suggenes) that had the same vague meaning as our old English word “cousin,” one of the same race, a near relative.*** The consequence is that we cannot be sure of the relationship between John the Baptist and our Lord. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. . York Place was rebuilt during the 15th century and expanded so much by [Cardinal Wolsey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Wolsey) that it was rivalled by only [Lambeth Palace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lambeth_Palace) as the greatest house in London, the King's London palaces included. Consequently, when [King Henry VIII](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_VIII_of_England) removed the [cardinal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardinal_(Catholicism)) from power in 1530, he acquired York Place to replace Westminster (the royal residential, or 'privy' area of which had been gutted by fire in 1512) as his main London residence, inspecting its possessions in the company of [Anne Boleyn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Boleyn). The name Whitehall was first recorded in 1532; it had its origins in the white stone used for the buildings. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. . Locusts are highly nutritious, hence they can be an excellent source of food. Locusts have been traditionally consumed in 65 countries for centuries. They are rich in industrial products like chitin, oil and bioactive proteins and wild honey is usually intense, rich, creamy, warm and complex. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. . Political problems led to dangerous shortage of food, strikes, mutinies in Army and Navy, separated Peace agreements outraged Germany and other friendly nations and opposition was getting stronger and outraged the Slavs. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 24. Archduke Franz Ferdinand was next in line to take the Habsburg Throne. Like most ruling Habsburg line, he entered the Astro-Hungarian Army at a young age. He is said to have 272,511 ‘game kills’ to his credit, 5,000 of these were Deer and he also shot and killed one elephant. It is said that he had 100,000 shooting trophies to his name. He lived in a soft environment but was cruel to animals and if his political scheming is correct, he was not wise or astute but more or less irresponsible and/or careless. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. . See Mark 1.12-20. The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness … and angels ministered to him. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. . Luke 16.16. “The Law and the Prophets were until John …” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. . In Deuteronomy, God commanded Moses to climb up and view the Promised Land from Mount Nebo: "Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. . “The idea that God is the Creator, therefored, we find one of the affirmations about God which the biblical writers, and christians after them, have regarded as of primary importance to the christian faith. And it is no surprise that this is so: the idea that God is the Creator of all thing is the indispensable foundation on which the other beliefs of the christian faith as based.” Langdon Gilkey, Maker of Heaven and Earth, Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co. New York 1959, p4f [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. . See 3.21 “when Jesus had been baptised by John, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, “you are my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” 5.16, “great multitudes gathered to hear and be healed of their infirmities.” 6.12, “all night he continued in pray” to 9.18, “it happened that as he was praying alone the disciples were with him” & 28f; “he took with him Peter and John and James” 10.21 he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes;’, 11.1,’one of his disciples said to him, “Lord teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” 22.41ff, “and he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed” 23.46. “then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!” “he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray”

    Seven of these are in Luke alone and they show Jesus at prayer before each great crisis of His life. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. . Rectangular Galaxy. The Moon's Magnetic Field. Why Do Pulsars Pulse? What Is Dark Matter? Where Is All the Lithium? How Will the Universe End? And, Across the Multiverse. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. . This is an ontological argument for the being of God founded on the assumption that existence is a property and one that is discoverable in the very concept of God. See also ‘the a-priori’ argument for the being of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)