

John the Baptist - Arrival

John the Baptist's Arrival - Late 28AD to early 29AD

JCV Integrated text **Matthew 3:1-6, Mark 1:4-6, Luke 3:3-6**

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zecharias in the wilderness.

Now in those days John the Baptist came baptizing in the wilderness of Judea and he went about the region surrounding the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of re-thinking-things towards forgiveness of sins. And saying, "Re-think-it, seeing as the Kingdom of Heaven is nearly here!"

This is who was spoken of through Isaiah the prophet, ([and] as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet) when it says, "A voice of one calling out in the wilderness, 'Make-ready the road for the Lord, set His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled in, and every mountain and hill made low. The crooked shall be made straight, and the rough road smooth. And all flesh will see God's salvation.'"

Now John himself had clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. And his food was locusts and wild honey. And at that time all the region of Judea and all of Jerusalem and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan river, confessing their sins.

Setting the dates

By normal Roman convention for numbering regnal years, Tiberius' 15th year ran from the date he took the throne as sole incumbent, ie. 19th August 28AD to 18th August 29AD. **Luke** gives other information which we can date too:

- Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea 26-36AD
- Herod being tetrarch of Galilee from 4BC to 39AD
- Herod's brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis and he died in 34AD
- Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene. Not 100% sure which Lysanias but there is one who died just before 36AD
- Annas was High Priest from 15AD but was deposed by the Romans. However, this wasn't recognised by the Jews and, although Caiaphas (his son-in law) performed the duties, Annas was still the power behind the office. This period where they operated together was 18-36AD.

Tiberius did have a co-regency with his step-father Augustus for about 3 years before he became sole ruler, so some choose 25-26AD as the 15th year of Tiberius as that fits with their preferred date of 30AD for Jesus' crucifixion. As there doesn't appear to be any solid historical evidence to support this interpretation of regnal years I don't take this view. There are other approaches which modify the dates by a few months:-

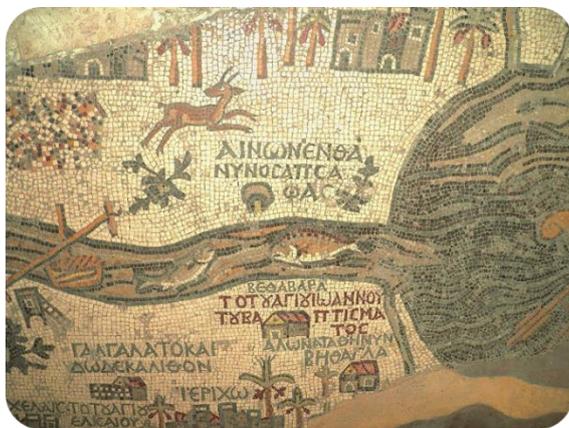
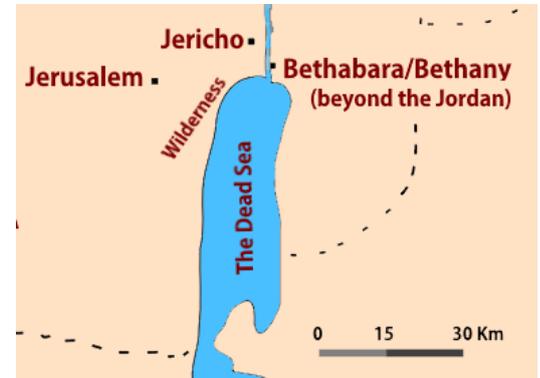
- Perhaps **Luke** is using the Jewish secular year whose first month, Tishrei is around September/October
- Maybe **Luke** is using the Jewish religious calendar whose first month, Nisan, is around March/April

We know that John had a major influence on a lot of people in a short time which suggests his arrival coincided with a large Jewish festival when there were lots of people gathering so it could be Passover in March/April if Luke uses the Jewish religious calendar or maybe, if he is using the Roman calendar, it could be August just before the Feast of Tabernacles.

'Out of' and 'Into' the Wilderness

John was 'in the wilderness' when the word of God came to him. (**Luke 3:2**) but he went 'into the wilderness' (**Matthew 3:1**) to preach and baptise.

The oldest manuscripts of **John's** Gospel say John the Baptist is baptising at Bethabara but this is amended to Bethany in later texts (referred to as B'ethany beyond the Jordan 'by scholars).

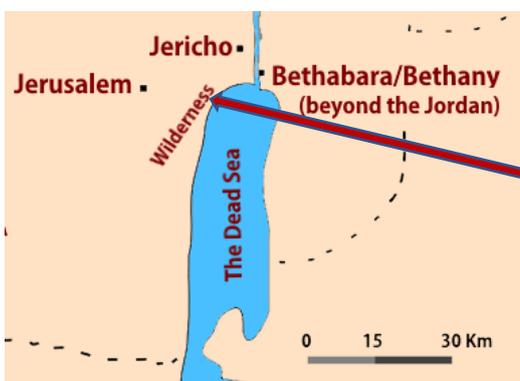


Site(s) of Baptism on Madaba Map M. Disdero, Madaba 21/02/2007. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic License.

Bethabara means 'House of the Ferry' and it is depicted clearly on the Madab map - an ancient mosaic. It is thought to be the place where Joshua crossed the Jordan to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land.



In the 1990s excavations revealed an ancient church at the place marked Bethabara on the Madaba map.



The Dead Sea scrolls were discovered at Qumran which was about a mile inland from the Dead Sea and seems to be the place John has come out of. The community based there have links to the Essenes.

We read about the Essenes in several documents:

Pliny the Elder (23-79AD) was a natural historian of the Roman world. He wrote:-

“Lying on the **west of Asphaltites**, and sufficiently distant to escape its noxious exhalations, are **the Esseni**, a people that live apart from the world, and marvellous beyond all others throughout the whole earth, for they have no women among them; to sexual desire they are strangers; money they have none; the palm-trees are their only companions.

Day after day, however, their numbers are fully recruited by multitudes of strangers that resort to them, driven thither to adopt their usages by the tempests of fortune, and wearied with the miseries of life. Thus it is, that through thousands of ages, incredible to relate, this people eternally prolongs its existence, without a single birth taking place there.

So fruitful a source of population to it is that weariness of life which is felt by others. Below this people was formerly the town of Engadda, second only to Hierosolyma in the fertility of its soil and its groves of palm-trees; now, like it, it is another heap of ashes. Next to it we come to Masada, a fortress on a rock, not far from Lake Asphaltites. Thus much concerning Judæa.”

Natural Histories, Book 5

And the Jewish historian **Josephus (37-100AD)** tells us:-

“...The Essenes are Jews by birth and seem to have a greater affection for one another than the other schools have. These Essenes reject pleasures as an evil, but consider continence and the conquest over our passions to be virtue. They disdain marriage but seek other persons’ children, while they are pliable and fit for learning, and regard them to be of their kind and form them according to their own principles. “

Josephus, The Jewish War 2.119,120

It seems that the Essenes don’t hold marriage in high regard and don’t have many children but do attract and take in other young people. We know that John’s father Zacharias was a priest and his parents were devout (**Luke 1:6**). We also know that they were old (**Luke 1:7**) and devout priests were likely to relate to the Essenes so it is possible (though we can’t be sure!) that, with Elizabeth and Zacharias’ consent, John is nurtured and trained by the Qumran community. However John would have been aware of his prophetic backdrop of specifically being called to be a forerunner. When he is around age 30 (he is 6 months older than Jesus) he decides the time is right come up out from that community to begin his ministry around the edges of the Jordan in Bethabara. It is likely that he would have been a Rabbi in that community for a period beforehand and probably had his own following.

John’s message of repentance includes the notions of both changed thought and changed behaviour. The ancient world believed these aspects were directly linked (and this is confirmed by modern psychology). I am using the term ‘re-think-it’ for ‘repentance’ in my JCV translation.

All four Gospels summarise John’s ministry with a rough quote from **Isaiah 40:3-5**. **Luke** in a Jewish teaching style blends words from **Isaiah 40 and 52**. He even replaces the phrase ‘Glory of Yahweh’ with ‘The Salvation of the Lord’ which in Aramaic/Hebrew would contain Jesus’ name.

Mark confusingly also uses a Jewish oratory technique, **Peshar**, to give the **Isaiah** quote a fanfare from **Malachi** and **Exodus**, leading some translations to drop the reference to **Isaiah** thinking that **Mark** may have made a mistake. All the Gospels assume their readers would understand the broader context of the quote from **Isaiah**.

“... Speak comfortably to Jerusalem; and call out to her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned, ... **The voice of one who calls out**, “Prepare the way of YHWH in the wilderness! **Make a level highway in the desert for our God**. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The uneven shall be made level, and the rough places a plain. The glory of YHWH shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken it.”

The voice of one saying, “Cry!” ... Surely **the people are like grass**. **The grass withers**, the flower fades; but the **word of our God stands forever**.” You who tell good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who **tell good news** to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with strength. Lift it up ... Say to the cities of Judah, “**Behold, your God!**” **Behold, the Lord Yahweh** will come as a mighty one... He will feed his flock **like a shepherd**. ... “

Isaiah 40:1-11.

As **Isaiah 40** continues it reflects things described in **Proverbs 8** which is a key Trinitarian Old Testament passage. Wisdom is personified and was with God before Creation. We can see the parallels here:

Isaiah 40	Proverbs 8
<p>12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and marked off the sky(/heavens) with his span, and calculated the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?</p>	<p>24 When there were no depths, I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.</p> <p>25 Before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was brought forth;</p> <p>26 while as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the beginning of the dust of the world.</p> <p>27 When he established the heavens, I was there; when he set a circle on the surface of the deep</p> <p>28 when he established the clouds above, when the springs of the deep became strong,</p> <p>29 when he gave to the sea its boundary, that the waters should not violate his commandment, when he marked out the foundations of the earth</p>
<p>13 Who has directed the Spirit of Yahweh, or has taught him as his counsellor?</p> <p>14 Who did he take counsel with, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?</p>	<p>14 Counsel and sound knowledge are mine. I have understanding and power....</p> <p>20 I walk in the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of justice; ...</p> <p>22 “Yahweh possessed me in the beginning of his work, before his deeds of old.</p> <p>23 I was set up (poured out/anointed) from everlasting, from the beginning, before the earth existed.</p>

Remember **Psalm 33** reminds us that the Heavens were made by the Word and the Spirit

“By Yahweh’s word, the heavens were made; all their army by the breath of his mouth “

Psalm 33:6

and **Isaiah 40** continues to build towards the One who has created all things being revealed.

“To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to him? A workman has cast an image, and the goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts silver chains for it. He who is too impoverished for such an offering chooses a tree that will not rot. He seeks a skillful workman to set up an engraved image for him that will not be moved”

“To whom then will you liken me? Who is my equal?” says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these ... “

Isaiah 40:18-20, 25,26

When John comes, he gives people something to look forward to but which is also very nearly here. So a sense of hope, expectation and excitement builds and many people are drawn to the message that God is going to be revealed – they will see Him!

John and Elijah

The desert provides all John needs to live on - locusts and wild honey. The description of his clothing makes a reference to King Ahab’s conversation in **2 Kings 1** where Elijah is described in a similar way .

He said to them, “What kind of man was he who came up to meet you, and told you these words?” They answered him, “He was a hairy man, and wearing a leather belt around his waist.” He said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite.”

2Kings 1:7,8

And finally...

The last few verses describe how John has a rapid and significant impact as people respond to his message.

Note: For detailed notes on the biblical text translation and integration please download the associated text translation file.