

John’s Message and Witness – Late 28AD to early 29AD

John the Baptist’s Message - to the Pharisees, Sadducees, multitudes, tax-gatherers, and soldiers

JCV Integrated Text: **Matthew 3:7-10**, **Luke 3:7-14**

Now he said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him (having seen many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to [see] his Baptism), “Brood of vipers, who forewarned you to flee from the coming wrath? So produce fruit worthy of changed-thinking. And do not presume to begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. And even now the axe is set to the root of the trees. So every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is cut down, and cast into *the* fire.”

So the crowds were asking him, saying, “What then shall we do?” And answering them he replied, “Whoever has two tunics can share with him who has none, and whoever has food can do the same.”

Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they asked “Teacher, what should we do?” So he said to them, “Collect nothing more above what has been prescribed for you.”

Then those who were soldiers were asking him too, saying “And what should we do?” And he said to them, “Don’t shake people up to then report trouble, and be content with your wages.”

The people were expectant and were all wondering in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ.

It is probably a feast time and people are coming from all over to Jerusalem. John is only about a day’s journey from Jerusalem and lots of people come to hear him. The crowds **participate in his message** and are being baptised but **Matthew** notes that the Pharisees and Sadducees are coming to **observe** his baptism.

An aside on dating the Gospels...

The Sadducees appear only 9 times in the Gospels (**Mt-7, Mk -1, L - 1, J - 0**) whereas the Pharisees appear 87 (**Mt-30, Mk -11, L - 27, J - 19**). The Sadducees were part of the Temple ruling classes and politically very important and when Jerusalem and the Temple was destroyed in 70AD very few Sadducees remained (Those that did became Qarite Jews) and there are very few references to them thereafter.

Those preferring a post 70AD dating of the Gospels argue that the lack of references to the Sadducees is because everyone had forgotten about the Sadducees when they were written. However, the one event where they are referred to in all three synoptic gospels is very specifically **in the present tense** indicating that they are still around at the time of writing:-

“On that day Sadducees (those who **say** that there **is** no resurrection) came to him. They asked him **saying...**” **Matthew 22:23-24**, see also **Mark 12:8** & **Luke 20:27**

A bit of background about the Pharisees and Sadducees

The Sadducees are mainly based around Jerusalem where they control the workings and financial activity of the Temple whereas the Pharisees are much more widely spread around Judea and in Galilee so, when Jesus starts his ministry in Galilee, He meets predominantly Pharisees rather than Sadducees. That there is only one explicit reference to the Sadducees in **Mark** and **Luke** is understandable since **Mark** is writing in Rome and **Luke** for the Gentiles. Neither group is concerned about the nuances between different Jewish priestly sects so **Mark** and **Luke** use ‘Pharisees’ as shorthand for ‘Jews’ and, when the Sadducees feature specifically, **Mark** and **Luke** describe exactly who they are. (see references above).

It is thought that it is a reaction to the Pharisees and Sadducees with their emphasis on ritual observance that gave birth to the Essene movement with its emphasis on community and simple living. The Pharisees take their name from the Hebrew word: Pərīšayyā / פְּרִישִׁיָּא (#H6567) which means ‘set apart’ or ‘separated’ and the Sadducees take their name from ‘Sadduc’ Greek spelling of ‘Zadok’ the first priest of the first Temple. He both dedicates Solomon’s Temple and anoints him. (**1 Kings 1:39**).

Josephus gives us some information about what causes the division between the Pharisees and Sadducees during the intertestamental period. As Judaism re-emerges after the diaspora the Pharisees have emerged as those devoted to the ritual around the Temple and we read about John Hyrcanus. He was the son of Simon Maccabees and nephew of Judah Maccabee who had led the revolt in which the Jewish family had taken control of Judea. In the second century BC, John comes in both as a governor and High Priest thus holding **civic** and **religious** power. The families begin to say that this the fulfilment of **Ezekiel 21:26-27**.

thus says the Lord Yahweh: Remove **the turban**, and take off **the crown**; this [*shall be*] no more the same; exalt that which is low, and abase that which is high. I will overturn, overturn, overturn it: this also shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it [*him*].

Josephus describes John’s anger when Eleazar casts aspersions on his mother and consequently his fitness for the high priesthood (see **Leviticus 21:10-14** for the requirements).

“The successes of Hyrcanus produced jealousy among the Jews, and the Pharisees were particularly hostile...

...at first, he was a disciple of theirs and was cherished by them. But he once gave a feast for them, and while they were having a good time, Hyrcanus asked them if they had any criticism of the way he governed. They replied that he was entirely virtuous, which he was delighted to hear. But...

...they replied that he was entirely virtuous, which he was delighted to hear. But one of them, named Eleazar, had a strong temper and enjoyed controversy...He said ‘Since you are

anxious to know the truth, if you really wish to be righteous, give up the High Priesthood and be satisfied with Governing the people.

When Hyrcanus asked why he should give it up, Eleazar replied, ‘Our elders have told us that your mother was once a captive under Antiochus Epiphanes. This story was false, but Hyrcanus was furious with the man, as were the other Pharisees... Hyrcanus became angry ... And left the Pharisees to join the Sadducees... The Sadducees were viewed as the party of the few and the wealthy...

Now there was one Jonathan, a very great friend of Hyrcanus's, but of the sect of the Sadducees, whose notions are quite contrary to those of the Pharisees.

He told Hyrcanus that Eleazar had cast such a reproach upon him, according to the common sentiments of all the Pharisees, and that this would be made manifest if he would but ask them the question, What punishment they thought this man deserved?

So the Pharisees made answer, that he deserved stripes and bonds, but that it did not seem right to punish reproaches with death...

At this gentle sentence, Hyrcanus was very angry, and thought that this man reproached him by their approbation. It was this Jonathan who chiefly irritated him... made him leave the party of the Pharisees, and abolish the decrees they had imposed on the people, and to punish those that observed them...

... the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them... And concerning these things it is that great disputes and differences have arisen among them...

.. the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them, but the Pharisees have the multitude on their side.”

Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 13

So, the Sadducees form a separate sect and their tussle for power with the Pharisees begins and later there is a further breakaway by the Essenes.

Back to the Text!

Matthew introduces the Sadducees as he is writing for the immediate Jerusalem/Judea context whereas **Mark** and **Luke** say little as they are writing for the Gentile setting.

John speaks powerfully using prophetic language and people are coming out to hear him. Some in the crowds are convicted and are baptised but the Pharisees and Sadducees are watching what is happening.

Note: In Hebrew/Aramaic the words for ‘children’ (**בניא /bnya**) and ‘stones’ (**אבניא /abnya**) are similar and John the Baptist uses wordplay in his statement.

“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the LORD: **look to the rock from which you were hewn**, and to the quarry from which you were dug... **Look to Abraham your father!**”
Isaiah 51:1-2

Luke gives more detail about the practical steps John gives to the crowds who ask. He is focussing on a heart response. Remember what the angel had prophesied about John:-

“But the Angel said... don’t be afraid Zecharias... Elizabeth will bear you a son... John...

He will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children ...’ **Luke 1:13-17** (quoting **Malachi 4:6**)

Tax collectors are instructed to take no more than is reasonable in expenses and soldiers not to cause trouble in order to report trouble in order to impose heavier fines.

Note: διασείω diaseio [diy-a-sei'-ō](#) v. (G1286) used by Luke in xxxx

1. to shake thoroughly or 2. (*figuratively*) to intimidate.

[Root(s) [G1223](#) and [G4579](#)]

KJV: do violence to

As people are stirred up and responding in their hearts there is a growing sense of expectancy and wondering whether John is himself the Christ.

John’s Witness to the Coming Christ

JCV Integrated Text: **Matthew 3:11-12**, **Mark 1:7-8**, **Luke 3:15-18**

John answered saying to all of them, "I in fact baptize you with water towards re-thinking-things, but after me the one mightier than I is coming whose sandals I am not worthy to carry [nor] stoop down to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Whose winnowing fork is in His hand to sift His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn. But He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

So in fact, with many other encouragements he brought good news to the people.

Note: **Matthew** says ‘carry’ whereas **Mark** and **Luke** say loose/untie. In Aramaic, ‘loose’ is said as ‘lachelet’, ‘carry’ as ‘lasyet’ but they sound very similar. This variant in hearing points to an original sermon heard differently by **Matthew** from **Mark** and **Luke**, though the meaning is the same in all three Gospels

There is good news as sin itself is starting to be dealt with – being washed off as people rethink and respond in their hearts (symbolised by John’s Baptism). But he points to Jesus who will wash our hearts with the Holy Spirit and who will sift the wheat from the chaff in our lives. He will refine our hearts with His fire so we can bear good fruit in our lives.

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